Original Article

Contemporary Trends in Audience Engagement and Their Implications for Genre Development in KUPAA

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ABSTRACT

Theatre, as a dynamic and responsive art form, continually evolves in response to shifts in audience engagement. In recent years, contemporary spectatorship has moved beyond passive observation toward active participation, significantly influencing both performance aesthetics and the evolution of theatrical genres. This paper examines contemporary trends in audience engagement and their implications for genre development within the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA). Grounded in reception theory, the study investigates how audience interaction informs creative direction and genre diversification in university theatre. The research adopted a qualitative methodology, targeting KUPAA officials, directors, performers, and audiences. Data was collected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques and analysed through thematic and document analysis. Findings revealed that emerging trends such as mashup plays, shadow performance, legislative theatre, and activist-driven content are reshaping genre boundaries and performance strategies. These innovations reflect a deliberate shift towards complexity, interactivity, and social relevance, with audiences actively co-constructing meaning rather than passively consuming content. This study is justified by the need to understand how evolving audience agency influences theatre-making within academic institutions. Its findings are particularly significant for Kenyan practitioners, offering practical insights into the creation of performances that resonate with intellectually engaged audiences. In the wider African context, where storytelling traditions and ritual forms intersect with modern theatre, the study contributes to scholarship on genre hybridity and cultural responsiveness. Globally, it engages with contemporary discourse on participatory and postmodern performance, affirming the role of the audience as a vital co-creator in the theatrical process. The paper concludes by calling for further research into digital theatre, indigenous forms, and policy influences that continue to shape the future of genre in both local and international theatre landscapes.

INTRODUCTION

Theatre, throughout its rich and varied history, has functioned as a cornerstone of human civilisation, serving as a dynamic and reflective mirror of society, a vessel for cultural transmission, and a potent catalyst for social and political discourse. From the ancient Greek tragedies and comedies that explored fundamental human dilemmas to the vibrant and politically charged theatrical movements of the 20th and 21st centuries, theatre has consistently adapted and evolved in response to changing social, cultural, and technological dynamics. At its core, theatre has always been a collaborative art form, a dynamic interplay between performers and audience. However, the nature of this interaction has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional theatrical practices and opening up new avenues for creative expression.

Historically, the relationship between performers and audiences was largely predicated on a model of passive spectatorship. Audience members were primarily viewed as recipients of a pre-determined narrative, their role limited to observing and interpreting the actions unfolding on stage (Carlson, 1996). This model, while effective in certain contexts, often marginalised the audience's agency and limited their ability to actively engage with the performance. However, beginning in the mid-20th century, a number of theatrical movements emerged that sought to challenge this traditional model and to empower audiences as active participants in the theatrical event.

The Theatre of the Oppressed, pioneered by Augusto Boal, stands as a seminal example of this shift. Boal's work, rooted in the principles of social justice and participatory democracy, sought to transform theatre into a tool for social and political change. By employing techniques such as "Invisible Theatre" and "Forum Theatre," Boal actively engaged audience members in the process of identifying and addressing social injustices, empowering them to become agents of change both within the theatrical space and in their communities (Boal, 1979). This emphasis on audience participation marked a significant departure from traditional theatrical practices and paved the way for a new era of audience engagement.

The rise of postmodernism in the late 20th century further accelerated the shift towards active audience participation. Postmodern theatre often challenged traditional narrative structures, embraced fragmentation and ambiguity, and actively sought to disrupt the boundary between performer and

audience. Performance artists such as Marina Abramović pushed the limits of audience engagement, creating immersive and often confrontational experiences that blurred the lines between art and life (Goldberg, 1988). These experimental approaches challenged audiences to actively interpret and co-create meaning, transforming them from passive observers into active participants in the artistic process.

The advent of digital technologies in the 21st century has further revolutionised the landscape of audience engagement. Live-streaming, virtual reality, augmented reality, and social media platforms have created new opportunities for audiences to connect with theatrical performances in real-time, regardless of their physical location. These technologies have not only expanded the reach of theatre but have also enabled new forms of interactive storytelling, blurring the lines between the physical and virtual worlds. Digital technologies also provide new ways for theatre companies to collect data on audience preferences and behaviours, enabling them to personalise the theatrical experience and to tailor their productions to the specific needs and interests of their audiences (Dixon & Smith, 2007).

