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# Performative encounters: Performance intervention in marketing health products in Nigeria

**ABSTRACT**

*The integration of performance in the sale of medicaments dates back to ancient shamanic practices. The shift from total reliance on healers from the 1960s to new products and models of healthcare delivery saw itinerant salesmen in Nigeria turn the sales of healthcare products into sophisticated participatory performative acts. Historically shamans contextualised healing as performed enactments in which trance, possession, and choreographed actions were important in convincing clients of their pedigree. The performance quotients deployed by shamans were significant in how results were viewed: a strategy that Nigeria's post-civil war (1967–1970) itinerant medicine salesmen later honed into theatricalised displays. From the early 1970s to 1990s modern itinerant medicine salesmen invaded public transports using a combination of spontaneous dramatisation, role-play, costuming, devised narratives and audience participation to ensure sales. The Nigerian government banned this activity from public transports in the late*

**KEYWORDS**

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1990s, but it persists in other settings. This paper explores the marketing of healthcare as a form of 'direct theatre' (Schechner 1992) and how the deployment of performance to functional intentions results in a unique form of theatricality in which medical products are significant 'actants' (Hilton 1987).

## INTRODUCTION

Healthcare in pre-colonial Nigeria was delivered by healers and herbalists, and by spiritualists whose training involved periods of apprenticeship with expert healers. Whether delivered through trance, séance or medicaments, healing was an act that depended on aspects of performance practice. From independence in 1960, but especially from the mid-1970s, the sale of healthcare products by itinerant salesmen grew astronomically, becoming a social phenomenon between 1980 and 2000; this was due to the wake of growth in the country's GDP, migrations of people from rural to urban settings and the movement of goods across large geographical areas. The majority of the post-independence salespeople neither produced the medicines they sold nor underwent the rigorous training and apprenticeship of their predecessors. Their training, usually brief, emphasised presentation techniques and prioritised performance skills over knowledge of medicines.

## SHAMANISM AND SALES OF HEALTHCARE PRODUCTS AS PERFORMANCE

In the past shamans traversed ancient trade routes consisting of extensive road networks dotted with numerous market towns and settlements. They, like modern herbalists, created their own *myths*; some built their pedigrees on ancestral fame, on outrageous claims (see Ogunshe 2007; Adegoju 2008) or carefully devised tales of great adventures and legendary victories over spirits, and biological conditions responsible for real and imagined diseases. Shamans' successes depended on their manipulation of performance skills; at home or on their journeys their craft depended on a combination of medicine, divination, and performances designed to reassure clients of their powers over spirits and of the efficacy of their products. Shamanism did not only survive Nigeria's independence in 1960; effective healthcare delivery remained beyond a majority of the populace. The country also witnessed an astonishing growth in faith-healing and itinerant salespeople, the latter trading all kinds of wares from cities to very remote villages. Out of the latter came a new generation of salesmen (yes, they were overwhelmingly, men) who sold healthcare products but lacked the mystical aura and authority of shamans; however, what they lacked in knowledge of modern medicines, they made up for with effective *performed* presentation strategies.

From the moment shamanism, faith-healing and market forces converged in the delivery of healthcare the entire population became a contested site. Wherever they found potential *clienteles-audiences* (school, church or village ground, inside of mass transport, roadside, or homestead), shaman, faith-healer, and medicine salespeople converted such spaces into performance venues. Like shamans, faith-healers rely on their relationship with the spiritual world. Medicine salespeople tout their unproven knowledge of modern medicines and like faith-healers, perform their *acts*. As shamanism declined from the early 1980s itinerant medicine sales exploded, having successfully appropriated aspects of Ajasco phenomenon into their acts. Ajasco is an advertising outfit that entered the public stage in colonial Nigeria as colourful foreign characters synonymous with dexterous dancing and cowboy outfits. Their acts involved acrobatics and vaudeville humour, but by the time they declined in the mid- 1970s they had come to symbolise anyone, especially performers, with a fondness for dance and fanciful cowboy costumes. Ajascos imitated American cowboys in costumes, most wearing toy revolvers and knee-length boots. Some faked American accents, usually affected a kind of swagger, looping walk, and other mannerisms associated with Hollywood westerns. At the peak of their fame in the 1960s Ajascos were cult figures with a sizable following among young people; they became associated, even long after their demise, with the lovable rogue in Nigerian literature.

