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“Squeezing money out of a rock”: diverse economies of contemporary theatre in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Ghana has a vibrant theatre tradition, and yet making theatre in Ghana is complex and theatre artists must grapple with the challenges posed by a lack of state support, limited access to formal funding and theatre venues, and a precarious labour market. This paper employs the perspective of diverse economies to explore how theatre artists make theatre. Rather than privileging formal institutions, capitalist enterprises, and waged labour, the diverse economies perspective brings to the fore diversity in labour arrangements, transactions, funding, and livelihood activities. We explore how theatre artists in Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region, and Accra, the national capital, engage in a diverse array of income generating activities, use different forms of labour, blend formal and informal finance, and engage in a multitude of transactions – that is, deploy diverse economies – to make the kinds of theatre they want and to lead the kinds of lives they find valuable.

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Introduction

There is a rich, dynamic, and evolving tradition of theatre in Ghana. Famous examples include the touring troupes known as Concert Parties and the major creative experimentation and genre inventions of the National Theatre Movement in the postcolonial period – a time when the government “supported artists’ engagement with their folk heritage in order that they could develop new and distinctly Ghanaian forms” (S. Collins, 2018, p. 181). Now the theatre industry in Ghana “is almost entirely composed of small production companies run by a single entrepreneur or small group of collaborators” (Resario et al., 2023, p. 246), but the ambition to stage inventive theatre remains undiminished and theatre artists experiment in a wide variety of forms from total theatre, to Avant Garde theatre, to theatre for development. These theatre artists and their companies usually have the objective of making creatively meaningful work, provoking social change, and generating artistic livelihoods.

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However, it is complex and challenging to make theatre in Ghana for a variety of reasons. In Ghana, the cultural sector as whole is underfunded and lacks infrastructure (Asare, 2022; Langevang et al., 2022), and the theatre industry is no different as the last major intervention to support the industry was the building of the National Theatre in Accra in 1993. Crucially, only a few companies regularly sell large quantities of tickets (Asiedu, 2016), production budgets are usually very low, the labour market is precarious (Resario et al., 2023), and there are few high quality and affordable theatres where plays can be staged. In this paper we study how theatre artists in Accra and Tamale make theatre today under such challenging conditions.

This paper employs the lens of diverse economies – an approach that de-centres dominant approaches to the economy that see capitalism as all-encompassing and thus privilege waged labour, market transactions, and capitalist businesses (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020b). Instead, a diverse economies analysis includes all the economic activities – paid and unpaid, market and non-market, capitalist and non-capitalist – that people undertake to live well (Dombroski et al., 2022). In line with this approach, we explore how theatre artists in Ghana mobilize various resources, utilize different forms of labour, access diverse sources of finance, and engage in a multitude of transactions to create various kinds of performances. By adopting this perspective, we aim to shed light on the complex and diverse economic practices within the realm of Ghanaian theatre.

Theatre scholarship has been attuned to diverse economies practices, but it has rarely adopted the diverse economies perspective. We argue that adopting the diverse economies perspective opens significant possibilities in the field for understanding the livelihoods of theatre artists beyond those enabled by formal institutions and wages. A diverse economies framework is particularly helpful for examining the diversity of transactions, labour strategies, and funding underlying contemporary theatre so that the meanings and implications of the myriad activities theatre artists do to make theatre can be understood in all their complexity.

In order to reveal the diverse economies of Ghanaian theatre, we first present the literature on diverse economies and then present our theoretical framework for analysing theatre making through a diverse economies lens. Second, we present the context of Ghanaian theatre as well as our research methods. Third, we present our findings focusing on an in-depth analysis of four case studies. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the diverse economies of Ghanaian theatre and our contributions.

Literature review: diverse economies

Diverse economies is a concept and field of research first sketched out by feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2008). The field has since grown into a community of scholars and activists dedicated to challenging the way the economy is typically represented. The concept of “capitalocentrism” (Gibson-Graham, 2008) is used to critique mainstream economic theory that places capitalism at the centre of economic analysis and understanding and therefore prioritizes and privileges capitalist modes of production, exchange, and accumulation as the dominant and superior economic system even though they are just the tip of the iceberg of current economic action.