In Kenya, longstanding theatrical institutions have been slow to embrace contemporary trends in audience engagement, particularly within their established festival genres. The Kenya National Drama Festivals (KNDF), for example, have traditionally prioritised conventional formats such as Swahili and English plays, which are largely tailored to primary and secondary school learners. Shikuku (2008) notes that this child-centred orientation has contributed to a relative stagnation in genre innovation. Nzomo (2016) similarly critiques KNDF's limited responsiveness to emerging theatrical forms, pointing out that such approaches inadequately serve more mature and diverse audiences, particularly those in university settings. This gap in genre inclusivity and audience engagement was a key factor in the establishment of the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA).

KUPAA has since positioned itself as a progressive platform for theatrical experimentation and innovation within Kenyan higher education. Unlike its predecessors, KUPAA actively explores and integrates contemporary audience engagement strategies, aligning them with the cultural realities and creative aspirations of university communities. Member institutions have experimented with hybrid genres, blending traditional Kenyan storytelling with modern performance techniques, and increasingly leveraging digital platforms to broaden reach and stimulate discourse on pressing societal issues.

Despite these advances, the implementation of such trends presents ongoing challenges. Balancing innovation with cultural preservation, ensuring inclusivity, and fostering authentic audience collaboration are complex tasks that require thoughtful navigation. Yet, it is precisely within this tension that new opportunities for genre development and audience connection are emerging.

This study, therefore, investigates the contemporary trends in audience engagement as practised within KUPAA and examines how these trends are influencing the evolution of theatrical genres in Kenya. In focusing on KUPAA as a case study, the research seeks to illuminate how audience-centred practices can catalyse both creative and cultural transformation in the broader theatrical landscape.

Statement of the Problem

Contemporary theatre faces the challenge of adapting to rapidly changing audience expectations and preferences. While technological advancements and evolving social dynamics offer new avenues for audience engagement, many theatre companies struggle to effectively integrate these innovations into their practice. The problem lies in understanding how to leverage these trends in a way that enhances the theatrical experience, fosters

meaningful connections with audiences, and contributes to the ongoing evolution of theatrical genres. Many institutions, including those within KUPAA, grapple with balancing tradition and innovation, potentially limiting their ability to attract diverse audiences and remain relevant in a competitive cultural landscape. Furthermore, a lack of empirical research examining the impact of specific engagement strategies on audience satisfaction and genre development hinders the ability of theatre practitioners to make informed decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary theatre worldwide has experienced profound shifts in audience engagement, prompting a redefinition of dramatic genres. Lehmann and Jürs-Munby (2006) describe post-dramatic theatre as a departure from traditional narrative forms, emphasising non-linear structures and sensory participation. This reconfiguration transforms audiences from passive observers into active participants, fundamentally altering how genres are constructed and experienced. Rubin's *World Encyclopedias of Contemporary Theatre* (1996, 2013) further document the rise of immersive, site-specific, and intermedia performances across Europe and the Americas, driven by the demand for more immediate, experiential theatre. However, these global perspectives often overlook the nuances of theatrical innovation in African contexts, particularly in educational theatre spaces. In Kenya, institutions such as the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) are experimenting with new modes of audience engagement, yet there is scant scholarly attention to these developments. This gap is significant, as KUPAA operates within a distinct sociocultural and institutional framework that both responds to and reinterprets global trends.

Peng (2023) explores the emergence of "trendy drama" in the global media landscape, showing how audience demand for fast-paced, visually immersive, and emotionally charged content has fuelled the creation of new hybrid genres. The study emphasises that audience preferences now play a central role in shaping creative directions, particularly within digital and screen-based performances. Similarly, Wichmann (1988) and Liu (2016) examine the adaptation of traditional Chinese theatrical forms, such as Beijing opera, into contemporary contexts. Their work reveals how the fusion of historical aesthetics with modern staging techniques reflects both cultural shifts and nationalist sentiments. Building on this, Lindsay (2019) analyses how changing audience demographics have driven thematic and structural reinventions in Chinese literature and theatre. In the South Asian context, Lahiri (2009) discusses how Indian theatre incorporates postcolonial memory and political narratives, producing genres that function as both cultural expressions and platforms for resistance. Collectively, these studies highlight the significant influence of audience expectations on the evolution of genre across various regions. However, a noticeable gap exists in scholarship on how these dynamics play out in African theatre, especially in Kenya. There is limited research on how contemporary Kenyan trends shape theatrical genres while shaping emerging patterns of audience engagement.

