

Theatre as a Campaign Tool against Drug and Substance Abuse in Selected Kenyan Schools Plays.

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Abstract

The Kenya National Drama Festival Committee, the organizers of the National Schools, Colleges and Universities Drama Festival usually enters into a sponsorship agreement with other institutions to help in disseminating certain messages through drama. One of these institutions is the National Agency for the Campaign Against Drug and Substance and Alcohol Abuse (NACADA). NACADA has sponsored a number of editions of the Festival in the hope that participants will be sensitized through the performances on the need for demand reduction and supply suppression of alcohol and drugs use. The event targets mostly the youth in Kenya who are said to be at the highest risk of becoming victims of drug and substance abuse. The youth are mostly in schools. This article interrogates some of the plays presented at this festival and their agency at advocating the NACADA course. Specifically, it seeks to respond to the following questions; how are the plays structured to communicate supply suppression and demand reduction? What qualities are assigned to characters so that they act as campaign agents and how are the plays designed to signpost the dangers

of drugs and substance abuse? How have they been used for supply suppression and demand reduction of consumption of drug and substances? What are the challenges that this sensitization campaign faced and how can they be overcome?

Keywords: *Drugs and substance Use, Youth, Theatre arts, Plays, Demand Reduction*

Introduction

There are four areas that put theatre at a great advantage as an agent for the campaign against drug and substance abuse can be established. These are its power to influence attitude change, its vibrancy and gregariousness, the thrill and lastly its participatory nature. These four do not work each in its individual stead but rather as a combination and in symbiosis. While theatre targets attitude change as the major area of intervention, it is also vibrant in nature as it attracts the youth to participate. It encourages the idea of collaboration between peers and students in the plays and their audience. The vivancy that it is executed with and the fact of standing out and confidently delivering the many lines and dialogues that the youth engage in makes theatre a preferred art of choice. Furthermore it acts as a form of peer advocacy. Underlying all this is the thrill; the sudden feeling of excitement and fear that builds out of adrenaline as the youth tell the story on stage before an audience.

Theatre requires stepping in ones shoe and empathizing with another person and living a make-believe life that convinces others. By participating or by seeing their colleagues participate, theatre allows them to introspect their lives hence is a perfect ground for intervening in attitude change. Demand reduction of alcohol and drug abuse is

highly dependent on attitude change rather than supply suppression particularly among youths who are already engaged.

Different plays embed certain qualities in their productions to express the matter of advocacy. These qualities constitute the theatre style of the plays that manifests in different areas of production. This article takes the Kenya National Drama Festival and Film Festival (KNDFFF) as its launch pad to interrogate the theme of the campaign against drug and substance abuse among the plays presented at the Festival as sponsored by NACADA between 2013 and 2015. Three plays that were awarded the best in terms of the theme of NACADA in 2013, 2014, and 2015 were selected and subjected to content analysis. These plays had gone through several levels of competition i.e. sub-county, county and regional levels of competition. An attempt is made to unlock the potency of the plays as campaign agents by interrogating the three areas of play production and how they were used in highlighting to the audience the fight against drug and substance abuse. Secondly, it identifies how three areas of production in three school plays were embedded with qualities of advocacy. These three areas are characterization, production design and structure/form. Thirdly, it appraised some of the challenges of using drama as a campaign tool and how such challenges can be overcome.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The article takes theatre semiotics as the lenses with which to analyse the three plays selected. This theory lays a foundation to argue that the festival is an activity involving performance embedded in systems of signs and significations that help pass the message for campaigning against drug and substance abuse. Propounded by Elam (1980) in his text *Semiotics, Theatre and Drama*, this theory defines semiotics as a science that is dedicated to the study of the production of

meaning in the society using the different sign systems and codes that are at work in society and the actual messages and texts produced there by' (p.1). While Elam credits Ferdinand de Saussure as the father of semiotics in the linguistics area, he argues that theatre and performing arts in general have simply appropriated what the linguists developed to explain the processes of generation of meaning in linguistic communication. He further argues that the transaction between the audience and the performer warrants and amounts to what can be termed as 'theatrical communication' which is just but a variation of communication (p.2). This theatrical communication is embedded in theatrical systems which are equivalent to the Saussurian linguistic systems. The linguistic sign in semiotics is made of a vehicle or signifier and a mental concept; signified. This sign in theatre is radically transformed by the stage (Elam, 2002).

