

Staging Limitations in Ghanaian Theatre Spaces: An Exploratory Study

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<p>Corresponding Author Sika Koomson</p> <p>Department of Theatre Arts, School of Creative Arts, University of Education, Winneba</p> <p>Article History</p> <p>Received: 01 / 04 / 2025</p> <p>Accepted: 21 / 04 / 2025</p> <p>Published: 24 / 04 / 2025</p>	<p>Abstract: This study investigates the staging limitations faced in multiple-set design practices within Ghanaian performance spaces. It adopts a comprehensive approach, incorporating personal interviews, direct observations, and critical assessments of selected performance spaces for theatre productions in Ghana. Key performance spaces for Theatre productions profiled are the National Theatre of Ghana, the School of Creative Arts Auditorium at the University of Education, Winneba, the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio at the University of Ghana, the Main Auditorium of the University of Cape Coast, and the Centre for National Culture in Cape Coast. Through this multi-pronged methodology, the study identifies several critical challenges: architectural inadequacies, obsolete and non-functional equipment, poor maintenance practices, and a lack of expertise and funding. These findings highlight the urgent need for infrastructural upgrade and strategic planning to enhance the functionality and versatility of performance spaces in Ghana, thereby supporting the growth and development of contemporary theatre practice.</p> <p>Keywords: Ghanaian Theatre, Performance spaces, Staging limitations, Multiple-set Design.</p>
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Introduction

Theatre in Ghana faces significant challenges in the practice of multiple-set design, an aspect of contemporary theatrical productions. Despite its importance, multiple-set design in Ghanaian theatre is constrained by numerous factors that impede its effective implementation. Multiple-set design, with its historical evolution from the foundational elements of Greek theatre to the recent complex and innovative designs, remains crucial in contemporary theatre, highlighting the imperative for adaptable and versatile stage environments. However, the theatrical landscape grapples to keep pace with the more multiple and complex designs today. The reliance on manual scene changes, coupled with limited access to modern scene-changing mechanisms significantly hampers creative possibilities and the seamless flow of performance. This challenge is prevalent in major institutions like the National Theatre, University theatres and the various Centres for National Culture (CNCs). These challenges have far-reaching implications, affecting the overall quality of productions and hindering artistic expressions. Veteran and budding playwrights are often limited in their storytelling, unable to fully explore diverse settings and develop complex characters due to the constraints. This limitation not only impacts the narratives but also restricts the creative potential of directors and sets, leading to a stagnation of artistic innovation. In educational theatres, the limitation deprives aspiring theatre professionals of valuable learning experiences and hinders their ability to adapt to industry standards.

Most recent theatre productions in Ghanaian theatres feature multiple settings that require multiple and complex set designs. Recent productions such as Martin Owusu's *The legend of*

Aku Sika, Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not blame*, Kwabena Ansah's *in the pants of a woman* among others all staged at the National Theatre of Ghana. Additionally, productions I have personally been involved in, such as *Guilty?* by Raphael Mensah, *Faith for sale* by Jennifer Abena Kpeli as well as Femi *Osofisan's Once upon four robbers* all staged at the School of Creative Arts, University of Education, Winneba further illustrate the growing trend of multiple setting plays and productions. Despite the growing trend, staging is often a major challenge to directors, designers and budding playwrights. There is a critical need for investment in modern infrastructure to enhance the quality of theatrical productions in Ghana. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify and document the challenges inherent in multiple-set designs within Ghanaian theatre spaces. In examining various performance venues and interviewing key informants, the study aims to provide an understanding of the limitations faced in executing complex productions. The significance of the study lies in its potential to inform and guide interventions that can enhance the functionality of these spaces.

Review of Related Literature

Multiple-set design, as defined by Thomas Postlewait (1998), involves creating and arranging sets to depict different scenes and locations within a single theatrical production. This practice has evolved over centuries, increasing in complexity and artistry. Greek theatre laid the foundation for multiple-set design using elements like *periaktoi* and *skene*. Aronson (2017) and Friedland (1991) discuss the Classical Unities; Action, Time, and Place, that emphasised simplicity and coherence by focusing on a single plotline, compressed time frame, and single location. This

classical approach fostered a streamlined storytelling technique and also constrained the potential for more dynamic stagecraft.

As theatre evolved, playwrights introduced more complex narratives and settings, moving away from strict adherence to the Classical Unities. Chaucer (2018) describes the adaptation of Greek stages to accommodate these demands, incorporating painted scenery and *periaktoi* for quick scene changes. Pearson (2019) highlights physical changes in theatre structures supporting these innovations. Scene changes grew more elaborate with pulley systems and machinery, as noted by Adix (1995), driven by diverse storytelling needs. This evolution underscores a persistent tension between tradition and innovation, challenging designers to honour historical precedents while pushing creative boundaries.

