

## THEATRE PERFORMANCE AS A PANACEA FOR TRAUMA HEALING

BY

**Ebohon Godfrey Oghuan**  
Department of English Language  
Federal University of Education, Kontagora  
Phone No: 08137830592  
Email: ebohonta@yahoo.com

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### Abstract

Trauma is an emotional damage caused by bodily injury, sexual violence and other threat to the life of the subject, such as direct and indirect exposure to extremely distressing situations or circumstances that can produce an involuntary and possibly overwhelming physiological stress response. Trauma can reshape its victims lives, both cognitively and physically impeding their sense of self, ability to trust, engage and many other seemingly ordinary aspects of day to day life that those unaffected by trauma take for granted. This study x-rayed the manageability of individual who have experienced or are experiencing trauma through the therapeutic potentials of theatre and performance in the society. The paper further explores the role of performance theatre function as powerful medium for trauma healing, drawing from psychodrama and expressive therapies in the contexts of embodiment and creative narration. The paper concludes that trauma is a psychological response to an experience in the face of the life threatening circumstance and so performance based interventions can foster emotional resilience and social reconnection for fast recovery for traumatic victims through theatre and performance therapy. This descriptive study essentially analysed relevant texts and document relating to the subject matter and therefore recommended among others; that the society should know that the assumption that theatre is only for entertainment is utterly wrong, but it shall be seen as a discipline that is all encompassing.

**Keywords:** Theatre, Performance, Trauma, Healing, Psychotherapy

### Introduction

The concept of creativity is a common dominator found in theatre and performance as well as transformation as it apply to the theatre. The whole essence of theatre is not only to inform, enlighten, educate, entertain or produce relaxation for the society. It goes beyond that, looking at the extreme dynamism of theatre and performance; it provides transformative space for healing, growth and rediscovery. By stepping into the stage, trauma survivors have the potential to write new narrative, reconnect with themselves and others, and gain a new sense of empowerment.

Wherever and whenever humanity have progressed beyond the mere struggle for physical existence, to gods and recreation and self-expression, there has been theatre in some sense: an inevitable place for acting,

dancing, dialogue, drama, in the ordered scheme of life. The collective theatre, from primitive dance to modern journalistic play, from divine ritual to profane representation. This type of therapy incorporates aspects of role playing, dramatic self-presentation, and group dynamics to help people gain greater understanding and insight into the lives and experiences. Using theatre and performance in healing a traumatic case through psychodrama medium is a type of experiential, action-based therapy in which people explore issues by acting out event from their past.

Traumatic victims often have dull creative spirit, making them feeling stuck and limited. But a good deployment of theatre and performance breathes life back into imagination, inviting victims to explore new possibilities. On stage they are not confined by past experiences. Instead, they can create, dream and envision alternative realities. Each role they play becomes an opportunity to explore different perspectives, awakening creativity that trauma may have suppressed in them.

Traumatic victims, because of their experience sometimes do not use their creative imagination. Some of them live their life in a dull, prosaic vacuum where they do only what they are told and sense only that which is obvious. These victims of trauma never bother to develop their creative powers, consequently, they lack the joy of life that comes from being resourceful. On the other hand creative people are vividly aware of their environment. Tanner (34) argues that

*“thus, you are able to store within yourself a vast number of idea and impression that you can reassemble and create into something freshly new when the situation demands. Being able to draw confidently from inner resources and to accomplish something that is unequally yours gives you a great sense of satisfaction and adds value to your life”*

Not only will a creative imagination help a traumatic patient to be more interesting person in daily living, it will enable the victim to become a more responsive person in his artistic endeavour. It should be recalled that theatre and performance inclusive, music, dance, acting, writing etc dwell on creative imagination. Perhaps less evident, but equally true, is that it makes a trauma victim to develop his imaginations which can help him or her to overcome the traumatic challenges.

### **Theoretical Framework /Literature Review**

This study adopts a therapeutic method called psychodrama developed by a Romanian-American psychiatrist, psychosociologist and educator named Jacob Levy Moreno. Moreno a Psychotherapist originated this concept of psychodrama therapy in the 1920s. Psychodrama usually takes place within group therapy but the focus is on the individual acting out a conflict. However, it is also possible to do individual psychodrama therapy. A

therapist facilitates the process, helping victims structure psychodrama that support working through challenges.

This theory emphasizes that individuals can gain self understanding and emotional insight by reenacting experiences in a safe, collaborative environment through role playing, improvisation and group interaction. The key concept include spontaneity, the readiness to act in new ways; creativity, the driving force for novel creation tele (empathy), the ability to understand another feelings; and autonomous healing centre within each and group, which therapy seeks to access by removing internal barriers. Psychodrama may help victims work through painful emotions, understand another person's perspective and resolve the situation.

