

# ZJER

## ZIMBABWE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

VOLUME 22

Number 1 March 2010

ISBN: 1013-3445

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**Zakaria Ndemo, Dr. David J. Mtetwa,**

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**Roswitta Gatsi and Professor Chipo Dyanda**

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**Saiden Tondhlana**

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN ZIMBABWE?  
**T. C. Kazembe**

THE USE OF SHONA AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN THE FIRST THREE GRADES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL IN A TONGA SPEAKING COMMUNITY: PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS  
**Ruth Gora, George Mavunga, Bertha Muringani, Febion Waniwa,**

EXPLORING FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE OF BACHELOR OF EDUCATION (EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION, PLANNING AND POLICY STUDIES) STUDENTS IN EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS: A CASE STUDY OF ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY, MASHONALAND WEST REGION  
**Emmanuel Chinamasa**

CHANGING THE FACE OF TEACHING: A CASE FOR REFLECTIVE TEACHING  
**Webster Kadodo**

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# THEORISING PRACTICE AND PRACTISING THEORY IN UNIVERSITY THEATRE DESIGN COURSES: THE CASE OF TWO ZIMBABWEAN STATE UNIVERSITIES

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## ABSTRACT

*Cognisant of the fact that theatre, particularly theatre design, is a multimedia art which uses many levels of communication, this article posits that, theatre design courses in universities should endeavour to do justice to both theory and practice. By way of comparing costume and scenic design courses at two state universities, namely, Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology and the University of Zimbabwe the study established that there is evident tension and negative attitudes among students regarding either theory or practicum at the two institutions. This article postulates that these tensions and negative attitudes have to be sufficiently addressed so that students are psychologically, technically and intellectually equipped to theorise practice and practice theory in design courses. The article submits that it is only through such an approach that theatre design curriculum can produce students-cum artists who can make meaningful and effective contributions in theatre design in the country.*

## Introduction

This paper is an attempt to contribute to the common debate in theatre on the dynamic between theory and practice focusing on Costume and Scenic design. The study reveals and explores the relationship between theory and practice using two state universities which seem to be the only ones offering theatre design courses at the moment in Zimbabwe. These are, Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology and the University of Zimbabwe. Theory in Costume and Scenic Design is defined here as intellectual constructions that seek to define and explain a phenomenon (Cameroon and Gillespie, 1992:194). This involves both dramatic theory and performance theory. However, the definition goes further to embrace what can be referred to as "disciplinary knowledge and research processes which constitute the base or foundation that supports the superstructure of practice" (Kruger and Perterson, 2005:131). On the other hand, practice or practicum is defined here as all technical, organisational, manual, practical and experiential work in Costume and Scenic design. Costume and Scenic design are studied together here owing largely to their close association. As Brocket (2000:393) observes, "The work of Scene designer and Costume designer interacts."

An examination of courses, documents and students' attitudes at the two state universities reveals that at Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology there is general emphasis on practicum while at the University of Zimbabwe there is an attempt to balance theory and practice, although students seem to prefer theory to practicum. Students' attitudes and perceptions in relation to what is offered at the two institutions are critically examined. After examining students' attitudes and perceptions with regards to theory and practice, as well as exploring the tension between theory and practice in theatre, the study will posit that by virtue of its multimedial nature, theatre design, is both an intellectual and creative/technical discipline. Consequently, universities are encouraged to provide all the technical, practical, intellectual and human resources that are needed to integrate theory and practice in Costume and Scenic Design courses.

## **Methodology**

This study largely culminates from a qualitative research that involved about 44 students from Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology and the University of Zimbabwe. Data were collected qualitatively using the following;

### **1.0 Document analysis**

Course outlines;  
Students' write-ups on practical projects;  
Seminar paper.

### **2.0. Observation**

2.1. Practical projects;  
2.2. Seminar presentations.

### **3.0. Formal and informal conversations.**

### **4.0. Qualitative or open ended questionnaires.**

The above research methods were carried out between 2004 and 2006. The research focused on two Honours classes from both institutions. For ethical reasons, the article will not use real identities of the students involved and consequently will use pseudonyms to protect their identities.

## **Costume and Scenic Design at Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology**

Theatre Design is one of the courses at Chinhoyi State University of Science and Technology under the Bachelor of Creative Art and Design Honours programme which offers courses such as Photōgraphy, Graphics, Ceramics,

Advanced Drawing, Fashion and Design, Painting and Mixed Media, Sculpture, Film and Video and Fine Art.