Ajasco was pure entertainment, but its appropriation by salespeople was significant for two reasons: firstly, it expanded the scope of theatrical activities thus diversifying the entertainment quotient for audiences; and secondly, it sustained a through action-line. In its heyday Ajasco injected humorous banter and spectacle into sales activities. Its presence facilitated a division of labour that enabled salespeople to concentrate on sales whilst Ajascos cajoled audiences into making purchases. The task for modern salespeople to combine two apparently opposed aesthetics, work and leisure, was hardly challenging; the two co-exist in many forms of indigenous African theatre. Globally salespeople work with the shifting loyalties of potential clients in mind. In the Nigerian context discussed here they used *performed* acts to exploit the mental flux between action and inaction, that brief moment between decision and indecision; the aim being to coax their *audience* towards what Schechner (1994, 2002) describes as 'transportation' (temporary change such as one-off purchase) or 'transformation' (permanent change or being hooked on the product).

Ajasco, like shamans, did not disappear altogether. It was re-contextualised with indigenous Nigerian character conventions from popular fiction and drama; its derivatives display outrageous behaviour, satirical wit, comic ignorance, bombastic language, and are often irreverent of social conventions. Ajasco-derived characters like 'Papa Lolo', 'Jagua', 'Samanja', and 'Chief' Zebrudaya of 'New Masquerade' have lent their names to long-running television series with Chief Zebrudaya and his household of comic buffoons, Ovularia, Gringory

and Clarus, creating a peculiar variety of 'pidginised' English. Ajasco-derived characters have become as successful and as diverse as *commedia dell'arte's* stock characters. Ajasco's successful reinvention is not limited to theatre and television drama. The character may arguably be credited with the popularity of enduring pictorial comic cartoon strips, *Ikebe* and *Ikebe Super Star*. In fact these magazines have an antecedent in *Atoka*, a Yoruba language 'publication which began in the late 1960s and continues today...with glossy cover and added attractions such as horoscope, advice column, and penpal advertisements' (Barber, Collins & Ricard 1997: 47). Unlike *Atoka* which is based on 'Alarinjo' plays (Jeyifo 1984), the English Language *Ikebe* photo magazines are based on Ajasco; Boy Alinco, Boy Ajasco, Papa Ajasco, and Mama Ajasco (whose escapades, outrageous costumes, comic physique, and bumbling forays into social commentary have continued to evolve new acts). With neither the reputation of shamans nor the services of Ajasco but inspired by successful reincarnations of the latter, the salespeople researched for this article are best described as 'sales-performers'. Their routines draw upon elements traditionally associated with performances such as storytelling, direct theatre (Schechner 1992), and vaudeville: loose storylines, episodic framework, spontaneous dramaturgy, mimesis, stage-audience interaction, etc.

### **PERFORMING SALES AND ADVERTISING**

The sale of commodities continue in Nigeria wherever there are crowds but the 'invasion' of coaches and trains by medicine salespeople resulted in a contextual shift in this ancient practice, for reasons which I now explore in this paper. The desire by government agencies and pharmaceutical companies to extend healthcare to every corner of Nigeria transformed the merchandising of medical products into the collusion of marketing and performance it was at its height. Shamans, and their modern derivatives, share stylistic sophistication and diverse product range but the sheer theatricality of the latter's act set them apart until the practice was banned in 1995. They employed 'direct theatre' and, without necessarily articulating their praxis in such terms, they based their acts on well-defined semiotic concepts and utilised performance-making strategies and models including:

- Tadeusz Kowzan's (1975) communication and sign system;
- Goffman's (1984) concept of lived reality as a performance;
- Devising and improvisation techniques;
- Indigenous reception strategies and audience participation, a feature of African performances that Soyinka describes as 'returned compliment' 'or the two-way communication between stage and audience (1988: 225).

The *performed* sales skits discussed in this paper epitomize Soyinka's 'returned compliment' on account of their highly interactive stage-audience dynamics, use of signs, characterisation, and role-play.

