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EXPLORING THE INFLUENCES OF INDIGENOUS CULTURAL PRACTICES ON TRADITIONAL NIGERIAN THEATRE DESIGN

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Abstract



The design of traditional Nigerian theatre has undergone a notable evolution, serving as a mirror of the nation's rich and diverse cultural heritage. Rooted in indigenous values, beliefs, and communal practices, Nigerian theatre has historically extended beyond mere performance to embody social, spiritual, and architectural expressions of identity. This research article examines the significant impact of indigenous cultural practices on the development of Nigerian theatre design, staging methods, and performance locations. It further investigates how local traditions, rituals, and community-centered performance modes have shaped both the physical and symbolic dimensions of theatrical spaces. This way, the study highlights the adaptability and resilience of Nigerian theatre in the face of colonial influences and modern innovations. Drawing from literature and contextual review, this paper highlights the distinctive nature and flexibility of Nigerian theatre architecture while also exploring its role as a living repository of cultural memory.

Keywords: Nigerian theatre, indigenous culture, theatre design, performance spaces

1. Introduction

Nigerian theatre design is a reflection of the country's rich cultural history, deeply influenced by indigenous cultural practices that have shaped its architectural and performance styles. Traditional Nigerian theatre design is rooted in communal spaces, open-air venues, and the use of natural materials

like mud, thatch, and wood, which create immersive environments for storytelling and performances. These spaces, such as traditional compounds and courtyards, often feature circular or semi-circular layouts that encourage intimacy between the performers and the audience. This design fosters a sense of community and active participation, which is integral to many indigenous traditions.

The storytelling tradition, particularly oral histories and myths, plays a significant role in the evolution of Nigerian theatre design. The minimalist stage design and reliance on simple props and costumes allow the audience's imagination to fill in the gaps, while also emphasising the skill of the performers. In addition, the dynamic use of call-and-response techniques, a feature in many Nigerian cultural performances, has also influenced modern Nigerian theatre, encouraging interaction between actors and spectators, thereby erasing the boundaries between the two.

Masquerade performances and ritual dances, which are central to many Nigerian cultures, have also left a profound impact on theatre design. These performances often take place in communal spaces and utilise elaborate costumes and masks, further enriching the theatrical experience. The design of these venues integrates environmental elements, creating a seamless connection between the performers, the audience, and nature.

Nigerian theatre design serves not only as a space for performance but as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting cultural identity. By blending traditional practices with contemporary innovations, Nigerian theatre design continues to evolve while maintaining a deep connection to the nation's cultural heritage.

Indigenous Cultural Practices is the traditional established customs, beliefs, and creative expressions that are rooted in the indigenous peoples of Nigeria, which have been passed down through generations and remain integral to the cultural identity of various ethnic groups across the nation. These practices include storytelling, oral histories, rituals, and artistic expressions such as music, dance, and visual arts, which have profoundly influenced Nigeria's theatrical and architectural landscapes.

The country of Nigeria, renowned for its rich cultural diversity, has witnessed the emergence and growth of a dynamic theatrical culture firmly rooted in its indigenous cultural traditions (Omoera, 2008). The development of conventional Nigerian theatrical design serves as evidence of the significant impact of these longstanding customs, which have moulded the architectural structures, staging methodologies, and performance venues that define contemporary Nigerian theatre (Bakare, 1970). The use of storytelling and oral histories has significantly influenced the development and preservation of Nigeria's diverse cultural heritage. These age-old traditions, deeply rooted in numerous ethnic groups throughout the nation, have significantly influenced the development of Nigerian theatrical design.

Faseke (1990) asserts that oral storytelling has been a vital part of Nigerian culture for generations, serving as a means of preserving history, transmitting knowledge, and fostering communal cohesion. These narratives encompass folktales, myths, legends, and epic stories, passed down from generation to generation through the art of storytelling. The storytellers, sometimes renowned elders or brilliant orators, enthralled their listeners with vivid descriptions, dramatic gestures, and melodious intonations, transporting them into worlds of imagination and collective memory (Faseke, 1990).

The effect of these narrative traditions on Nigerian theatre design may be observed in the architectural forms and performance venues that have grown throughout time. Traditional Nigerian compounds and courtyards, with their central open areas, have acted as ideal venues for storytellers to assemble their audiences (Omoera, 2008). The circular or semi-round design of these venues fostered an intimate and immersive experience, enabling the storyteller to develop a direct relationship with the listeners.

