

# The implication of Jean-Louise Barrault's best and worst of profession on performing art and the Nigerian society

Adjeketa Blessing



Ph.D, Department of Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, e-mail: [blessing.adjeketa@gmail.com](mailto:blessing.adjeketa@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This essay discourses the performing art, as an art form created to reflect the life and culture of the individuals who create them, and their influences on society. A segment of the Nigerian population believes that performing art is a ludicrous art not worthy of being identified with. The analytical method of research is used in the essay. The work of Jean-Louise Barrault; Best and Worst of Profession, is x-rayed in determining what society thinks about the artist, his performance, and its implication to Nigerian society. The essay point first, to performing arts like drama, songs, and music as a means of urging and moving people to social action, and then, to the therapeutic significance to the audience as the second primary concern after the entertainment. The essay recommends that a healing of the Nigerian nation will only be possible when the artist is serious in his performing art as trade.

**Keywords:** Performing Art, Performance Art, The Artist, The Actor, Trade or Business, The Nigeria Society.

Citation/Atf: BLESSING, A. (2022). The implication of Jean-Louise Barrault's best and worst of profession on performing art and the Nigerian society. *Journal of Arts*. 5(1): 1-7, DOI: 10.31566/arts.5.1.01

**Corresponding Author/ Sorumlu Yazar:**  
Adjeketa Blessing  
E-mail: [blessing.adjeketa@gmail.com](mailto:blessing.adjeketa@gmail.com)



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Several scholars have written extensively on the subject of art, performance, and its effect on society. Among is Hauser in his *The Sociology of Art* (1982). The book "considers all forms of the arts, whether visual arts, literature, film, theatre or music from Bach to the Beatle" Hauser explores almost all the aspects of interactions between art and society and how society influences art and vice versa. He discusses the role of the artist in society and the artist's manifestation of his latent ideology. Another writer of note is Abercrombie who looks primarily at the history of art in a social context, as artists are relating to various publics in his book, *Artists and Their Public* (1975), where he mentions that the performance and the artists are nothing without the society who host them and that the art (performance), is specifically human. It is maintained and understood only in the context of our social history and our society. However, this essay takes as a premise, Best and Worst of Professions; a lecture by Jean-Louis Barraut on the phenomenon of theatre from the standpoint of a practitioner. Originally delivered in French in 1961 from the stage of The Oxford Playhouse and translated by John Hodgson and Manolo Santos. The article appears on pages 16-32 of *The Uses of Drama: Acting as Social Educational Force*. Barraut's audience included graduates and undergraduates' students of Oxford and so it was a lecture for young minds who are interested in knowing the theatre's true state. This essay reviews Barraut in the area of how people view the actor and the theatre (performing art) as against their true nature. It, therefore, examines the impact of performing artists on Nigerian society. The question of whether the theatre and the performing artist are valuable to Nigerian society is the thrust of this discourse.

Barraut looks at the theatre practice from two perspectives. Firstly, like bad art to practice and secondly as the best art one can think of practicing. His discussion is divided under two broad sub-headings; destruction and the indestructibility of theatre. He discourses the art of the actor or the performing art as a social delusion. An art that brings nothing but a feeling of shame to tho-

se who sincerely perform the art.' Theatre practice is, therefore, a "criminal" act, and a "shameful act." For him, how the cinema or certain productions in the theatre exploit vulgar eroticism, both morbid and senile, the manner and method in which the press overestimate this eroticism and profit from the private lives of certain stars to sell newspapers, cannot but give a feeling of shame to the performing artist (Jean-Louis 1977:18). He also discourses the phenomenon of incapacity. He mentions that many among the younger generation, who think they are devoting themselves to theatre practice are in fact, running away from life. They do not want to become theatre artists because of the richness of the theatre but as a result of their incapacity. They are not looking for theatre; they are running away from the true problems of everyday life. All these boys and girls who rush into drama courses are unfortunates. They think they are taking the coward's way out, turning their back on life believing they will find some excuses for their incapacity and laziness (Jean-Louis 1977: 18).

He also looks at the phenomenon of 'standalone art' like painting art, sculpting art, singing art, etc. which satisfies the human senses. He examines performing art as a minor of art because it is an art that cannot stand alone. He however mentioned that the theatre or performing art as the case may be is a combination of all arts because it satisfies all senses. Furthermore, under his description and examination of what he termed the indestructibility of theatre, he painted theatre art with beautiful colours as he uses the effect tragedy or comedy has on the audience or the society. He mentioned that tragedy or comedy rises from the same source which is human anxiety and solitude. He places the theatre as a meeting place resulting from the need of society to satisfy the feeling of solitude. Barraut, in his discussion, places the performing art as a recreation of societal problems which the audience have already observed in real life before coming to the theatre; so the idea or reason of coming to the theatre is to forget their little individual concerns and to witness others having greater concerns. He places the theatre as a place where justice is dispensed, a place where life is being readjusted to equilibrium. Therefore, the theatre

is useful to society since it purifies and revitalized human figures. The actor or theatre artist like a lover fits himself into the skin of others to critically present the true nature of society. Barrault concludes his discourse by supporting that performing art is not destructive.

