

Children and Drama in Education: A Perspective on Mono and Solo Dramatic Performance

Uwadinma-Idemudia Eunice, PhD
Department of Theatre Arts and Film Studies
Redeemer's University, Ede

Abstract

Solo and mono performances are not very regular art forms in today's performance experience. However, the ability to perform as it were may have been imbued in everyone especially from birth. Consequently, the ability to develop this innate quality is enhanced by one's capacity to engage in constant practice. This paper espouses that a child who self-performs continuously in private, also undergoes immense self-criticism to acquire sufficient boldness to perform solo in the presence of adults. It also finds that during mono performance(s), children stutter and through such failures they learn to overcome both personal and societal obstacles in life. Thus, children who spontaneously enact actions in front of adults had gone through both emotional and physical catharsis as they self-rehearse in the privacy of their acting space.

Keywords: Solo, Mono, Performance, Self-perform, Catharsis.

Introduction

Solo and mono art forms have gradually become genres that are accepted world over as mainstream practices of dramatic performance forms. Even though monodrama was originally from the renaissance melodramatic form, its influence and growth as a major dramatic genre have not been as rapid as other popular genres. The advent of experimental and avant-garde theatre in the western theatre have led to the proposal of various methods of expression in drama and today, almost every art of expression that is both consciously and unconsciously arranged may be regarded as drama. In Tatanrenko it was reported that "at the end of the XX Century - at the beginning of the XXI century the interest in Mono-performances had significantly increased in the world theatre arts" (209) Tatanrenko asserted that the attention paid to Mono-performances at this earlier stage of its inception chronicled the continued existence of one-person performance which has been common not only in Ukrainian repertory,

but world over (209). Awde (2016) affirms, that “whatever you call it – solo performance, one-person show, one actor’s theatre – or monodrama as it is increasingly known worldwide, remains one of the fastest growing genres in the business”. After the pivotal works of August Strindberg’s *The Stranger* (9) and Eugene O’Neill’s early nineteenth Century *Before Breakfast* (1916), mono performances took a dramatic turn, and got almost as popular as mainstream dramatic practice. Wallace submits that “there has been a multiplicity of monologue forms that have appeared over the last thirty years” (4). Her submission though made almost two decades ago, still remains valid today in that, the proliferations of different art forms into the taxonomy of mono and solo dramatic have astronomically increased over time.

In Nigeria for instance, Binabai affirms that the art of solo performance is very recent in the Nigerian Stage. According to him, “the literary or modern solo drama is an avant-garde dramatic form, an alternative theatre which came to the coast of Nigeria in the 20th Century” (140). In the works of Mbajogwu, the solo dramatic art form resonates in his masterpiece *The Minister’s Son*. This play is solo-performed mostly by the playwright himself, and has received a lot of academic and performance presence in the Nigerian literary platform. Tracing the presence of mono/solo dramatic performance in Nigeria, Binebai also reports, “solo or mono drama refers to the literary art in which a drama is created and written essentially for performance by one person.... The principal character that is the storyteller or narrator impersonates” (139).

From Role-Play to Mono or Solo Drama

In Educational drama for instance, Mono and Solo arts forms are inevitable tools that come handy in exploring and executing sessions that rang from role-play, forum theatre, process drama and even children’s theatre. Though this art form is not categorised as a fundamental tool, it forms the nucleus that binds creativity, imagination and the art of learning in educational drama and in the broader spectrum of applied theatre experience. A performance requires an action to be re-expressed to communicate meanings that will either edify, teach or perform both functions and this art of re-showing is the imitative act that is innate in everyman. Children perform unconsciously from conception and continue to do so as they grow into the consciousness of the world around them. One of the major theatrical activities a child engages in as he/she develops from one

stage of life to another is role-play. Like other life tasks, children attempt to become dependent on themselves without any tutelage at an early stage in life. Even though role-play is innate in everyone, the attributes of role-play begin to develop more in a child from his formative years. This continues through pre-school until a child gets more actively engaged in curricular activities.

While the engagement of children in role-play is unprecedented, role-playing in children is imitative. Imitation in its purest form underlies the basic principles of drama and the act of imitation in children is purer than imitation in a dramatic performance.