In the Baltic region, Johnson (2017) and Staniškytė (2009) explore how post-Soviet theatres use historical re-enactment and collective memory as strategies to engage audiences, creating genres that centre national identity and encourage reflective participation. The study highlights how genre formation is closely tied to socio-political contexts and audience interaction, rather than being a rigid artistic category. Both scholars suggest that performance genres evolve in response to cultural memory and the need for communal dialogue. Chkhartishvili (2019) supports this view by proposing a flexible understanding of genre, one that recognises its constant negotiation with audience reception and shifting environments. Similarly, Leveille (2019) in the study of independent theatre in Toronto, illustrates how

economic uncertainty and community-driven models give rise to adaptive, modular genres. These genres are constructed not only around artistic content but also through the active involvement of audiences, often blurring the line between performer and spectator. Together, these studies affirm that genre is a living, responsive framework, shaped as much by creators as by the audiences they engage. They underscore the importance of context, memory, and socio-economic conditions in the ongoing redefinition of performance genres. However, they also leave open the need to explore how such dynamics operate within African contexts, particularly in spaces like Kenya, where theatre is equally influenced by history, politics, and audience participation.

Historically, Zingg (1950) observed that contemporary drama frequently mirrors prevailing social trends and audience sensibilities, anticipating the now widely accepted view that spectatorship plays a central role in shaping genre. His early insights suggest that genre has always been influenced by the cultural and emotional currents of its time. Building on this foundation, Igweonu (2011) brings the discussion into the context of twenty-first-century African theatre, highlighting a notable rise in experimental forms. These include site-specific performances and multimedia productions that directly respond to shifting audience expectations, societal transformations, and advancements in technology. Igweonu's work underscores how contemporary African theatre is not only a reflection of its environment but also a flexible, adaptive practice shaped by continuous dialogue with its audience. These developments indicate that African theatre, like its global counterparts, is increasingly characterised by innovation, hybridity, and responsiveness. Such trends challenge rigid definitions of genre, revealing it instead as a dynamic framework influenced by interaction, context, and change. While Zingg provides the theoretical roots of this shift, Igweonu exemplifies its practical manifestation in African performance. Their contributions frame the broader context within which emerging Kenyan theatre trends shape audience engagement and genre diversity.

Barber (1987) argues that popular arts are shaped by the desires and engagement patterns of their audiences, making audience interaction central to genre formation. In such settings, genre becomes a fluid and negotiable construct, constantly shaped through real-time exchanges between performers and spectators. This dynamic allows for the emergence of hybrid forms that reflect both artistic intention and audience expectation. Sirayi (2002) highlights this in the South African context, where intercultural performances blend local and global traditions to appeal to diverse audiences. These performances not only expand genre boundaries but also facilitate cultural dialogue and inclusivity. Diakhate, Eyoh, and Rubin (2013) support this view by documenting how African theatre has historically evolved in response to shifting social and political conditions. The work identifies practices such as community theatre, educational drama, and protest performance as outcomes of this responsiveness. Despite this rich history of adaptive performance, little research has focused on how these principles are currently enacted within university-based theatre in Kenya. This study addresses that gap by examining how KUPAA negotiates genres through audience engagement, contributing to a deeper understanding of how African theatre continues to evolve with its publics.

In Kenya, Sabina (2024) explores how contemporary artists are expanding genre boundaries by utilising digital platforms, public spaces, and interactive installations to foster collaborative audience experiences. This marks a clear shift from passive audience consumption to active co-creation, where spectators significantly influence the form and content of performance. Sabina's work underscores how audience agency is reshaping not just performance dynamics but also genre itself. Njogu (2019) adds to this conversation through his analysis of radio theatre, particularly its

use of ad-theatre techniques rooted in orality and popular culture. The study reveals how Kenyan radio drama adapts traditional storytelling to the patterns of commercial media, resulting in a hybrid genre that is both culturally grounded and broadly accessible. Together, Sabina and Njogu illustrate how Kenyan artists are leveraging familiar cultural idioms alongside contemporary media to engage audiences in innovative ways. These studies demonstrate that genre development in Kenya is increasingly a product of dynamic, audience-centred processes. However, these works focus on media and public space, leaving a gap in understanding how similar trends play out within institutional theatre spaces such as universities. This study addresses that gap by investigating how KUPAA engages its audiences to shape evolving theatrical forms within a higher education context.