The Theatre Design component consists of Scenic, Costume, Lighting and Sound Design. The Costume Design component includes both theory and practice. Theoretical aspects include History of Costume Design, The Psychology and Sociology of Clothes, Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations in Costume Design, Approaches in Costume Design. The practicum consists of the following elements: Organisational Paper Work, Drawing and Rendering, Costume Construction and Applied Make-up.

Scenic Design is taught under the following topics,

- (i) Introduction to Scenic Design;
- (ii) Aspects and Categories of Scenic Design;
- (iii) Abstraction in Scenic Design;
- (iv) Mechanical Drafting, Perspective and Rendering;
- (v) Model Box; and
- (vi) Scenic Construction and Painting.

The article proceeds by examining students' perceptions and attitudes in relation to what is offered in both Costume and Scenic design.

### **Students' Attitudes and Perceptions**

This section examines the attitudes and perceptions of students from Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology on specific aspects and topics offered especially in Costume Design. While focus is on costume design, the same views apply to their attitude and perceptions on Scenic Design. Below is a table summarising the attitudes and perceptions of 24 students as expressed in open-ended questionnaires that were administered between 2004-2006.

**Table 1: Twenty Four Students' views on Costume Design topics at Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology**

Topic	Number of students making positive statements	Number of students making negative statements	Number of students NOT making specific reference to the topic	Major reason(s) for positive statements	Major reason(s) For negative
History of costume	6 (25%)	18 (75%)	0 (0%)	-Gives relevant information	-Does not help practice -Too much reading
Psychology and sociology of costume	11 (45.8.3%)	8 (33.33%)	5 (20.83%)	-Style of presentation was good -Topics relates to concrete situations	-Too academic
Theory and Concepts in costume	4 (16.7%)	20 (83.3%)	0 (0%)	-Informative	-Difficult -Not relevant to concrete situations
Approaches to Costume Design	14 (58.3%)	9 (37.5%)	1 (4.2%)	-Is useful when one wants to design	-Too historical
Organisational Paperwork	19 (79.2%)	2 (8.3%)	3 (12.5%)	-Interesting to do -Prepares for industry and real work	-Terms used are confusing and difficult to remember
Drawing and Rendering	24 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	-Gives relevant practice for real work	
Costume Construction	24 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	Gives opportunity for 'real' design and prepares for professional work	

The above table coupled with other findings from interviews with the students show that students from Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology generally prefer practicum to theory. For instance, it is clear from data in the above table that at least 100% of the students thought that drawing, rendering and costume construction were the most relevant topics in what they covered in costume design. The same attitudes and perceptions were expressed by at least eighty five (85%) students from the same institution in relation to scenic design.

The majority of the students (82%) expressed very positive views and attitudes towards technical and practical aspects such as model box construction, carpentry, or property construction and scenic painting. However, the researcher wanted to know what motivates these perceptions and attitudes.

First, Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology attempts to train students in Science and Technology with a view to making courses as relevant as possible to industry. This creates a certain degree of expectation among the students. The majority of students doing the Bachelor of Technology in Creative Art and Design programme have diplomas from Teachers' Colleges and Technical Colleges or Polytechnics. These diplomas have strong practical and technical components. Consequently, students from such a background are very proficient in technical and practical work such as drafting, rendering, construction and painting. Given this proficiency in technical and practical work, the temptation to 'specialise' in practicum is very high. In addition, apart from theatre design, they do other courses such as Sculpture, Ceramics, Fine Art and Design Display, which are very demanding both physically and mentally. This puts them under so much pressure that they think of prioritising. Under these circumstances, reading a book is the last thing that they might want to do. For example, it is not easy for a student who has been attending a practical class of Sculpture for about eight hours to have time to theorise, say on dramatic theory, or postmodernism, Grotowsky's Poor Theatre, Epic Theatre or Post-Coloniality and its implications to the practice of theatre design. There are many challenges that make it difficult to integrate theory and practice.

However, this article argues that notwithstanding the above and other challenges, it is imperative to integrate theory and practice at a university, especially in theatre programmes. A theatre designer is a technician, a creator, a thinker and an interpreter of other people's ideas and works (Russel, D. 1973:445). So a designer should have a strong theoretical background in the art of theatre. In addition, a designer designs both character and Given Circumstances which are situated in a specific philosophical, cultural, ideological, and aesthetic milieu. To be able to design properly, these contexts have to be aptly theorised, analysed and interpreted. Here the study endorses Cameroon and Gillispie (1992: 193) when they say "... good design is not redundant. It does not merely state the theme. It has its own complexity." Perhaps the need for theoretical knowledge in theatre can be aptly demonstrated by a brief examination of three practical projects, two from Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology and one from the University of Zimbabwe.

