


The Importance of Box Office in Theatre Production

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the discussion and revelation of the importance of the box office in a theatre production. In the theatre, the box office or ticket office, as it is called in most cases, is a place where tickets are sold to the public for admission to an event or performance. The box office exists in all theatres and is very functional, especially if the theatre is determined to make a profit and stay functional. The box office does not serve as the point of ticket sales alone; it is the theatre's accounting department and also a reference point in the calculation of the number of persons that attended a particular theatre production. In a theatre production, the box office holds great economic importance; it is the point of economic transaction in the production. It serves the role of record and bookkeeping of the number of persons that attended/attended a theatre production. This is why the study concludes by saying that no matter how the theatre structure may be, the box office cannot be pushed aside on the production day, as it is a major factor in the arms of theatre.

Keywords: *Indigenous Identity, Cultural Representation, Colonial Stereotypes, Native American Drama.*

Introduction

Theatre, as a collaborative art form, is made up of the collaborative work of different theatre actors and personnel. While the word theatre means different things to different people, some consider it a place or building consisting of a stage and seating arena where an audience gathers to watch plays, musical performances, public ceremonies, and so on. Others see it as a building where plays, shows, etc., are performed on a stage as a form of entertainment. These different views of people, as regards what theatre is, are what has given theatre the different meanings it has to date. Despite this, one thing that one must note in the discussion of theatre, is what Brockett & Ball (2004) says about the theatre, which is that “theatre is a complex art at least twenty – five hundred years old and over such a long span, it has undergone many changes and

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followed diverse paths” (1). This indicates that the theatre has existed for decades, growing from a crude form of arts and entertainment, with different forms of improvised performances, locales, scenery, etcetera, to a now sophisticated venture with fancy theatre buildings, sceneries etc.

In the early years of its existence, the theatre was visited regularly by people in large numbers on days/nights of performances, as it was a vital part of communal entertainment. Most communities hosted different theatre troupes and buildings, which put up different performances that served as sources of entertainment. Most of these performances were hosted free, and without the collection of any form of gate fee taking. But with the passage of time, another major feature was introduced into the theatre, and this has come to be right from the point of its introduction till date. This major addition into the arts of the theatre is considered the commercialization of theatre performances; the need to make money out of the different performances is very high because the cost of putting up a theatre production.

With this new emergence and development in the theatre came the presence and introduction of different arms and areas of the theatre. This introduction and development, gave room and rise to the introduction and emergence of different arms in the theatre. This introduction of the different arms into the theatre, also saw the emergence of different personnel, who were saddled with the responsibilities that such new arms, pushed forth. One of such major areas that were introduced into the theatre, which in this present era cannot be neglected in the discussion of theatre anywhere, is what we consider as the box office; which is a significant unit of the management angle and aspect of the theatre. This area of the theatre is saddled with the responsibility of managing the ticketing of a theatre performance or any similar event. The major role of those who occupy this office include managing the box office, accounting for ticket transactions, and ensuring the proper operation of the performance venue to ensure that all those who come to see the theatre performance are well checked in.

Literature Review

In the words of Ayakoroma (2014), the word theatre, means different thing to different people. To the medical student, a theatre is a place where surgical operations are done. To a soldier, the word theatre means a place where a war is being fought; thus, we talk of theatres of war across the globe. To a university undergraduate, a theatre could just be a hall where lectures are delivered, this is why we have Lecture Theatre in different Universities (p. 13). This is why

the mention of the word “Theatre” draws people’s attention to different things. However, the theatre discussed in this section is theatre as it relates to arts and performance (theatre arts). The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* (2000) puts it that theatre is “a building or an outdoor area where plays and similar types of entertainments are performed” (1239). This assertion puts theatre as just a building or venue for performances and other entertainment functions or events. This view is also supported by *The New Webster’s Dictionary* (2004), which says that theatre is “a building or open space where dramatic performances are given, furnished with a stage for actors and seats for the audience” (1024). These two standpoints points to the fact that, a theatre is first a building, either well-built and furnished or an uncompleted building where dramatic performances take place, and it must have a stage for actors and seats for the audience.

About the audience factor, the definition makes it clear that the audience is an important factor in the discussion of theatre, they are the reason for any theatre performance, and without them, the theatre cannot be functional; as the performances had to be seen and those to see them, are the audience. Thus, neglecting the audience in the discussion of theatre, is like neglecting food in the discussion of a child’s physical growth. This is why theatre is defined by Bell-Gam as quoted by Clive (2006) as “a form of artistic experience or art form which utilise the physical participation of audience, actors and stage” (1), and also by Nilson in Clive (2006) as “an event in which the performers are in the presence of the audience” (1). These assertions all points to the importance of the audience in the discussion of theatre.