Psychodrama is a structured form of therapy in which a person dramatizes a personal problem or conflict, usually in front of a group of other therapy victims. The other victims usually take part in the drama, though each performance focuses on a single person's concerns. After Moreno's developments in the 1920s, several practitioners have developed new approaches to psychodrama, though the approach to resolving an individual's issues in a group setting remains. Psychodrama may be one part of a large treatment programme, or it may be the primary or sole treatment modality.

The aim of psychodrama is to;

1. foster empathy;
2. Help a person see themselves as other see them;
3. Support a person to work through challenging emotions;
4. Help a person resolve psychological issues from trauma and relationship conflicts. Trauma can trap individuals in cycles of pain, disconnection, and emotional paralysis. Creative solution, such as theatre and performance, can offer an alternative or supplement to traditional talk therapy, offering an embodied, active approach to healing. This method emerged as a result of the limitations of traditional trauma therapy.

Traditional therapy method has long been the go to approach for healing from trauma. Many victims find relief from the insights generated through talk therapy, cognitive behavioral techniques, and other established psychological interventions. Yet many trauma survivors find themselves frustrated by the limitations of conventional therapeutic methods.

Talking about trauma can often feel like repeatedly reopening a wound, with words failing to capture the deeply embodied nature of traumatic experiences. Most talk therapies operate from a cognitive framework, assuring that understanding a traumatic experiences intellectually will release its emotional grip. But trauma is stored not just in the minds of the victims, but in the bodies in the way victims breathe, move, and interact with the world. While traditional therapy provides valuable insights, it frequently struggle to address the visceral, physical dimensions of trauma that words alone cannot reach.

Many trauma victims report feeling stuck despite years of traditional therapy. They can eloquently describe their experiences, understand their triggers, and map out their psychological patterns, yet still feel disconnected from genuine healing. The gap between intellectual understanding and emotional liberation remains frustratingly wide. This is where theatre and performance offer a more holistic approach to traumatic recovery. It provides a dynamic, embodied pathway to healing that goes beyond intellectual understanding, inviting victims to literally step into new narratives and possibilities.

Right from antiquity there are reasons in favour of the use of theatre and performance in the healing of traumatic patients. In I Samuel chapter 16: verse 23;

*“And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well and the evil spirit departed from him.”*

Early treatment of mental illness was based on either a religio-magical or a naturalistic view of disease. This concept originated before recorded history which suggested certain forms of personal suffering or of alienation from one’s fellow as caused by an evil spirit that had gained entrance into the sufferers. The treatment then was based on participation in suitable rites under guidance of a priest-physician.

Traumatic events that occur in an unpredictable fashion are quite damaging to its victims. There are various kinds of traumatic events, hence the disparity in its definition. The plurality of trauma studies spans across multiple discipline ranging from history, culture studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology and many more. The Holocaust of world war II is significantly the precursor of studies in trauma ([www.encyclopaedia.com/topic/trauma.aspx](http://www.encyclopaedia.com/topic/trauma.aspx)). Balacv (149) asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. The development of trauma studies and “trauma theory” in particular can be traced to its first appearance in Caruth Cathy (1996) *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*. The theory’s seminal origin stems from her interpretation and elaboration of Sigmund Freud’s deliberation on traumatic experiences.

Treatment consisted of measures to promote bodily well being and mental tranquility psychotherapy of nonhospitalized patients in the naturalistic tradition was not distinguishable from ordinary medical practice until the latter half of the 19th century. Modern psychotherapeutic methods for directly treating patients include emotional support, problem exploration, interpretation, feedback, and psychosocial skills training. Behaviour therapies are aimed at correcting specific pathological emotional states or behaviour pattern through appropriate countermeasures.

As more research about the ways in which trauma alters cognitive and physical functioning emerges, new and innovative treatment methods are also being brought to light, including the healing power found in the arts

(Theatre and performance). Using theatrical tools, acts as a treatment option for trauma victims, allowing individuals to reconnect with their bodies and their minds, gaining new perspectives on their experiences and coming to terms with their holistic self.

## Conceptual Clarifications

### Trauma

According to Ike (458) trauma is an emotional, depressing and distressing experience. It leaves functional irregularities and developmental problems in its victims". Trauma frequently isolates its victims, making genuine connection feel impossible, by mentally trapping victims in their past experiences. Unpleasant events occur at one time or the other in people's lives, which when recalled, painful memories. The concept of trauma is a broad base phenomenon; but basically it causes stress in the victims brain that leads to the shutting down of moral emotional responses and furthermore triggers danger on the internal and external human psyche.