One of the key contributions of diverse economies scholarship is the recognition of economic activities that are often marginalized or overlooked in traditional economic

analysis. The growing body of scholarship on diverse economies takes the starting point in an understanding of the economy as heterogenous rather than monolithic and centred only around waged labour, private enterprise, private property, and institutional finance (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020b). Accordingly, diverse economies emphasizes the significance of recognizing and valuing various economic practices and highlights the agency and creativity of people and communities in generating economic systems and livelihood activities (such as subsistence work, informal labour, care work, community-based initiatives, barter systems, in-kind payments, sharing economies, and self-help networks) that may not conform to conventional notions of capitalism.

The landmark publication, *The Handbook of Diverse Economies* (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020b), takes stock of the field and presents an initial diverse economies analytical framework. This framework is presented as a tool to “open up” the economy and includes an inventory that categorizes economic activities into five types related to enterprise, labour, transactions, property, and finance. The framework aims “to challenge the de-legitimation of certain economic knowledges, working therefore to bring into question practices and discourses which homogenize dominant economic knowledges” and is intended to act as “a provocation to ‘take back the economy’ – populating it with what is at hand and valuing the productivity of many kinds of economic endeavours” (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020a, p. 10).

Diverse economies scholarship thus offers new conceptualizations of livelihoods, work and transactions, which are “not captured by unidimensional and unidirectional studies of economic practice and change” (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020a, p. 4). By highlighting the existence of diverse economies, the aim is to encourage a broader understanding of economic possibilities. The framework invites scholars and activists to examine and promote alternative economic practices and challenge the hegemony of capitalism by recognizing and supporting the diverse economic activities that exist in different sectors and communities around the world (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020b).

Central to the diverse economies agenda is challenging “the Eurocentric nature of economic theorizing”, which has been “homogenizing development agendas” and therefore “actively de-legitimized Indigenous and folk knowledge of economic diversity” (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020a, p. 4). Beyond inventorying the many kinds of economic action that exist, diverse economies scholars “are committed to describing, theorizing and inventorying a range of ethical economic actions that enable more-than-human flourishing and those that stand in its way” (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020a, p. 19), and a commitment to building ethical community economies is central here. Dombroski et al. (2022), for example, dedicate a special issue to showcase “the diversity of livelihood practice and more-than-capitalist economic activities enabling communities to ‘survive well’ in the Asia-Pacific” (Dombroski et al., 2022, p. 5). Within the diverse economies scholarship focused on Ghana, Hossein and Bonsu draw attention to the moral dimensions of community economies through exploring the case of Ghanaian susu groups (a form of rotational savings and credit association) and find that these groups “prioritize community over pecuniary benefits, encouraging a moral economy that focuses on community well-being without necessarily compromising individual welfare” (Hossein & Bonsu, 2023, p. 111).

Research indicates that the significance of diverse economic activities increases when formal economic institutions fail, as individuals facing economic crisis often engage in multiple income-earning endeavours in addition to, or as an alternative, to wage

labour (Fickey, 2011). However, in numerous societies across the global South, the practice of diverse economies is not only prevalent but also a longstanding norm. This is evident in studies examining various contexts such as peasant livelihoods in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (Duojie, 2022), informal miners in the Philippines (Placino & Gibson, 2022), and the labour of migrant women in Ghana (Sato & Tufuor, 2020).

Towards a diverse economies of theatre

The diverse economies lens has been adopted by a range of disciplines and fields of research, recently also by creative industries scholars (Alacovska & Bille, 2021; d'Ovidio, 2021; Mullen, 2017; Templer Rodrigues, 2020). Alacovska and Bille (2021), utilizing a diverse economies perspective, show a wide spectrum of artistic economic practices among visual artists in Denmark. These practices encompass formal paid and unpaid work, informal cash-in-hand transactions, barter exchanges, mutual aid and favour-swapping, as well as thrift and self-provisioning. d'Ovidio (2021) employs the concept of diverse economies to showcase the multitude of economic activities taking place in Taranto, Italy, and the values individuals attribute to their work, extending beyond pure economic rationality. Apart from Mullen (2017), however, the diverse economies lens has been little used to make sense of theatre making. In a study of applied theatre companies in New Zealand, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom, Mullen (2017) draws on the concept of diverse economies to examine a diversity of economic and organizational practices in applied theatre which co-exist “without reinforcing capitalism as an all-pervading or determining force” (Mullen, 2017, p. 7). The study sheds light on “the decisions, actions, and relationships of theatre companies as they generate or acquire the resources needed to produce socially committed, aesthetically rich practice” (Mullen, 2017, p. 7). We build on this initial work.

