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**TAKING OFFENCE WITH NO OFFENCE:
RELEVANCE OF TIME AND PLACE/SPACE WITHIN NIGERIA'S STAND-UP
COMEDY**

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Abstract

Stand-up comedy has become one of the most popular live performances in Nigeria since the 1990s. Its patronage has risen phenomenally even in the face of the dwindling fortunes of conventional theatre. This notwithstanding, it has been largely ignored by recent studies in African theatre/performance. Hence, there exists a huge gap between its practice and reception, on the one hand, and its learned interrogation, on the other. This study thereby provides a scholarly interrogation of the manifestations and meanings of "time" and "place/space" in stand-up performances. Using Victor Turner's liminality, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's "joking relationships" and Max Gluckmann's "ritual of rebellion" as basic frameworks, it identifies the unwritten pact between the performer and the audience which permits the former to insult the latter at will without repercussions. It further deploys audience response theory to discuss how spectators' interpretations complete stand-up art. Due to popularity and use of multiple performance mechanics akin to mimesis, Bright Okpocha (Basket Mouth) is selected for study. Data are acquired from commercially-available Video Compact Discs (VCDs). The study thus finds that the idea of time and place is a social construct whose establishment is by mutual consent, hence absolving the performer from slander no matter what s/he says.

Keywords: Performance, nigerian stand-up comedy, space, time, theatre

Introduction

Stand-up comedy is a kind of live performance wherein an artist entertains people with sundry forms of amusement, primarily to induce laughter. The audience is an inalienable part of stand-up art because their response qualifies individual joke narratives and the entire performance as successful or otherwise. The comedian is a catalyst; using words and sometimes, mimesis, to stimulate the audience into creating its own amusement. This makes the comedian and the audience equal participants. Skilled comedians encourage close interaction with the attendees because it is only through such exchange that the conditions for mirth can be created. Once this is achieved, laughter grows incrementally as the rendition progresses because succeeding jokes are craftily built on the feedback the comedian receives from the preceding jokes. Furthermore, being a temporal art which exists in time and space, stand-up comedy is akin to theatre. Its temporality is however deeper than that of other live performances because audience response is instantaneous and cannot be retrogressively retracted.

John Limon identifies what he calls “the basic structure” upon which stand-up comedy. He posits that if the stand-up audience (collectively) thinks something is funny, then there is no disputing it (2000: pp. 2-3). His views are summarised as follows:

- individual audience member’s reservations are not regarded;
- there is no room for recanting laughter already expressed; and
- stand-up comedy is the only art form that relies on audience appreciation rather than on criticism to make its mark. (2000: pp. 2-6)

He uses the words – Indispensability and Incorrigeability – to underscore the centrality of the audience and laughter to stand-up comedy. It is also noteworthy that both are inseparable

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy especially in deciding the outcome of the art. Furthermore, without the audience and its active contributions, the comedian is doomed. And whatever response it gives to a joke narrative in the first instance remains valid. It is also true that the dissenting views of individual members do not matter so long as the majority thinks, through its reaction, that the joke is funny or not funny.

Humour itself is temporal in nature. For it to come, the punch-line must catch the spectators unawares. Victor Raskin accedes to this with the postulation that there are two important elements of humour – “surprise” which is delivered by the punch line and “play” otherwise referred to as “fooling around” (1985: p. 33). To him, the “play” is always on two parallel “senses” of an idea, the first which is commonplace, and the second, which only the joke-teller knows at the onset. In other words, the joke-teller is said to be “playing” at two meanings. The second meaning comes at the climax with the “punch-line” which in itself is the surprise. And it is this “surprise” that actually instigates the laughter (1985: p. 35). The importance of the element of surprise in the elicitation of laughter in a joke situation cannot be over-emphasised because a joke can hardly make anyone laugh if one already knows the outcome. Hence, stand-up comedians ensnare their audiences by making them unaware of where the narrative is going until the final minute. For this reason, a joke loses its power to evoke laughter any other time it is repeated. As a result, comedians who repeat jokes stand the risk of being booed out of the stage.

Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria

Nigeria is one of the countries that used to have a thriving theatre industry as can be seen in its array of dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola and many others. Owing to persistent economic problems from the early 1980s; and as resources for artistic

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy performances became lean, theatre performances gradually declined. From the early 1990s, newer genres which required less capital like stand-up comedy and video films became preferred. Gradually it became preferable to sit in a stand-up auditorium and be amused than watch a tragedy by say Shakespeare or Soyinka. As such, stand-up comedy has become preferred rivalling the video film (Nollywood) with which it has become a dominant tradition that challenges mainstream cinema and live theatre respectively. Its relevance has been enhanced by persistent economic crises which, on the one hand, necessitated the dearth of live theatre performances and on the other, heightened people's thirst for escapist laughter to temporarily estrange themselves from the harsh realities of everyday life. A society that is highly traumatised by the tragedies of unemployment, lack of social amenities including basic necessities like power, water, shelter and public transportation will readily pay whatever it can to be momentarily thrilled by snap-shot jocular narratives.

On the transcendence of stand-up comedy over hitherto conventional forms, Ezechi Onyerionwu avers:

For those who have been disheartened by the continuous decline of the Nigerian theatre tradition, the advent of an avant-garde alternative in the emergent stand-up comedy culture has hugely compensated for a truly sad loss. This feeling of loss is completely understandable ... But today as we have come to see, the only artistic medium that has undisputedly inherited [... the] laudable responsibilities of the theatre tradition is stand-up comedy. It is perhaps to the credit of the many characteristics which both genres share that an overlap-free transition has been guaranteed. First, like the core dramatic theatre, stand-up comedy is essentially a stage art. (2007: par. 2)

Stand-up comedy is thus a more contemporaneous art than theatre because the performer talks about prevailing circumstances without first doing a script, sourcing for funds, casting, and

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within Nigeria's stand-up comedy rehearsing before going into performance. In Nigeria, it has a recent origin, its themes are always current and for the performer, it does not require much capital. Essentially, stand-up comedy shares dramatic theatre's *liveness* but not necessarily all of its other forms. It is a derivative art. Just like in the words of Homi Bhabha, "a state of emergency is also always a state of emergence" (Bhabha 2004: p. 41); Nigerian stand-up comedy emerged from the difficulties or 'state of emergency' of the country's theatre.

In spite of its overwhelming popularity, African theatre/performance scholars have concentrated more on other indigenous and modern forms than on emergent ones. Nollywood had the same problem at inception: scholars preferred to study cinema that they hardly have access to because they then considered video films to be pedestrian and less worthy of serious academic enquiry. Presently, it is gradually receiving scholarly attention. This study aligns itself to existing interrogation by examining the role of "time" and "space" in stand-up situations and how they aid the appreciation of jokes as inoffensive even when they are supposed to offend. For this study, Basket Mouth (Bright Okpocha) is selected by purposive sampling from the numerous Nigerian comedians. This is because he is among those that appropriate a wider range of comedic techniques than others.

The language of Nigerian stand-up comedy is primarily Pidgin English. It is intrinsically comedic, being a mix of "uneducated" English and a few local languages. Performers also employ embodied acts – speech, body/spatial movements, facial expressions, narrative dexterity and mimicry – to convey meaning to the audience. Suffice it to say that the use of these is informed by the need to stimulate laughter rather than that of theatrical correctness. Stand-up comedy is like theatre since both are live stage arts, but it differs in two major ways:

- It does not have coherently structured narratives
- Its main purpose is to elicit laughter

On the part of Basket Mouth's acts, he plays multiple snap-shot roles, denigrates his personality by appearing unprepared; uses scripts and laughs at his own jokes, wears shorts and T-shirt sometimes; verbally creates imageries or incredible juxtapositions of (under)privileged peoples, among many others. He is also eclectic in embodiment use; often defamiliarises familiar events and people; uses often exaggerated narratives; employs suspenseful plot; avoids heckling but prefers adjacency pairs especially the question-answer model in interacting with his audience. Most Nigerian comedians organise gigs where they perform alongside others, but in his *Basket Mouth Uncensored* he is the only comedian on stage for the night. For a genre that thrives on variety, Basket Mouth's ability to hold spectators for a couple of hours is a rare show of stupendous skill on Nigeria's stand-up comedy stage.

