

Theatre Production as a Temporary Creative Project: Reframing Academic and Commercial Theatre Through Project Management Theory

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Abstract

Theatre production involves the coordinated mobilization of people, resources, schedules, technologies, venues, and stakeholders to create and deliver a performance within a bounded period. Existing research has established connections between theatre and project work, creative project management, and theatre management, but these literatures remain fragmented. This paper develops an integrative conceptual framework that positions an individual theatre production as a temporary creative project embedded within a continuing theatre organization. An integrative literature review draws on project management, temporary organization, projectification, creative industry and theatre management scholarship, prioritizing 2024/2026 research while retaining foundational sources. The synthesis identifies three interacting systems: a production system concerned with resources and logistics; a creative system concerned with artistic interpretation, experimentation and iteration; and a coordination system concerned with communication, negotiation and adaptation. The paper proposes Collaborative Adaptive Governance, Negotiate, Facilitate, and Adapt, as a conceptual mechanism connecting project structure with creative practice. It

also introduces Embedded Project Management and the Recognition Gap and develops a seven-stage Theatre Creative Project-Management Model: Initiate, Plan, Create, Integrate, Test and Refine, Deploy, and Close. The framework contributes an integrated, context-sensitive basis for future empirical research in academic and commercial theatre.

Keywords: *Theatre production; Temporary organization; Creative projects; Project management; projectification; Project plasticity; Theatre management; Adaptive governance; Academic theatre; Commercial theatre*

1. Introduction

Theatre production is simultaneously an artistic, organizational, and collaborative activity. A production requires actors, directors, designers, stage managers, technical personnel, administrators, and other contributors to coordinate their work around a particular production objective. It also requires financial, material, technological, and spatial resources within temporal constraints. These characteristics give theatre production a clear project dimension. Project research has long distinguished temporary, goal-directed work from continuing organizational activity (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Projectification research subsequently examined the increasing use of projects as a mode of organizing work (Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014). Performing-arts scholarship has explicitly connected theatre with project work: Lindgren and Packendorff (2007) examined the co-construction of project work and professional identities in theatres, while Lehner (2009) used theatrical staging to inform project management. The issue, therefore, is not whether theatre can be associated with projects. The more useful question is how an individual theatre production should be conceptualized when project structure and creative emergence operate simultaneously. Recent scholarships make this question more important. Contemporary temporary-organizing research emphasizes process and practice (Brunet et al., 2025), project plasticity (Sydow et al., 2025), and the organizational consequences of how actors enact project temporariness (Pötz & Coudre, 2026). Creative-project research identifies creative project management, creativity management, and management of creative projects as interconnected streams (Pires & Varajão, 2024). Theatre-management research addresses organizational structure, artistic autonomy, stakeholders, financing, leadership and evaluation (Karcz & Jabłoński, 2024). Recent theatre-specific research further shows that projectification and deprojectification can coexist. Ćwikła (2026), based on survey and interview evidence from theatre professionals in Poland, identifies six dimensions through which deprojectification becomes visible. This supports a distinction between a continuing theatre organization and the temporary production undertaken within it. Accordingly, this paper argues that an individual theatre production can be conceptualized as a temporary creative project embedded within a continuing theatre organization. The paper does not argue that theatre organizations are inherently temporary, or that artistic work should be reduced to standardized project management procedures. The contribution of this paper is therefore integrative rather than a claim of first discovery. Existing studies have already demonstrated relationships between theatre, performing arts, and project work. The present study brings these strands into a single conceptual argument: temporary-organization theory explains the bounded nature of production; project plasticity explains the capacity for substantial change without loss of project identity; creative project research explains the coexistence of managerial coordination and creative emergence; and theatre-management scholarship provides the institutional and professional context. The resulting framework

specifies the individual production as the unit of analysis and proposes a mechanism for coordinating structure, creativity, and adaptation.

1.1 Positioning and contribution

The paper is positioned at the intersection of project management studies, temporary-organization theory, creative project research, and theatre-management scholarship. Its unit of conceptual analysis is the individual theatre production rather than the theatre organization. This distinction is important because a theatre organization may continue across multiple seasons and productions, whereas a particular production has a defined initiating point, a bounded period of preparation and delivery, a specific configuration of people and resources, and a point at which the production closes. The production can therefore be examined as a temporary project embedded within a continuing organization. The contribution is not a claim that theatre has previously been identified with project work. Earlier scholarships have already examined performing arts through project-based work, temporary organizational arrangements, and project management. The contribution developed here is instead of an integrative synthesis. The paper connects temporary organization theory, project organizing theory, project plasticity, creative project management and theatre management research to explain how a theatre production can simultaneously possess project structure and creative emergence. In this framing, project structure provides temporal, resource, stakeholder and coordination boundaries, while creative emergence means that interpretation, experimentation and artistic decisions can alter the developing production during its life.

