Chapter 12

That’s My Space: Ageing, Gender, and Survival in Ugandan Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Age is critical as a resource in a theatrical career, for it offers the energy and looks necessary for drawing audiences and attracting financial supporters to sustain one’s career and socio-economic survival. The discussion in this chapter aims at establishing the experiential differences of male and female theatre performers concerning the effects of the aging process on their theatrical careers. It concentrates on Kampala-based theatre performers as respondents. The discussion emphasizes “the process” of aging, in other words, the addition of years to one’s life and to his or her career, rather than the state of being “old.” Using Amartya Sen’s conceptualization of development, the chapter explores how aging in some ways opens up socio-economic opportunities for some Ugandan theatre performers and yet for others it brings about greater constraints to their socio-economic survival in the industry. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with five male and five female respondents. It reflected that in general aging is more constraining than rewarding to a theatrical career. Female more than male theatre performers feel the brunt of its negative effect because of existing gendered stereotypes and perceptions tainted with gender discrimination.

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BACKGROUND

Sociological investigations into the impact of ageing on the professional lives of theatre performers are not common in the academic literature of theatre, least of all, in that of Ugandan theatre. Globally, this is mainly due to the pre-eminent medical interest which dominated research produced in the field of gerontology in the earlier centuries (Morley, 2004). The dearth of specific social qualitative gerontological literature in the earlier centuries notwithstanding, Tibbits (1963) recognises that some knowledge on the socio-economic existence and survival of older persons in pre-literate Greek and Roman societies was kept. He explains that within these societies the guarantee for older persons’ existence and survival in society was the value attached to the embodiment of wisdom in their old age. In essence it was expected that the young would live off their energy while the old lived off their wisdom. This perception does not greatly differ from a widespread belief in pre-colonial and sections of contemporary Africa and Asia which holds that the old were/are wiser than other members of these societies and that they should be respected and provided for on the basis of their age and wisdom (Lockenhoff et al 2009; Lumun, 2013).

Social gerontological research, according to Tibbits (1963), became most significant in the 1960s but a survey of available literature still does not reveal any substantial debate about ageing within the theatre performance profession. Some foundational research analyzing the representation of ageing in art only began to emerge in Europe and America in the twenty first century (Mangan, 2013; Hepworth, 2000). More specific attention to the impact of ageing on the careers of artists in Hollywood was later done by Addison (2006).

On the African scene, investigation into ageing of theatre performers remains scanty and difficult to come by. The present chapter, therefore, contributes to the budding research area which explores the relationship between ageing, gender and the socio-economic survival of Ugandan artistes who earn their living through performance. Its interest is to explore any similarities and variations in the way ageing impacts the career development of female and male musicians, actors, actresses and dancers in Kampala, the Capital City of Uganda. This exploration inevitably quizzes pertinent issues to ageing and survival of the subjects in theatre, that is to say, societal perceptions of the artistes, personal sentiments of the artistes about their age and career, policy environment and market forces.

METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory qualitative study which employs the ‘information power’ technique (Malterud et al 2016) to determine the sample size of ten respondents. It has been suggested that ‘information power’ as a technique can guide the choice of respondents and sample size because “Information power indicates that the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower amount of participants is needed” (p.1755). According to Malterud et al, 2016), smaller samples determined by ‘information power’ are ideal if; the study aim is narrow, there is a specificity of the knowledge, experiences or properties that the sampled respondents share, an established theory that guides the analysis of the discussion, there is particular strength of the content of the dialogue that takes place between the interviewer and respondent and the location of the study in a case study design. This study contained all the above features. The area of research i.e. experiences of ageing by theatre artistes in relation to socio-economic survival is fairly under-researched. This makes the study quite exploratory in nature with a very specific
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