Bogatyrev (1938) writes that all objects and bodies defined within the stage are metamorphosed, bestowing upon them an overriding signifying power which they lack- or which at least is less evident- in their normal social functions (pp. 35-6). Thus there is a primary signifying function of all those performance elements on a stage. In fact as Veltrusky (1940) declares, "All that is on the stage is a sign" (p.84). The very appearance of objects and subjects on a stage means that they leave the present world to enter the realm of the symbolic or signifying world. Thus the stage transforms the sign into a signifier. For example, an actor's body acquires what Elam (2002) calls "its mimetic and representational powers by becoming something other than itself, more and less than individual" (p, 5). A seat on the stage is a theatre seat. Set, costumes, props, characters, happenstances, entries, exits, spoken words, unspoken words, gestures, expressions, sounds, (both diegetic and non-diegetic), lighting and others are

signs that point towards something (Elam, 2002). They all conspire as signs towards a concept.

This chapter looked out for all these signs in the plays that were selected and interrogated how they were realigned to bear the weight of telling the story of the campaign against drug and substance abuse.

Methodology

An analysis of performance text must take a qualitative design in the sense that Silverman (2000) looks at it as a soft, subjective and speculative approach of inquiry (p.2). This is because it aims at interrogating plays presented at a festival which is a very subjective social activity. The analysis used close reading as well as content analysis which are critical techniques of a qualitative design. This is a performance analysis since it sought to analyse certain aspects of several performances and how they motivated the theme of campaign against drug and substance abuse. The temporal location was fixed and closed as the study interrogated plays presented between 2013 and 2015. This study analysed only three (3) plays presented at the Kenya schools and colleges drama festival between 2013 and 2015. Each edition of the festival usually has competitions in six genres divided into stage and screen productions. This study took the stage productions which usually have the play, the narrative, the cultural creative dance, the choral and solo verses and lately the stand-up comedy and the modern dance. This study selected the play genre only since the play genre takes a longer duration to develop the structure and plot; all of which were points of concern for this study. Each year about two hundred (200) plays are presented by institutions of learning in Kenya. These institutions include primary schools, secondary schools, teacher training colleges, technical training colleges, institutions with special needs learners, and universities. From the whole population

of over six hundred (600) plays that were presented in 2013, 2014 and 2015, the study first selected any item that had the theme of the campaign against drug and substance abuse, or popularly known in the Festival as the NACADA trophy winners. In picking the items with the theme on the campaign against drug and substance abuse, the study extracted winners from the awards lists that are usually generated by adjudicators and appended on the festival programme of the subsequent years. On the awards lists are usually a section of awards given to those who have excelled in scripting and presenting plays with the theme 'Campaign against drug and substance abuse'. There are usually four levels of reward for items with the theme. These are;

- i. Overall Item with the theme
- ii. Play with the theme
- iii. Dance with the theme
- iv. Verse with the themes

The study used recorded plays at the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). This is the official body charged by the Ministry of Education to record and archive performances presented at festivals organized under the auspices of the state department of education of Kenya. To acquire the video tapes and DVDs of the plays, the researcher went to the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) marketing division and ordered for all of them. The first previewing of the video recorded material led to a selection of only three (3) plays which had strongly brought out the theme of drug and substance abuse. These were The Docker by Menengai High School- Nakuru, Friendly Fire by Lions Primary School- Nakuru, and The Village Gauge by Kenya Aeronautical College.