The historical and ongoing struggle to balance creativity with fiscal responsibility is a recurring theme in set design literature. Sharp (2002) illustrates how Elizabethan set designers utilised cost-effective methods such as painted backdrops, a practice still relevant today. Thayer (2010) emphasises the need for strategic resource allocation to optimise the aesthetic and functional aspects of set design. Fielding (2012) advocates for minimalist and modular designs to manage cost while maintaining artistic integrity. This underscores an essential truth in theatre production: creativity often flourishes within constraints, with designers leveraging limitations to fuel ingenuity.

Budget constraints directly affect the availability of scene-changing mechanisms, which are crucial for seamless transitions and enhancing visual impact. Potvin (2004) and Taylor (2013) note that the absence of advanced mechanisms like revolving stages and scenic elevators forces designers to rely on alternative techniques such as lighting and sound, which can limit the scope and ambition of a production (Southern, 2002). This financial reality often dictates the scope of a designer's creative vision, challenging them to find innovative solutions within their means.

The absence of these mechanisms poses significant challenges in executing complex multiple-set designs. Without the ability to seamlessly transition between scenes, designers must find creative ways to simulate changes, often resulting in simpler and less dynamic sets. This limitation underscores the importance of budget and resource allocation discussed earlier, as financial constraints often preclude the acquisition of advanced scene-changing technology. Here, the designer's skill in problem-solving and resourcefulness becomes paramount, often leading to breakthroughs in design philosophy and technique.

Venue constraints, particularly spatial limitations, further complicate the design process. Gassner (1961) and D'Orazio (2020) discuss how confined stage dimensions necessitate innovative solutions to maximise the utility of available space. The lack of scene-changing mechanisms is often exacerbated by these spatial constraints, requiring set designers to optimise every inch of the stage creatively. The adaptability required to manage these space limitations highlights the need for logistical and technical expertise. Thayer (2010) and Southern (2017) emphasise that set designers must tailor their designs to diverse stage sizes while preserving the design's essence, often leading to inventive solutions that maximise space without compromising artistic vision. This adaptability is a testament to the designer's ability to navigate physical and technical limitations, transforming potential obstacles into opportunities for creative expression.

Rose (2008) and Saldivar (2016) underscore the need for seamless integration of moving sets, specialised lighting, sound systems, and automation technologies. Effective coordination among various professionals is critical to ensuring that these elements function harmoniously (Dietrich, 2017). Set designers must not only manage the technical aspects but also ensure that their designs align with the narrative and thematic elements of the production. This dual focus on technical execution and artistic interpretation requires a collaborative approach to maintain coherence and impact. The interplay between technology and artistry in set design is a dynamic dance, one that requires constant negotiation and innovation.

The literature reviewed here reveals a fascinating interplay between tradition and innovation, resourcefulness and limitation in multiple-set design. The evolution of set design has been significantly influenced by historical practices, theatrical conventions, and budgetary constraints. As designers navigate the challenges posed by financial limitations, venue constraints, and the absence of sophisticated scene-changing mechanisms, their ingenuity and adaptability become paramount. The historical progression from simple backdrops and *periaktoi* to complex sets with advanced mechanisms illustrates a relentless pursuit of creative solutions within the confines of available resources. The synthesis of these scholarly insights provides a roadmap for overcoming the inherent limitations and advancing the practice of multiple-set design in theatre.

Methodology

Data was collected through personal interviews from key informants. This data served as a primary source of data. Additionally, direct observations of performance spaces and critical assessments of various productions were employed to garner wide-ranging insights into the challenges. To facilitate the analysis, I transcribed the audio recordings of the conducted interviews. I also scrutinised my field journal to enrich the data collection process and that offered supplementary information to enhance the depth of analysis. The data captured from my field journal also served as a form of triangulation of that data source. Basically, the multi-pronged approach laid the groundwork for a thorough analysis and synthesis of the gathered data. Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process, with explicit consent obtained from all informants to mention their names and insights within this study.

Findings and Discussions

To address the study's objective of identifying and documenting the staging limitations of multiple-set designs in Ghanaian theatre spaces, a comprehensive profiling of selected venues was conducted. The profiling aimed to highlight the unique characteristics and infrastructural nuances of each space, providing essential context for the discussions. The performance spaces sampled for this study included the National Theatre of Ghana, the School of Creative Arts Auditorium (SCA, Theatre) at the University of Education, Winneba and the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio at the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana. The other two were the Main Auditorium of the University of Cape Coast and the Centre for National Culture (CNC) in Cape Coast.

