



## Changing Trends in Dreamboat Children's Theatre, Calabar, Nigeria.

### KEYWORDS

Children's Theatre, Dreamboat, Changing Trends, Calabar, Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT** *In the last twenty eight years DreamBoat Children's theatre has gained prominence in South-South Nigeria. Its operations have become more professional and have received more attention within the school system. But this was not so in the beginning. The study set out to find out what factors led to this development. Qualitative method was used to gather data from children, teachers and practitioners as well as observation of many Dream-Boat's children's theatre productions across two states of Cross River and Akwa Ibom. Data was gathered from over 500 children and two hundred teachers in four towns. The principal question the study sought to answer was: How can the DreamBoat children's theatre performances help the child perceive patterns, relations feelings and produce an inner meaning? Or how do children experience theatre aesthetically? The research findings revealed that the type of stories enacted were the principal framework of transmitting meanings to young persons, the play is the heart of production and another aesthetics medium is the style of production. This is the icing on the cake it adds colours, sparkle and glamour. Conclusively as Children's theatre producers work to stir the souls of young people by bringing them universal themes, feeding their imagination and giving beauty and fantasy enshrined in theatre which embodies all arts, then and only then will valuable contributions be made to the growth of creative individuals who will hold the baton for generations yet unborn.*

### INTRODUCTION

For more than twenty years DreamBoat Children's theatre popularly called DreamBoat has been devising and producing plays for young audiences in schools, communities and faith based spaces. DreamBoat Children's theatre is one pioneering outfit that works for children in South-South Nigeria., it is domiciled in Calabar. DreamBoat has produced more than fifty plays for children many which have toured nationally. Since its inception, more than two million young people have been exposed to DreamBoat plays. Dreamboat's children's theatre operating budget is funded by gate takings collected from students in schools. Schools use a variety of ways to raise the gate fees.

It was originally tagged Children's fun bow Theatre House. The fun bow was conceived as a response to the entertainment needs of children in schools and out of schools. It was to offer a refined, exciting and educative alternative to the terrifying seasonal masquerades and boring routine of gorging children with foods and soft drinks at Christmas and birthdays. It was meant to fill this vacuum of wholesome children entertainment that marked Nigeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fun bow was driven by another force - the professional exuberance of young academics anxious to test their academic theories and theatre skills outside the classroom. They were driven by a need to find professional relevance within the University community and the larger society.

Dreamboat's early history was also informed by the need of the young theatre academics to augment the slave wages they earned as lecturers. By 1990, fun bow transformed and expanded its scope and focus for nationwide operations under the name: DreamBoat Theatre. Its thrust included the use of educational techniques for curriculum instruction in nursery, primary and junior secondary schools. In 1993, DreamBoat became engaged in the promotion and protection of the rights of the girl-child, sexuality education in nursery and primary schools, teenage pregnancy, rape, parenting and the girl child economic empowerment issues. Community development work was incorporated

into Dreamboat's menu in 1995. This involved using Theatre for Development (TFD) to mobilize young people in markets, prisons, hospitals and communities. Dreamboat Theatre for Development Foundation is now a national NGO established in 1996. It was first registered with Cross River State Government and later registered with Cooperate Affairs Commission (CAC) of Nigeria in 2005.

DreamBoat children's theatre respects creativity, imagination, excellence, critical thinking, problem solving and humanity and it achieves this by the constructs it models. DreamBoat children's theatre strives to create valuable and impactful experiences for young people through its performances. Theatre is an experience of community, people gather together to watch something about themselves. Cornett and Smithrim in the Arts as Learning Makers say that the most important aspects of civilization and culture are preserved not in standardized tests or on report cards but in imaginative literature, art, drama, dance and music. (2) Plays are usually devised keeping in mind the developmental and educational need of the target audience. DreamBoat children's theatre has evolved over the years. This study sets out to explore the changes that have occurred.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

During the first five years of its existence there was low patronage by children's audiences. Research also revealed a detachment of young audiences from the stage action. Further inquiry revealed that plays were not as stimulating as they should have been.