Collectively, these studies suggest that across global and local contexts, audience engagement is not merely a method of presentation but a powerful force shaping the very structure of performance. As theatre-makers increasingly respond to the demands, tastes, and participation of their audiences, genres continue to evolve, blending elements of tradition, technology, and interactivity. In Kenya, this dynamic is vividly illustrated in movements like KUPAA, where audience-centred strategies are not only reshaping performance content but are also redefining the aesthetic and structural contours of theatrical genres.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Reception Theory, developed by Hans Robert Jauss (Wagner, 1984) and expanded by Wolfgang Iser (1978), both key figures in the Konstanz School of Reception Aesthetics. The theory offers a useful framework for examining how audiences interpret and respond to theatrical performances. It emphasises that meaning is not solely determined by the playwright or performer but is shaped through the audience's interaction with the performance. Jauss introduces the concept of the "horizon of expectations," which

refers to the historical, cultural, and social conditions that influence audience interpretation. Iser focuses on the open nature of texts and the active role of the audience in constructing meaning during the performance experience. This theoretical approach aligns with the study's focus on how audience engagement within the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) influences the development of theatrical genres. It helped to interrogate how contemporary trends such as mashup, pageantry and street dance are shaped by interactivity, site-specific performance, and improvisation, inform audience reception and, in turn, genre formation. Reception Theory highlights the importance of individual perspectives, prior knowledge, and social context in the creation of meaning. Reception theory enabled the study to investigate how audience practices in KUPAA contribute to the evolution of theatre in Kenyan universities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore audience engagement and genre development in contemporary theatre. Data were primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders within the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA), including KUPAA officials, directors, actors, playwrights, and audience members. These in-depth interviews explored their lived experiences with diverse audience engagement strategies, their perspectives on the shifting landscape of theatrical genres, and their reflections on the challenges and opportunities confronting the theatre community. The interviews aimed to capture rich, nuanced narratives about how audience interaction shaped performance and genre. In addition to interviews, the study incorporated a comprehensive review of relevant archival materials, such as KUPAA production records, performance reviews, and KUPAA 2024 and 2025 festival surveys. This archival analysis provided crucial historical context, illuminating the evolution of audience engagement

and genre development within KUPAA over time. Before beginning the study, the researcher secured an introductory letter from Kisii University and applied for a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya (License No: NACOSTI/P/25/417886). After ethical approval was obtained before data collection, all participants were informed of the study's purpose, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data.

Sampling Strategy

The study employed a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and experience in university-based theatre under the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA). Purposive sampling was used to deliberately target key informants who were directly involved in the creation, performance, or reception of theatrical productions. This included KUPAA officials, directors, actors, playwrights, and audience members affiliated with KUPAA, whose insights were essential to understanding the dynamics of audience engagement and genre development.

Following the initial selection, snowball sampling was applied to expand the participant pool. Key participants, such as KUPAA officials, were asked to refer the researcher to general informants who met the study's inclusion criteria and were likely to provide meaningful contributions to the research. This method was particularly effective in accessing a network of practitioners and audience members who might not have been identifiable through formal institutional channels. In total, twelve (12) participants were interviewed. The number of participants was sufficient to reach thematic saturation, as no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews. The dual-sampling

approach not only ensured a diverse and relevant participant pool but also reinforced the richness and consistency of the narratives, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the study's findings.

Data Analysis

Data from both interviews and archival sources were analysed using thematic analysis, a rigorous process that involved identifying recurring patterns, themes, and meanings within the data. The researcher triangulated the findings across the various sources to enhance validity and reliability. Through this approach, the study aimed to provide a deep, contextualised understanding of the complex relationships between audience engagement and genre development in Kenyan university theatre.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Insights gathered through interview schedules with KUPAA officials, performers, directors, and audience members revealed several key trends shaping university theatre within the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA). Among the most prominent are the use of pageantry, shadow plays, street dance, mashup and historical plays. These forms were repeatedly highlighted as effective in drawing audiences into performances and creating more meaningful, engaging experiences. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, these trends are contributing to a noticeable shift in genre boundaries, reflecting a blend of innovation, cultural expression, and audience participation. The following sections examine each of these trends in detail, exploring their impact on both audience engagement and genre development within KUPAA.