Each of these venues offers distinct staging possibilities and limitations, contributing to the overall understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing theatre practitioners in Ghana. I believe that the understanding of the diverse attributes and

specific features of each performance space is fundamental to contextualising the staging challenges. Although the profiling delved into the architectural, historical, and functional aspects of the selected venues, I dedicated more attention to the stage area of the spaces as that is the area central to this study. The profiling, essentially, served as a crucial prelude to unravelling the challenges.

National Theatre, Ghana

The National Theatre of Ghana, inaugurated in 1992, serves as a central hub for the country’s theatrical arts scene. Its multifunctional facilities host a wide range of events, from concerts and plays to film screenings and exhibitions. The theatre is governed by a Board of Directors and managed by an Executive Director, overseeing various departments like Artistic, Technical, Marketing, and Finance. The architectural design of the National Theatre is a blend of Ghanaian heritage and contemporary artistic expression, featuring a curved roof reminiscent of a seagull in flight. The Main Auditorium, a 1,200-seat venue with a classic proscenium stage, is the centrepiece of the theatre, offering a traditional separation between performers and audience. In addition



Fig 1: Exterior shot of the National Theatre of Ghana

Source: Researcher on field (18th February 2023)

The main stage of the National Theatre encompasses a generous 440 square metres. The proscenium arch stands 25 metres above the stage floor, while the fly loft extends to a height of 53.3 metres. The auditorium itself stretches 21.3 metres in length. The stage’s proscenium configuration includes 38 bars, with 5 dedicated to rigging stage lights and the remaining bars accommodating drops and drapes. An additional bar supports a large projection screen. Two front curtains, one operating horizontally and the other vertically, complete the stage setup (Obeng, 2014).

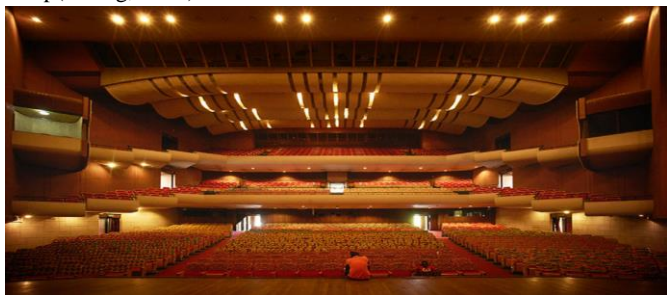


Fig 2: Main auditorium of the National Theatre of Ghana

Source: <https://www.archdaily.com/891153/ghana-national-theatre-cctn-design>

Beyond the main Auditorium, the National Theatre offers a range of performance spaces catering to diverse artistic needs. The 200-seat *Folks Place* provides a flexible setting for experimental productions, allowing for adaptable configurations to suit various artistic needs. Additionally, the theatre boasts of dedicated rehearsal halls equipped to accommodate traditional ensembles. A team of skilled technicians and stagehands ensures the smooth execution of every performance, supporting the creative vision of directors and artists.

School of Creative Arts Theatre, UEW

Commissioned in 2018, the School of Creative Arts Theatre is an integral part of the John Agyekum Kuffour main building at the Central Campus of the University of Education, Winneba. The building encompasses offices, lecture halls, and various studios, providing a conducive environment for creative activities.



Fig 3: Main auditorium of SCA Theatre

Source: Researcher on field (23rd March 2023)

With a sitting capacity of 435, the auditorium functions as a hub for creativity, playing host to a myriad of events, including theatre productions, musical concerts and exhibitions. The various departments within the School of Creative Arts including theatre arts, music, graphic design, art education and textiles education all utilise the space for artistic exhibition. The relatively equipped auditorium, underscores the commitment of the University of Education, Winneba, to providing a conducive environment for fostering artistic talent and educational exploration within the realm of creative arts.

The theatre is equipped with basic staging facilities such as flying bars. The stage area, relatively spacious by design, can accommodate the diverse needs of staff and students’ productions. Notably, the auditorium boasts ample space above the stage area, allowing for some six flying bars that can be automatically and manually operated.



Fig 4: Stage of SCA Theatre

Source: Researcher on field (23rd March 2023)

Efua Sutherland Drama Studio

Nestled within the academic enclave of the University of Ghana, the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio, popularly called the Drama Studio, stands as an iconic institution steeped in historical significance. Named after the renowned Ghanaian playwright, poet, and cultural activist Efua Sutherland, the Drama Studio holds a cherished place in the annals of Ghanaian theatre, having played a pivotal role in pioneering theatre education in the country. It stands as a tribute to Efua Sutherland’s vision of a vibrant cultural and educational space where creativity blossoms. As a centre for theatrical exploration, it caters to the academic and creative pursuits of the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana, purposefully designed as a versatile unit catering to research, workshops, and performances.



Fig 5: Aerial shot of the Drama Studio

Source: <https://greenviewsresidential.com/a-history-of-theatre-in-ghana>

With a maximum capacity of four hundred, the Drama Studio space is equipped with a proscenium stage, the Arena (theatre-in-the-round), and the End Stage, offering a spectrum of staging options to cater to the diverse needs of theatrical productions.