Theatre scholarship has long focused on what could be termed diverse economies practices – things such as unpaid labour, donations and other forms of non-market finance, the market exchange of tickets, and more than capitalist enterprises such as non-profits. The key benefit of a diverse economies approach to theatre is that it examines the interplay between all these practices. In essence, the diverse economies approach takes the diverse practices that theatre scholarship has long been charting and shows how they work together in dynamic, complex, and evolving ways.

Theatre companies rely on diverse sources of finance and transactions to stage their performances, such as some combination of ticket sales, government subsidies, grants, and donations. A crucial focus in the theatre literature has been cultural policy and government support for theatre with scholars showing how socio-political contexts are important for determining how theatre companies can organize their business models, including the kinds of funding they can access. In Canada, for example, government funding for theatre is seen as an investment in the cultural heritage of the nation (Poisson-de Haro & Montpetit, 2012), so theatre companies have public funding they can apply to access, while in China building grand theatres and subsidizing performances has been part of a state modernization agenda (Sun, 2021). In the US on the other hand, relying on philanthropy and community patronage is more important than government subsidy for non-profit arts organizations (McDonnell & Tepper, 2014). On the micro level, the enterprise type often determines what kind of funding can be accessed and what kind of business model is deployed by a theatre company (Mullen, 2017).

Researchers have also repeatedly shown that not all kinds of theatre – and correspondingly all kinds of theatre artists – are valued by formal institutions. For example, in Israel performing arts that conform with the tastes and values of elite social groups are more likely to receive support from the government (Feder & Katz-Gerro, 2012), and Saha (2017) shows how British cultural policy marginalizes British Asian theatre creating “segregated visibility” and reinforcing racial inequality in theatre. Many theatre artists must rely on other avenues to produce theatre than institutional finance or formal policy measure, and they do. For example, Resario et al. (2023) have shown that theatre artists can be resilient in the face of challenges through practices of coping, reworking, and resisting, and these strategies happen at individual and communal levels. A diverse economies approach centres *how* theatre artists work and the practices they undertake to keep going, and it is thus useful especially in contexts where formal institutions have failed and workers need to rely on something else in their place.

Short-term, project-by-project, and on-demand work arrangements are typical in the creative industries (Mathieu, 2011) and free intern labour as well as gigs that “pay” in exposure rather than money are common (Campbell, 2020; Resario et al., 2023). The creative industries literature has discussed at length how creatives engage in work with little financial remuneration because it is self-actualizing and they are passionate about it (cf. McRobbie, 2016). These labour practices often mean that workers in the creative industries need to find work outside of them. Adler (2021), for instance, explains how artists keep specific kinds of outside jobs as a commitment device to their art practices instead of migrating to “better” jobs. We suggest that a diverse economies lens is particularly useful for understanding such circumstances as this approach de-centres the capitalist economy (with its centring on formality, growth, and wages) in favour of examining the myriad economic practices undertaken to live well as individuals and communities, which could well include community oriented artmaking even as it is not lucrative (d’Ovidio, 2021), socially engaged theatre and filmmaking (Langevang et al., 2022), or a theatre company configuring its business model to serve its social and artistic values (Mullen, 2017).

From a diverse economies perspective both institutions and individual livelihoods matter in shaping theatre companies and the wider theatre industry. A diverse economies approach highlights the lack of clear boundaries between a theatre artist’s theatre work and their family/community life, wider livelihood portfolio, and personal finances. A diverse economies approach urges us to study how businesses can make community (Böhm & Szreder, 2020), and how those communities enable businesses (Hosseini & Bonsu, 2023), through an emphasis on commoning resources and surviving well together. Taking this approach means emphasizing the livelihood strategies of creative workers and how they configure their time and resources to create businesses *and* lives they find meaningful.

Context and methods

Setting the stage

There is a diverse range of theatre forms in Ghana; from traditional performative practices as observed by various communities, to literary drama, popular theatre, educational and developmental theatre, and experimental theatre. Earlier experimentations with form for the modern Ghanaian stage produced performance traditions such as Anansegoro and

Abibigoro. While Anansegoro employs the formalistic elements of traditional storytelling among the Akans, which usually takes place in a courtyard, and includes a narrator, music, dance, and audience involvement (Djisenu, 2000), Abibigoro tells stories of African history and traditions and has detailed *mise en scène* (Deandrea, 2002).