Theoretical Framework

The essay adopts a multi-disciplinary approach, using theories from Anthropology to highlight the sociological relevance of the joke as well as elaborate on situations under which jokes are inoffensive while audience response theory (as akin to reader-response criticism) is deployed in underscoring the centrality of the audience in the process of humour generation within stand-up performances. The trio of Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's "Joking Relationships", Max Gluckmann's "Ritual of Rebellion", and Victor Turner's explications on "liminality" are the anthropological theories employed for the study. Radcliffe-Brown holds that joking relationship is "a relation between two persons in which one is by custom *permitted*, and in some

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy instances *required*, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is *required* to take no offence” (1940: p. 195; my emphasis). Gluckmann discusses two major conflict lines reflected in ancient rituals of the Zulu: first, between men and women, and secondly, between rulers and their subjects. By the use of these rituals Gluckmann underscores the existence of culturally-endorsed situations where social roles are swapped. He holds that in the Zulu *Nomkubulwana*, for instance, women do not go out of their way to irrevocably change gender order but engage in the rites to find the strength to go on living as mothers, sisters and wives afterwards; and the second performance proceeds “within an established and sacred traditional system, in which there is dispute about particular distributions of power, and not about the structure of the system itself” (1963: p. 112). Two things are obvious here: the suspension of nominal “social hierarchy” and that of “time”. It is this suspended “time” that Victor Turner refers to as liminal period within which the weak assumes temporary authority over every other member of the society in the function of a priest or in any other capacity as conferred by the society itself.

For stand-up comedy, Radcliffe-Brown’s as briefly explicated above highlights the presence of an intangible but very effective social contract between comedians and their audiences which permits the former to ridicule the later and still be absolved of slander. This form of agreement is so strong that it is often seen as taboo for a member of audience to pick offence at being the butt of a joke. For the duo of Gluckmann and Turner’s postulations, one uses them to equate the stand-up setting as not only a moment of upending social structure but also a liminal period when comedians are permitted to roundly take a swipe on their society and beyond without fear of being considered rude. It should be noted that this is allowed within specific time/period and location; within the time and space allotted for the stand-up performance.

Audience response is usually referred to as reader response criticism by literary critics.

The major postulation of this theory is that the reader is an active agent who actually completes the meaning of a work of art through interpretation. In other words, the work of the creator of arts does not entail the interpretation that the creation will receive. Hence, audience response theory posits that since works of art are not complete without audience's interpretation, the interpreter is also part of the creation process. One believes that audience response within stand-up comedy is more emphatic than in any other genre of art because if the audience fails to grasp what the comedian is saying, it will be difficult for it to give the expected response – outcome. Hence, one argues that the stand-up audience is active and is part of the performance itself. Also, unlike the reader of a piece of literature or the viewer of artistic works who could be individualistic in his or her response, the stand-up audience works as a group meaning that each individual's opinion is subsumed in that of the majority. This group response comes with an irrevocable credibility because as Limon observes, “once the majority thinks something is funny, it then is funny” (2000: p. 2).

The use of these theories brings us to the understanding that there exists a social contract between stand-up comedians and their audience which allows the former to insult the audience within the stand-up time and space; and the audience not to take offence at the insult within the same time-space continuum. Hence, just like observed by Radcliffe-Brown, the stand-up moment is designated as a period set aside (“liminal” in the words of Turner) wherein no one present should take offence no matter how personal the insult is. It is worthy of note that it is not the audience alone that can be insulted. This leads us to a little detour into the nature of laughter within stand-up comedy. In the first instance, the audience can laugh at a joke, in another; they can laugh at the bearer of the joke. The first example is desirable because it supposes that the

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within Nigeria's stand-up comedy. A comedian has successfully told his or her joke. The laughter from the audience shows endorsement and he or she can well proceed to the next time after gauging the appropriate moment to take it up. However, where the comedian fails to make the audience laugh through the joke narrative, he or she stands the risk of becoming the object of the laughter. In terms of offence therefore, either the comedian or the audience is permitted to cause offence, but none is permitted to take offence.

Furthermore, not taking offence does not mean that the member of audience who feels he or she has been insulted cannot react. The unwritten social contract provides for an aggrieved member to respond though not with anger. The best form of response, though often not loud enough for everyone present to hear, is expected to come jocularly too. This is referred to as heckling – where the audience talks back at the performer. Heckling can destroy a good show if the comedian fails to handle it well. It requires a high level of spontaneity because there is no pre-arranged script to which participants will adhere. It is for this reason that some comedians craftily steer clear of such situations especially by ignoring whatever it is a member of the audience says to him or her directly. Basket Mouth is one comedian who allows heckling to a minimal extent while performing. Nevertheless, the audience does not necessarily need to speak to become part of the performance because its presence and response which are duly given to joke narratives based on their interpretations of them put them in a more relevant position as an inalienable part of stand-up acts.