From the view of Ejiofor (2007), theatre is a composite art which “employs the arts of playwriting, directing, costume and make-up, acting, scenography, and theatre management in concert at performances for the sole purpose of communication” (3). This definition puts into consideration and brings to light, the different units and arms that exist in the theatre. But how exactly and when exactly did this composite art come to be?

Origin of Theatre

Historically speaking, Brockett & Ball (2004) explains that:

It is uncertain just how and when theatre originated, but as far back as we can trace human history, various kinds of rituals considered vital to the well-being of the tribe were already using the elements needed for theatre: a performance space, performers, masks or make-up, costumes, music, dance, and an audience.” (3)

Despite this assertion, Brockett & Hildy (1999) clearly explain that the most widely accepted theory on the history of theatre, is the one “championed by anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (which) envisions theatre as emerging out of myth and ritual (1). Supporting this view, Ejiofor (2007) states that “the earliest records of the origin and development of Western theatre and drama cannot be dissociated from religious rites and ceremonies, dating back to the 5th Century B.C.” (p. 4). Theatre has its origin in the cultural settings of the past and the vicissitudes of the present. The theatre tradition has been part of the people’s ritual and social life, embracing the totality of their way of life, habits, attitudes and propensities. Victor A. (2014) explains that from the early ages to the medieval period, theatre and religion were regarded as “strange bed fellows” i.e. the most widely accepted theory on the origin of theatre is that it arose out of myth and ritual (*this assertion is very unclear as it does not explain what Victor A. says*). The earliest recorded quasi-theatrical event dates back to 2000 BC with the “passion plays” of Ancient Egypt. Greek theatre, being the root of the Western tradition, was part of a broader culture of theatrical performances, which include festivals and religious festivals e.g. celebrating Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, with the Dionysia festivals. This assertion displays and makes clear how theatre has long existed in the society, though the argument on the particular location (country and region) where theatre began is still on, theatre is mostly believed to have begun in ancient Greece around 5th Century B.C., and to have originated from ritual worship and activities.

Now that the meaning and origin of theatre are established, what elements must be present for one to know that theatre has occurred? The answer to this question is seen in the discussion on the theatre element below.

Elements of Theatre

Brockett & Ball (2004), in their discussion on what they tag “The Basic Elements of Theatre” explain that the theatre has three basic elements, which are “what is performed (script, scenerio, or plan); the performance (including all of the processes involved in the creation and presentation of a production); and the audience (the perceivers) (p. 4). This assertion seems to be incomplete as in the assertion provided by Brockett and Hildy on the meaning of theatre, they present some elements of theatre, which are the “Performance space (the theatre building or stage), a performer (dancer, singing, actor, drummer, etcetera), masks or make-up and costume (ornaments for the decoration of the performer), and the audience) (3). Front this, we

know that for theatre to occur in any place, these key elements of space, stage, or location for the performance, the performer, the audience, and the other technical aspects like the scenography, light, sound etc., must be present. Furthermore, other aspects and elements of the theatre are worth creating awareness of, and these areas are the management aspect or element of the theatre. This aspect of the theatre is generally regarded as theatre management.

Theatre Management

Theatre management is that aspect of the theatre saddled with the responsibility(ies) of managing and running the theatre's financial, marketing, human resources, and sales activities. According to Ohiri (2016), one of the most popular definitions of theatre management is that provided by Chris Nwamuo, which states that theatre management is the art and science of planning, staffing, organizing, motivating, directing, and controlling human and material resources in the arts of the theatre, with the sole aim of this being guaranteeing satisfaction, having a full house and maximizing profit (p. 56). From this, it is obvious what theatre management entails (planning, staffing, organising, motivating, directing and controlling human and material resources, to guarantee satisfaction, have a full house and maximize profit.) Lending his voice to this definition,

From the view of Ohiri (2016) states that these elements of a theatrical production that are to be managed, include the creative raw materials like the script, the scenario, a place to present the idea which is the theatre building; a performer or person to refine these raw materials like a dancer, singer, witch doctor, an actor; and audience to witness the production (p. 56). Theatre Management is so important that without it, there cannot be theatre. This is because theatre can only take place after the procurement, harmonization and utilization of the human and material resources of the theatre. The presence and need of the audience, their comfort etc., is also considered and created through the theatre management unit. This is why Theatre Management is the root of the success of any theatre business or production (p. 57).

So, theatre management is an aspect of the theatre that is focused on seeing that both human and material resources, and all that will make for a successful theatre production, are present, harmonized and judiciously utilized to see that a theatre production becomes successful, and gain/profit is made. Giving credence to these aims and objectives of theatre management, Ayakoroma (2013) explains that theatre management aims at:

- (a) Facilitating the operation of all commercial aspects of a production, and handles those operations in an efficient and responsible manner.
- (b) Coordinating and controlling all the theatre business, including sales, purchasing and publicity activities.
- (c) Facilitating the job of the director, designers and technicians and the performance of their artistic duties when such duties have commercial dimensions.
- (d) Carrying out all theatre policies as they relate to the public performance programme.
- (e) Acting as a liaison between the artists and the business officer of the theatre (p. 27).