Furthermore, the inclusion of local materials and building techniques in Nigerian theatrical design reflects the influence of storytelling traditions. Iyamah and Akpughe (1970) note that using natural elements like wood, thatch, and mud not only enhances the authenticity and cultural significance of the spaces but also improves the acoustics, creating an ideal environment for oral storytelling to thrive. Narrative traditions have also inspired the stage approaches adopted in Nigerian theatrical design. Storytellers typically utilised props, costumes, and basic sets to enhance their storytelling, enabling the audience's imagination to fill in the gaps (Abah, 1996). This minimalist style has been carried over into Nigerian theatrical design, where simplicity and suggestive elements are preferred, providing an opportunity for the audience's imagination to flourish. The collaborative aspect of Nigerian storytelling traditions has inspired the audience-performer interaction in Nigerian theatrical design. Storytellers regularly engaged their audiences using call-and-response strategies, promoting involvement and building a sense of community experience (Nwadiigwe, 2014). This participatory feature has been incorporated into Nigerian theatre design, where the borders between actors and viewers are typically obliterated, promoting active interaction and a shared theatrical experience.

Afolabi (2016) explains that the continuous history of storytelling traditions and oral tales in Nigerian theatrical design is a tribute to the deep-rooted cultural heritage that continues to influence creative manifestations. By embracing these indigenous practices, Nigerian theatre design has not only preserved the essence of storytelling traditions but has also adapted them to create unique and culturally resonant performance spaces, ensuring the continued relevance of these cherished narratives in the contemporary theatrical landscape.

2. Literature and Contextual Review

A review of existing literature and contextual perspectives is essential for understanding how traditional Nigerian theatre design has evolved under the influence of indigenous cultural practices. Some scholars have given exposure on African performance traditions that highlight the centrality of ritual, storytelling, and communal participation in shaping theatre forms, while scholarship on theatre architecture highlights how performance spaces reflect cultural values and social organisation (Adaeze, 2024; Apalowo & Ridwan, 2024; Mzara & Maaziz, 2025). At the same time, the Nigerian context, marked by diverse ethnic traditions, historical transformations, and contemporary reinterpretations, provides a unique backdrop for analysing the interplay between culture, space and performance. This section, therefore, topically, examines relevant scholarly contributions alongside the socio-cultural and historical contexts that frame the development of Nigerian theatre, to situate the present study within broader academic and cultural discourses.

2.1 Masquerade Performances and Ritual Dances

Masquerade performances and ritual dances have been central to Nigerian cultural traditions, playing a crucial role in ceremonial and spiritual practices across various ethnic groups (Ododo, 2014). These vibrant, symbolic expressions have significantly influenced the development of Nigerian theatrical architecture, shaping architectural forms, staging methods, and performance venues. Masquerade performances, such as "Egungun" and "Gelede," act as bridges between the physical and spiritual worlds. Featuring elaborate masks and costumes, they represent ancestral spirits, deities, or mythical animals, embodying community histories and beliefs through gestures and movements (Ododo, 2014).

The impact of masquerade performances on Nigerian theatrical design is evident in the integration of open-air venues and indigenous architectural elements (Asigbo, 2012). Traditional compounds and courtyards serve as natural stages, blending performers with their environment, while materials like wood, thatch, and mud enhance the cultural authenticity of the experience. Ritual dances, closely tied to religious events and festivals, also contribute to Nigerian theatre's evolution. These dances often feature circular or semicircular performance spaces, echoing ancient communal gatherings. The dynamic nature of these performances has inspired Nigerian theatre practitioners to incorporate masks, costumes, and live music, enriching the sensory experience (Fáléyè, 2021). The inclusive nature of these

traditions, blurring boundaries between performers and audience, fosters a sense of community ownership, underscoring the cultural vitality of Nigerian theatre (Afolabi, 2016).

2.2 Community Gatherings and Ceremonial Spaces

Community meetings and ceremonial venues have been essential to Nigerian cultures, acting as hubs for social interaction, religious activities, and shared cultural experiences. These spaces have played a crucial role in shaping Nigerian theatrical design, influencing architectural forms, performance areas, and staging techniques that reflect the nation's rich indigenous heritage. In many Nigerian communities, traditional gatherings such as village meetings, initiation ceremonies, and harvest festivals foster a sense of solidarity, identity, and belonging (Lewis, 1980).