The Nigerian Stand-up Audience

Little or no scientific studies exist on the nature of the Nigerian stand-up audience. However, from observation, the average Nigerian stand-up audience is made up of the middle-

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within Nigeria's stand-up comedy class, urbane and mostly young adults. As one of the most popular live entertainments in a society where theatre and cinema attendance is almost inexistent, stand-up events have become the likeliest public location for socialites to interact. As such, one sees Nollywood stars and other artistes, young entrepreneurs, expatriates in attendance. The average visitor is youthful rather than middle-aged or old, and is equally female and male. Though there are more males on the Nigerian stand-up stage than females, there are slightly more females in the auditorium than there are males. In terms of class relations, comedians have moved up the social ladder since their trade became prestigious since its overwhelming patronage. Giving that the entry tickets for most stand-up shows do not come cheap, one supposes that people who throng these shows belong to the same privileged class as the performers themselves. They may not share the same moral normativity *per se*, but even when the renditions become farcical and/or lewd, those with contrary views would hardly protest openly if the majority finds the acts risible.

The nature of stand-up comedy demands that for the performer to generate humour, he or she must take off from what a good number of the audience recognises easily. This is because for humour to occur, it has to be a form of incongruity; a kind of absurd aberration that goes against what the audience knows. Hence, normal situations can only be laughable to abnormal people, but to those considered to be sane, it is things that are out-of-the-ordinary that can amuse. It then follows that stand-up audiences share a great number of similarities with the performers. In the first instance, they both live and work in Nigeria (except in instances where they perform abroad to Diaspora persons). Here, contemporary socio-political and economic issues become the basis for most jokes. Furthermore, they also share past experiences of economic deprivation. Reminiscing about life in certain impoverished locations of major cities like Ajegunle in Lagos, is a recurrent theme in Nigerian stand-up practice. This is one of the reasons one believes that the

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy comedians belong to the same social class as most of their spectators. Also, there are more jokes about women than there are about women in the corpus of Nigerian stand-up renditions. One supposes that this is due to the large number of females in the audience, on the one hand, and the marginal presence of female performers, on the other. Specifically, there are more females in the auditorium than on the stage. Since comedians speak mostly to their audiences, the gendered or class constitution of the spectators, as well as the location of the performance, to a large extent affect the theme(s) the comedian will treat on stage. And since there are fewer women to speak about men from the stage, male comedians are often preoccupied with issues bothering on women and femininity.

Concept of Time and Space

Peter Brook, in his *Empty Space*, preferred the use of “space” to de-conventionalise the nomenclature, “stage.” “Space” refers to interval of time or an area set aside for an event. In my consideration, “place” is more apt since it possesses a definiteness that conflates both “interval of time” and “an area set aside for an event.” Panayiota Tsatsou concurs by averring that “Space becomes place when it acquires symbolic meaning” (2009: p. 12). Acquiring “symbolic meaning” refers to entrusting “space” with the determinacy of “time” and “location” – the “place” of the rendezvous. Tsatsou further observes that “Space exists in time and changes through time” (2009: p. 11), thereby confirming the inseparability of “time” and “space” in the consideration of “place.” Putting it succinctly, “space” or “place” without “time” amounts to imprecision and nothingness because if an event has to hold in a location, “symbolic meaning” is achieved when it is imbued with “time”. It has been posited that both place and time are

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy conjoined, intertwined and that they “coexist, intermesh, and define each other in personal experience” (Tuan 1977: p. 130).

The “place” of stand-up performances can mean both the location and the stage (whether elevated or not) from which the comedian speaks to the audience. Radcliffe-Brown describes joking relations as “a relation between two persons in which one is by custom *permitted*, and in some instances *required*, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is *required* to take no offence” (195; my emphasis). And there are two forms – symmetrical, where “each of the two persons teases or makes fun of the other,” and the asymmetrical type, where X jokes at the expense of Y and Y accepts the teasing good-humouredly but without retaliating; or Y in return teases X only a little (p. 195). Stand-up comedy also exemplifies the two examples of joking relationships mentioned above because members of the audience can either retaliate through heckling or take it calmly when directly insulted by a comedian.