### Objective/Research Questions

DreamBoat management team then set to conduct a study – the key questions it sought to answer were

- i. How could DreamBoat employ playwrights and designers working in children's theatre to arrange words, pictures, colours, bodies that these symbols help the child perceive patterns, relations, feelings and produce inner meanings?

- ii. What could be done so that the theatrical productions evoke intellectual and emotional responses from the audience?

### OBJECTIVE

The key objective of the study was to establish how children experience theatre aesthetically.

### METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative methods to gather data from children, teachers and theatre practitioners as well as parents in two states of Cross River and Akwa Ibom. It also observed ten DreamBoat's children's theatre productions. More than five hundred children and fifty teachers in two states and four towns participated in the study. Focused group discussions and key informant interviews with specific children who had attended DreamBoat productions were the major tools employed. The research spanned six months. Locations of research were Calabar, Uyo, Ogoja and Ikot Ekpene.

### CHILDREN'S THEATRE CONCEPT

Children's theatre is a term given to the form of drama that exists for the child audience. It is a formal theatrical experience, which involves playwriting, acting and designing. Usually a group of Professional theatre practitioners, amateurs (school teacher's, Sunday school teacher, camp leader, park director etc) or older children act a play for other children. According to Nellie Mc Caslin in her book Creative Dramatics for the Classroom

The child in the audience is a spectator (not a participant), and the benefit he derives is aesthetics. (7)

The product is the focus of this activity as opposed to Creative dramatics where the process is the focus. Usually Professional actors take plays to schools, libraries, hospitals, museums and churches. Other times, special physical children's theatre structures exist where plays are performed solely for children: They may give two or three performances a day including matinees. Parents usually take their children here to entertain and occupy their time.

What does a child learn from attending good children's theatre? He gains much including the following:

- **Entertainment**
- Educational Exposure
- Psychological growth
- Developing a future audience.

**Entertainment:** There is thrill in seeing well-crafted play. There is joy in being part of the world of make believe: It adds colour to childhood memory bank when one remembers a colourful episode of actors in costume performing for children.

**Educational Exposure:** Children are usually introduced to historical, literary, geographical, biblical and other concepts through play performances. They could be introduced to the cultures of other people like their folktales, costumes, and other peculiarities through play performances. Ruth Beall Heining in her book Go Adventuring quotes Mark Twain writing in 1908 to a children's theatre director in Chicago:

Children's theatre is easily the most valuable adjunct that any educational institution for the young can have, and that no other wise good school is complete without it. It

is much the most effective teacher of morals and good promoter of good conduct that the ingenuity of man has yet devised. The reason that its lessons are not taught by books and dreary homily, but by visible and enthusing action; and they go straight to the heart, which is the rightest of right places for them. Book morals often get no further than the intellect, if they even get that far from their spectral and shadowy pilgrimage. But when they travel from a children's theatre they do not stop permanently at that half-way -house, but go on home. The children's theatre is the only teacher of morals and conduct and high ideals that never bores the pupil, but leaves him sorry when the lesson is over. And as for history, no other teacher is for a moment comparable to it; no other can make the dead heroes of the world rise up and shake the dust of the ages from their bones and live and move and breathe and speak and be real to the looker and listener. No other can make the study of the lives and times of the illustrious dead delight splendid interest, passion; and no other can paint a history-lesson in colours that will stay, and stay, and never fade. It is my conviction that the children's theatre is one of the very great inventions of the twentieth century; and that its vast educational value now not dimly perceived and but vaguely understood- will presently come to be recognized. (92)

**Psychological Growth:** It has been said that theatre helps a child develop through ego problems. The director does this through providing positive models such as bravery, courage, truth, and honesty for the children. Children through identification with the good but abused Cinderella for example; develop an emphatic bond which affects their attitudes.

Another benefit is developing a future audience: People who are exposed to watching plays from childhood grow to appreciate the art. They also develop a liking for theatre. Research conducted in many parts of the world has shown that some of these people grow up to take theatre as their Profession.