Beyond its structural adaptability, the studio exudes a cultural richness that is symbolically represented by a prominently placed stool at the front of the stage. This symbolic stool not only serves as a visual centrepiece but also carries profound cultural significance, acting as a welcoming motif that embraces the heritage and traditions inherent in the performances held within its walls. The integration of these elements in the drama studio enhances its role not only as a stage for artistic expression but also as a symbolic space that honours and embodies the cultural essence of the School of Performing Arts.

The proscenium has a height of 4.2 metres. Its depth from the proscenium arch to the back wall or cyclorama is 6.4 metres. The width of the proscenium from left to right is 10 metres. The proscenium covers an area of 286 square metres. From the proscenium arch to the end of the apron which marks the beginning of the arena is 4.5 metres. For stage illumination, the Studio makes use of wooden beams to rig lights on the proscenium and on the arena. (Obeng, 2014)



Fig 6: Interior shot of the Drama Studio

Source: <https://greenviewsresidential.com/a-history-of-theatre-in-ghana>

Functioning as an educational centre, the studio fosters the development of emerging talents in theatre arts. Lectures, rehearsals, and performances are carried out within its walls, contributing to the holistic growth of students enrolled in the School of Performing Arts.

University of Cape Coast Main Auditorium

The University of Cape Coast Main Auditorium, can be found within the main Science Faculty building of the university. It serves as an important venue for significant university events. Despite its commendable large seating capacity, the auditorium is equipped with only basic sound speakers and lacks essential features such as lighting bars and other sophisticated stage facilities. This limitation in technical infrastructure may impact the versatility and overall production quality of events hosted in the auditorium.



Fig 7: Interior shot of the UCC main auditorium

Source: Researcher on field (3rd February 2023)

The Department of Theatre and Film Studies, situated within the Faculty of Arts, has adopted the auditorium as its laboratory and actively utilises the space for a spectrum of theatrical events, including rehearsals, workshops, and various performances. While the auditorium fulfils a vital role in hosting major university events, its adoption by the Department of Theatre and Film Studies further underscores its importance as a place for artistic and academic pursuits within the university community.



Fig 8: The stage of the UCC main auditorium

Source: Researcher on field (3rd February 2023)

Centre for National Culture, Cape Coast

The Centre for National Culture, is a cultural institution in Cape Coast, Ghana. It serves as a centre for the promotion and preservation of Ghanaian culture and traditions. The centre typically hosts various cultural events, exhibitions, and performances, showcasing traditional arts and crafts, music, dance, and other aspects of Ghana’s rich cultural heritage.



Fig 9: Front view of CNC, Cape Coast

Source: Researcher on field (3rd February 2023)

The Centre also functions as a platform for artists and cultural workers to enhance their talents through cultural and artistic programs and exhibitions. Additionally, it engages in the production, collection, and exhibition of diverse arts and crafts for sale or educational purposes, organises periodic drama, dance, and choral competitions/festivals for groups. It also produces textiles, ceramic wares, and sculpture pieces through its Visual Arts Department. Mr David Chapman Quayson, head of the performing arts section of the centre, who was an informant of this study informs me that;

Our centre has a proscenium auditorium designed to host a variety of social functions, arts and cultural events, as well as business meetings. With a flexible seating capacity of up to three hundred, depending on the layout, the auditorium serves as a versatile space for theatrical presentations, lectures, seminars, conferences, receptions, and diverse performing arts events, including theatre, music, and dance. The facility also provides essential services such as sound and lighting equipment, ushering, and decor, catering to the needs of performing arts groups and contributing to the vibrant cultural scene.

Source: Extract from field data (16th March, 2023)



Fig 10: Interior view of CNC, Cape Coast

Source: Researcher on field (3rd February 2023)

On the field, I observed that the stage at the Centre for National Culture in Cape Coast is outfitted with some fixed lighting bars containing antiquated and malfunctioning lighting

equipment, coupled with a noticeable absence of modern stage facilities. This deficiency in up-to-date infrastructure poses significant implications for the quality and versatility of performances held at the venue, potentially limiting the artistic and technical possibilities available to artists and performers. The absence of essential modern stage amenities may hinder the centre’s ability to attract diverse cultural events and impact the overall appeal and functionality of the facility.

The foregoing profiles of the performance spaces offer a concise overview of the diverse performance spaces selected for this study. An understanding of these spaces, their unique features, and limitations is essential to contextualising the staging challenges that the first objective sought to delineate. The following discussion will present and discuss these challenges, drawing upon data gathered from the field.