The experiences as a whole redefines perception of life generally. Trauma can lock its victims into a rigid, survival-based behaviour. This sometimes cause emotional numbers in the individuals suffering from trauma. There are no rule about what experiences can be traumatic. It's about how one react to situations. Trauma is when one experiences very stressful, frightening or distressing events that are difficult to cope with or out of our control. It could be one incident, or an ongoing event that happens over a long period of time. In most cases its effect on us depend on the way we react to such an event. "But we won't all be affected the same way. Trauma can happen at any age. And it can affect us at any time, including a long time after the event has happened" (<https://www.mind.org.uk>).

### Theatre

Theatre can be viewed from two perspective theatre as a structure and theatre as acting (performance) for the sake of this paper, attention will only be drawn on theatre as activity. Soyinka (93) cited in Dare (13) defined theatre as "one arena through which human beings have tried to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of their being". Theatre is a representation of life on a stage. It is like a mirror that reflects and refracts the reality of life (Dare 2001:91). Theatre works on imitations and what is imitated is what is found in the human society and environment. The arts of the theatre have been one means by which human beings have been able to reexamine their lives, dissect and aimed at a definite decision on how to improve and make them better.

Theatre demands responsible commitment as one works towards a creative goal, it makes one develop qualities that promote maturity, teamwork, cooperation and dependability. Theatre makes you develop personal growth as well as make the individual gain confidence and poise from frequent participation. On the other hand, if you are a creative person you become vividly aware of your environmental. Infact Tanner (34) elaborates that:

*Therefore, frequent observation of numerous individual will add to your acting background. You must observe how various people think, how they feel, how they behave. You must notice, for example, how the movements of the old differ from the young, how the emotions of the teenager vary from the adult, how the thoughts of the worker differ from those of the boss.*

Looking at the extreme dynamism of this institution Clifford (83) cited in Akinwale (3) gives a sound summary of the functions of the theatre in the society: Theatre because it reflects nature and human behaviour has of times led the way in promoting new revoluntary philosophies, economic theories and social reform. It has shown man, moral evils in human attitude and behaviour.

## **Performance**

Performance is an act or process of staging or presenting a play, concert or other form of entertainment. Performance has no precise or agreed definition but can be understood as the application of embodied skills and knowledge. Therefore, performance can be defined as behaviour in which performers often, but not always, have some responsibility either to an audience or to each other as in participatory performances in rituals or council/guild meeting (Mokwunyei, 2008:33).

The main sense of performance is artsy; actors and musicians performances. It is an act of doing something successfully, using knowledge as distinguished from merely possessing it. Simply put it is an all encompassing activities of individuals; during a period marked by their continuous presence before a particular set of observers/audience which has some influence on the audience. In the purview of theatre and society, performance in its broadest sense is the praxis of everyday social life that is continuously renewed and re-enacted from generation to generation.

## **Psychotherapy**

This is a form of treatments for psychological, emotional, or behaviour disorder in which a trained person establish as a relationship with one or several patients for the purpose of modifying or removing existing symptoms and promoting personality growth. Psychotropic medications may be used as adjuncts to treatment, but the healing influencing in psychotherapy is produced primarily by the words and actions of the therapist

and the patient's responses to them, which in combination are meant to create a safe, intimate, and emotionally meaningful relationship for the open discussion and resolution of the patients concerns. Individual and group psychotherapeutic methods are used to treat many forms of psychological distress, in which the symptoms can be emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physical. These forms include behaviour disorders of children and adult; emotional reactions to the ordinary stress, hardship, or crises of life, psychotic disorder, neurotic disorder such as anxiety and depression; additions, psychometric disorders and personality disorders. Psychotherapeutic principles are also emphasized in rehabilitation programmes for mentally disabled and chronically ill individuals.

### **The Relationship between Theatre Performance in Trauma Healing**

In spite of the identified importance of theatre in the lives of the individual and the society as a whole, it is disheartening to note that in our society theatre and performance are only seen as means for information, enlightenment and probably education. The use of theatre as an active, social process which draws on the participant's capacity for role play for projecting into imagined roles, characters and situations as a way of exploring and expressing was through the body and the voice.

Theatre and performance as a medium or means for trauma treatment, brings about genuine connection which makes a victim originally isolated. Theatre and performance are inherently collaborative. It requires teamwork, trust and synchronicity. Victims through participation lean to rely on others and be relied upon, gradually rebuilding social skills and emotional attainment. The collective nature of performance creates a safe space to practice interpersonal skills and experience meaningful connection. Snyder, Brooklyn (2019) in a paper presented at student scholar symposium in December at Chapman University Department of Theatre. She posited that "both the theatre community and the field of psychology recognize the detrimental effects of trauma, and how the arts can act as a mechanism for healing". However, there is still a disconnect isolating drama therapy from these larger fields. She further stressed that "drama therapy, as seen in both clinical settings and artistic programmes, has shown to be beneficial to people living with trauma.