Studies have shown that disadvantaged children learn more both intellectually and socially when they engage in social dramatic activities that enhance dramatic role-play in them. According to a study by Barnett Mark, engaging children in fanciful activities that involve the organisation of complexly integrated sequences of activities (i.e., plots and themes) can facilitate the development of their imagination and intellectual competence (44). Lillard, S. Angeline et al. cite Copple & Bredekamp (2009) with the submission that “high-level dramatic play produces documented cognitive, social, and emotional benefits” (1). A huge success of this kind is only possible because of the innocence and effort the child applies to the social dramatic and imitative art of this nature. When children imitate, they role-play and express themselves and give their all to not just impress, but also, to build enough confidence to sustain themselves and become less dependent on others. Peter Simpson surmises Aristotle’s concept of imitation as a method for “Children... to learn by... and children typically imitate by doing; that is doing what they see adults and other children do” (281).

Like folklore, the child’s performance is presented in various formations. These formations range from group performance to co-performance. In most cases, the performance can be multiple performances in a group. Even though children like to be in the lead during any group performance, they strive better when they perform alone. A child can interpret anything that exists around them through imitation. They even strive to be noticed either as substitute or as the figure they admire in their lives. They find and secretly admire and keep heroes and heroines who they aspire to emulate at all times. Lillard, S. Angeline et al. classifies role-play as ‘pretend play’. In their work, they affirm that even though ‘pretend play’ presents a social platform for interactions between children, at “other times, pretending

is a solo activity". This a child does to validate an action or emotion he/she tries to evaluate and understand. A child's level of intellectual development is enhanced during role-play. The more they role-play either in groups or in a solo/mono performance, the better their skill of imagination, and in turn this enhances the level of their imitation and performance techniques both in school and at play.

Imitative arts in children are first mono performed to themselves in the privacy of their thoughts after which it is reinforced as mono for personal enjoyment and aggrandizement. When a mono performance is successful and proven perfect by a child, it is then ready and qualified to be performed before family members and friends. It is at this stage the act of imitation in children is either encouraged or destroyed. For parents and relatives who value and understand the overall benefits of imitation and role-play, they will advertently encourage their child.

On the other hand, children will be discouraged by those who may see such behaviour(s) as disrespectful and not comely for children. Most often than none, an imitative act from mono to solo gradually progresses and matures with time and not instantly. For instance, Lillard, S. Angeline et al. observe that pretend play "is most prominent in early childhood, beginning with ages 3 to 5, with age 5 being declared its "high season" (2). During play, no two children role-play the same character exactly in the same way. This is because children also form their personal opinion about life and the impression created by people around them.

A lot of spontaneous actions are performance by nature, and they mostly happen as mono as well as 'solo performance'. The moral in spontaneous mono performance is that it begins as private performance mostly with no one else present at the initiation stage. But even when secretly experienced, mono performances become publicly shared. This happens in moments after achieving purgation of emotions that occur during such periods. The emotions are released during private mono performances and are transferred to the public space of others where the experiences learned are shared. At the point of sharing with others the experience learned from mono arts, mono performances are re-enacted. This reenactment includes the public in the secret experience and emotional rush that accrues from the narrator. Through sharing, the foregoing experience(s) becomes solo performed to give the audience insight into a manifold measure of the action. John Howell opined that everyone solo perform constantly and privately to audiences that are permanently there, and the audience are

always ready to consume the products of such performance (52). He identified the audience of these solo performances as oneself. He thinks the best audience a man has after all, is himself who listens attentively and pays unyielding attention to all his actions unconditionally. Therefore, we become our own private audience when we mono perform. Howell observed that:

Everywhere someone talks, someone listens, even alone the process continues in the constant monologue each of us carries on with that most faithful audience each of us carries on with that most faithful audience, the self. In fact, the voice the voice we hear in our individual heads sounds so familiar, so definitive, that only when someone ... begins to sing a different song do we remember that most often everyone listens to his or her own record. (52)

We perform so well with our 'self-audience' that each time after such personal performance, we feel so satisfied that we gather enough confidence to showcase such performance to others as a newly discovered treasure. Our 'self-audience' urges us on always, to continue in our various acts but criticizes us too when we obviously make mistakes. But still, like John (1979) observed, during these secret acts we are ourselves the most faithful audience of each and every of our performance.