The impact of these communal spaces on Nigerian theatre is evident in the architectural designs that have developed. Traditional compounds and village squares have long served as open-air locations for social engagement, employing indigenous materials like mud, wood, and thatch to enhance cultural authenticity and acoustics, creating an immersive experience (Adekeye, 2014). Staging methods in Nigerian theatre often reflect the layout of these communal spaces, using circular or semicircular arrangements that dissolve the boundaries between performers and the audience (Adekeye, 2014). This inclusive design fosters a sense of community and shared cultural experience.

The participatory storytelling present in community gatherings has also influenced Nigerian theatrical design, with call-and-response techniques and live music becoming central elements in performances (Go-Sam, 2008; Nwadigwe, 2014). The integration of these traditions ensures that Nigerian theatre remains a vibrant, culturally resonant medium, preserving the nation's communal memory and identity (Afolabi, 2016).

2.3 The Evolution of Architectural Forms in Nigerian Theatre Design

The architectural forms of traditional Nigerian theatre architecture have experienced a remarkable development, heavily inspired by the country's rich cultural past and indigenous rituals. This growth has given birth to a unique combination of traditional and contemporary components, producing settings that capture the essence of Nigerian culture while adapting to current theatrical demands (Iyamah & Akpughe, 1970).

1. **Traditional Compounds and Courtyards** At the core of Nigerian theatre design lies the notion of traditional compounds and courtyards, which have served as the basis for numerous performance venues. These open-air areas, generally located in rural villages and metropolitan neighbourhoods, have been crucial to numerous cultural gatherings, storytelling sessions, and social festivals. The circular or semicircular design of these rooms generates a feeling of intimacy and community, allowing for a tight connection between artists and the audience.

2. **Integration of Indigenous Materials and Construction Techniques** The growth of Nigerian theatrical design has been strongly based in the utilisation of indigenous materials and traditional construction techniques. The use of natural components such as mud, thatch, wood, and stone not only adds to the authenticity and cultural resonance of these spaces but also increases their acoustic qualities, producing an excellent atmosphere for storytelling, music, and theatrical performances (Igbaro & Akinbileje, 2010). Moreover, the use of these indigenous materials and methods indicates a strong regard for the environment and a sustainable approach to building. The ancient ways of construction using locally found materials have been handed down through generations, guaranteeing the preservation of cultural knowledge and fostering environmental responsibility.

3. **Adapting Traditional Spaces for Contemporary Theatrical Performances** While taking influence from traditional architectural forms, Nigerian theatre architecture has also changed to suit the needs of

contemporary theatrical plays. Modern theatrical venues frequently integrate characteristics of classic compounds and courtyards while adding technology breakthroughs and novel architectural ideas (Orji, 2020).

For instance, modern Nigerian theatre design may have open-air performance spaces surrounded by covered sitting sections, offering shelter from the weather while keeping the link to the natural environment. Additionally, the integration of lighting, sound systems, and other technological components has grown vital, allowing for more dynamic and immersive theatrical experiences. The use of flexible and modular architectural features has grown increasingly widespread, allowing the modification of conventional venues to fit a broad variety of performance styles and genres. This versatility reflects the dynamic character of Nigerian theatre, which continues to incorporate both traditional and modern creative styles.

Ogundeji (2016) asserts that the growth of architectural forms in Nigerian theatre architecture is a tribute to the nation's capacity to retain its cultural history while embracing innovation and modernity. By seamlessly combining traditional features with modern architectural principles, Nigerian theatrical venues have become lively centers of creative expression, honouring the rich variety of the country's cultural identity while offering platforms for the exploration of new artistic possibilities.

2.4 Traditional Compounds and Courtyards

Traditional compounds and courtyards have played a crucial influence in creating the architectural forms of Nigerian theatre architecture. These spaces, firmly established in the cultural fabric of many Nigerian communities, have served as natural meeting places for storytelling, performances, and community festivals, making them a vital component of the country's indigenous legacy (Omoera, 2008).