## 2. BARRAULT'S ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS AND PERFORMING

All humans have a similar pattern of development flowing from infancy to childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood. Infancy is the first and most important stage of human development. The Infant does not have control over his body. He banks on others to meet his needs. As those needs are met, he learned to trust the caregiver while developing physically. With time, the child begins to discover progressively that his actions have consequences. At this stage, the child starts to develop a sense of independence and make personal decisions. In a few years, they develop into young man/womanhood, a stage popularly referred to as adolescence. Here, young men and women are principally fretful with finding themselves and venting who they are in the world. They make effort to find their place and where they fit in society. They also try out diverse roles and make attempts at isolating themselves from the old them to a new person. This new person faces new challenges-challenges of adulthood. Adulthood is a time for major decision-making about school, career, and home. A time to decide where one wants to live, whom he wants to live with, and what type of work he wants to do. Adulthood becomes a time to answer one of life's biggest questions: That of, whom I want to become. An actor? businessman? civil servant? general? policeman? Teacher? Or subaltern? Individuals, who are no longer themselves but merely individuals they wish to appear? Barrault compares the actor and his art with the process of human development. According to him, "Play is not only the business of childhood," but "every human action is done out of the instinct for preservation (because of whom they want to be)" (Barrault, 21). This means that what the individual wishes to appear in the future, starts from childhood with

play. This life training action builds strong imaginative ability in children for usage in the future when they become an adult. For example, when playing, children improvise with many objects that enable them to transit from one character to the other. For instance, 'child A', can assume the role of a mother and switch over to 'child B', which is that of a nurse. "Sometimes, the stories 'child A' acts out reflect issues she is struggling to understand." Barrault's, therefore, opines that "humans have no time to do things for nothing. Every human behaviour and activities like sleeping, eating working, procreating are all useful for problem-solving, skill-building, and overcoming physical and mental challenges". Barrault calls these actions "training for life" (Jean-Louis 1977: 21). He uses the human developmental process and human behavior to describe what exists in all human-a desire for the metamorphosis of personality. For Sara Wilford, a director of the Art of Teaching, Graduate Program, at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, "When children during play sessions disagree about who gets to be the daddy, mother, or who will wear the purple dress, they are developing important social skills" which becomes part of them to be used in the future when they become adults. The implication of Barrault and Sara's statement on the human developmental process and the performing art is that the performer or the actor learns the practice of his creative art from childhood.

### PERFORMANCE ART OR PERFORMING ART?

The term performance art might seem both strange and unclassifiable for someone unfamiliar with the genre. It operates with the non-narrative theatrical vocabulary of today's advent Gard, full of imagery that must be intuitively appreciated rather than understood employing a coherent plot. Unclassifiable, because to the uninitiated, a performance might look like theatre or dance or poetry or music or mim.

Bensman and Lilienfeld in *Craft and Consciousness: Occupational Technique and Development of World Images* (1991) describes three types of performance art. In the first, he said the script is reduced to an opportunity for the performer

to show his expertise, and technical performance aspects are emphasized. The second is a performance that has the quality of a lecture and is meant to teach. In this second kind of performance, the audience always knows that the performer is performing, the audience here is never swept away by the performer's presentation. In the third, the talent of the performer exceeds the aesthetic quality of the performance. The performer will cater to the audience based on their reactions to the performance. The person performing, therefore, assumes a responsibility to the audience, but the responsibility is that of the performer acting out a role.

Conversely, the term performing art is sometimes used synonymously with the term theatre arts. According to Britannica online definition, both phrases largely mean a combination of all the arts. Theaomai, which is the original Greek word for theatre means "to see," theatre is incomplete without a spectator which means "to view" and, an audience which means "to hear". "It, therefore, means that theatre is an art that concerned almost exclusively with live performances in which the action is precisely planned to create a coherent and significant sense of drama". Further, performing art is also referred to as the doing arts, which deals with "drama, music or dance presentations". These arts, satisfy the human sense of hearing, and comprehension. Unlike the other arts like a painting that pleases the human nous of vision; poetry that placates the nous of thought, drama, dance, music, and songs, which are examples of the performing art, satisfies all five senses.