Where stand-up periods (space of time) are culturally-endorsed moments within which insults are exchanged without offence, the place of the performance and the stage also become sacrosanct throughout the duration of the enactment. When a member of the audience purchases tickets and enters such places during the time of the enactment, he or she willingly gives up the individual right to take offence. He or she also, at the same time, by the singular act of attendance, empowers the comedian to insult at will. Consequently, the “stage” is imbued with power within the moment of the enactment so much so that no matter who is in the auditorium, the performer takes overall authority to say whatever he or she wills. The comedian is thus like a priest who assumes transcendence over all social and religious institutions within the community to become the all-knowing, god-like persona who is granted permission to satirise and ridicule. It is noteworthy that so long as the comedian keeps a majority of the

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy attendees at the edge of their seats, he or she is permitted to continue saying whatever will keep the audience that way.

“Time” within stand-up enactments is specially designated moment within which social order is suspended. Max Gluckmann uses two traditional festivals among the Zulus to talk about cultural periods when social order is set aside and people momentarily assume the roles of other people. The first is enacted within a fertility rite related to the Zulu Princess of Heaven, *Nomkubulwana*, wherein women momentarily take over the roles of men after which they revert to their usual roles in the society. The other is a study of protests contained in the Swazi *incwala* ceremony which “consisted of a public humiliation of the king, songs of hatred and a ritual threatening of the king who had to flee into a sacred enclosure” (Schröter 2004: p. 44). According to Gluckmann, within *Nomkubulwana*, women do not go out of their way to irrevocably change gender order but engage in these rites to find the strength to go on living as mothers, sisters and wives afterwards; and the second performance proceeds “within an established and sacred traditional system, in which there is dispute about particular distributions of power, and not about the structure of the system itself” (1963: p. 112).

Victor Turner looks beyond the purification effect of the ceremonies to the exhibition of “the power of the weak” (Turner 1969: p. 108) and what has been referred to as “a temporary travesty of the ruling order” (Schröter 2004: p. 46). In other words, within the short period of the enactment of ritual, ritual performers take over to become the centre of attraction. These individuals could be anybody other than the ruler, and while they remain the focal point of the ritual even royalty is bound to heed whatever they say. Two things are obvious here: suspension of nominal social order to allow weaker members to positions of authority and then, the period or time. The implication is that there is a time limit on the momentary upending of

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy social structure of authority within which the person who assumes temporary authority will have control over every other members of the society. In relation to stand-up comedy, these two come to play: comedians, no matter their social status, assume positions of authority and; they must exercise their authority within the duration of the show. Stand-up performers are ordinary individuals who possess no authority except when they take up the microphone and, like priests, assume the role of making people laugh at their own foibles. Hence, stand-up comedians, their audience and the performance especially are locatable within Turner's *liminal* phase because no matter who is seated in the auditorium, comedians are given leave to say whatever they will and in whatever manner they choose.

Joke Samples

A major limitation of stand-up criticism is how to present jokes in the same manner they were first given without losing the tenor of its rendition to a live audience. A mere narrative of a performed joke is mostly bereft of the dynamics of its live enactment – the comedians embodied actions (gestures, facial expressions, body and spatial movements) as well as the peculiarities of intonations, voice modulations and other forms of mimicry which the performer used. However, in spite of this, one has to give a few jokes of Basket Mouth's and then discuss the response of the audience to each of them.

In one rendition, Basket Mouth says that Osama bin Laden will fail in Nigeria because if he meets an Igbo man and asks him to go on suicide bombing so that his family will be paid, the Igbo person will respond with thick Igbo accent: "Nna¹, give my family the bomb and give me the money" (Williams, ND: *Nite of a Thousand Laughs Volume 13*). The audience responds to

¹ "Nna" - Igbo word for a male, but here specifically used to mean "my brother" or "my friend."

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this with a thunderous guffaw because of the unexpected juxtaposition of Osama bin Laden and the Igbo man who is reputed to love money² and life so much that he cannot sacrifice one for the other! This joke brings with it an incredible picture of a dreaded terrorist coming down to Nigeria, going to an Igbo man (possibly at his shop, since they are mostly traders) and then asking him to give up his business so that he can become a suicide bomber. It is inconceivable that any Igbo man will agree to the prospect of abandoning his business to take up terrorist activities. It is this recognition that amuses the audience including Igbo people who are in the auditorium.