The notion of traditional compounds and courtyards may be traced back to the traditional house patterns present in rural communities and urban areas throughout Nigeria. These compounds often consist of a central open space surrounded by residential structures or huts, offering a common place for social interaction and cultural events. One of the distinctive aspects of traditional Nigerian compounds and courtyards is their circular or semicircular layout. This design not only enables a feeling of community and connection but also adds to the acoustics and sight lines, making it a great venue for performances and storytelling. The circular shape provides for a more personal and immersive experience, where the audience may congregate closer around the performers, encouraging a shared connection and heightened participation.

As Nigerian theatre design progressed, the influence of traditional compounds and courtyards became visible in the architectural shapes and staging methods utilised. Many contemporary Nigerian theatre facilities have adopted the circular or semicircular layout, embracing features of old compounds and courtyards while altering them to fit modern theatrical needs. The ongoing presence of traditional compounds and courtyards in Nigerian theatre design provides as a remarkable witness to the durability of indigenous cultural traditions and their capacity to adapt and survive in a rapidly changing environment. These venues not only conserve the essence of Nigerian cultural history but also offer a canvas for unique artistic expressions, assuring the continuous relevance and vitality of traditional architectural forms in the current theatrical setting.

2.5 Adapting Traditional Spaces for Contemporary Theatrical Performances

The evolution of Nigerian theatre design has been significantly shaped by the fusion of indigenous materials, traditional construction methods, and contemporary theatrical needs. This integration, which reflects a dynamic interplay between the past and present, has led to the creation of culturally vibrant

performance venues that honour Nigeria's rich heritage while incorporating modern innovations in theatre technology and design (Onwuanyi & Oyetunji, 2016).

Indigenous materials and building techniques have long been central to Nigerian theatre design. Ethnographic studies, such as those by Krama (2017), reveal how locally sourced materials like mud, thatch, wood, and stone contribute not only to the aesthetic and cultural authenticity of theatre spaces but also to their acoustics and environmental qualities. For instance, the use of mud bricks and thatched roofs, traditional methods passed down through generations, can still be observed in many contemporary Nigerian performance venues. These materials create a tactile connection to the land and its people while also offering practical benefits such as insulation and natural cooling, creating an inviting atmosphere for both performers and audiences. Furthermore, the use of indigenous building methods like woven bamboo and palm fronds in theatrical architecture highlights the continued relevance of sustainable, ecologically responsible construction practices (Chen & Tao, 2013).

However, Nigerian theatre design has not remained static. Adekeye (2014) notes that the adaptation of traditional venues to accommodate modern performance requirements has involved the incorporation of flexible, modular design elements. These adjustments allow for diverse stage configurations, enabling directors to experiment with various dramatic forms. Moreover, the integration of advanced lighting, sound, and multimedia elements, such as video projections and digital scenery, has transformed traditional spaces, enriching the sensory experience for the audience (Orji, 2020). Importantly, these modern adaptations do not sacrifice cultural authenticity; instead, they foster a dynamic interaction between tradition and innovation, ensuring that Nigerian theatre remains a living, evolving art form.

By blending indigenous materials, traditional building techniques, and modern theatrical technologies, Nigerian theatre design exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of its cultural and architectural heritage. This interdisciplinary approach, incorporating ethnography, architectural history, and performance studies, ensures that these performance venues continue to serve as vital spaces for cultural expression and community engagement.

2.6 The Influence of Indigenous Staging Practices

Nigerian theatrical design has been significantly affected by the complex culture of indigenous staging methods, which have their origins in the country's numerous cultural traditions. These age-old customs, handed down through generations, have inspired the staging methods and performance settings that define modern Nigerian theatre. The Influence of Indigenous Staging Practices Nigerian communities have a long-standing history of storytelling, dance, and ceremonial performances that have been important to their cultural identity (Ogundeji, 2016). These traditional rituals have served as the basis for the creation of distinctive staging methods, which have been adopted and integrated into current theatrical shows.

One of the most prominent impacts of indigenous stage methods is the notion of audience engagement and involvement. In many traditional Nigerian performances, the audience is not only a passive viewer but an active participant in the story and theatrical experience. This participatory attitude is evident in the stage methods adopted in Nigerian theatrical design, where the borders between actors and viewers are frequently blurred or non-existent (Afolabi, 2016). For instance, the utilisation of circular or semicircular performance venues, evocative of traditional village meetings, provides for a more immersive and inclusive experience. Actors and performers may roam freely among the audience, engaging them directly and generating a feeling of shared ownership over the tale.