The history of performing or imitation especially in Africa for example, cannot be traced (Oyekan 1985 citing Ogunba 1978: 9). The implication is that the art of performing came with man into existence. A man from birth who serves the role of an actor through his performance functions as the world's mirror. A lens with which the society sees itself. By mirror or lens, it means, for example, the reflection of traditional life seen in the final product of the performer which is the performance. The performance, therefore, is also a product of the performing artist. Drama, dance, and music performances, therefore, serve to

reflect society and its philosophies.

It is good to state here that some of these philosophies presented by the performer in his performance are also evident in most traditional arts around the globe. The philosophies presented in the performances express the culture of the people, the people's emotions, opinions, and world view. They are handed down from "generation to generation and therefore are not tempered with" (Okpu 2001). Deeply rooted in the religion, culture, and worldview of the people, some of these philosophies are seen in ancient walls and gravesides in some local communities. Okpu also mentions that modern performing art is a new artistic expression by college-trained artists. This implies that modern performing artists recreate old stories like the people's folklore into new art forms, expressing the idea of the old arts.

### **3. THE ACTOR OR ARTIST AND HIS TOOLS**

The actor who is the performer is the artist. The artist depends on the strength of his health, voice, breath, and charisma as tools to recreate life with his performance. These tools are non-material, human phenomena, which the artist uses to achieve his aim; that of expressing his intention and opinion about life through role-playing. The voice for example is most important to the artist in creating and communicating life to his audience. This is because spectators do not only come to see a play in performance, they also come to hear it. Voice, therefore, is a powerful and important tool every artist should have. Apart from the voice tool, the actor's body or charisma has to be put into good use in the true-to-life creation process. It is the body of the actor or artist the audience sees; it is the body that tells the spectators what the actor feels about a situation. It, therefore, means that the artist's every move tells about the character he represents.

Therefore, the actor, fit himself in another's skin", to act like and "resemble the man he wants to interpret- the man he wants to become". By this, the actor is "infected by simulation- the phenomenon of mimetism", for he puts on the same smile, colour of eyes, tone of voice, handwriting, and to some extent body movement, etc as the

person he represents. It is true what Baraut says in the earlier part of his work that, because the actor's self is involved in the life-creating process, his emotions may escape his control, and at that point, the performer, is no longer able to bring to the true creator, that obedience, that faithfulness, which is indispensable to true art.

As mentioned above, acting, dance, music, and song are all practical creative activities that are performed before an audience for entertainment and education by the artist. Sometimes, an artist may be a master of more than one of the arts. This is especially evident in the Nigerian and Indian creative industry where one-person sing, dance, and act. In cases where this is seen, the master of the art(s) is entitled with the acronym "star." the term star is most times used to describe a widely known person in his or her locality; a celebrity playing leading roles in popular movies, television shows, and other dramatic media. Images or photos of these individuals frequently appear in print media and television adverts. While the media make huge money from using them, they on the other side, gain popularity.

#### **4. THE ARTISTS WORK AS A TRADE OR BUSINESS IN NIGERIA**

Nigerians understanding of trade involves the action of buying and selling goods and services. It is also understood to be a job requiring manual skill and special training. There are different reasons individuals engage in certain trades. Some participate for the fun of the businesses, others are recommended into it, some do because they don't have a second choice to make, and some for the benefit involved and yet others for the love of it. For some trade, moral capacity is a requirement. Others, intellectual and physical capacity is needed. It is therefore left for the individual to choose the trade where he or she best fits.

Artistry is big business, especially in modern Nigerian society. People are making big money with acting, dancing, and music, including stand-up comedy and comedy skits produced and posted on several social media platforms. "Whether it is a lifelong dream or a recent interest, there is no denying it: being a star actor or singer is incredibly appealing in modern Nige-

ria. a life full of inter-state travel, meeting fascinating personalities and characters. Glamour accompanies a steady foray into the performing business. The music industry and acting can be a difficult business to break into, particularly if hit songs and best seller films are your callings. However, within a solid portfolio, a trustworthy agent, wide network, dedication, and commitment many are making it in the acting and music business" in Nigeria (wikiHow : np).

While it is big business to many, acting and music practice to some in modern Nigeria is like a trade for fugitive-like and refugee-like individuals with incapacity to engage in any other trade. These individuals' incapacity may include people being unable to make or "communicate responsible personal decisions." Although "physical disability is never sufficient to find incapacity because persons with a physical disability make his or her own decisions as long as they have full mental capacity. Therefore, the artistry to some in Nigeria is a trade for individuals' especially young ones who hate working and schooling. The Nigeria community is full of young boys and girls who attempt to mimic stars, draw tattoos all over their body, males make hair, and carry dreaded hair rooming in the street. It is this ideology and misrepresentation of the artist by the aspiring stars that have made many think that the performing arts business is for the touts in society. Hence, they develop a sense of disdain for the business.