The first project was from Kudakwashe Chirashe on the scenic design for Cont Mhlanga's *Workshop Negative*. The student proposed to design the play on a proscenium stage which would give him the opportunity to design a very realistic and beautiful scenery. So he constructed a model box on the basis that the play would be performed on a proscenium stage. However, there is no proscenium

stage at Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology. So if the student had properly mastered the theory of manipulating available space for instance, he would have realised that in theatre, one makes use of available resources and technology. This theoretical knowledge would have richly benefited his practicum. The second project is on scenic design for Patience Manzira's "Ahoyi Zimbabwe" which is an adaptation of *Woza Albert* by Percey Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema. The design was done by a Third Year Honours student from the University of Zimbabwe. About twelve students from Chinhoyi University of Science and Technology who watched "Ahoyi Zimbabwe" were highly impressed by the acting, but they complained that there "was no design." This is because by its very nature, "Ahoyi Zimbabwe" or *Woza Albert*, one can only construct a very minimalistic or near bare stage if the events in the play are to flow smoothly and dramatically. The point is that, given their strong background in visual art, drawing, painting and mixed media, the students thought that theatre design is technical wizardry or the creation of very flamboyant and spectacular images. In order to correct this misunderstanding, students need to be thoroughly oriented in the works of Jerzy Grotowski and his *Poor Theatre*, Bertolt Brecht and his *Epic Theatre*, Adolphe Appia and Credo Mtwa and their theories and ideas on the stagecraft of African ritual and narrative performances.

Lastly, about five students at Chinhoyi chose to do their practical projects on August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. They opted to do costume and scenic design. The major weakness in terms of scenic design for most of the projects as reflected on the ground plans, model boxes, and perspective drawings was that there was too much scenic "paraphernalia". Yet *Miss Julie* represents a revolt against surface reality towards critical naturalism which emphasises emotional and psychological reality. In relation to proposed costume designs, the major weaknesses were that the students did not consider much theoretical and conceptual aspects such as character evolution, stylisation, interpretation of the period and stereotypes. Before one engages in the practical and technical aspects of costume design, there is need for a thorough intellectual, ideological, cultural, and aesthetic understanding of Given Circumstances.

The above discussion shows the importance of theoretical knowledge and concepts if appropriate and meaningful designs are to emerge from any context, particularly that of the university environment. The next section examines different aspects of the same issues with reference to the University of Zimbabwe.

### **Costume and Scenic Design: University of Zimbabwe**

This section focuses on Costume and Scenic design at the University of Zimbabwe with a particular emphasis on the BA Honours programme. In this programme, Theatre Design or Stagecraft is one of the courses offered, among other theatre courses such as Acting, Directing, Film and Media, Theatre Criticism, Theatre in Africa, Dance, Theatre Management and Theatre for Development.

The stagecraft component teaches both theoretical and practical aspects. This article proceeds by examining students' attitudes and perceptions on costume and scenic design.

### Students' Attitudes and Perceptions on Costume and Scenic Design

The table below summarises views and attitudes of about eighteen students who responded to an open-ended questionnaire which solicited their opinions on the topics and aspects covered in scenic design. The twenty students are from two Bachelor of Arts Honours classes in two different academic years. Again, for ethical reasons, pseudonyms are used to protect their identities.

**Table 2: Twenty Students' Perceptions on Scenic Design Courses – University of Zimbabwe**

Topic	Number of students making positive statements	Number of students making negative statements	Number of students NOT making specific reference to the	Major reason(s) for positive statements	Major reason(s) For negative
Introduction to Scenic Design	15 (75%)	0 (0%)	5 (25%)	-Provides relevant background	-
Aspects and Categories of Scenic Design	16 (80%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)	-Informative -Intellectually stimulating	-Difficult concepts to grasp -Not quite applicable
Theories of Scenic Design	15 (75%)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	-Broadens knowledge	-Difficult concepts
Abstraction in Scenic Design	13 (65%)	6 (30%)	1 (5%)	-Links well with other courses in theatre -Informative	-Difficult to apply
Mechanical Drafting Perspective and Rendering	4 (20%)	15 (75%)	1 (5%)	-Develops skills for professional work	-Lack of good background -Too technical
Model box	6 (30%)	14(70%)	0 (0%)	-Useful for effective staging - Relevant training	-Takes too much time -Difficult
Scenic Construction and Painting	6 (30%)	11(55%)	3 (15%)	-Good for professional growth	-Work of technicians -Lack of enough resources

workshop. On the floor, a brown colour is suggested to depict sadness. Lastly, she proposes to draw a fox on the same floor to indicate the cunningness of Mkize, the main character in the play. The fox image would function as a metaphor which would be accessible to a largely "intellectual" audience at the University of Zimbabwe.