They used spontaneous dramaturgy, participatory interaction and improvisation techniques to create a make-believe world that valorised their actions. Salesmen located themselves in their acts, becoming performed and performing *selves* (Goffman 1984); their sales actions were as real as their stage business was fictional. By suspending disbelief, by being in the coaches watching passively or participating actively in the 'audience of travellers' and the health products, they became what Julian Hilton calls 'actants' (1987: 29). Hilton's description of 'actant' as 'any person or thing, human or not, who or which participates in the action' (1987: 14) and the fact that participation can be active or passive gives some weight to this description of the coach-bound travellers as an *audience*. The result was usually a carefully rehearsed, pre-planned quasi-spontaneous display that straddled reality and fiction.

By all accounts 'sales-presentation acts' exhibit the hallmarks of performance, 'a doing and the thing being done' (Schechner 2002) and although they lack the sophistication of professional dramatists, sales *performers* draw from the same performance conventions as aesthetic theatre. Performers of the pre-ban acts, which I refer to as 'coach sales performance' for lack of a better term and because they operated mainly in the confines of travelling coaches, are the hundreds of itinerant, poorly-educated, medicine hawkers who utilised a range of improvised, spontaneous 'scripts' that starred themselves as presentation framework for plying their trade before a captive audience of passengers. The reception strategy in 'coach sales performances' is similar to that of street theatres; what turns product marketing into performance is advertisers' deployment of products as 'actants' (Hilton 1987) and in the Nigerian context, the salesmen's transformation of economic relations into theatricalised encounters and their reliance on artifice, mimesis, and learned 'restored behaviours' (Schechner 1985) for the creation of a sufficiently dramatic stage presence and *dramatis personae*.

The *performed sales* required 'the creation of presence' (Schieffelin 1998: 194) without which salesmen would neither convince their *audience* nor guarantee sales. Presence occurs in this instance only when accompanied by expressive performativity that communicates the right intentions to the audience. Everywhere salespeople mask their motives as *logical* service (see Grice 1999); they are twice removed from *truth* and many of their claims are, at best, half-truths, fantastical, or deliberately designed to confuse through amusement. The actions of *sales performers* derive from a functional purpose and so, are 'true' to some extent but because they are also artificial and contrived, they are fictional even when they *convince* 'audiences' of the *truth* of their claims. By exploiting their knowledge of what the 'audience' wants, by accepting the parameters and temporality of the make-believe world created right before them, audience collude with the motives of salesmen and satisfy an important condition for theatre; that of sharing the same aesthetic world.

Salespeople compete with other advertisers for audience's attention and, in the case of medicines, there are few more difficult situations than convincing people unwilling to 'suspend their disbelief' about the unproved efficacy of a medicine. This hurdle, as Adegoju (2008) argues with respect to the advertising of herbal medicines as alternatives to modern medicines in twenty-first century Nigeria, is surmounted with a performed rhetoric in which advertisers use a falsely conceived binary preposition to persuade potential customers with a 'speech designed to create concern about a problem' with their health, but which most importantly, 'asks' them 'to agree that [their] specific conditions should be perceived as a problem requiring solution' (O'Hair et al. 1975: 581–582, cited in Adegoju 2008). Success by itinerant medicine salesmen in Nigeria depended on two factors; firstly, on the fact that 'performativity' is 'part of our active being-in-the-world' (Schieffelin 1998: 197) and secondly as Goffman (1984) would argue, it depended on how well communication was articulated through performative actions. If anything *sales-performers* relied on their audiences accepting that, despite their improbability, the acts and claims performed for them were real, sincere and authentic.

As performances go, *sales-performers'* created their own protagonist, context, action, and storyline. The performance content may be quasi-dramatic, the action/storyline is a fabrication recounting the escapades of the protagonist-performer in fabled glowing terms, however, the efficacy of their medicines was nothing short of stupendous. The boastful and unsubstantiated claims of *sales-performers* and shamans have long returned in rather outrageous fashion in herbal medicine advertising on radio, television and billboards since the early 1990s (see Komolafe 1998; *Tell Magazine* 2005; Adegoju 2008). The context was usually *performers'* touching concern for the welfare of their 'cliente-audience'. The actions combined rehearsed and spontaneous routines with low-level mimesis based on a loose frame of pre-planned sequences that changed as *sales-performers* adjusted to the moods of the audience. The storyline, like the anecdotal tales that constituted a major part of presentations, was imaginary. The integration of reality and fiction created an atmosphere unlike aesthetic performances, as some dramatists have come to use the term, but the actions are neither less theatrical nor devoid of leaned performance skills. I am referring here to acts in which 'performativity is located at the creative, *improvisatory* edge of practice in the moment it is carried out – though everything that comes across is not necessarily consciously intended' (Schieffelin 1998: 199, emphasis added).