Historical Plays

Historical plays, whether based on factual or imagined events, offer a compelling way to address current social and political concerns. Yet, despite their richness, this genre has not gained widespread acceptance within mainstream theatre circles.

Shikuku (2008) points out that the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) continues to prioritise conventional English and Swahili plays, often selecting softer themes that are more accessible to younger audiences. KUPAA, on the other hand, has taken a more ambitious route by staging historical plays. These works require a deeper level of research, artistic commitment, and audience engagement. Ogutu, KUPAA secretary general, noted, "You need more research and understanding to develop historical plays because they go deeper into Kenyan history. That means more time, resources, and expertise (P. Ogutu, personal communication)."

This indicates a need for more expertise and a more experienced crew and audience that will thoroughly understand the historical contexts and effectively convey the genre. It also reveals one of the genre's key obstacles, that is, making it resonate with the young audiences in KNDF who may not be familiar with the historical contexts involved. Isalambo, KUPAA chairperson, noted that KUPAA has managed to build a loyal following among people with direct or inherited experiences of Kenya's past, who connect with these stories on a personal level (Isalambo, personal communication, May 30, 2025).

This trend reflects Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1981) perspective that bringing history to the stage acts as a form of resistance, giving marginalised voices a platform through the power of collective memory. KUPAA's historical plays move beyond simply recounting events. They offer culturally relevant and politically engaged reinterpretations that broaden the discourse on historical theatre and deepen its academic and social significance.

Shadow Play

Within KUPAA, shadow play has become a significant artistic development, valued not only for its visual appeal but also for its powerful capacity to convey layered meanings through symbolic and metaphorical storytelling. Unlike conventional theatre that emphasises physical presence, shadow performances depend on silhouettes, abstraction, and fragmented visuals to stir emotion and invite interpretation. This aligns with Victor Stoichita's (1997) argument that shadows represent both what is visible and what is hidden, embodying the unseen, the suppressed, and the unspoken. By favouring implication over directness, shadow play disrupts traditional theatrical realism and encourages the audience to participate actively in shaping the meaning of the performance.

This interactive mode of storytelling reflects findings from Matsuda's (2001) study on Parisian shadow theatre, where the absence of live actors allowed for more complex visual narratives and challenged performer-centred norms. Similarly, Cohen (2017) suggests that the lack of tangible presence in shadow theatre demands that viewers construct meaning through the interpretation of silence, gaps, and subtle imagery. This perspective was echoed by Washira, an adjudicator at the 2024 KUPAA festival, who described shadow theatre as "transformative" because it provokes thought and interpretation rather than passive reception (W. Washira, personal communication, May 29, 2025).

Such creative practices are closely aligned with Reception Theory, which sees the audience as central to meaning-making. They also resonate with traditional African performance aesthetics that favour symbolism, indirectness, and collective interpretation, as noted by scholars such as Micere Githae Mugo (1987). In a broader regional context, Saker (2019) highlights the metaphorical use of shadows in Nigerian literature to explore themes of memory and postcolonial identity, underscoring the broader significance of shadow imagery in reconstructing selfhood across African cultural expressions.

The embrace of shadow plays in KUPAA has carved a unique identity distinct from other theatrical bodies such as KNDF. Rather than simplifying narratives, this stylistic shift toward abstraction is a deliberate artistic strategy that

broadens the boundaries of performance and deepens audience involvement. The fluid aesthetic of shadow play blends poetic, ritualistic, visual, and dramatic elements, challenging fixed genre classifications. As KUPAA Student Council Treasurer Khisa remarked: "We're not trying to replicate theatre but trying to disrupt it. Shadows help us do that. We must understand that if we don't embrace new trends, drama will stagnate. Next year, there will be many plays that follow the styles of this year's winners" (C. Khisa, personal communication, May 31, 2025).

In this way, KUPAA's use of shadow play demonstrates how embracing abstraction can foster innovation in genre and strengthen the relevance of theatre. It supports Carlson's (2006) view that abstraction in performance expands the semiotic field and questions traditional aesthetic norms. Shadow play, therefore, stands as a key example of how experimental forms are shaping the future of university-based theatres in Kenya.