In another joke, “Women are ten times smarter than men,” Basket Mouth says. He qualifies the statement by talking about Adam and Eve, asserting that since the length of time between when Eve ate the forbidden fruit and the time she gave it to Adam is not stated in the Bible, it could have been a couple of years or less. He then uses his narrative to create graphic images of how Eve could have amusingly watched Adam as he went about his chores in the Garden, naked. Basket Mouth uses mimesis to ensure that his audience gets a picture of how his penis could have been dangling all over the place and how Eve, with her now superior consciousness, could have been laughing at his expense before she finally decides to help him open his eyes by saying, “Adam come collect apple chop³” (Okpocha 2007: *Basket Mouth Uncensored Volume 2*). Basket Mouth avers that Eve could have been amused by Adam’s ignorance of his own nakedness. This is because since she became conscious of their nudity before her husband she could have taken advantage of that knowledge to gloat over Adam’s exposed manhood for as long as she wished. This is also an allusion to the various instances in

² Nigeria is full of ethnic stereotyping and the Igbo is said to love money more than other tribes. I am Igbo myself and so is Basket Mouth also. People hardly take offence anymore when addressed as a lover of money so long as you are Igbo.

³ “Adam, come take this apple and eat.”

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within Nigeria's stand-up comedy real life where men are being hoodwinked by the womenfolk and they still have the erroneous impression that they are smarter than their wives, girlfriends and daughters.

In another one, he speaks with so much passion: “God go punish all de ‘aristos’ in Jesus’ name! [...] Una don marry una wives come de confuse our future wives. We go buy dem recharge card, una go buy dem phone. We go give dem moni for cab, una go buy dem car. Na who de babe wan listen to⁴?” (Williams ND: *Nite of a Thousand Laughs Volume 12*). On the surface, this may not seem like much of a joke, but knowing that it is the daily experience of struggling men in the country that they often lose their girlfriends to more privileged men, the comedic dimensions of his observation emerges. This joke is an example of reminiscences about past lives of people who have recently become successful in Nigeria. Hearing statements such as the one above from comedians now can be considered amusing since it reminds them of their former states of deprivation. As have been stated earlier, most comedians lived such lives before stardom. That is why they sometimes use themselves as examples of people who used to be poor.

In the last joke that I wish to cite, Basket Mouth talks about girls who lie a lot so much so that they tell about a trip to London where they had to wind down the window of the aeroplane in which they were travelling to get a better view of the clouds. He uses a circular movement of the hand to indicate someone who is mechanically winding the glass of a car down or up (Okpocha 2007: *Basket Mouth Uncensored Volume 2*). The import of this joke is that the girls have never been in an aeroplane because if they have, they would have known that aeroplane windows are sealed and can never be wound down or up. The audience is well aware that there are people who always try to use bogus stories of success to give the impression that they are more

⁴ God will punish all the ‘aristos’ (girls, mostly university under-graduates, who follow rich men for money) in Jesus’ name! (The audience shouts a thunderous ‘Amen’...) You have married your own wives and are now confusing our future wives. When we buy phone credits for them, you buy phones for them. When we give them money for taxi, you buy cars for them. Who will the girls listen to then?]

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy prosperous than they really are. Sometimes, such people in their ignorance make horrendous blunders like saying that they went to New York City in England and things like that.

Audience Reading

Basket Mouth does not, for instance, explain how an aeroplane is, but he believes that a majority of his audience would have been inside an aeroplane and as such can recognise the incongruity in his joke narrative. Hence, my first observation is that it is the audience that makes the associations that will make it laugh. The work of comedians is to appropriately employ the mechanics of their trade as identified by Franklyn Ajaye (2002) to include Stage Presence – entrance, appearance and stage mannerism, Delivery, Timing, Smooth Transitions and embodied behaviours (pp. 10-12) and then act as catalysts for laughter situations. The second is that audience response is communal because as Limon posits, individual opinions do not matter. In other words, those members of the audience who do not recognise the absurdity have no room to disagree with the majority. Sometimes, laughter itself is infectious in conditions where individuality is subsumed in group dynamics. Hence, there are some people who would laugh not because they understood what has been said but because every other person is laughing and they would not want to do something different from others. Thirdly, no one is allowed to take offence no matter how highly placed the person is or how grievous the insult is. Everyone submits his or her personality to the comedian within the “time” and “place” of stand-up comedy. Finally, audience response comes once – at the moment the joke is given, and cannot be faulted retrogressively by whatever newer information is available. There is no post-mortem criticism that can efface the response that is given at the point of rendition.