Challenges in the Architectural Designs of Performance Spaces

From the data, I gathered that the architectural designs of the performance spaces are a major challenge. It is noticed that the architectural designs of most of the performance spaces did not make room for scene changing facilities rendering them inhospitable to the incorporation of machinery or facilities essential for the execution of complex productions, particularly those demanding multiple-set designs. This challenge posed by the architectural designs of performance spaces is notably exemplified in the Efuia Sutherland Drama Studio. Despite its historical significance, the Drama Studio is architecturally challenged, lacking the necessary features to facilitate or host advanced scene-changing mechanisms. The studio, with its architectural limitations, struggles to provide an environment conducive to efficient transitions between sets. One of the key informants, Mr John Edmundson Sam, who is familiar with the architectural layout of Efuia Sutherland Studio asserts that;

... When it comes to accommodating modern multiple-set design practices, we encounter notable challenges stemming from our architectural configuration. the studio lacks dedicated spaces and mechanisms for scene changes. The layout does not align with contemporary demands for flexible staging of plays. We have often grappled with limited backstage infrastructure, and the space above the stage area cannot host the minimum of flyovers and that obviously hinders our ability to execute scene changes and it imposes a substantial limitation. We recognize the need for architectural upgrades to transform the studio so we can cater for the evolving needs of contemporary theatre practices.

Source: Extract from field data (18th February, 2023)

The above assertion actually aligns with Obeng (2014) observations that;

Structurally, the stage does not permit certain stage activities such as flying of sets, draping, rigging of sufficient stage lights, the use of stage curtains, among others. Again, the stage does not have wings, teasers, tormentors and metal bars for hanging backdrops. The Studio structure does not create the avenue for some of the basic facilities to be installed.

Mr Sam mentioned that the layout does not allow for contemporary demands of flexible staging, making it difficult to execute complex productions with multiple set designs. These informants emphasise the lack of backstage infrastructure,

particularly the absence of flyovers, which significantly hinders scene changes and limits creative possibilities. They express the need for architectural upgrades to transform the studio and cater to the evolving needs of contemporary theatre practices.

The observation that the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio's architectural design presents challenges to modern multiple-set design practices aligns with my informant's assertion. However, the claim that these challenges stem solely from architectural limitations warrants further examination. While it's undeniable that the studio's current configuration may not fully cater to the demands of complex scene changes, it's crucial to consider the studio's original purpose and intended use. As a studio theatre primarily designed for educational purposes, it may have been intentionally conceived with a minimalist approach to foster creativity and resourcefulness in students.

The absence of dedicated spaces and mechanisms for scene changes could be seen as a deliberate design choice to encourage students to find innovative solutions within constraints, similar to the practices described in the literature review regarding budget limitations. The studio's bareness might be viewed as a blank canvas, prompting students to think critically about space utilisation and set design, thus enhancing their problem-solving skills and adaptability.

Furthermore, it's important to acknowledge that architectural constraints are not always insurmountable. The Efua Sutherland Drama Studio, like many other performance spaces, has the potential for adaptation and modification. While major renovations may not be feasible, creative solutions such as utilising modular set pieces, adaptable lighting techniques, and innovative stage management practices could mitigate some of the challenges posed by the existing architecture.

Ultimately, the debate surrounding the architectural limitations of the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio highlights a broader tension between tradition and innovation in theatre design. Striking a balance between preserving the studio's original educational purpose and accommodating the evolving needs of contemporary theatre practices requires careful consideration and a nuanced approach. Rather than viewing the studio's architecture as a hindrance, it could be reframed as a unique opportunity for creative exploration and experimentation within a historical context.

Therefore, while the studio's architectural design may indeed pose challenges to complex multiple-set designs, it's essential to consider the potential benefits of these constraints in fostering creativity, resourcefulness, and adaptability among students and practitioners. The studio's limitations could be seen as a catalyst for innovative approaches to set design and stage management, ultimately enriching the educational experience and contributing to the evolution of theatrical practices in Ghana.

The Main Auditorium of the University of Cape Coast also encounters similar challenges in terms of architectural design. Its configuration may not inherently support seamless scene changes, thereby constraining the creative potential of theatrical productions hosted within. One of the informants for this study, Mr Samuel Addai a technical coordinator for the Department of Theatre and Film Studies in UCC and has oversight responsibility of the main auditorium intimated that;

The auditorium has been a central venue for our performances but when it comes to accommodating

modern multiple-set mechanisms, we have none. Perhaps the auditorium wasn't primarily constructed with theatrical performances in mind. It is likely that at the time of construction, there was possibly no consideration for theatre performances talk less scene-changing mechanisms. The result is that the space lacks dedicated infrastructure for transitions between sets. Backstage facilities are almost unavailable and the overall layout does not favour scene changes as required by contemporary theatre practices.