**Personal Influence:** Children's theatre has a profound effect on members of the audience. Studies conducted on Winifred Ward, have shown how her work shaped many lives. Annie Thurman, one time student of Winifred Ward and later a Professor of children's theatre has this to say:

You Winifred Ward, have been one of the most important influences in my life, you changed my life for the better.

Hazel Easton, Winifred's close friend of more than 50 years writes in "A friend remembers". Going to the children's theatre plays and taking part in them sometimes changed the whole outlook of a child. When Winifred died, many people wrote me and again and again they said, she changed my whole life. One young man stopped Winifred during an intermission of an opera to declare; you won't remember me, but I was your Rumpelstiltskin. It changed my life.

Children's theatre demands high standards of production. It is good theatre at its peak. It tries to create illusion. It demands hard work, commitment and excellent contributions from its workers. Winifred Ward said; Theatre for children must be the same as theatre for adults-only better.

Eloquent testimonies abound from teachers, children and parents that support the power of positive influence of DreamBoat children's theatre on its multiple clients. Below

are excerpts of three feedback:

- \* *Before now, I used to think theatre was useless, now I see its potentiality in education and its prospects as a career – Mrs V. Adams (Supervisor, St. Christopher Nursery School, Calabar)*
- \* *Since I became a fan of the DreamBoat Children's Theatre, I can now write stories and can understand people better even my speaking skills have also improved–Felix Eyo (Auntie Margaret Nursery School)*
- \* *Edisua do not give up. Keep up the unique work. Though it has been tough, I am convinced that one day you will be fully rewarded, since you are the only one around here in your field. Mrs. Sama (Proprietress Children International Nursery School, Calabar)*

### DREAMBOAT CHILDREN'S THEATRE: GENESIS

Funbow Children's Theatre House (now known as DreamBoat Theatre for Development Foundation) began in 1987. Edisua Oko-Offoboche (now paints the origin of the vision in Drama with and for Children

While I was working as a Research Assistant at the Centre for Cultural studies in former University of Cross River State, Uyo, I was challenged by late Professor E, D. Akpan to make my services viable by generating income for the centre or face rationalisation. This made me to go back to my text .books on children's theatre and to reflect on some of the class projects I had done with my former lecturer, Mrs. Danielle Lyndersay. Ideas began to pop in my head which were to give birth to the Children's, Funbow Theatre House which much recently became DreamBoat Development Theatre Foundation. (106)

In the beginning the work focused on entertaining children. Through improvisations and experimental styles of production – plays were put together. The first plays were didactic in nature and preachy. Later on a lot of cultural materials such as folklore and myths were used, it was a way of handing down cultural values and heritage to a generation that was fast losing it. And much later came plays with educational, social and contemporary themes. Plays were always performed in the proscenium theatres and these acted as a barrier as audience members sat detached from the stage action. Large cast were used – often reaching fifteen or twenty – this posed challenges of welfare and proper remuneration in terms of fees. In the Western world children's theatre theorists advocate for use of theatre magic to fill the need of fantasy in Children's plays, DreamBoat designed elaborate stage scenery to meet this requirement.

For box office DreamBoat depended on sales of tickets during performances – this gate-takings remained deplorable and audience scanty. The work encountered a number of challenges which included:

- Resistance from head teachers and school authority who lacked understanding of the role of theatre in education
- Misunderstanding from parents who emphasized cognitive development of their children
- Lack of children's theatre personnel, directors, playwrights, actors and designers, all roles were often combined by the artistic director.
- Limited resources of children's theatre which included lights, costumes and plays
- Inadequate funding

### CHANGING TRENDS IN DREAMBOAT CHILDREN'S THEATRE

The research findings revealed four areas that DreamBoat needed to review in order to transmit deeper meanings for children

1. Theoretical framework
2. Stories and characters
3. Styles of production
4. Audience participation

#### 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the beginning DreamBoat devised plays without following any key principles or patterns. The study revealed that DreamBoat work needed to have a theoretical basis or systematic way of working, a formula. Psychological theories of Vygostky and Bandura provided the basis of DreamBoat's work. Vygotsky sociocultural theory had proposed that learning was embedded within social events and occurred as individuals interact with other human beings, objects and environment and this interaction helps the child to learn what is important in their culture. Similarly, Bandura emphasized the importance of observational learning whereby children model behaviours, attitudes and emotional responses of others according to the observed benefits and adverse effects of those behaviours.