The use of call-and-response tactics, a feature of many Nigerian cultural acts, has been extensively embraced in Nigerian theatre production. This participatory technique stimulates audience interaction

and produces a dynamic interplay between artists and viewers, further blurring the barriers between the stage and the audience. Abah (1996) opines that the notable effect of indigenous staging traditions is the use of minimal sets and props, focusing mainly on the actors' abilities to tell the tale via their movements, gestures, and vocal emotions. This minimalistic technique, steeped in traditional Nigerian storytelling, not only shows the ability and variety of the performers but also enables the audience's imagination to develop, producing a more engaging and immersive theatrical experience.

The inclusion of live music, drumming, and dancing components, which are important to many Nigerian cultural events, has become a trademark of Nigerian theatre staging. These aspects not only enrich the overall sensory experience but also act as potent conduits for cultural expression, linking the audience to the rich Nigerian traditions. The impact of traditional staging methods on Nigerian theatre design has resulted in a distinctive and culturally relevant approach to performance settings and staging techniques. By embracing these historical traditions, modern Nigerian theatre has evolved a unique character that honours the nation's varied cultural past while pushing the frontiers of creative expression.

2.7 Open-Air Performances and Environmental Integration and Audience Participation and Communal Engagement

Nigerian theatrical design has long embraced the notion of open-air performances and environmental integration, reflecting the country's rich cultural history and customs. This approach to staging and performance venues has not only promoted a deeper connection with nature but has also encouraged audience involvement and community interaction, providing a genuinely immersive and collaborative theatrical experience (Nwadiigwe, 2007).

Open-Air Performances and Environmental Integration The practice of staging performances in open-air settings has been deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural traditions, where many rituals, ceremonies, and storytelling sessions have traditionally taken place in the heart of villages, courtyards, or natural landscapes. This link with the environment has been perfectly interwoven into Nigerian theatre design, resulting in unique performance venues that merge flawlessly with their surroundings. One of the most prominent instances of open-air performances and environmental integration may be seen in the usage of historic compounds and courtyards as theatre locations. These spaces, frequently defined by their circular or semicircular layouts, offer a natural platform for artists while enabling the audience to connect with the performance in an intimate and immersive way (Iannace, 2016).

By encouraging audience involvement and public engagement, Nigerian theatre design has developed a unique and inclusive theatrical experience that celebrates the nation's cultural history and creates a feeling of shared identity and belonging. These places become lively sites of community gathering, where creative expression and cultural interaction fluidly merge, strengthening the social fabric of Nigerian communities.

2.8 Contemporary Nigerian Theatre Design: Blending Tradition and Modernity

The current Nigerian theatrical design environment is a tribute to the nation's ability to smoothly mix its rich cultural traditions with the needs of modernity. This perfect blend has given birth to a distinctive and dynamic theatrical experience that highlights the country's rich traditions while embracing cutting-edge technology and new design techniques (Betiang, 2010).

Incorporating Indigenous features in contemporary theatre Architecture Contemporary Nigerian theatre architects and designers have expertly integrated indigenous features into their projects, paying tribute to the nation's cultural origins while pushing the bounds of contemporary design. This integration may be evident in the utilisation of traditional materials, building processes, and architectural forms that inspire a feeling of cultural authenticity and resonance.

Modern Nigerian theatrical design has become a potent vehicle for cultural diplomacy, exhibiting the nation's rich creative traditions to worldwide audiences. By exporting these distinctive and culturally resonant performance venues to foreign stages, Nigerian theatre design has helped to the promotion of cultural interchange and understanding, developing a deeper respect for the country's varied cultural milieu (Iyamah & Akpughe, 1970).

In essence, the current Nigerian theatrical design environment symbolises a harmonic combination of history and modernity, commemorating the nation's rich cultural legacy while embracing the needs of the present and the potential of the future. This dynamic interaction between the past and the present has given birth to a unique and engaging theatrical experience that not only entertains but also educates, inspires, and ultimately, protects the essence of Nigeria's rich cultural character.