The first major attempt at the national level to promote the theatre industry began with the drive towards political independence – an era where “state culture, education, and media infrastructures were built on a logic that performance was crucial to making the nation” (Shiple, 2015, p. 1). Within this context, “The National Theatre Movement emerged as a state-based project to inspire and develop creative theatre through studying and developing various performance traditions rooted in the experience of African peoples” (Shiple, 2015, p. 60). With the Movement’s goals tied to decolonization and national identity building (Yeboah, 2021), there was great investment in building a performing arts culture towards achieving those ends (Schauert, 2015). By the end of the first phase of the movement – which lasted almost a decade – the Drama Studio theatre had been built, and professional groups had been trained (Gibbs, 2009) and were putting up performances on a regular basis (Hunter, 2017). The establishment of the School of Music and Drama in 1962 (now School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana) ushered in the second phase of the movement. However, the second phase did not receive the needed support to expand nation-wide before funding and support ceased. The professional groups, nurtured on financial support from the state through The Arts Council, started to struggle.

Faced with the realities of funding (Gibbs, 2009), the proponents of the movement began to give serious consideration to the operations of the popular Concert Party practitioners (Sutherland, 2000). Concert Party theatre emerged in the 1930s (Donkor, 2016), and with funding from private businessmen, Concert Party groups were able to tour rural communities across the country, and with their use of local language, improvised comic skits, female impersonation, borrowed features of traditional Akan storytelling and later the addition of guitar bands, they created a performance model that became very successful (J. Collins, 2014). However, following a series of coup d’états from 1966 to 1981 with attendant curfews and restrictions on night life, and the growth of video-film home entertainment (Shiple, 2015, p. 152), even the Concert Party with its “unbroken history of evolution” (Sutherland, 2000, p. 47), could not survive.

The last significant state intervention in the theatre industry was the construction of the National Theatre in Accra in 1993. Beyond building this theatre with funding from the Chinese government (Yeboah, 2021), public support for theatre has been limited. Even the revival of the Concert Party in the mid-1990s was made possible only through a collaboration between the financially struggling National Theatre and a multinational corporation operating in Ghana (Donkor, 2016). There have been various policy efforts, and sporadic funds allocated, to the creative industries through the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture. The existence of a cultural policy and the recently developed Creative Arts Industry Act (2020) point to policy efforts and attempts to provide institutional and legal framework to support the sector. However, these institutional frameworks are yet to be implemented. NGOs and foreign cultural institutions have also played a role in supporting theatrical productions in Ghana (Hunter, 2017). However, the driving force in the industry today is the many small production companies doing diverse economies practices, as we will show.

Methods

In this paper we analyse the theatre industry in Accra, the national capital, and the so-far understudied city of Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region. There remains a significant North–South divide in Ghana. Historically, structures that support the movement of capital have positioned some regions, like the Greater Accra Region, as preferred destinations for labour and capital, resulting in the neglect of less favoured regions, such as the Northern Region (Awanyo & Attua, 2018). Tamale is a regional hub for NGOs and other development organizations and is often termed the NGO capital of Ghana. Theatre industries exist in both Accra and Tamale and theatre artists in these cities rely on diverse economies to make theatre, as we will show. Studying both places allows us to unfold the array of diverse economies practices that make up contemporary theatre in Ghana.

Our study involved 21 theatre artists, 10 in Accra and 11 in Tamale. We did interviews with 16 theatre artists, and 5 of these artists were interviewed twice. We also did a focus group with 5 additional theatre artists in Tamale. We identified our participants through personal networks in the theatre industry in Accra and through snowball sampling in Tamale. The interviews and focus group, which were held in English and lasted from 40 min to 2 h and 20 min with a usual duration of 90 min (the focus group was 1 h 40 min) were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus of our conversations was understanding the challenges and opportunities of working in theatre, the influence of place, navigating creative work and other responsibilities, the support networks they draw upon, the relationship between their creative and other businesses (if any), the policy/infrastructure context of the theatre industry, their motivations and hopes, and the structure of their businesses.

In order to further understand their business models we used the Business Model Canvas (BMC) – a tool for analysing and visualizing new or existing business models developed by Osterwalder et al. (2010). The BMC outlines nine elements, which form the building blocks for the business model that “describes the rationale of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value” in a one-page canvas: Customer Segments, Value Propositions, Channels, Customer Relationships, Revenue Streams, Key Resources, Key Activities, and Key Partners. We brought a physical copy of the canvas in A3 size to the interview and the respondents were asked questions regarding each of the nine elements. Importantly, we translated the BMC’s jargon to plain language and asked many questions about each category tailored to the theatre industry and the informal economy (for example, when asking about revenue we asked about ticket sales and grants, but also about personal investments, help from friends, family, and community, and favour swapping). The answers were jotted down on the canvas through a participatory process and the respondents were usually given a copy to keep. We found that the BMC provided a simple and structured way of talking about business elements and allowed us to visualize how the theatre artists’ businesses worked. It was a useful tool to understand in detail how they gather resources and accordingly organize their theatre companies in different ways.