The Social Cognitive Theory is relevant to communication. First, the theory deals with cognitive, emotional aspects and aspects of behavior for understanding behavioral change. Second, the concepts of the Social Cognitive Theory provide ways for new behavioral research in education. Finally, ideas for other theoretical areas such as psychology are welcome to provide new insights and understanding.

According to Obeten Ifere in *An SBCC Approach to Increasing HIV prevention of mother to child*

Bandura would claim that the child who has seen her parents being kind and caring, giving to charity, caring for the environment, being kind to animals, will tend to be the same. However, an individual who has seen problems being faced with violence, arguments occurring, wrongdoing being punished by beating, will tend to grow up to be more aggressive etc. They will learn violent ways of addressing the world. Key constructs of social learning theory that are relevant to behavior change interventions include:

- Observational learning
- Reinforcement
- Self-control
- Self-efficacy (29)

Hence according to Waters – Socio-cultural theory suggests that individuals' cognitive developmental processes and learning processes are simply products of their society and culture. DreamBoat children's plays always modeled positive role models such as courage, truth, bravery, honesty. For instance children through identification with the good but abused Cinderella develop empathic bond which affects their attitude and behaviour.

#### 2. STORIES AND CHARACTERS

*I just love to see beautiful stories of boys like me; I always think about the stories, I even dream of them. Freddy 9years old – (DreamBoat Children's Theatre fan 1991)*

Research findings revealed that the type of stories enacted were the foundations and principal framework of trans-

mitting meanings to young people. The quest to enrich young people lives depended on what stories they heard. The success of the artistic and technical areas depended on the story. DreamBoat wanted to offer solid, wholesome stories whose roots and hooks go deep. The stories were the first major aesthetics vehicle.

The Funbow (DreamBoat) was committed to creating stories that would help the child discover meanings in life, to understand himself and others better and to be able to have satisfying human relationships. DreamBoat desired children to experience the full gamut of life – the dark and the sunny sides that children go outside narrow confines of believing only in pleasant rosy situations to experience that bad things can happen to good people and vice versa. DreamBoat wanted them to know that much that goes wrong in the world is as a result of human behavior and action. All men have the propensity to be aggressive, selfish, to be angry, jealous etc. and when they make wrong choices, it affects many others. Children needed to understand that there are differences between people, one has to constantly decide who he wants to be and that decision are not always based on right or wrong – but sometimes people make decisions through their emotions.

According to Bruno Bettelheim in the *Uses of Enchantment*

The child identifies with the good hero not because of his goodness but because the hero's condition makes a deep and positive appeal to him. The question for the child is not, Do I want to be good but who do I want to be like. He projects himself into one person in the story that touches or inspires him. (10)