What make the process of educational drama most effective with young children is the constant imitative, but mono and solo performances they have had practiced from before they can remember themselves. The process of educational drama becomes an avenue for them to recapture the essence of the dramatic embodiment they understand so well in their everyday living experience. While educational drama varies and makes use of various drama conventions to interact dramatically, the stored up experience become handy and a ready tool that drives a child to participate unreservedly.

Mono performance happens at various stages of educational drama, and children perform more in private than in public most of the time. When unattended, their private performance becomes more intense. This is because of the appearance of lack of interferences from adults or their age mates. Through the intensity of a mono performance

a child learns by trials and errors. In reality a child learns the ropes of life through failure and corrections and by his/herself, the child attains the status of the character he/she imitates. Additionally, the trial(s) and error(s) that attend a child's private mono performance are what privately shape his ideology and conception of the world around him/her.

The main purpose of educational drama is not just to teach the main tenets – in terms of techniques and professionalism in drama, especially in a glamorous and spectacular setting. Rather, it is to educate the child totally through the experience gathered in the process of an educational drama practice, which encourages a child's total and unwavering involvement. Constant practice and preparation in an educational drama process do build up confidence and self-esteem in children. This is because, while they engage in solo performance, they experience first hand, issues that challenge them. An innate self-activating force to role-play is what gives a child enough impetus to mimic a role model who he sees and admires in his daily life. Thus, if family members and friends with questionable character surround a child, those character traits will be picked and role-played by them constantly in any available performance space. And inadvertently, such behaviour can become a permanent part of the life style of the child.

Performing Solo/Mono in Public

The sudden burst of confidence a child gathers to solo perform a role model either as creatively conceived or as the recreation of an exemplary role model in the presence of adults comes as a result of constant rehearsals within him/herself. It can also occur before his/her own self-audience who overtime reshapes the final product of what he/she performs to bigger and living audience other than their faithful self-audience. Discussing solo folklore, Jay Mechling observes that:

As humans we are familiar with internal dialogues, silent conversations we have with ourselves in our minds. Sometimes we rehearse anticipated conversation, sometimes we replay in our heads conversations we have just had, and create a meta-commentary on what we wish we had said. (439)

This rehearsal is born out of creativity described in many quarters differently. For instance, Angeline S. Lillard et al (6) cites Wallach & Kogan, (1965) as positing that this creativity is “the ability to produce

original content relevant to a particular task” while Lev Semenovich Vygotsky commented that:

any human act that gives rise to something new is referred to as a creative act, regardless of whether what is created is physical object or some mental emotional construct that lives within the person who created it and is known only to him (7)

In Vygotsky’s definition of creativity, every aspect of a child’s creative art during a mono performance both physical, psychological or emotional is deployed to showcase the genuine feeling a child has and is ready to share. Positive solo enactments are as a result of positive lifestyles impacted by siblings, relatives and the immediate environment of a child during the formative period of growing up. While negative solo enactments are also products of the immediate societal influence a child has. If a child reenacts negative roles, over time, such roles become habits that are capable of hampering the future of that child. Performing spontaneous solo roles increases the potentials to stutter and invite critical evaluations from the audience who in their own experience tries to reshape a perspective discovered in a child’s performance. Thus the public becomes a school that shapes innate creative ideas that could be potentially beneficial or harmful to a child’s wellbeing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Like adults, the repeated circle of self-rehearsals and self-performance is most expressive in children who are eager to make a statement in the new space of life, which they are learning to inhabit. Conversely, the lessons of life become a mirror that infuses a personality that ultimately defines the life of man. Thus the acts of mono performance in private and solo performance in public are purgative actions in the story of life as exhibited by children. It then behooves the society that molds a child to do more by encouraging solo performances in their wards and young ones. Society, parents, immediate family members, caregivers and teachers must be saddled with a responsibility to reinforce the innate performative tendencies that engenders self teaching through mono performances. Conclusively, in the words of Jay Mechling (2006)

“As humans we are familiar with internal dialogues, silent conversations which we have with ourselves in our minds. Sometimes we rehearse anticipated conversations, sometimes we replay in our heads conversations, thus creating a metacommentary on what we wish we have just heard”. (138)

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