Mashup Plays

A significant trend within KUPAA is the emergence of mashup plays, developed as a creative response to audience fatigue resulting from the repetition of similar genres in successive theatre festivals. Mashup plays reflect a broader shift in audience engagement, moving away from viewing spectators as passive recipients and toward recognising them as active participants whose interpretive responses influence theatrical innovation. Within the KUPAA context, mashups integrate a range of texts, genres, and cultural elements, resulting in performances that are both layered and non-linear. These works often challenge traditional narrative forms and align closely with the fragmented, multifaceted nature of contemporary audience realities.

According to Ombija, Chairperson of the KUPAA Student Council, "The mashup plays respond to the complexity of our audiences. They are not just watching for entertainment but decoding, interpreting, and often seeing their fragmented realities reflected on stage" (personal communication, May 23, 2025). His view emphasises that these hybrid performances do more than entertain, they provoke critical engagement and mirror lived experiences, especially among university audiences accustomed to navigating diverse ideological and cultural contexts.

Shikuku (2008) notes that plays presented at the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) are often simplified to accommodate younger audiences, which limits the introduction of more intellectually demanding and formally innovative genres such as mashup plays. The adjudication criteria at KNDF, which prioritise developmental appropriateness, tend to discourage complexity, thereby reinforcing conventional forms. KUPAA, by contrast, provides a more experimental platform that embraces complexity and genre hybridity, making it more responsive to a mature, intellectually curious audience.

In this way, the mashup play not only revitalises performance aesthetics within the university theatre space but also illustrates a critical engagement with postmodern cultural dynamics, where multiplicity, fragmentation, and intertextuality form the basis for new modes of meaning-making.

Beauty Pageantry

Beauty pageantry has emerged as a dynamic theatrical trend in KUPAA, functioning not merely as visual decoration but as a revitalised dramaturgical tool that deepens audience engagement and fosters cultural reflection. According to Eng. Muthii, a judge at the 2024 KUPAA beauty pageantry event, performances often incorporate stylised rituals, elaborate costumes, symbolic choreography, and emotionally charged music to explore themes such as identity, fashion, and socio-political critique (E. Muthii, personal communication, May 31, 2025). These elements combine to create immersive experiences that resonate with university audiences and

challenge them to reflect on both personal and societal issues.

Unlike Kenya National Drama Festival's more regulated framework (KNDF), which tends to exclude such content due to its emphasis on child-centred theatre, KUPAA embraces the expressive freedom that allows pageantry to flourish. As one student performer noted, "KUPAA gives us the space to be bold, our costumes and performances tell stories that KNDF would probably censor" (Anonymous interviewee, personal communication, May 28, 2025). This flexibility supports the evolution of pageantry into a genre-blending form that unites spectacle with commentary.

The use of visual excess in these performances aligns with Essin's (2016) view of theatre as cultural labour, where performance is not just art but a process of meaning-making. Similarly, Kellner (2003) argues that spectacle can both entertain and interrogate authority by engaging audiences through mass media forms while simultaneously exposing and critiquing the power structures behind those spectacles, a dual function evident in many KUPAA productions. In this context, spectacle becomes a communicative device that encourages interpretation rather than passive consumption, positioning the audience as co-creators of meaning.

KUPAA's embrace of pageantry illustrates how traditional and contemporary forms can intersect to generate new theatrical expressions. It reaffirms the association's role as a space for experimentation, ideological expression, and genre innovation in Kenyan university theatre.

Street Dance

Street dance has gained growing recognition within KUPAA as a valid and expressive theatrical genre, moving beyond its informal roots to become a powerful tool for cultural commentary and creative innovation. Characterised by physical intensity, improvisation, and urban influence, it has been embraced by student performers as a means of exploring themes such as identity, resistance, and

social justice. While mainstream festivals like Kenya National Drama Festival and Kenya Music Festival continue to focus on traditional genres such as folk and cultural creative dances, KUPAA has opened space for more experimental forms, such as street dance, to flourish.

According to Williat, a KUPAA workshop coordinator, street dance was initially seen as unserious or too informal for academic festivals. "There was a time when street dance wouldn't make it to the main stage. Now, it's one of the most expressive genres we have -it speaks the language of the students," he noted (Williat, personal communication, May 30, 2025). This shift reflects a growing appreciation for the genre's capacity to connect with contemporary issues, including inequality, mental health, and youth disenfranchisement.