In practice, *acts* developed in different directions: contexts shifted in the face of probing questions from potential customers. Depending on how good they were, *sales-performers* engaged the *audience* in comic banter or initiated a 'cat and mouse' game with unpredictable outcomes; effective presentations generated sales, whereas *failed* performances generated no sales or aroused ridicule as in one of the examples cited later. Convincing audiences to abandon logic

and to make purchases was dependent on effective performances, for which some salesmen appealed to authority – aligning their products to famous public figures and celebrities, a form of ‘endorsement or celebrity testimonial’ (Adegoju 2008). Some created *theatre* from the information on medicine packages. Both these approaches were a proven advertising trick that Adegoju (2008) describes as ‘*argumentum ad vercundium*’ – a ploy designed to astonish and lure audiences to col-  
lude with the object of the presentation. It is:

this forgetfulness of the context, partly voluntary on the part of the audience, but in good part compelled by the quality of the performance, that constitutes so-called “suspension of disbelief” and enables the activity of the players to assert itself as an emer-  
gent reality, vivid and alive.

(Schieffelin 1998: 201)

## TWO EXAMPLES OF PERFORMED SALES

A coach of about 40 passengers (traders, businessmen, professionals, students, etc.), among them is a medicine salesman travelling incognito to others but known to driver and his mate. Salesmen get off at coach depots, sometimes boarding coaches heading in the opposite direction, once again appropriating passengers as captive audiences for their acts.

A discussion of two displays I witnessed in 1993, (1) by a self-proclaimed ‘Professor Breezer’ between Lagos and Ore in the west (LOX) and (2) by a less colourful salesman travelling from Jos to Lafia in the north (JAL), will highlight the aesthetics of these *sales acts*. The *scripts* used in this paper have been edited and adapted for the benefits of a wider, non-localised audience, in the process I have left out most of the ‘pidgin’ English without sacrificing the linguistic flavour and interactive atmosphere of both performances. ‘SP’ is my acronym for salesman-performer while ‘PA’ is for individual passengers.

### SCRIPT 1 (LOX)

*(Salesman gets up, clears his voice to attract attention ... whistles a familiar tune.)*

SP: Let us pray (*prays*).... Amen! Why don’t we make that Amen convincing? (*diverse response*) Sir! Long time no see. How’s life with you?

PA 1: Brother, life is complicated ... but we will survive this regime. A child that keeps its father from sleeping also loses its sleep.

SP: *Na true...o! We dey here before ‘am...we go dey after am too!* (That’s true! We were here before and will be here after him ....!) (*clears voice, then proceeds*) ... some (*gesturing towards audience*) know me, but for the benefit of others, I will introduce myself again even though the ‘International Assembly of United Nations’

has already done it. My name is 'Professor Willy Breezer', the only person Beecham, PZ, Smith & Kline, and Bayer permit to advertise their medicines. Ten years ago, at the University of St. Petersburg in Yugoslavia my lecturers *see* my great *intelligent*. CIA, KGB, and Mossad ... almost started world war because of me, so UNO *beg* me to travel round the world to teach doctors, lawyers, engineers, pharmacists, and other professors ... After 7 years ...

PA 2: But I know you from the motor park ... are you not that *Agbero* (motor tout) I saw last time ...

SP: *Nooooo!* ... *that go be my twin brother*. After 7 years, I decided to go private, to the real people like you and me. So whatever I give you, ask no questions, simply pay to help my new research, (*passengers protest*) ... it's not for me ... Sir, read this yourself (*passenger reads out name on medicine packets given*).

PA 3: New PR..., by German pharmaceutical company, Hoechst ... Phensic for joint pains, B- Codeine for headache ...

SP: Thank you sir ... you've heard it from this intelligent man ... vitamin B12 ... Magnesium Stearate for strong bones ... Providone, new blood medicine.... Altogether, 1000 mg of pure power ... (*pause*) ... cure for weak *manhood*, too much urinating, VD, *echetaram!* *Echetaram!!* [Et cetera used to imply listing and unlisted diseases.]