Source: Extract from field data (16th May, 2023)

Like the Drama Studio, the UCC Main Auditorium appears not to have been built with theatre specifically in mind, resulting in a layout that could enable scene changes. The absence of dedicated infrastructure for set changes and limited backstage facilities further restrict production flexibility and creative possibilities. This suggests a possible oversight during construction or a prioritisation of other functions that did not anticipate the evolving needs of modern theatre. A thorough analysis of the Main Auditorium's design, exploring renovation options for essential infrastructure and enhanced backstage facilities, could be key.

The challenges encountered by both the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio and the Main Auditorium of the University of Cape Coast in accommodating complex multiple-set designs highlight a complex interplay between inherent architectural limitations and the adaptability of theatre practitioners. While the existing designs of these performance spaces may not fully align with the technical demands of contemporary theatre practices, it's crucial to recognize that the issue is not solely a matter of faulty design, but also of adaptation and creative problem-solving within those constraints.

The architectural designs of these spaces, while perhaps not initially envisioned for the complexities of modern productions, present an opportunity for theatre practitioners to reimagine and repurpose the existing infrastructure. Rather than viewing the architectural limitations as insurmountable obstacles, they can be seen as catalysts for innovation and creative solutions. The resourceful use of modular set pieces, adaptable lighting techniques, and innovative stage management practices can effectively mitigate some of the challenges posed by the existing architecture.

Furthermore, the historical and cultural context of these performance spaces should also be considered. The Efua Sutherland Drama Studio, for instance, holds significant historical value as a training ground for generations of Ghanaian theatre practitioners. Preserving its original essence while adapting it to contemporary needs requires a nuanced approach that balances tradition with innovation.

Ultimately, the question is not merely whether the design is the problem or the failure to adapt to the design. It's a matter of acknowledging both the inherent limitations of the architectural designs and the potential for creative adaptation within those limitations. By recognizing the interplay between design and adaptability, theatre practitioners can find innovative ways to overcome challenges and create compelling theatrical experiences in existing performance spaces.

Again, I observed that even the recently constructed SCA Theatre did not make provision to include standardised facilities to support and facilitate multiple set design practice. Dr Johnson Edu,

one of the informants who was instrumental in the construction of the facility adduced that:

We are even lucky to have this because the initial design made the stage area really small and did not consider so many technicalities. I think the challenge was not having someone as part of the committee who really understands and appreciates the nitty gritty of theatre productions. It was later that we had to implore on the contractor to open up the stage area a bit more and we are fortunate to have it as it is now and even with that because the initial architectural could not be extensively varied, we can't really incorporate any of the modern facilities that could facilitate scene changes and multiple set-design.

Source: Extract from field data (16th May 2023)

Dr Edu's statement highlights a significant issue in the design and construction of performance spaces: the lack of input from theatre production experts during the planning phase. This oversight can result in facilities that do not meet the practical needs of theatrical productions, underscoring the importance of involving knowledgeable professionals in the design process to ensure that performance spaces are both functional and adaptable.

Moreover, the challenges extend to cultural spaces such as the Centres of National Culture spread across the country. These centres, while pivotal in showcasing Ghana's rich cultural heritage, grapple with architectural limitations that impede the efficient execution of multiple-set changes during theatrical presentations. The significance of multiple-set changes in Ghanaian theatre design is a multifaceted issue that requires a nuanced understanding of both historical context and contemporary artistic aspirations. While the traditional forms of Ghanaian theatre, such as Ananse storytelling and ritual performances, often relied on minimal set changes, the contemporary theatre landscape is evolving rapidly. As Ghanaian theatre practitioners engage with global trends and explore new storytelling techniques, the incorporation of multiple-set changes has become increasingly relevant.

Mr Quayson who is involved with the management of one of these cultural spaces provided a firsthand perspective, shedding light on the root of the issue. The informant expressed that most of the centres were built for conferences and symposiums and cultural events like dance and recitals, and perhaps no consideration was made for theatre performances that would require complicated scene-changing mechanisms.

This observation underscores a critical aspect of the challenge that is the original purpose for which these cultural spaces were constructed. The focus on conferences, symposiums, and cultural events reveals a design concentration that did not anticipate the demands of theatrical performances. The informant's insight highlights the oversight in not considering the specific requirements of theatre productions, particularly the need for sophisticated scene-changing mechanisms to facilitate the fluidity of multiple-set designs.

The architectural limitations observed in the Centres for National Culture are intricately tied to their initial design intent, which prioritised certain cultural events over the complexities of theatrical presentations. The informant's perspective serves as a poignant illustration of the broader challenge faced by cultural spaces that were not originally envisioned to accommodate the requirements of modern theatre productions.