While the above projects were very strong in terms of theoretical grounding and conceptual clarity, they had serious technical and practical limitations. There was nothing 'theatrical' on Tatenda Mhuri's costume sketches. A technically conscious designer could have added stylistic elements on the silhouette of the costume to make it "bigger than life." On the other hand, Munashe's perspective drawings were not clear, suggesting that even if she were going to execute them, there would be a big gap between the plan and the actual design. In any case, the image of the fox was missing from both the floor plan and perspective drawing. In general, one notes that most brilliant design plans were not executed owing to technical and practical limitations.

### **Tension between theory and practice**

Theatre theorists and practitioners have noted the tension between practice and theory which has a bearing on theatre studies at universities (Wiles 1980:9, Banham 1996:35, Pavis 2000:80, Hornby 1977:6). To begin with, evidence from the two case studies seems to suggest that a theoretically strong student might not necessarily be proficient in technical and practical aspects. These limitations inform attitudes and perceptions to either aspect of theatre design. This is to say that the co-existence of an artist and the intellectual in the same person is difficult to find (Pavis 2000:80). Furthermore, in the case of the two universities referred to in this study, it seems there are serious limitations which make it difficult for both universities to do justice to both theory and practicum. Some of the limitations relate to the negative attitudes of the students, technical material and human resources challenges and limitations.

Nevertheless, this study argues that it is imperative for both universities to integrate theory and practice because of the nature of the theatre design discipline which has been highlighted in previous sections. It is, therefore, important to deal with the negative attitudes and perceptions which are held by students from both universities. If the negative attitudes and perceptions are not addressed, they end up creating or worsening antagonism between performers/artists and theatre academics. For instance, it seems there is a general "anti-intellectualism" among professional, community and amateur theatre practitioners who seem to think that the university offers only abstract concepts in theatre studies. At the same time, theatre academics can benefit a lot from a close relationship with who artists who can function as valuable sources for the construction of knowledge.

Perhaps the tension between creativity and intellectualism or reflection can never be resolved in other disciplines and might still remain an ideal more than a reality even in theatre. However, the university seems to be the most ideal place to integrate theory and practice. In the case of theatre design, it is an imperative, simply because theatrical design requires continuous intellectual and imaginative thinking to meet the intellectual needs of the play and then come up with the technological solution to realise the appropriate visual images (Arnold 1998:325). Thus, the functions of scenic and costume design "are both practical and metaphoric, both concrete and imaginative" (Cohen 2003:447). In addition to the above, theatre design is also defined as "... physicalisation of a poetic idea" (Hodge 1970:180). In light of the above, this article argues that the university curriculum for theatre design courses should strive to produce a pedagogue – artist. Perhaps after graduation students can choose to specialise either in "academia" or 'creativity.' But both theoretical knowledge and practical skills will remain invaluable either way.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There are many impediments and challenges which will confront any attempt to integrate theory and practice. Some of them have been highlighted in this article. In fact, the dynamic between theory and practice in the arts in general is characterised by shifting and at times conflicting relationships. However, given the nature of theatre design, it seems the university curriculum should always endeavour to theorise practice and practice theory if the goal of producing professional designers and academics is ever to be realised.

Consequently, students studying theatre design should be well-grounded in both dramatic theory and performance theory. For instance, they should be familiar with all dramatic genres as well as studying different plays from across the world. They should study performance theories, ideas and concepts from theoreticians and practitioners such as Peter Brook, Credo Mtwla, Wole Soyinka, Bertolt Brecht, Adolphe Appia, Gordon Craig and Jerzy Grotowski among many others. At the same time, theoretical knowledge should be enriched, contextualised or even modified through application in practical situations. Therefore, practical and technical aspects have to be given enough attention as well as material, technical and human resources. It is imperative to employ technicians, graphic artists, carpenters, tailors and other relevant specialists. In addition, we recommend that all theatre design students should be placed on attachment to a professional company, or arts organisation, where they would experience "the 'real' world for which they are training" (Kruger et al 2005:133). Perhaps a minimum of eight months on such placement or attachment can give enough time for students to test, apply and contextualise their intellectual and practical skills. Lastly, it would be interesting if future studies could explore the dynamic between theory and practice in other theatre courses such as Acting, Directing, Theatre for Development and Dance.

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