Trauma victims are sometimes mentally trapped. Allen (46) thus, "desiring to control external event set them up for anxiety, frustration and misery" theatre and performance demand presence, you must be fully in the moment, listening, responding and engaging. This mindful practice helps rewire the brain, teaching victims to ground themselves in the present rather than being constantly pulled back to traumatic memories. Each performance becomes an exercise in being fully alive in the now. According to Umukoro (11) creative dramatics is, at its best exploratory drama that takes the individual involved on a voyage of self discovery through the free about creative process of self expression. The logic behind deploying theatre and performance in traumatic treatment is that an ideal world is created out of the real world, both the victims and participants

journey into an imaginary world to adjust or readjust life in the real world. The truth is that one cannot return into the real world from imaginary one the same, because your life will be so affected that you tend to adjust in the real world based on the messages and lessons learnt in the imaginary world.

Theatre and performance offer a playground of identity, allowing individuals to try on different perspectives and persons. By embodying various characters participants practice flexibility, empathy, and alternative ways of being. The process helps break destructive psychological cycles and expands the victims sense of personal potential. This medium involves creating and acting out scenes from the victim's life. The therapist act as a director to guide the individual, known as the protagonist and others in the programme through the scenes using various techniques. The therapist can therefore involve a member in the programme to act out the protagonist emotions and behaviour. The participant/actor will say something they believe the victim thinks or what he seems to be withholding. The activity creates a link between the victims internal reality and the reality of the external world. This method or technique can be useful for helping victim gain perspective or when someone needs to have emotional distance in order to better understand their emotions. Infact theatre and performance require emotional authenticity and expression. With this method the traumatic patient learn to recognize, feel, and safely express emotions. Performing in front of others becomes an act of vulnerability and strength, gradually thawing emotional defenses and rekindling emotional responsiveness.

By building a connection the worlds of theatre and psychology through the practice of drama therapy on a larger scale, will be able to offer more effective treatment to individuals in need. Only by integrating drama therapy successfully across theatre and psychology will we be able to move the treatment method into mainstream of therapy (Snyder, Brooklyn, 2019). Healing from trauma is not a passive exercise, it requires action and engagement. Theatre and performance is fundamentally about doing, moving and active participation. The make believe nature of performance create a safe container for exploring challenging emotional territories.

Traumatic victims can practice moving through difficult scenarios, and building confidence and resilience in a supportive environment. This is why theatre and performance act as an effective treatment tools, helping those with trauma come to terms with their experiences while simultaneously regaining a sense of unity within their bodies.

## **Conclusion**

Trauma often disconnects its victims from their physical selves. It is a psychological response to an experience in the face of life threatening situations. In this study therefore, it is very clear that theatre and performance act as therapies contributing to the general personality growth and problem resolution skills by helping victims gain insight into their feelings and behaviour. To be better used, the psychotherapist try to create a therapeutic

situation that will enable victim to express themselves with complete freedom while the therapist maintains a consistent, non-judgmental interest, which at the end help patients discover aspects of their personalities that have been pushed out of awareness.

This paper has attempted to look at the role or place of theatre and performance, by examining their quintessential purpose in the society and how they can be used to facilitate the healing of traumatic patients. Every healing process is unique, the application of theatre and performance has shown that it can be a powerful therapeutic tool because its goal is to create a supportive and safe environment for victims personal healing process.

### **Recommendations**

In the light of the findings during the course of this discourse the following recommendations are hereby suggested which may help further investigation from different perspective in traumatic situations.

1. Psychodrama is not something a person can do alone, it is a collaborative venture that requires expertise. Therefore, it is recommended that, it relies on a trained and licensed therapist who facilitates the development and the acting out of the drama aspect of the whole programme in a traumatic treatment.
2. Drama therapy is any intervention that encourages people to act out stories for healing or for personal growth. However, it is important to be aware that while psychodrama has grown in popularity there is not a great deal of research demonstrating the impact it has therefore, theatre practitioners and professional dramatist should begin to look inward on how this technique can be developed and applied in most Nigerian situation
3. Efforts should be made or taken by the government at all levels to stimulate the citizenry through theatre programmes to develop independent thinking habit and creativity which can assist the country in achieving development that can bring about the promotion of employment peace and stability of the economy.

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