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The challenge of architectural designs within performance spaces transcends specific venues, encompassing educational institutions and cultural centres alike. The Efua Sutherland Drama Studio, the Main Auditorium of the University of Cape Coast, and the Centers of National Culture collectively highlight the need for an exploration of architectural constraints to foster a more conducive environment for innovative and dynamic multiple-set design practices in Ghana.

The Need for Modern Equipment

Another staging limitation that surfaced in the engagement with the data is the obsolescence of available equipment, particularly equipment that could aid scene-changings. Despite the presence of such mechanisms in some of the performance spaces, they are worn-out, typified by the National Theatre of Ghana. In the National Theatre for example, the counterweight system with flyovers and pulleys, once a marvel of engineering innovation, now stands as a relic of a bygone era.

An informant from the National Theatre provides valuable insights into the challenges posed by the worn-out equipment, particularly in the context of scene-changing mechanisms. The informant highlights that these once-innovative systems, such as the counterweight system with flyovers and pulleys, have aged to a point where they are no longer efficient or reliable. The informant observes that, "these things have become old, and it is really difficult to use them." This observation underscores the tangible difficulties faced by theatre practitioners in maintaining and operating outdated equipment. The informant's remark on the counterweight system, once hailed as an engineering whiz, now serves as a symbol of a wider struggle. Many performance spaces grapple with outdated equipment that has long outlived its usefulness, creating limitations on contemporary productions.

The term "difficult to use" implies a practical hindrance in the daily operations of the National Theatre. The ageing mechanisms likely exhibit signs of wear and tear, contributing to operational inefficiencies that may compromise the smooth execution of scene changes. The informant's acknowledgment of the challenges posed by the obsolescence of equipment adds a perspective to the broader discussion on the staging limitations. The observation emphasises the urgent need for interventions.

Non-functional Equipment

Non-functional equipment also surfaced as a notable staging limitation. Informants underscored the critical impact of equipment that have ceased to function as intended. Their insight suggests that the tools and machinery essential for scene changing have reached a state of disrepair, rendering them ineffective in contributing to the smooth execution of multiple-set changes.

In the informant's words, "we grapple with equipment that are no longer functional." The struggle to navigate the creative process with tools that have lost their functionality. The struggle to navigate the creative process with tools that have lost their functionality not only hinders the execution of ambitious productions but also stifles artistic expression and innovation. It forces practitioners to compromise their artistic vision, adapt their creative choices, and resort to workarounds that may not fully realise the intended impact of their work. The term "grapple" conveys a sense of ongoing struggle, indicating that the non-functional equipment is not merely a minor inconvenience but a significant impediment in the day-to-day operations of the theatrical space.

Many of our lighting instruments are outdated and unreliable. We often have to improvise with makeshift solutions, which limits our creative choices and can even compromise safety during performances. For example, during our last production, a spotlight malfunctioned mid-scene, leaving actors in darkness. These issues create a constant state of uncertainty and detract from the overall production value.

Source: Extract from field data (3rd April, 2023)

Both observations highlight the detrimental impact of non-functional equipment on theatrical production. The informant from the National Theatre emphasised the difficulties posed by broken scene-changing machinery, impeding the seamless execution of multiple-set changes.

Lack of Expertise

Another significant staging limitation delineated from the data for multiple-set design practices was the lack of expertise in managing scene-changing facilities. This challenge is particularly evident in performance spaces such as the National Theatre. The absence of an in-house expert dedicated to overseeing the limited available scene-changing facilities is a notable hindrance to their efficient operation.

The National Theatre's reliance on workers who, although familiar with the facilities, lack specialised expertise, accentuates the limitations in managing and maintaining scene-changing mechanisms. These workers, while over-familiarized, may not possess the nuanced understanding required for intricate repairs or the optimal functioning of sophisticated equipment.

Similarly, other performance spaces such as the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio, the School of Creative Arts Theatre, UCC Auditorium, and the Centers of National Culture face a complete dearth of in-house experts. The absence of dedicated professionals with specialised knowledge in scene-changing facilities management exacerbates the challenges across various theatrical venues.

For instance, an informant familiar with the National Theatre's operational dynamics expressed that "we don't have an in-house expert for the scene-changing facilities. We often have to depend on workers who, while familiar with the facilities, may not have the expertise needed for proper maintenance and repairs." This lack of expertise introduces another layer of uncertainty in handling scene-changing mechanisms, potentially leading to safety concerns, and increased exposure to wear and tear.

Capital Intensiveness

The initial investment required for modern scene-changing machinery presents a significant financial barrier to the implementation of contemporary staging practices in Ghanaian theatre. High-tech fly systems, with their intricate mechanisms and automated controls, and sophisticated counterweight designs, the silent orchestrators of seamless transitions, necessitate substantial capital expenditure. This initial financial hurdle is particularly challenging for smaller community spaces and educational institutions, often operating within limited budgetary constraints. The struggle to adhere to contemporary performance standards while navigating these financial limitations frequently results in the continued use of outdated equipment, hindering artistic vision and compromising the full potential of theatrical productions.