In selecting the three plays as the sample for the study, the research was guided by Charmaz (2006) who recommends that

qualitative research ought to only use a sample beyond which no new property of the whole population is achieved. In the case of this study, the research estimated that beyond the third play, there would be no new material or ideas relevant to the theme of campaign against drug and substance abuse. The selection of these three editions of the Festival was purposeful since the study was interested in the editions that were heavily sponsored by NACADA as title sponsor. A title sponsor is considered a key ally to the KNDF in the organization and execution of the festival in a particular year. Such a sponsor is given a latitude of privileges including advertising its functions and products as well as branding most of the material and venues of the Festival.

In selecting the plays presented in the years that NACADA sponsored the KNDF, the study assumed that those plays presented profited from NACADA directly or indirectly since NACADA officials made presentations on how plays with themes on the campaign against drug and substance abuse should be done. These presentations benefited scriptwriters, directors and producers during workshops held at the Kenya School of Government-Mombasa, at Kenya School of Government-Embu and at Kenya School of Government-Baringo in 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively.

Data collected from the recorded plays was analysed using content analysis approach. Baker (1999) suggests that content analysis can use a scheme in which the frequency of occurrence and recurrence of patterns in content, amount of that pattern of content, absence or presence of certain qualities within the content, type of content, source and degree of intensity of that content is used to analyse it. Using the above parameters, the study categorized content in the plays in regard to the research questions on characterisation, production design as well as structure and plot. In discussing characterisation, the portrayal of figures and elements as signs and symbols of the fight against drugs and substance abuse were investigated. The structure of the performances in allowing for a cathartic flow of events was also subjected to inquiry. Techniques that helped the directors and playwrights impact positively on the audience through the structuring of the plays were interrogated. Lastly, the analysis endeavoured to appraise the production design and how they act as landmarks and beacons of the message of the fight against drug and substance abuse.

Findings

Below are three tables showing the findings of the study in the three areas of production in the selected plays.

Area of production: Structure

Play/ Unit of measure	Exposition that relates to drug issue	Complication that is related to drug demand or supply	Climax confronting in a drug related issue	Youth centred denouement that emerges from the foregoing and is related to drug issue
Friendly Fire	Present	Present	Present	-Not youth centred -Emerges from Narrative -Related to drug issue

The Docker	Present	Present	Present	- Not youth centred - Emerges from Narrative - Related to drug issue
The Village Gauge	Present	Present	Present	- Not youth centred - Does not emerge from Narrative - Related to drug issue

Area of Production: Characterization

Play/ Unit of measure	Protagonist and antagonists involved in Drugs as signs	Rehabilitation of addicted characters as symbols	Portrayal of child characters as signs of optimism
Friendly Fire	Positive	Positive	Positive
The Docker	Positive	Positive	Negative
The Village Gauge	Positive	Negative	Negative

Area of production: Production Design

Play / Unit of measure	Purposeful and symbolic use of sets, backdrops and props	Purposeful use of sound	Relation of design elements to drug and substance abuse
Friendly Fire	Positive	Positive	Positive
The Docker	Positive	Positive	Positive
The Village Gauge	Positive	Positive	Positive

Findings on Theatre content as a campaign tool

Here, the study was interested to primarily establish the kind of content that the plays presented to the audience. The play *Friendly Fire* by Lions Primary School Nakuru seeks to address how children may inadvertently abuse drugs in the quotidian life at home and in school. The play also alludes to unintentional abuse of drugs by children through consumption of substances like Kuber, dextrosal and other sachets of substances bought innocently from Kiosks around schools. Parental role in minimizing access to drug consumption is tackled here. In the play *The Docker*, the allure of the Kenyan coast and poverty are seen causes that lead to peddling of drugs by children. This leads to child prostitution and unwanted

pregnancies. The influence of foreigners at the Kenyan coastal region is also indicted as one of the causes of drug peddling and consumption by minors in Kenya. Lastly in the play *The Village Gauge* greed and get rich quick by merchants of death and entrepreneurs of illicit are seen as the cause of the rise in adulterated and cheap killer liquor that causes blindness, death and family strains.