PA 1: How *illiterates* go know what that means? We no go school like you!

SP: I'm sure you go ..., (*jokingly*) to that a run-down school in Maroko! I went to the international school of medicine in Washington D. C.

PA 2: Was that before the University of St Petersburg in Yugoslavia? Incredible.

SP: That was between Petersburg and after a Ph.D. at Chinawawa University, Toronto.

PA 3: I prefer ordinary paracetamol.

SP: Wonderful ... there's paracetamol inside this pure 1000mg of 'magnum power'. I recommend it because after taking it ... my wife *think say I use mangani* ... [a potion believed to induce sexual potency] ... Since then I no fear bedroom ... I dey get special breakfast from ... this *na* [is] special for man *wey* like women [womaniser] ...

PA 1: In that case let me have two packets.

SP: Wise man ... you give money to treasurer, treasurer give me money, from me to bank manager who will pay poor pensioners ... your wife be lucky woman from today ... She *go* thank me very

very proper for this ... (*hands over medicines*) ... Abeg [please] pay treasurer quick quick ...

PA 2: (*protests jokingly*) But you say money be for new research ...

SP: True! ... I dey research why pensioners no get money to buy medicine, why them depend on their children *wey* government no *dey* pay ... why the blood in some people body no *dey* flow well well ...

(*Interaction continues for about ten minutes in several directions, it involves several passengers and culminates in sales.*)

## SCRIPT 2 (JAL)

(*The passengers are mostly boisterous undergraduates travelling home from university ... opening glee is uncertain, insufficiently theatrical.*)

SP: ... So I go to University of Wellington in Liverpool ... Australia.

PA 1: Wellington is in New Zealand my friend!

PA 2: ... (*general laughter*) he doesn't know what he's talking about. He failed his GSCE Geography!

PA 3: No! He passed. He had an A\*\* but mistook it for the privilege to transfer towns wherever he likes (*prolonged laughter*).

SP: So you think I don't know book. Look, let me tell you people ...

PA 1: ... Shhh.... Silence everyone! Professor ... (*peers at salesman's coat*) Schlumberger Drills wants to speak. Lend him your ears ...

(*Passengers seize opportunity for comic banter, ignoring salesman who goes quiet.*)

PA 2: How much will he pay me for lending him my *expensive* ears?

PA 3: At least he'll give you a Chinese balm for your old grandmother.

PA 2: (*jokingly*) Hey! Don't insult me. My grandmother is a perfect eight ...

PA 1: (*in affected anger*)... What!?

PA 2: Wait ... let him finish ... he means eight decades, the Course (degree programme) he's studying tells you he has problems with figures.

PA 1: I mean 'figure eight'. Isn't that why your grey-haired uncle has been wooing her?

PA 3: You don't have to display your ignorance, we can tell her age from your ...

SP: (*exasperated*) Wetin I do you people? [What have I done wrong?] *Na me be Gov'ment wey* close university? ... Please hear me, even if you won't buy anything!

(Students continue in satirical vein for several minutes, salesman tries unsuccessfully to get someone to read packages: each gives reasons for declining.)

SP: (*exasperated*) ... You louts! I *wan* sell medicine to feed my children ... *una no dey gree* [but you won't let me]. *Which kin people be dis?* [what kind of people are you?] (*Packs up, defeated.*)

## **AESTHETICS OF PERFORMED SALES**

The presentations above reveal four main sections:

1. 'opening glee' (Jeyifo 1984);
2. transitional pre-performance stage when commercial intent was disguised as altruistic concern for public health (see O'Hair et al. 1975);
3. climactic stage, the business section in which arguably, the 'art' [of advertising] 'and drama' [of entertainment] 'meet' (Jennings & Ase 1993: 187) as salesmen, disrobed of all pretences, relinquished mimesis and conducted sales;
4. conclusion; in which salesmen ended all activities or waited for another 'opening glee'.