This indicates the vital role management plays in different organizations, as well as in the theatre. The achievement of these aims and objectives, is the only yardstick and guarantee that a program, or an organization will stay functional and not fold up. This is why theatre management is so vital in the theatre.

Structure of Theatre Management

Just as theatre itself is a collaborative and collective art of different professionals and personnel, theatre management comprises different structures, personnel, and units. These different management units, which are manned by different theatre personnel (mostly managerial personnel), function hand in hand to achieve the managerial goal and pursuit of the theatre. As Ayakoroma (2013) puts it, the management ladder and unit of a typical theatre follow the structure below.

1. Board of Directors

There is the Board of Directors or the designated representative at the helm of affairs. He could be the Chairman, who is in a non-executive capacity. In an academic theatre like ours in the African university, this position is occupied by the H.O.D and all staff of the department. They oversee the affairs the theatre and all that happens in and around it. It might even include the school's authority, as they also play a vital role in the running of the academic theatre.

2. The Managing Director or Executive Producer

In the management hierarchy and structure of the theatre, the Managing Director or Executive Producer comes next after the board of directors. He/she functions in an executive capacity, formulating policies for implementation.

3. The Theatre Manager

Under the Managing Director, we have the Theatre manager. His/her duties are to oversee the day-to-day running of the theatre organisation. This is the level and person responsible for translating the policies laid down in the management unit, into action. The theatre manager ensures the actualisation of the goals of the company (theatre) through effective application of the principles and practice of management.

4. The Business Manager

The next level in the administrative hierarchy of the theatre, is the Business Manager. As the second in command on ground at the executive level of the management team, he takes charge of the actual business of the theatre and stands in for the theatre manger where needed.

5. The Publicity Manager, Public Relations Manager, Box Office Manager, and the House Manager

These people work directly under the Business Manager in the theatre. In line with their designations, they take care of production publicity, advertising, theatre-public relations, ticket sales, and taking care of the theatre auditorium and the audience, respectively.

6. The Assistant Manager and the Officers

Though not the least in the ranking, the Assistant Manager and the Officers come on next in the hierarchy of the management (p. 29-31).

We must know that all these people have a list of officers working with them to ensure that the aims and duties they are assigned to do are successfully carried out on time and effectively.

The Box office

In a simple term, box office, is an area in a theater where tickets are sold for a performance or production. A box office or ticket office, as it is called in most cases, is a place where tickets are sold to the public for admission to an event or performance. The structure of this office is usually built in a way that allows patrons and those who want to view the performance to buy their tickets from the box office manager through a hole in a wall or window. According to *The New Webster's Dictionary* (2004), the box office is considered the ticket office in a theatre (115). This word, by extension, is frequently used, especially in the

context of the theatre and the film industry, as a synonym for the amount of business and sales a particular production receives, such as a film or theatre show.

From a historical perspective, Sinha (2016) explains that the term 'box office' originated in the Elizabethan era, when affluent people would sit in private 'boxes' to watch theatre. Tickets for boxes were sold at a 'box office. A significant portion of the revenue would come from these tickets as they were costlier. The profit made at the box office or a *box office* business can be measured in terms of the number of tickets sold or the amount of money raised by ticket sales (revenue) per event. The projection and analysis of these earnings is very important for the theatre industry and often a major point of interest for the theatre managers and even the performers and fans. In movies, the box office is a major source of interest for the fans, this is predominant in the Hollywood movie industry. This is the main reason why box office still stands as a major factor in the movie industry.

It is worthy to know that in the movie industry, to determine if a movie made profit, it is not correct to directly compare the box office gross with the production budget, because the movie theater keeps nearly half of the gross on average. The split varies from movie to movie, and the percentage for the distributor is generally higher in early weeks. Usually, the distributor gets a percentage of the revenue after first deducting a "house allowance" or "house nut". It is also common that the distributor gets either a percentage of the gross income, or a higher percentage of the revenue after deducting the nut, whichever is larger. The distributor's share of the box office gross is often referred to as the "distributor rentals", especially for box office reporting of older films (Cones, J. W., 1997, p. 41). In contemporary times, 'box office collection' means earnings generated by ticket sales after a film's release (Sinha, 2016).