Theatre Style as agent for the campaign Findings on the structure

Ideally, a play production that advocates for demand reduction and supply suppression would have the elements of structure reveal an issue that relates to the drug problem. Right from the exposition through the complication to climax and to

the dénouement, the narrative ought to be arranged in such a way that punishes offenders, offers optimism and rehabilitates the addicted. The plays start by introducing a problem at the beginning in what is called exposition. The problem is made worse as characters, especially the protagonist, try to make it better by trying to run away from drug use or drug business (complication). Forces that are bent on supplying drugs to children or making dirty money in drug business fight the protagonist and are about to win at the climax. In a reversal of fortunes, these forces are defeated (in the Village Gauge), unmasked (In Friendly Fire), and decimated (in The Docker). The forces are arrested and taken to court or made to account for their deeds. The end restores the normal order.

In all the plays, the plots tend to be prescriptive and preachy and in this event, the audience do not relate to the pain, anguish, joys and sufferings of the lead characters. As a result, the impact of association between the spectator and the character; the identification that spurs soul searching in the audience and the need to purge the burdensome emotions of imagining that they can engage in drug or substance abuse is almost lost. It is therefore concluded that although the productions attempted to present plays relating to drug and substance abuse, they fall short in as far as constructing a plausible message of the same. However, this in itself cannot bind the productions as total failures. It is possible to have a production weak on plot but strong on production design and characterization.

Findings on Characterization

While interrogating the role characters in the construction of the theme of campaign against drug and substance abuse, attention has to be paid to the role of characters as semiotic signs in the play production and their Saussurian role as vehicles in the communication of the NACADA message. The motivations that lead characters to

either peddle, sell, supply and or consume drugs were found to be key in revealing the redemptive roles. The use of youthful characters played a key emulative role to the students in the audience who saw their own struggle to overcome drug and substance abuse. Most main characters are youth and hence themes are treated at the levels of their world views.

It was found out that portrayal of youth as being able to overcome their situations of need for drugs and substance was not exploited well in the three plays. Most of them relied on adults for help in overcoming the drug problem. Plays resolve by rehabilitating characters already hooked to the drug and substance abuse. Characters who supply drugs and substances are arrested and made to account for their deeds. Parental negligence is also a factor that leads to drug addiction, or supply in two of the plays i.e. *The Village Gauge* and *Friendly Fire*. Indictment of foreigners particularly at the coast of Kenya for messing the children through allures of money and material gains is seen in the play *The Docker*. Characters are offered a psychological and attitudinal rehabilitative dose that is encouraged in healing addicts in *Friendly Fire*.

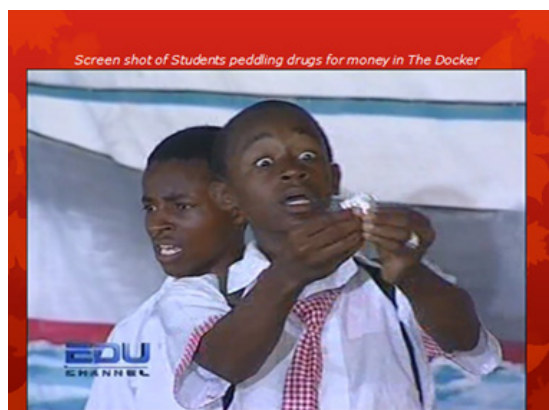


Image grab courtesy of KICD

Findings on Production Designs

In terms of the production design, the use of stage and hand props, costumes, set,