Sections one to three depended essentially on the interactive participation of potential customers. In 'opening glee', *sales-performers* announced their presence and pedigree and initiated participatory interaction with audiences (see Spencer 1990; Okpewho 1990; Osofisan 1991, on 'opening glee' in African oral performance). 'Opening glee' took many forms; from heraldic voice-clearing and singing, to performers announcing themselves as the delegated representatives of some fictional high authorities. 'Opening glee' established a relaxed, interactive atmosphere – an important condition for good sales. The second stage increased interaction between salesmen and passengers – the latter participating directly or vicariously in the life-drama improvised by salesmen. The climactic third stage, the business section of performed sales, dovetailed into the closing fourth stage, when all pretences and sales ended and normality was re-established. Like 'opening glee', the climactic and closing stages are based on traditional African itinerant performances during which performers are offered gifts to which they respond with either praise songs for good gifts or comic insults for poor patronage. Performance stages flowed into each other. The timing and content of each stage depended on a salesman's understanding of his *audience*, and on his command and handling of participation.

By resorting to the common advertising strategy of establishing his credibility with appellations (Adegoju 2008), 'Professor' Breezer gave himself academic and medical credibility in 'LOX'. This achieved three purposes: it drew parallels between himself and professional doctors/pharmacists (Adegoju 2008); it gave theatrical credence to his boastful claims; and thirdly, it assured the *audience* that the information he communicated was reliable, based on empirical evidence and

proven medical facts. All three depend however, on the salesman's skilful handling of *script* and *participation*. In performance Breezer integrated camaraderie and gregarious loquacity into a presentation style that undermined the audience's natural suspicion. He conflated three distinct characters: the solo shaman; comic Ajasco; and *commedia dell'arte's* loner, II Capitano (the Captain), who pretends to be more than he actually is. Like *commedia's* II Dottore (the doctor) and shamans, Breezer understood every ailment and specialised in curing them all. Through his claims and fictional *credibility*, an academic and doctor rolled into one, Breezer, like good advertisers everywhere, entered the realm of dramatic characterisation whilst simultaneously urging potential customers to overlook their scepticism: in other words, suspend their natural inclination to disbelieve. This type of presentation, according to Goffman, requires observers:

... to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be ... the individual...puts on a show for the benefit of other people.  
(Goffman, in Kendon, 1988: 28)

The actions of the passengers in legitimising the salesmen locate *performed sales* in Victor Turner's liminal zone where theatre and social reality meet. In effect the collusion between medicine salesmen (Christian evangelists filled this gap after the ban and continue to operate in coaches in similar fashion without interruption) and passengers alleviated the tedium of long travel and commercial transactions; it also left the audience ultimately responsible for their own actions. Goffman points out that a salesman's techniques may 'guide the conviction of his audience only as a means to other ends' (1984: 28) as 'Professor' Breezer did. This is a strategy that herbal medicine practitioners now employ to very good effect in print and electronic advertising. The failure of the 'JAL' salesman underlines the importance of integrating dramatic leit-motif and performance techniques into a salesperson's act.

The sales acts described in this article, like their highly dramatised counterparts on television, are a social phenomenon on account of their reliance on routine trading activities, and the transformation of these activities into what Eugenio Barba (1991, 1999) and Watson (2002) describes as 'extra-daily behaviours'. They mirror 'the business of everyday life' and are 'routinely imbued with formal significance' (Chaney 1993: 24–25) yet they contain 'the theatrical terminology of dramatism – role, script, audience, stage, etc. (Bauman 1977: 17). They implicate their audience in active participatory roles, making them accessory to the display. They blur the boundaries of performance and life and achieve dramatic characterisation through a combination of Schechner's (1985) 'restored behaviour' and Goffman's 'performers'

credulity' – two performance concepts that require audiences 'to believe the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess' (Goffman 1984: 28). As 'restored behaviour' the presentations draw on two related dramatic premises; pretence and role-play, both of which ritualise social behaviour and transform passive observers into active participants.