On this basis, the paper proposes Collaborative Adaptive Governance as a conceptual mechanism for coordinating these conditions through three linked practices: Negotiate, Facilitate, and Adapt. The mechanism is proposed by the present synthesis and is not presented as an established theory. Likewise, the embedded project management and recognition gap concepts are analytical propositions that require empirical examination. The resulting framework therefore seeks to extend the conversation from whether theatre production can be understood as project work toward how project structure, creative uncertainty, collaboration and organizational learning can be integrated within the management of a temporary theatre production.

1.2 Problem statement

Theatre production requires coordination of objectives, people, resources, schedules, technology, venues, finances and stakeholders, yet these activities are not always explicitly conceptualized as project management work. Existing scholarship demonstrates theatre project connections, but relevant insights remain distributed across project management, theatre management, creative industry and performing art literatures.

The resulting gap is not an absence of research on theatre and projects. Rather, there is insufficient integration between temporary organization theory, creative project management, and theatre management scholarship. There is also a need to distinguish the continuing theatre organization from the individual production project.

A related issue concerns academic theatre. Production may develop competencies in scheduling, budgeting, coordination, communication, leadership, problem-solving and risk response without those activities being explicitly identified as project management competencies. The Nigerian context is particularly relevant because existing scholarship addresses production management and educational and commercial theatre, but these

contributions have not been sufficiently synthesized through a temporary creative project framework.

1.3 Aim and objectives

The aim is to develop an integrative conceptual framework for understanding theatre production as a temporary creative project and to examine how project management principles can coexist with artistic creativity, uncertainty and collaborative practice in academic and commercial theatre.

- Identify project and temporary organization characteristics applicable to theatre production.
- Examine the relationship between project lifecycles and theatre production processes.
- Identify project-management practices embedded within theatre production.
- Distinguish theatre production as a creative project from conventional projects.
- Examine artistic autonomy and managerial structure.
- Compare academic and commercial theatre.
- Identify gaps in theatre/project-management scholarships.
- Examine implications for theatre education and professional practice.
- Propose a Theatre Creative Project Management Model.

1.4 Research questions

- What characteristics define a project, and to what extent are they present in theatre production?
- How does the project lifecycle correspond with stages of theatre production?
- What project management practices are embedded within academic and commercial theatre?
- What distinguishes theatre as a creative project from conventional projects?
- How can artistic creativity and project management structure be balanced?
- What gaps exist concerning theatre production as project work?
- What are the implications for theatre education and professional practice?

1.5 Conceptual clarification: organization, production and performance

Theatre organization refers to the continuing institutional, commercial, educational, or cultural entity within which theatre activities are organized. Theatre production refers to the bounded undertaking through which a particular performance or set of performances is developed, rehearsed, coordinated, and delivered. Theatre performance refers to the public delivery/output event. The unit of conceptual analysis in this paper is therefore the individual theatre production, rather than the theatre organization

2. Literature Review

2.1 Projects and temporary organizations

Lundin and Söderholm's (1995) temporary-organization framework emphasize time, task, team and transition. These characteristics are visible in theatre production: a bounded production period, a defined production task, a temporary or reconfigured team, and a transition from development to delivery and closure.

Winch (2025) develops an action theory of the project, while Brunet et al. (2025) frame temporary organizing as processual and practice based. Sydow et al. (2025) revisit the 4T framework and introduce project plasticity, emphasizing the capacity of projects to change

while retaining continuity as identifiable projects.

2.2 Theatre as project work

Lindgren and Packendorff (2007) demonstrate that project work is intertwined with professional identities in theatres. Lehner (2009) uses theatre staging to develop project management insights. These studies establish that theatre-project relations are already recognized in scholarship. The present contribution is to integrate these insights with contemporary temporary-organizing and creative-project perspectives.

2.3 Projectification and deprojectification

Projectification does not necessarily mean that a continuing organization becomes entirely project based. Packendorff and Lindgren (2014) distinguish narrow and broad forms of projectification. Ćwikła (2026) provides direct theatre evidence of the coexistence of projectification and deprojectification, supporting the distinction between theatre organizations and individual productions.

2.4 Creative project management

Pires and Varajão (2024) identify three research streams: creative project management, creativity management, and management of creative projects. Bérubé and Gauthier (2023) examine tensions between artistic and project management values, while Freitas et al. (2025) emphasize plural creativity in cultural projects. These studies support the view that creative projects require management approaches capable of accommodating emergence and multiple forms of expertise.

2.5 Theatre management

Karcz and Jabłoński (2024) review theatre management scholarships around organizational structure, artistic autonomy, financing, stakeholders, leadership, personnel, effectiveness and production. This literature provides the theatre-specific institutional context within which project practices operate.

2.6 Embedded project management

This paper proposes Embedded Project Management: project-management functions integrated into theatre-production practices whether they are formally labelled as such.

- Production concept → scope/objective definition
- Casting and crew formation → resource/team management
- Production schedule → schedule management
- Production meetings → communication and coordination
- Production book → documentation and knowledge management
- Rehearsal → execution, testing and iteration
- Technical integration → integration management
- Venue coordination → stakeholder/resource management
- Contingency arrangements → risk response
- Performance → delivery
- Post-production review → closure and learning

These mappings are analytical interpretations developed by this paper; they do not claim

universal use of project-management terminology by theatre practitioners.