From the explanation put forth by Ayakoroma (2014), the box office is the small office in the front house where tickets are sold. It is the first point of contact between the audience and the theatre management staff. Thus, the first impression is essential towards building a lasting relationship. This is why the box office personnel should be:

- (a) Officers who should be personable, courteous to people;
- (b) Persons who are well groomed, able to put on a smile always;
- (c) Persons who are intelligent, who should listen to everybody;
- (d) Officers who are efficient to render smart services;

- (e) People capable of working under pressure, not the type who will be confused when there is a “mad rush,” or will lose his cool when faced with a quarrelsome audience; and
- (f) Those who could be diplomatic, and recognise the theatre patrons (p. 06).

The box office clerks or ticket sellers issue the tickets to the audience. All tickets, which are usually in booklets of fifty each or one hundred each for easy handling, are numbered. Each ticket has a stub bearing the same number with the part that is handed over to the audience. This is to enhance hand to hand check when the officer is making returns. In advanced theatre cultures, tickets are sold according to the seat numbers, thus, a theatre patron can book for the particular seats he likes. In our own experience, apart from command performances, where seats are reserved for dignitaries, the audiences sit anywhere they like. However, the box office clerk should know how many tickets would be sold for a given production, and stop sales when the house is full to avoid overcrowding and stampedes. At the end of the day, after closing shop, the officer fills the daily sales form to balance his account for the day. This involves a record of the number of tickets sold, their denominations and the amount (96-97). Now that a clear understating has been established on what the box office, and the duties and activities that are performed in it, let us go straight to explaining the importance of this management office in a theatre production, which is the main focus of the discussion.

The Importance Of Box Office In Theatre Production

It is necessary to start by asking if there truly is any important role the box office and its officers play in a theatre production. The reason for this question is because of the diverse beliefs people have concerning the box office and its officials. So many believe that the box office and its officials play no role in the theatre or a theatre production. This belief is found on the ground that the theatre was considered very functional even without the presence of the box office. But we must note from this point that, even though the box office came into being in the later years in the practice of theatre, the place, role, and even importance of this office has been long in existence in the theatre, just like the many other areas and aspects of the theatre that long existed and was manned by different people before it was handed over to, and being manned/controlled by special and designated personnel. Be that as it may, clarification is still necessary to clear everyone's doubts about the important role and function of the box office and its personnel in theatre production and to point out these important roles.

To start with, I will say that the greatest importance of the box office in a theatre production, is economical. By this, I mean to say, that the box office holds great economic importance in a theatre production, it is the point of economic transaction in the theatre production. It is where all financial transactions are handled in the theatre before and during the theatre production. By this, it is clear that the first importance of the box office in a theatre production, is economically. This economical importance is also attributed to the fact that it is where the financial aspect of the production, in terms of people getting/buying the tickets to see the production, and where the resources and money raised in a theatre production is gathered and accounted for. This economic aspect is also attributed to how the box office helps the theatre management team, and the organizers of the production to know if they are making a profit or are running at a loss. This balance sheet function is achievable by doing a minus and plus of all expenses covered against the total number of sold tickets, and the amount made in the production. So the economic importance of box office in a theatre production, cannot be covered in a single discussion, and should always be considered and put first in the debate about the importance of the box office in a production.

Another importance of the box office in a theatre production, is that it serves the purpose and role of record and bookkeeping of the number of persons that attended/attends a theatre production. The total number of persons that attended a theatre show or production is easily known, through a trace of the ticket sales. In this aspect, the box office and its officials help with theatre attendance and bookkeeping. Apart from this, the box office also helps in maintaining orderliness in movement to and fro the production venue. This is achieved through the checking in process which the officials of the box office take charge and care of in the production process.

The box office officials are also responsible for and serve the important role and function of properly accounting for and keeping ticket fees for production. This importance can also be said to be like the important role the financial secretary plays in an organization. Because just like the financial secretary, the box office and its officials take and keep all financial records on the production. By this, the box office serves and works as the financial record keeper of the production; without them, the financial record of the production will be lost and gone. The box office functions as the administrative arm of the production on the main day of production.

Finally, the box office, like other arms in the theatre management team and everyone in the production team, works hand in hand to ensure that the production is a huge success. This function of the box office officials is of major importance and should not be underrated or looked down on in the discussion of theatre production. Because without a proper and effective box office team, there will surely be disorder at the theatre entrance, and this is not good for any theatre production. Thus, we should always note that the theatre production is incomplete without the presence of the box office and its officials. Therefore, the importance of box office in the theatre production cannot be over-emphasized.

Conclusion

After the completion of an investigation into the topic of discussion on the place and importance of the box office in a theatre production, one will say that indeed, the box office is a major aspect of any production, and it is stated clearly that, the box office exist in all productions. We must note as parting words that, no matter how the theatre structure may be, the box office cannot be pushed aside on the production day, as it is a major factor in the arm and discussion of theatre, theatre management, and theatre production.

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