In practice *sales acts* combine straight performance and presentation for, as Schechner argues, the 'difference between performing myself [...] and more formal "presentations of self" is a difference of degree, not of kind' (1985: 37). Schechner's 'difference of degree' underlines two fundamental features of *performed sales*. It highlights the retrievability of 'restored behaviour' and the reliance of sales on theatrical pretence in order to achieve real outcomes. Secondly, by insisting that 'restored behaviour is the main characteristic of performance' (1985: 35) Schechner highlights the 'transactional' (1985: 35) nature of social drama whilst foregrounding 'performativity' as a central element of performer-audience interaction. Without 'transactional' interaction and the audience's acceptance of the presentation, the sales performances I have described here would neither be sustainable nor would they guarantee results. Schipper (1982), Soyinka (1988), and Bharucha (1993), among many other writers, have commented on the contract between performers and audiences in drama, ritual, sporting event, and informal social gatherings. The successful 'LOX' salesman relied on 'transactional' interaction but how did the outcome in the sale of products impact the status of the presentation as reality and/or as theatre? Schechner's (1994) argues that 'a performance is called theater (*sic*) or ritual because of where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances' and that 'one can look at specific performances from several vantages' since 'changing perspectives changes classification' (Schechner 1994: 120). The salesmen did not simply apply drama to commerce they *put on an act* without elaborating or distinguishing between role and actor (Chaney 1993, emphasis added).

### **LANGUAGE OF AND IN PERFORMED SALES**

The different interests of salesmen and passengers, the proxemic relationship between them, and the language of transaction provide the dramatic tension that justifies the theatricality of these performances. In practice the narrow, restrictive aisles eliminate the necessity for extensive stage business but this deficiency is compensated for by the verbal and linguistic agility of salesmen. As Rudlin points out about the *commedia dell'arte* (which, as I have already indicated, possesses similar marketplace origins and features as *performed sales*), the performer goes wherever 'a crowd has to be attracted, interested and then held if a living was to be made' (1994: 24). His speech and vocal modulations may be ordinary (although this is rarely the case) but their deployment in the service of theatrical 'acts' requires creativity and imagination. Salesmen tackle this essential requirement in any

number of ways, from gregarious loquacity to banter and witty remarks deliberately designed to arouse laughter. Dry humour and bombastic statements are common too, but, irrespective of language preference, the narrative employed involves 'an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content' (Chaney 1993: 17).

Salespeople are in 'direct relationship to' their 'public, based on a humorous sense of collusion' (Rudlin 1994: 23) but those described here are involved in more than a straightforward commercial interaction. Limited to the aisles, they interact with passengers that flit from 'unfocused' individuals to 'focused' gatherings 'exemplified by occasions of conversation of all sorts', to 'jointly focused' or even 'multi-focused gatherings' (Kendon 1988: 24) exhibiting different levels of mental presence, alertness and involvement. Verbal language, (but less so for physical language) is important in how salesmen manage passengers' perceptions of their acts and consequent responses. Language attracts and then holds the audience's attention; it frames the resulting 'transactional' interaction as a specialised act with well-established aesthetic signifiers as well as displaying all the important features of expressive, meaningful communication:

There is, first of all, contrivance – inventiveness, and a capacity for improvisation, in 'filling out' and connecting up familiar 'pieces of expression' – which, because they are 'pieces of expression' familiar to his audience (for they too have learned them) are recognisable and easily understood by them. Second, there is the meaningful content: the 'pieces of expression' – skilled phatic routines of posture, movement, gesture, and symbolically loaded formulae of wording, intonation, etc. – which he has learned (by imitation, practice, experience).

(Burns 1992: 122–123)

In the aisles, the limited standing-room-only *space* available to salespeople, stage business and spectacle are compromised; this makes the *performer's* body a physical vocabulary and site of theatrical action in which language is not only transformed into 'extra-daily' (Barba 1999; Watson 2002) action, it also acquires the status and complexity of a metalanguage in the sense that it is both verbal and physical. The body emphasises narrative content, performer's active involvement, and modes of delivery in equal proportion. The linguistic content, especially with respect to the information communicated, structure, and style of delivery are designed to assault passengers' attention, to encourage their participation, and to channel their attention towards sales. What salesmen do is 'enact reality through a drama in which "the unity of language and way of life" are "both manifested and reinforced by dramatic argument"' (Hawkes 1973: 216; in Chaney 1993: 31). In the diverse 'gathered' audience roles change frequently, participatory interactions are deliberately manipulated, salesmen and passengers go