The art of stand-up comedy is ostensibly spontaneous and disordered unlike theatre. In actuality, it takes a lot of crafting because making a group of people with different convictions to laugh requires a great deal of talent and scheming. Basket Mouth sometimes brings pieces of paper to the stage but from the manner he uses them it is obvious that he employs them for comedic purposes even though they may serve as prompter for following the order of his jokes. One major mechanic of stand-up comedy is stage presence. This refers to the entrance, appearance (costume, make-up and gait), as well as stage mannerisms. The artist's manner of entry to the stage and his or her appearance create a first impression that if done properly will arrest the attention of the audience. Stage mannerisms aid the sustenance of audience attention. It is true that the audience makes interpretations from which it generates its laughter, but it is instructive that without the comedian's art, the audience may not be able to create the situations for laughter for itself. The comedian cannot also succeed without honing his or her craft to the point of easily capturing and holding the attention of the audience from the moment he or she enters the stage till the end of the performance.

Basket Mouth always enters the stage with a feigned unassuming posture. His manner of dressing is not fixed, but one observes that he often makes references to his costume, an indication that he dresses to suit some of his jokes. The only thing that is fixed about his appearance in recent times is that he has grown natural dreadlocks. He tries to demystify his art by appearing unprepared. He once said that he just makes jokes without bothering himself with punch-lines. He also laughs at his own jokes, something that may be considered unprofessional. In spite of these, Basket Mouth is one comedian that brings a lot of crafting to his art especially in his Delivery, Timing and Transitions. These are the tripartite engine-room of stand-up comedy.

Delivery is the pattern of rendition, the manner of joke narration. The way a story is told to a large extent determines the way it will be received. Stand-up jokes are given jocularly and each comedian chooses specific patterns to make their jokes more risible. Timing refers to the rate of delivery. It is as important as delivery itself because if a comedian fails to gauge time appropriately, his or her punch-lines would be lost on the audience. Transitions are also as important as the other two because when they are smooth enough, disjointed joke narratives will acquire plot. Transitions are required not only to link disparate stories but also to make audience response to grow increasingly till it gets to the end of the performance when it is supposed to reach its highest point. After these three, we now have embodied actions which include speech, mimesis, gestures, facial expressions and body/spatial movement. Speech is central to stand-up comedy because it is primarily a story-telling kind of art. While other embodied behaviours are equally important, they act as accompaniment to speech. Basket Mouth is very gifted in the art of using words to create apt images especially in making incredible juxtapositions like in the joke of Osama bin Laden and an Igbo man. There are other instances where he places dissimilar situations side by side to stir up incongruity and amuse his audience.

The audience may not necessarily be conscious of the art behind the performance, but it sure will respond negatively if it is not applied appropriately. In most available performances of Basket Mouth, his jokes are so thematically linked that it is almost difficult to separate them into individual jokes. The audience thus finds itself moving from one level of laughter to another. It is not the place of the comedian to explain jokes, but it behoves him or her to tell them in a way that the punch-line is not given away earlier or later than required. It is here that spontaneity comes into play. In spite of whatever has been said, the basic tool of live performances is spontaneity. In stand-up comedy it is a highly desirable ingredient since the performer-audience

Taking offence with no offence: relevance of time and place/space within nigeria's stand-up comedy interaction is current throughout the rendition. Unlike theatre where the comedian may have other actors on stage to act with, the stand-up artist simply acts with the audience. It is noteworthy that in stand-up situations house lights are on and the spotlight on the performers is not too bright as to make it impossible for them to see their audiences clearly. Spontaneity is what the performer requires to be able to mentally adjust his or her script to suit the response of the audience.

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy is a temporal art form which thrives on audience-performer interaction within specific time and place. Audience response is instantaneous and possesses an enduring life-span since it cannot be faulted retrogressively. The same cannot be said of the jokes themselves because once given, they cannot re-capture their original effect when given to the same audience a second time. Also, attendance to stand-up events is, at once, a voluntary shedding of one's right to take offence at insult, and empowerment of the comedian to say whatever he or she wills so long as the audience remains in mirth.

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