The maintenance of scene-changing facilities in Ghanaian theatre presents a constant drain on financial resources. Just as acquiring modern equipment requires a hefty initial investment, keeping it functioning smoothly necessitates an ongoing commitment. Outdated mechanisms inevitably succumb to wear and tear, demanding repairs and refurbishments. Rusty fly systems need grease and welding, counterweights require inspections and adjustments, and ageing motors cry out for replacements. This constant cycle of upkeep generates a hidden cost, an invisible burden that weighs heavily on theatre budgets. Replacing worn-out ropes, repairing frayed pulleys, and maintaining ageing counterweight systems can quickly eat into funds allocated for other crucial production elements. This creates a challenging scenario where theatres are forced to choose between keeping the lights on and ensuring seamless transitions between scenes. The pressure to allocate limited resources towards equipment maintenance can restrict investment in other essentials, such as costumes, props, and artist fees, ultimately impacting the overall quality and artistic potential of productions.

Engaging the services of expert scene-changing technicians adds another layer to the capital intensiveness challenge faced by Ghanaian theatres. The proficiency to operate, maintain, and repair these complex facilities does not come gratis. Hiring professional personnel internally can put a significant strain on already stretched budgets.

The scarcity of readily available and affordable scene-changing experts in Ghana often necessitates outsourcing. This reliance on external professionals, while ensuring smooth and safe scene transitions, adds financial burden to productions. Hiring external crews for every performance or relying on expensive freelance arrangements can quickly devour limited financial resources. This creates a major challenge, balancing the desire for professional expertise with the stark realities of budgetary constraints.

Furthermore, the lack of readily available in-house expertise can hinder long-term maintenance and preventative care. The absence of dedicated personnel equipped with the technical knowledge and experience to identify potential issues before they escalate can lead to costly breakdowns and repairs later down the line. This reactive approach to maintenance further exacerbates the financial constraints, often resulting in a vicious cycle of expensive troubleshooting and repairs. Mr Jojo Quansah, the Technical Director of the National Theatre, and familiar with the financial intricacies of managing scene-changing facilities expressed that..

The capital intensiveness associated with scene-changing facilities is a significant hurdle for us. Whether it's purchasing new equipment, maintaining the old ones, or hiring experts for specialised services, each step requires a considerable financial commitment. We survive on government subvention and it is not even adequate to cater for the basic needs of the entire theatre. So, I think it will be really difficult to engage experts just to handle those facilities.

Source: Extract from field data (20th January, 2023)

This perspective sheds light on the intricate dimensions woven into the fabric of the capital intensiveness challenge, underscoring the financial burdens carried by performance spaces in Ghana.

Over-reliance on Traditional Materials

The data also revealed a persistent reliance on traditional materials, such as lumber and plywood, in Ghanaian theatre set design. This over-reliance poses significant challenges to the implementation of multi-set designs, hindering the creative vision and practical execution of productions. It is observed that, the use of traditional materials is deeply ingrained in historical practices, and this familiarity often leads to reluctance to exploring alternatives. Additionally, limited awareness of sustainable and cost-effective options contributes to the continued use of conventional materials.

The extensive use of lumber results in heavy and cumbersome sets, making manual scene changes difficult and time-consuming. The financial burden of procuring these materials adds to production costs, a significant concern for resource-constrained theatre groups. Moreover, the sheer weight and size of traditional sets can limit creative possibilities and impede the seamless flow of performances. Mr Samuel Addai the informant from UCC shared his insights on the issue:

Our over-reliance on traditional materials has become a stumbling block. We grapple with the weight, the costs involved, and the practicality of manoeuvring sets manually. It's time to explore alternatives that align with sustainable practices for a more effective and forward-looking approach in multiple-set design.

Source: Extract from field data (20th January 2023)

This statement reflects a growing awareness within the theatre community of the need to break free from the constraints of traditional materials. The data underscores the urgency of exploring alternative materials and methods for set design. This research project, therefore, seeks to identify and test sustainable and cost-effective materials that can facilitate the implementation of multiple-set designs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this exploratory study has illuminated the multifaceted challenges inherent in multiple-set design practices within Ghanaian performance spaces. The findings underscore a pressing need for strategic interventions to enhance the functionality and versatility of these spaces. By addressing architectural limitations, upgrading obsolete equipment, investing in maintenance and expertise, and exploring alternative materials, Ghanaian theatre can unlock its full creative potential. Embracing sustainable practices and fostering collaboration among stakeholders will further enrich the theatrical landscape, ensuring that it thrives as a vibrant and dynamic platform for artistic expression and cultural preservation.

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