The authors of this paper are based at universities in Ghana, the UK, and Denmark and have specializations in theatre, film, and geography. The larger research project, from which this paper derives, has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee for

the Humanities at the University of Ghana. Participants gave oral consent and have been anonymized to protect their identities.

Findings: diverse economies of theatre in Ghana

In what follows we illustrate how theatre artists engage in a diverse array of income generating activities, use different forms of labour, blend formal and informal forms of finance, and engage in a multitude of transactions to sustain their companies and live the kinds of lives they find valuable. In order to present the richness of the array of economies theatre artists rely on we present four cases from the 21 in detail before discussing the entire sample. Our aim is not to bring forward “representative” cases or make “comparative” analysis but rather to draw out, through these stories, the array of economies that artists rely upon when making theatre in contemporary Ghana.

Case 1: Illarion

Illarion, a theatre artist in Tamale, was involved in a wide range of theatre and other activities in the city. He was a schoolteacher and ran the drama club (about which he was immensely proud as they had competed in national competitions), staged plays at his church, did theatre for development plays in his community, co-founded a media school offering informal short courses, and had just embarked on staging for-profit plays. This mode of working across several jobs and businesses was incredibly common and, for most of the theatre artists we interviewed in both Tamale and Accra, necessary for making theatre.

When we met, Illarion had recently staged his first for-profit play. He invested his own money in the production (a cost of GHS 8700, approx. \$770) since getting sponsors onboard was impossible, and he sought to recoup his investment in ticket sales. Beyond his personal investment – which he could make because of his salaried job as a schoolteacher – he relied heavily on his network to make, advertise, and watch the play. For example, he described his audience as “the general public” indicating he was trying to make mass market theatre, but then added “you can narrow it to people who know you” such as his friends, colleagues, students, and fellow church members.

He has a wide network of actors he calls upon, generally people he once taught, and he described them as one of his biggest resources (the other being the ability to write his own scripts). These actors did not receive a wage for their labour (a fixed payment agreed in exchange for their acting work), but instead had the potential to receive monetary payment if the play was a financial success. In essence, their financial compensation for their work would be determined based on ticket sales, and “if nothing comes out, you don’t pay anybody”, he explained. These actors were “otherly remunerated” (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020a) and they could count on receiving food and transportation rather than a wage, a practice that was typical in the industry. While typical, otherly remunerated labour is not uncontroversial, for example it can exploit young people trying to enter the theatre industry (Resario et al., 2023). He would also rely on his actors to provide their own costumes, which was, again, typical for acting jobs in Tamale. Maintaining harmonious relations with potential collaborators is essential to making theatre in Tamale as plays tend to come together around the hope of future commercial success rather than on guaranteed wages.

At the same time, Illarion had spent years doing free theatre to give back to his community. For these types of productions, he said: “I do my scripting I do my directing, I get my team” and I make it clear to them that “we are doing it for free to support society so nobody should expect anything in return”. Making these plays to “give” to society is, he said, “part of the joy of doing it [theatre]. Even though we are business minded”.

Making theatre required upholding a complex web of community relations based on mutuality, reciprocity, and care. Theatre making, for Illarion, was more than capitalist. This relational/community embeddedness was what allowed Illarion to live well while making theatre – just as being a good community member sustains and enables good livelihoods in other diverse economies (Placino & Gibson, 2022; Sato & Tufuor, 2020).

Case 2: Antonia

Antonia, who is based in Tamale, had been consistently staging for-profit plays on an annual basis since 2017 via her company. Her company had no physical location or employees – “I have my office in my bag for now”, Antonia quipped – but nevertheless she was “trying to still be consistent and keep going”. She had to be inventive and rely on the support of others to keep her business going as she explained that it “is not generating any revenue for now” and “we’ve not even broken even yet”. A diverse economies perspective lets us see how and why she keeps going.