2.9 Exploring New Staging Techniques Inspired by Indigenous Practices

Contemporary Nigerian theatre design has evolved by blending traditional performance customs with modern theatrical techniques, creating a dynamic and innovative approach to staging. This fusion results in a unique and engaging theatrical experience that pushes the boundaries of creative expression while honouring Nigeria's cultural heritage. Drawing on the nation's diverse traditions, modern Nigerian theatre design incorporates participatory methods that engage audiences as active participants rather than passive viewers. This blurring of boundaries between actors and spectators is achieved through flexible stage arrangements, enabling immersive experiences that foster a sense of shared ownership in the narrative (Kafewo, 2007). This approach reflects the evolving nature of Nigerian culture and highlights the role of the audience in shaping the performance.

Incorporating indigenous elements such as live music, dance, and multisensory components further enhances the experience. Traditional practices like Yoruba drumming and masquerade dances are seamlessly integrated into contemporary plays, creating a multi-layered, culturally rich experience for the audience. Omoera (2008) notes that the use of simple sets and minimal props, a hallmark of traditional Nigerian performances, has also been adapted in modern theatre. This allows performers to showcase their skills while encouraging the audience's imagination to fill in the gaps, making the experience more interactive and immersive.

Nigerian theatre practitioners have expanded the boundaries of traditional venues by transforming unconventional spaces such as abandoned buildings and outdoor landscapes into dynamic performance sites (Nwadiigwe, 2014). This not only challenges the conventional notion of theatre but also fosters a deeper connection between the performance and the environment, reinforcing the relationship between Nigerian culture and the natural world.

The role of Nigerian theatre design in preserving cultural heritage is substantial. By integrating indigenous materials and architectural forms into modern theatrical settings, Nigerian theatres serve as living archives of cultural memory, ensuring that diverse traditions are preserved for future generations ((Iyamah & Akpughe, 1970)). These spaces also function as educational platforms, introducing younger generations to traditional art forms like music, dance, and storytelling, thereby fostering a greater appreciation for cultural history and safeguarding these practices for the future (Onwuanyi & Oyetunji, 2016).

Nigerian theatre design has also become a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, showcasing the nation's rich traditions on the international stage. By exporting these culturally resonant performances, Nigeria promotes cultural exchange and global understanding. Furthermore, sustainable practices, such as the use of locally sourced materials and traditional building methods, contribute to environmental stewardship and the preservation of cultural heritage (Krama, 2017). Through this blend of tradition and innovation, Nigerian theatre design not only entertains and educates but also ensures that the nation's diverse cultural expressions remain vibrant and relevant in a rapidly changing world.

3. Conclusion

Indigenous cultural practices in traditional Nigerian theatre design has provided valuable insights into the deep interconnections between cultural heritage, architectural design, and performance. Key findings from this paper highlight the significant influence of traditional storytelling, masquerade performances, ritual dances, and community gatherings on the evolution of Nigerian theatre spaces. These elements have shaped not only the architectural forms of performance venues but also the staging methods and the immersive, participatory nature of Nigerian theatre. The use of indigenous materials, such as wood, thatch, and mud, continues to serve as a foundation for creating culturally resonant performance spaces that foster communal experiences and enhance the sensory impact of performances (Iyamah & Akpughe, 1970).

However, the integration of these traditional practices with modern theatre faces several challenges, especially with the rapid influence of globalisation and technological advancement. Technology and modernisation, while offering new opportunities for innovation, have also posed threats to the authenticity and cultural significance of Nigerian theatre design. The increasing reliance on advanced technologies in theatre production may risk overshadowing the rich, sensory experiences that are rooted in traditional practices. Additionally, the shift toward urbanisation and commercialisation has led to the decline of traditional venues like rural courtyards, impacting the intimate, community-centered experience that defines Nigerian theatre.

As Nigerian theatre continues to evolve, it is crucial for theatre practitioners and designers to strike a balance between embracing technological advancements and maintaining cultural authenticity. Recommendations for further research include exploring the potential for sustainable theatre design that integrates traditional architectural elements with modern technologies while ensuring that indigenous cultural practices remain at the forefront of theatrical expressions. Further consideration should also be given to the role of education and community involvement in preserving traditional performance venues and staging methods, ensuring their continued relevance for future generations.

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