backdrops, as well as flaps, sound, lighting in regard to their semiotic symbolism as an antecedent to the theme of drug and substance abuse was investigated. It was established that the execution of production techniques enhanced the construction of the theme of the fight against drug and substance abuse in the selected plays. It is further argued that the use of sets, backdrops, props and sounds was purposeful in creating particular ambiances, traits of characters, settings both at temporal and spatial levels, moods, tones and styles that were necessary for the advancement of the plots and for the construction of the key meaning in the plays i.e. the fight against drug and substance abuse. Creatively, the production designs paint drug abuse as a menace both in school and at home. In the play *Friendly Fire*, the abstraction of the paintings and drawings of flaps and use of props simultaneously hides and reveals this destructive nature of drugs which as the plays suggests, can be found in normal day to day household consumables at home or in school. In all the plays, purposeful use of sets, backdrops, props and sounds to create particular ambiances, traits of characters, settings both at temporal and spatial levels, moods, tones and styles that were necessary for the advancement of the plots and for the construction of the key meaning in the plays i.e. the fight against drug and substance abuse.

Challenges of Using Theatre for Advocacy

Several challenges of using theatre as a tool of advocacy in the fight against drug and substance abuse were established. They are financial, technical and institutional constraints.

Financial: Schools do not have funds to mount serious productions of theatre for advocacy on health. Presently, a serious advocacy production may cost in the excess of Ksh. 500,000 which schools may not be able to invest in. More so, the theatre productions for

advocacy is not a mainstream objective of education institutions hence the will to invest such amount of money may not be there.

Technical: Techniques of theatre for advocacy on health like use of participatory modes and facilitative theatre are not considered in the productions since, as stated earlier, the main objective of educational institutions is not to produce theatre pieces on advocacy.

Time and institutional constraints: Time at school is heavily regimented to the extent that a full program of theatre for advocacy on health, demand reduction and supply suppression of drugs is almost impossible to achieve.



A production technique in which drugs are represented as simultaneously bad but still alluring

Image courtesy of KICD

Recommendations

Multi Agentic Funding: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should consider funding of the plays as theatre pieces that advocate for demand reduction and supply suppression. This is because the students in school are largely under the charge of Ministry of Education. In cases where school going youth are affected, it becomes not just the mandate of NACADA but also of

Ministry of Education to ensure their well-being.

There is need for training on the construction of advocacy themes especially in educational institutions. This capacity building will empower scriptwriters, directors and other theatre workers to create theatre pieces with specific and clear messages of the fight against drug and substance abuse.

There ought to be advance preparation through collaborations between NACADA and MoEST. This can include mainstreaming messages of drug demand reduction and supply suppression in lower levels of the Festival. Secondly, the National Agency for the Campaign Against Drug Abuse (NACADA) can make it a policy to send representatives well versed in both anti-drug abuse campaigns and theatre as a tool of advocacy to the lower levels of the festival to strengthen performances that don't make it to the national level so that they can be used as campaign platforms that go beyond the idea of giving awards. Such items can be used in various fora where youth are gathered like the world anti-drug day or sponsor some activities that reinvigorate their message. NACADA can also record the productions and archive them for later retrieval and screenings when the need arises.

Conclusion

In the fight against drug and substance abuse by youths, NACADA has engaged different sectors to reach the youth. One of the sectors is the education sector through the use of the creative arts particularly the schools and colleges' drama festival. NACADA has sponsored the 2013, 2014 and 2015 editions of the Kenyan Schools and colleges drama festival. This chapter has appraised these plays and their potency to communicate meaning of advocacy against drug and substance abuse. It has broken the play productions into three

areas i.e. the structure, characterization and design. The study acknowledges that indeed theatre has potency to act as an agent for advocacy against drug and substance abuse. It concludes that the plays used characterization to communicate messages of drug and substance abuse. However, they could have bestowed the agency of rejection of drugs in the youth rather than in adult characters. In terms of structure, the plays meet the threshold by half as they tended to be preachy in the dénouement. The designs were purposeful to create ambiances and mind images of the fight against drug and substance abuse. The article further concludes that the greatest challenge to the use of theatre as a medium of advocacy among the youth in educational institutions is funding and capacity building. This can be overcome through funding of target specific capacity building workshops on how to use theatre for advocacy against drug and substance abuse. Secondly MoEST could consider annual budgeting of funds for this capacity building workshops.

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