'in' and 'out' of roles. Without the rich complexity of their language providing a visual contender or equivalent to images on television and billboard advertisements, salesmen would hardly sustain their captive audiences' interests, let alone direct and manage their actions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since the ban ejected salesmen from public transport their presentation strategies (using language to evoke spectacle and to communicate effectively in a short space of time in the absence of visual equivalents, and aligning themselves with the healthcare needs of potential clients) continue in the marketing of herbal medicine (Adegoju 2008) and in creative copy-writing in Nigerian media advertising (see Nworah 2007). *Performed* sales, like ancient shamans and the government-licensed herbalists that now dominate the air waves, were driven by commerce. They all use '*argumentum ad vercundium*' (Adegoju 2008) to convince clients that their medicines are not simply panaceas; they have larger-than-life properties. The aims were, and, in the cases of herbal medicine and pharmaceutical advertisements, are, to destabilise audiences' scepticism, establish their 'sales character' or integrity, and to convince audiences that their *sincerity* and *trustworthiness* are synonymous with 'concern for the well-being of the audience' (Lucas 1992: 326). Performed sales, herbal medicine and global pharmaceutical advertisements use performance to 'create and make present realities vivid enough to beguile, amuse or terrify ... , they alter moods, social relations, bodily dispositions and states of mind' (Schieffelin 1998: 194). The difference is that, unlike herbal and modern medicine advertising, shamans and *sales-performers* framed this strategy for the solo performer without the backing of sophisticated organisations and professional actors.

*Sales-performers* devised their routines from unwritten 'scripts' to suit different contexts. Unlike Meyerhold's inspirational actor who rejects technique and 'is content to rely exclusively on his own mood' (Braun 1969: 129), they used established, tested techniques without surrendering to character or role as in naturalistic acting. Their training was mainly by way of Schechner's (1985) 'restored behaviour' which facilitates periodic recalls, retrieval, and the manipulation of established sequence of actions for new performances. Such retrievals may lead to new skills and acts but they essentially allowed these salesmen to 'rebehave according to these strips, either by existing side by side with them' (Schechner 1985: 36) or by passing them on to others. *Sales performers* sustained proxemic relationships with audiences without the spatial ruptures there are in conventional communal performances. Despite this the dramatic action 'is not limited to one group or to one place exclusively, but rather eddied through all those present' (Chaney 1993: 29). There are unrestricted exchanges among passengers, as well as between them and the salesmen, resulting in "'inclusive" tactile dramatisation' (Chaney 1993). The acts are not *social drama* as Turner (1974 and 1986) and

Schechner (1994) define the form, but a good salesman creates his acts to include 'mundane experience thereby imbuing it with new levels of meaning' (Chaney 1993: 28). In effect, what we have is not only a set of paratheatrical activities which dissolve the audience-performer opposition (Schechner 1994: 122) but 'direct theatre', that 'is not "about" something so much as it is made "of" something. It is actual and symbolic, not referential and representational' (Schechner 1992: 104).

In the cited examples the acting self and *other* self differ for, as Schechner put it, 'the self can act in / as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or set of roles ....' (1985: 36). Some activities in sales presentations happen spontaneously, others are rehearsed till they become second nature and are stored and retrieved for use when required. The performative context of *performed* sales was, and remains, undeniable. Like many commercial activities in which the performative intent is non-defined (as in aesthetic theatre), *performed* sales functioned on the same socio-theatrical dimension and aesthetics as those found in all product advertising and marketing, from medicine to the most sophisticated electronic goods.

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# The Poster

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## Aims and Scope

*The Poster* is a forum for debates about the ways in which visual devices are used to form opinion, sway, persuade, provoke, unite and divide us. The journal invites all scholars and practitioners of visual culture - its social operation, anthropology, philosophy, history, politics and creation - to join with us in an open debate about the ethics, aesthetics, effect and operation of visual rhetoric in the public sphere. *The Poster* aims to bring openness and clarity to the sea of visual persuasion in which we are all submerged.

## Call for Papers

*The Poster* seeks submissions from visual practitioners, theoreticians and researchers (including those from industry) on the following:

- Why and how the poster stands as a privileged signifier of rhetoric, over and above every other instance of the visual which also persuades or affects behaviour.
- What are the new agents of visual rhetoric?
- In a networked world who now owns and controls the means of rhetorical production?

For the full list of suggested submission questions please see the Full Call on [tinyurl.com/theposterjournal](http://tinyurl.com/theposterjournal)

Submissions may be full papers, short papers contextualizing visual submissions, position papers, reports of successful visual rhetorics deployed in the field, and reviews of relevant conferences, industrial events and exhibitions.