Staging theatre in Tamale was very difficult, and according to her, people in Tamale “are not ready to pay even a few Cedis to come and watch your production”, making generating revenue through ticket sales very difficult. Very few seats at her plays were filled with audience members paying the publicly advertised ticket price. Rather, most audience members had been “invited” by Antonia – that is, given tickets as a means of rewarding sponsors, promoting her business, and fostering future relationships. In essence, the price any given person paid for the performance was determined by Antonia, based on the relationship they shared, not by the market. She also relied on “other market transactions” (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020a) such as barter: for example, the sponsors of her plays were almost entirely small local businesses (like local restaurants) that gave in kind rather than cash, essentially a relationship where they would give goods in exchange for promotion. She received a sponsorship from the Ghana AIDS Commission, but this was only for GHS1000 (approx. \$87) and much less than she asked for. As was typical of theatre in Tamale, sponsorship from development agencies was sought after and seen as desirable, but the amounts given were usually very low and never enough to sustain a theatre company.

The most important source of finance for her company is Antonia herself. She is formally employed on a government salary in a position where she does theatre for development among other activities, and it is because of these wages that she had the money to cover the costs of her theatre company’s activities. Antonia wanted her company to grow, but she did not express a desire to leave her waged job. Moving from being a wage-worker to a business owner is not a stable or linear trajectory, nor is it universally beneficial or desirable (Sato & Tufuor, 2020), Antonia’s preferred life involved having both simultaneously.

Alongside staging what she termed “commercial plays” – meaning, in her definition, ones where she sold tickets with the goal of generating profits – she also did theatre

for development work. For example, with both her company and job she staged plays in communities to address challenges impacting them (e.g. proper hygiene and child marriage). Doing this kind of work was not lucrative for her personal business and development agencies did not commission her frequently, but she was passionate about it. For example, she spoke excitedly about staging a play for school children on HIV where they encouraged children to get tested:

It's a scary area. People do not really want to go and test for HIV at all. But based on the story we presented on stage they were willing. They had the courage. Out of let's say about 600, 403 were able to go and screen for HIV.

Evaluating the impact of plays is difficult of course, but what is absolutely clear is that Antonia *felt* she was making a change in her community and that formed the basis for her ethical commitment to her work.

Her theatre work with her company helped Antonia live well because she felt it had a purpose, even though she would have had more money (at least in the present) if she did not start the business and kept her wages. A diverse economies lens encourages us “to think through what must be done in order to survive *well*”, not simply survive (McKinnon, 2020, p. 117). Her business may not have been profitable, but it helped Antonia live the way she wanted, and it is valuable because of that.

Case 3: Elisa

Elisa has a theatre company, which she started in 2013, but what makes her a unique figure in the Ghanaian theatre landscape is that she owns a theatre space in Accra. Her theatre is built on a large plot of land owned by her family, and it is made of shipping containers which house the indoor rehearsal space and flank the open-air stage.

While her business involves market exchanges (such as ticket sales) and she pays her cast and crew for performances, arguably it is the diversity of non-market exchanges she has undertaken that keep it going. Her theatre exists because of her access to non-market finance. In addition to the vital contribution of land by her family, she also ran a crowd-funding campaign on Indiegogo – a rewards-based crowdfunding platform of non-market finance (Langley & Leyshon, 2017, p. 1025) – to build the theatre. Like almost every other theatre artist in our sample, Elisa also invests her personal money in her business, for example she sells visual art (a market exchange) and when she makes a sale, she spends the resulting money on her theatre business.

The challenge of finding affordable performance space plagues most theatre artists, but not Elisa. Because, as she says “we do our stuff in our own place ... [we] don't have any costs. We have our own sound, our own light”, and thus, for each production, “most of the time we are [only] paying actors and costumes and crew”. Yet even in this privileged position, making theatre involves careful consideration of what she can and cannot afford. For instance, Elisa had difficulty finding actors and dancers with the skills she wanted in her performances that were also within her price range. Typically, talent is accessed relationally, and theatre artists would draw on their networks to make theatre, for instance, acting at a reduced rate in a friend's play and then in turn relying on a friend to provide stage lighting for one's own production. Elisa lived and trained abroad before returning to Ghana and she thus lacks this vital local network (Haarman

& Langevang, 2021). She cannot afford the market rates for talent she wanted nor rely on a longstanding network, so she started training programmes (for example on dance technique) so she could access talent in a different way.

Her shows are experimental and Avant Garde and she explained that she tries to embed her work “as much as possible in traditional settings, ways of thinking, norms, practices”, rather than making theatre with a more mainstream or mass market appeal. She thus tries to keep production costs low – from GHS2,000 to a maximum of GHS15,000 – in an effort to break even in the circumstance that they attract only a very small audience, as making ticket prices “affordable” (instead of the current price of GHS60) did not increase audience numbers. As with Antonia, making the most money possible was clearly not her goal. Rather, she had an ethical commitment to a certain kind of creative practice, and she configured her other activities to make it possible.