DreamBoat sought to open the children's mind through stories so they could appreciate higher things in life. The stories stimulated their fantasies and fed their imagination. They also acted as agents for socialization. DreamBoat devised stories that would play therapeutic functions, to help children find solutions, through reflecting on the implications of the story to their own inner conflicts and personal problems. DreamBoat used stories to answer the children's most important questions. It employed wide range of stories, no longer limited to traditional literature, fairy tales, myths, legends, fables. Adaptations of Cinderella, The Frog Prince, Rapunzel, Gretel etc opened up to contemporary stories from everyday occurrences and about normal people, stories about social issues and scientific topics, DreamBoat stories gradually moved from princesses and kings, from fairies and witches to stories of ordinary boys and girls in their homes facing sibling rivalry, in schools who want to learn something different from what the curriculum offers (Teacher, Teacher!) and in communities who try to run away from the gang or peer influence. DreamBoat play scripts repertoire include a wide variety of plays such as; 'I am a girl and so what?' 'Okon and the zoo', 'The ABC Man', 'Chris and the Colourshop', 'The lying kid', 'Greedy Children Listen', 'Eme the Pearl', 'Ete Ibak – the Wizard,' 'Wicked Step-mother', 'Sodium and Chloride', 'The Red Bucket', 'Bones of the Body,' 'Where does Light come from?' 'The Radio', 'Hansel and Gretel' 'The Frog Prince', 'Cinderella,' 'Sali's Christmas gift', 'Christmas: Jesus Birthday', 'Christmas day comedy', 'Machine', 'The Servant', 'The Pastor', 'Mosquitoes', 'Osmosis' etc

### 3. STYLES OF PRODUCTION

For DreamBoat another aesthetic medium was the style of production. It discovered that children preferred a mixed

grill to a plain fare. Initially, plays had used mostly presentational realism. DreamBoat began to use syncretism coming presentational and representational styles bringing a lot of activities such as dance, songs, puppetry, mime, acrobatics, masks, make-up, mixture of styles such as Stanislavski, Epic, poor theatre, story theatre, symbolism were all employed to add variety. This helped to hold the attention of children as they patiently sat anticipating the thrill of the next surprise.

Through the styles the production became a magical affair, helping to stimulate the imagination of children helping them to live their dreams and helping the children travel through the world of fantasy. Some productions had elaborate costumes and sets. Each story was a magic mirror which reflected some aspects of children's inner turmoil or the turmoil around them. These were the icing on the stories adding colour, sparkle and glamour. Slapstick was always on the menu, it was part of DreamBoat's style: a lot of physical action such as fights, violence, buffoonery and horseplay were always incorporated. Child-like behavior were also part of the play. Children are always amused when they see adults crying, being stupid or naïve. It tells or reminds them that they are not alone – all human have flaws.

Children love pleasure – everyone does. DreamBoat incorporated eating, drinking, having backs scratched etc. The pleasure principle served to show that often most of what we do as humans are based on passions and are irrational. We can become prisoners to our senses but the process in which a child makes a decision whether to be swayed by a passion or not helps his personal growth and development. The application of what he sees on stage to his personal life experiences helps him make meaning in his/her daily struggles.

**Audience Participation:** It began with audience engineering. Research had shown that audience patronage was lower than had been expected. Audience members wanted the plays to reach them where they were. DreamBoat management voted for doing shows that would tour schools. Even when plays were done in schools, gate fees did not automatically improve – Edisua Oko-Offoboche further explains what actions were taken to solve this challenge in Drama for and with children

The following strategies were devised to improve box office department

- The use of school authorities and teachers as sales agents. The teachers are usually given a commission that ranges from 10%-30% of the total sales to motivate their interest in supporting the performance.
- The use of handbills and posters.
- Doing mini - skit shows during school assemblies and during break periods to stimulate the interest of the children in watching the shows. These skits often are frothed with clowning, songs and mime. (108-109)

This was done basically by removing the fourth wall and involving the children audiences not a spectator but as what Boal would call spect-actors! For this a number of activities were incorporated. They included a lot of songs, dances, comedies, question and answer sessions, involving audiences in crowd scenes where they took up roles – as drummers, villagers, trees in the forest, animals etc. Plenty of movements on stage such as dances, mime, running

round. Workshops were usually incorporated at the beginning or end of performances. All of these helped to bring the performance alive. DreamBoat audiences were not spectators, but became spect-actors! Augusto Boal's Theatre of Oppressed methodology such as imaging, games, foruming and hotseat were also incorporated into some productions.

### CONCLUSION

DreamBoat Children's Theatre productions have not only been entertaining for young people but have demonstrated positive influence on the behaviour and knowledge of children. There is need to sustain this practice and to further investigate the depth of effectiveness of the use of play performances on their total well being.

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