#### **5. INFLUENCE OF THE PERFORMING ARTS OR ARTIST ON THE SOCIETY**

The claim that the arts are good for individuals takes many forms. Arts like drama, dance, and music have been said to improve health, mental well-being, cognitive functioning, creative ability, and academic performance (Guetzkow, 2002: 10). The arts, improve psychological well-being. Viewing shot comedy film skits on the social media platform, attending live arts events, and participating actively when need be, stimulate and relieve stress, hence leading to improved happiness/ life satisfaction. Such active participation in the arts leads, in addition, to improved self-concept and a sense of control over

one's life (Guetzkow, 2002: 21). This is true about Nigeria especially now when large gatherings are not allowed. Popular comedians and artists create short comic performances and post them on social media. While they make money with it, people who are stressed up with work or are locked down at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic are entertained by them. The creation and completion of some of such art projects provide an opportunity for such participants to succeed and gain some positive public recognition, it improves their sense of control over their life and self-concept (Guetzkow citing Fiske 1999). This is similar to the use of drama in ancient Greece, where the art of drama is used for catharsis. This implies that the performing art, especially in Nigeria, serves as a deliberate medium to tap into emotions, build self-esteem and reduce feelings of isolation. In communication, Citing Hanna (1983) Rebecca, explains in her 2004 Sociology Honors Thesis, that, the "audience reads, interprets and makes-meaning from the information that they take in from the performer.

It was mentioned previously in this discourse that, the actor is the performer or the artist, the performance is drawn from events, cultures, and world view of the people, the performer learn the practice of his creative art from childhood especially when he realises he is living among others, who are like him with the same life purpose. It is this purposeful life activity that is created in drama either as tragedy or as comedy, aimed at mirroring life. Tragedy, which is a literary genre of drama and literature features a dramatic story of an individual's fall or misery- traditionally, the fall is usually attached to someone who is great and or of noble birth. A fall is often caused by prearranged fate, or personal defect or hubris of the individual, with the aim of "the audience deriving fulfillment" from the fall story. What this means is that the audience sees a tragic performance "gets a feeling of release after identifying themselves with the central character." The second genre of drama aims to amuse. This second dramatic form- comedy is always contrasted with the first. The primary concern of comedy is to correct follies and vices in the hope that they will, as a result, be mended. Rather than on private individuals, comedies hang on humans

in general as social beings (Hoy 2014). The audience through the performance of tragedy or comedy at the end of the performance releases some kind of pleasure and depression. Enekwe (2015), is of the view that human beings generate crisis in society and also create the means for their elimination (1). The actor through his performances does the same thing. For fulfillment of theatrical representation, the world (society) has to "come together to see fellow human like them under life stress and ensnared by problems of life, recreating the same problems they have already faced, seen or observe in real life. This life re-presentation if well carried out by the artist, fortified, rejuvenate, and eliminate from the audience their anxiety. It also helps in reassuring them of hope providing them with what appears to be justice (Jean-Louis 1977: 13). The artist here plays a Godly role of giving justice, the role of a comforter, comforting his fellow mortal.

Further, the influence of the artist and his performance has been recognized in many eras and places. Hanna (1983: 4), recognizes, that the government acknowledged that "art, like drama, provoke and intensify heated sentiments." And that, there is an obvious relationship not only between the performer and the audience but also between the performing arts and society. "Since art and society reflect each other, theatrical performances like dance, music, and acting provide a non-experimental laboratory to explore what is shared in the broader society" (Hanna 1983: 7).

## 6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The paper discourses that, the artist through performance, comfort and reassures his fellow human. And that is what Barrault believes makes the nobility of his trade. Rather than a 'stupid, false and deceptive trade as some see it. The discussion in this essay like that of Barrault believes that, like sin which is a thing humans cannot help doing, drama, music, dance, for their true nature, is sin- a thing individuals who love them cannot help, but keep doing (Jean-Louis 1977: 17). Hodgson is right in his paper when discoursing the effect the performing artists and his performances have on the audience, who come to the theatre, first of all, to forget self, to forget their personality, to forget their daily life. Indivi-

duals who make up the society who have come also to witness the concerns of others, to pull out like cloth and hang out of the performance arena, their little individual concerns because they want to see others having much greater ones, helping them to “purge of their concerns: and receive healing (Jean-Louis 1977: 25). This, the paper like that of Barrault, note, is only possible when the spectator opens himself to be penetrated and devoured by the artist. In achieving this goal with his weak and “uncertain instruments”, the artist allows himself to be infected by “simulation- the phenomenon of mimetism.” This paper concludes that a healing of the Nigerian nation can occur through dramatic performances like play performances, music, and songs. It is, therefore, enough reason for the artist whether stand-up comedian, social media skit maker, musician, film actor, etc to be more serious in the art he is known for.

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