A diverse economies lens makes visible the range of economic practices that Elisa uses to run her company and produce the kind of theatre she wants. Critically, the most significant financing comes from non-market sources, even as she also sells tickets to productions (a market exchange).

Case 4: Eben

Eben, the founder of one of the largest and most commercially successful theatre companies in Ghana had this to say:

I know the people in the arts scream about funding, but that is a problem every other sector is facing so it's not peculiar to us. ... I believe it is our responsibility to find a way of raising the funds and not complain that there is no funding. No businessman says “there is no funding.” They go and squeeze money out of a rock if they have to, and that is what I believe we've got to do.

Eben relies on a diverse economy to “squeeze money out of a rock” and keep the business going, as we elaborate in the following.

Tickets sales are the principal way his business makes money and thus he must consistently deliver a spectacular theatre experience to keep audiences in Accra coming back as, in his words, “I live or die with the success of my last production, because it is from that one that I pay salaries, it is from that one that I will finance the next one.” Eben produces total theatre with elaborate production values. He is able to hire a live band, a choreographer, construct realistic set design, and have lavish costume, for example, and he has a large and loyal following.

Yet, even in this formal business that is sustained through the market exchange of ticket sales, informal practices are still critical to its operations. For example, radio is the most important platform for advertising his plays, but it is also very expensive to purchase advertisement spots. To secure the vital advertising partnership with a major radio station, Eben bartered his labour: the radio station gives Eben a discount on advertising spots, and in exchange Eben gives his labour as a presenter on their station. Likewise, while his company does have employees that collect salaries, they also draw on other kinds of labour. Artists are given honorariums for being in the plays, but clearly lots of work is done by artists looking for their big break. His company's annual audition attracts hundreds of people, and selected people join their “signed group” of 180 people who *could* be cast in upcoming plays, but who, in the meantime must, in his words, “contribute

whatever you can to the success of the production including ushering, including working at the front office, at the box office and whatever it is that you can do”.

Staging spectacular theatre requires a diverse economy. Eben barter (e.g. with the radio station for crucial sponsorship) in addition to getting resources through market exchanges (ticket sales). He relies on both waged and otherly remunerated labour. He felt that he has not “gotten to that point yet” where the theatre business alone can support him and his family, and he explained that another key source of their livelihood is his corporate speaking engagements. Only when we keep all these diverse economies practices in view can we understand how Eben is able to keep going and how he can produce theatre.

Discussion and conclusion

The value of the diverse economies approach to theatre is that it enables us to see the interplay and blending of formal and informal, market and non-market, capitalist and non or more than capitalist practices that typify theatre making in Tamale and Accra. The diverse economies approach accounts for the diverse array of economic activities that are happening on the ground now and the values that underpin them: it helps us tell stories of presence rather than absences, and, we suggest, this allows for new ways of thinking about the theatre industry. Here we discuss key findings from the four cases presented as well as trends from our entire sample of 21 theatre artists.

We found that whether through relying on personal savings, a salary from another job, or family assets, personal investments are needed to get theatre businesses started in Ghana and to keep them running over time. This was true of all our participants. It is thus necessary to focus on the theatre artists running companies to understand the strategies of their businesses. In many cases distinguishing between the artist and the company itself is difficult: Illarion and Antonia, for example, are the primary funders of their companies, and they could not stage plays without providing these financial resources (in addition to their labour writing, directing, and promoting the plays), and the same was true of Philemon, a theatre artist in Accra, as he relied on his salary from a college teaching job to stage his plays. It would not have been possible for someone *other than Elisa* to build the theatre since building it relied on family assets that only she could access.

All the theatre artists we studied relied on a diverse array of income generating strategies and types of labour to sustain their businesses, what was different between them was the degree to which they employed various practices. For example, ticket sales were often relied on to generate income, but the degree to which this strategy was successful varied widely. Eben’s business relied heavily on ticket sales, and he staged the kinds of plays that he knew were likely to sell out, whereas others like Commander and Christopher, theatre artists in Accra, had highly variable success selling tickets. Beyond ticket sales, another important source of finance for theatre companies in Ghana was money given to them by NGOs and other development organizations. All theatre artists in Tamale compete for funding from these organizations, but, as the case of Antonia demonstrated, this funding is often very small in monetary terms and infrequent – it is not a source of finance any theatre company can rely on. Even Adwoa, a theatre artist in Accra and the one who attracted the most development funding of anyone in

our sample, still relied on diverse economies practices such as unpaid labour and her own personal financial contributions to stay in operation. NGO funding was not important because it was the *sole* or even a *major* source of finance theatre companies could rely on, but rather because it was one of many resources they could draw on as part of their individual diverse economies.