Scholars like Guarato (2021) have argued that street dance operates as a means of preserving cultural meaning in changing urban contexts, while Bell (2019) frames it as a form of embodied activism, views that resonate with how the genre is now being practised within KUPAA. The association has further supported this trend by organising national street dance workshops, integrating the genre into competitive categories, and encouraging thematic depth through choreographic research. Through these deliberate efforts, KUPAA is not only redefining genre boundaries but also fostering a more inclusive and socially responsive theatre culture that is one that values performance as both artistic expression and public discourse.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of audience engagement in contemporary Kenyan theatre, as revealed through the emergence of genres such as historical plays, street dance, mashup plays, and pageantry, signals a significant shift in how performance responds to social, political, and cultural dynamics. These trends demonstrate that audiences are no longer passive recipients but active participants whose

expectations and lived experiences are shaping the creative direction of performance genres.

Historical plays have re-emerged not merely as artistic retellings of the past but as potent tools for political commentary, memory preservation, and cultural identity reconstruction. Their resurgence, particularly within frameworks such as KUPAA, reflects an audience increasingly interested in works that interrogate the past to make sense of the present. Although these plays demand more from both creators and audiences that is; requiring historical knowledge, critical engagement, and emotional maturity, they have proven effective in fostering reflective spectatorship, especially among older and historically aware demographics.

Street dance, on the other hand, exemplifies a youthful, high-energy mode of expression that thrives on immediacy, physicality, and popular culture references. Its accessibility and improvisational nature resonate with urban youth and informal audiences, effectively democratising performance space and redefining what constitutes legitimate theatre. In the same vein, mashup plays blend multiple genres, languages, and styles, appealing to hybrid identities and audiences who seek layered, innovative storytelling that mirrors the complexity of their realities.

Pageantry has also carved a unique niche by merging visual spectacle with cultural commentary, often drawing from indigenous practices, traditional aesthetics, and ritual forms. It invites audiences into immersive experiences that go beyond the proscenium, invoking a sense of communal participation and cultural affirmation.

These trends indicate a fluid and responsive theatre landscape where genre is no longer a fixed category but a flexible framework negotiated through ongoing dialogue with the audience. Genre development, therefore, is not simply a matter of artistic invention but a reflection of changing audience sensibilities, technological influences, and socio-political currents. Contemporary Kenyan

theatre, as illustrated through these forms, is increasingly collaborative, hybridised, and grounded in the cultural and political consciousness of its audiences. Recognising and responding to these shifts is vital for artists, educators, and institutions committed to sustaining a relevant and dynamic theatre practice.

Recommendations

To support the evolving nature of audience engagement and genre development within KUPAA, several strategic actions are recommended. First, institutions involved in the festival should actively encourage experimental genres such as shadow play, legislative theatre, and mash-up performances by providing the necessary resources and creative space for their development. These genres have proven effective in provoking deeper audience reflection and artistic innovation.

Second, audience engagement can be enriched through structured forums and workshops that allow for dialogue between performers and spectators. Such platforms would help cultivate more discerning, interpretive audiences who can meaningfully engage with a wide range of theatrical forms. In addition, protecting the freedom of artistic expression is crucial. University leadership, the Kenyan government and KUPAA organisers should develop policy frameworks that safeguard performances, that is, especially those that tackle sensitive political or social themes, from undue administrative interference or censorship.

Further Research

Although this study has illuminated several key trends in audience engagement within KUPAA, there remains ample space for continued inquiry. One significant area involves the rise of digital and hybrid theatre forms. As universities increasingly integrate technology into learning and creative expression, future research could investigate how online and blended performance models are influencing both how audiences participate and how genres evolve in response. Another valuable avenue

is the study of audience reception over time. Understanding how audience preferences shift across different KUPAA festivals could offer insights into how certain genres gain traction or fade. Longitudinal studies would help map these changes and inform future programming.

Comparative research between KUPAA and other festivals such as KNDF, KMF or international university theatre events, could further reveal how institutional contexts, age demographics, and regional politics shape genre development. Such studies would allow scholars to appreciate KUPAA's uniqueness while situating it within a broader festival landscape. Future research might also focus on how policy and governance frameworks, whether educational or political, influence what is performed and how. Legislative plays, for example, often tread into sensitive political territory, raising important questions about freedom of expression, institutional support, and the boundaries of academic theatre.

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