Ghanaian theatre artists rely on many labour configurations beyond wage labour to stage their plays and keep their businesses going. Illarion, for example, simply could not afford to stage his play without the resources given to him by others (e.g. his actors supplied their own labour and costumes). Eben, working with a much larger budget and staging vastly more expensive theatre than Illarion, also relied on non-waged labour in his plays. We found that it is typical in Accra and Tamale for theatre companies to be loosely configured organizations run by individuals or small groups joining forces to stage plays before dissipating and then reforming when they had the resources for the next play. Often, and especially in the emerging theatre companies in our sample, interested people would gather and pool their skills to stage plays in the hopes of generating a profit. Diverse economies scholars have shown that “market-oriented formal labour” is “far from hegemonic” and other ways of arranging labour are prevalent (Williams & White, 2020, p. 143), and this was absolutely the case in Ghana. Key to theatre making in Ghana is “otherly remunerated labour” (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020a), which was underpinned by a relational infrastructure, and no theatre artist in our study could put on a performance without it.

All the theatre artists in our study were motivated by interests beyond profit just as they were all attempting to grow their businesses and generate income through them. Illarion had long been staging plays on “pure sacrifice” before staging his first “commercial” play, and he intended to continue doing commercial plays even when his first attempt was a *financial* failure because on other metrics – that were important to him – that attempt was a success. Likewise, Antonia’s business had never broken even, and yet she continued staging plays for years because she believed what she was doing was important. d’Ovidio (2021, p. 2277) argues that “work has a rationality well beyond the economic, and that it represents an important element of an individual’s identity, a source of pleasure and ethical stance”, and this was also true in our case. Every theatre artist we interviewed was concerned with creating social change through their art – whether questioning identity and what it means to be Ghanaian today as with Elisa, teaching Christian family value as with Eben, or advocating for the rights of queer people as with Adwoa. The change they wanted to provoke changed based on each company, but *that* they wanted to provoke social change was remarkably consistent.

While it is necessary to focus on the theatre artists running companies to understand the strategies of their businesses these need to be seen as part of community economies. The theatre artists needed the resources of their communities to make theatre, but making theatre *for* their communities was often the key driver of their art. Hakeem, a performance poet in Tamale, put it particularly plainly: “I had that vision of using my voice and my ink to contribute to community development and so, as a writer I was looking at ways by which I can advance my medium of communication to affect social change.” Bettering his art and bettering his community went hand in hand. This kind of commitment to community is widespread in the Ghanaian creative industries

(Gough et al., 2024; Langevang et al., 2022; Resario et al., 2023), and is central to artmaking, not a peripheral effect. Much like Ghanaian susu groups who through the practice of susu “enact community economy by mobilizing the disaggregated resources of individuals for the common good” (Hossein & Bonsu, 2023, p. 122), Ghanaian theatre artists pull together the resources of their communities to make theatre with and for those same communities adopting an ethical stance towards the common good.

Formal institutional support, such as funding or favourable cultural policy measures, is important to shaping the theatre landscape and the opportunities theatre artists have within it as countless scholars have shown (Harvie, 2015; Poisson-de Haro & Montpetit, 2012; Saha, 2017). State support has also been important in Ghana (Shingley, 2015; Sutherland, 2000), but this grand support is long in the past and the state is more noticeable now for its absence from than presence in the industry. A key benefit of the diverse economies approach is that it shifts attention away from this kind of absence to the varied actions being undertaken by theatre artists to make theatre *anyway*. By adopting a diverse economies approach we can understand how theatre artists in Ghana have succeeded in making theatre and why they keep going even in the face of significant challenges. However, it is crucial to not romanticize diverse economic practices. As we have shown, diverse economic practices can be exploitative and do not present an alternative utopia. Nor is a diverse economy an excuse for austerity – just because theatre artists can work without institutional backing does not mean that they should have to. Rather, we should be inspired by the array of diverse economies activities theatre artists do to keep making theatre no matter the circumstances and draw from that in devising interventions to support them.

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