2.7 Artistic autonomy and managerial structure

Creative projects require coordination but also professional and artistic autonomy. Bérubé and Gauthier (2023) show that creative project management involves compromising between artistic and project management values. The objective is therefore not managerial domination of artistic work, but structures that enable creative work.

2.8 Collaboration, trust and shared leadership

Theatre production depends on distributed expertise. Abson et al. (2024) show the importance of trust for shared leadership in project-based organizations, while Gray et al. (2024) identify collaboration, reciprocal listening, trust, communication and navigation of uncertainty as lessons from theatre practice.

2.9 Risk and creative uncertainty

Operational risks include equipment failure, absence, venue disruption, financial constraints, and scheduling conflicts. Creative uncertainty is different: interpretation, experimentation, and audience response cannot always be fully known at initiation. The appropriate response is therefore Anticipate → Monitor → Respond → Learn rather than an attempt to eliminate all uncertainty.

Academic theatre

Academic theatre combines educational and artistic purposes. Franklin (2024) highlights the professional-academic stage-management interface, while Okwulogu (2024) addresses educational theatre management in Nigeria. A project perspective can make production-management competencies more explicit without replacing artistic training.

2.10 Commercial theatre

Commercial theatre introduces market, financial, venue, sponsorship and audience constraints. Okwulogu (2023) illustrates the interaction of artistic and business considerations in Nigerian commercial theatre production.

2.11 Theatre education and transferable competencies

The Recognition Gap is proposed to describe the difference between performing project-management functions and explicitly recognizing them as transferable competencies. This is a research proposition rather than an established universal condition.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Theoretical framework

The framework integrates four perspectives: temporary organization theory; contemporary project-organizing theory; projectification theory; and creative project-management research. Together they support the central proposition that an individual theatre production is a temporary creative project embedded within a continuing theatre organization.

3.2 Conceptual framework



The framework contains three interacting systems:

- Production system: people, finance, equipment, venue, schedules, logistics, technology and materials.
- Creative system: interpretation, experimentation, artistic judgment, rehearsal, iteration and discovery.
- Coordination system: communication, scheduling, negotiation, feedback, decision-making and adaptation.

Three Interacting Systems of the Temporary Theatre Production

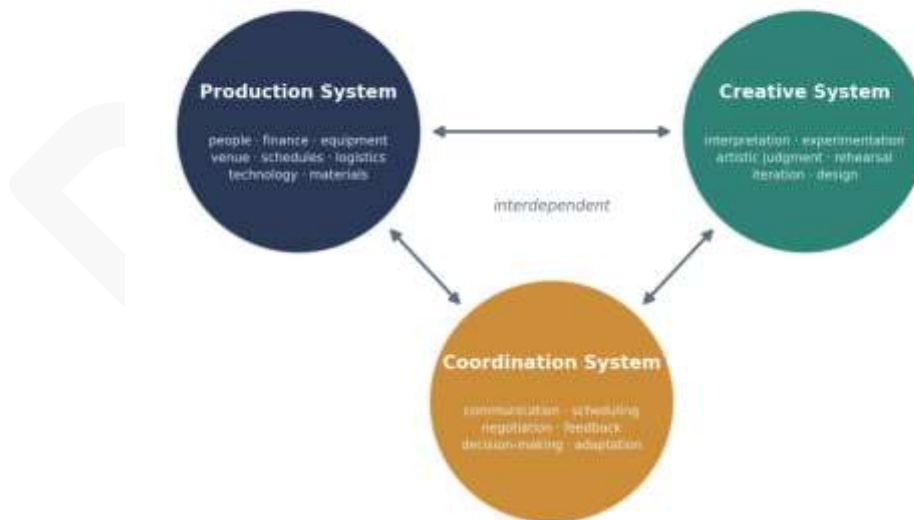


Figure 1. Three interacting systems for temporary theatre production.

The systems are interdependent. Production resources enable creative work; creative decisions affect schedules and resources; and coordination connects both.

3.3 Collaborative Adaptive Governance

The paper proposes Collaborative Adaptive Governance as a conceptual mechanism connecting project structures with creative emergence.

Figure 2. Collaborative Adaptive Governance: Negotiate → Facilitate → Adapt.

Negotiate. Reconcile artistic, operational, financial and stakeholder interests.

Facilitate. Create conditions for communication, trust, experimentation, and distributed expertise.

Adapt. Modify plans, resources, roles, or processes as new information and creative discoveries emerge.

The mechanism is therefore Negotiate → Facilitate → Adapt. It is a conceptual contribution of this study, not an established theory.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study adopts an integrative conceptual literature review approach. It does not estimate effect sizes, conduct meta-analysis or claim exhaustive systematic retrieval. Its purpose is to integrate concepts from project management, temporary organization, projectification, creative industry management, theatre management, performing-arts research and theatre education.

The review prioritizes 2024/2026 scholarship while retaining foundational sources where theoretically necessary. Recent sources were checked against publisher or institutional records where available, including contemporary work on theatre projectification/deprojectification, temporary organizing, project plasticity, and organizational learning.

4.2 Analytical procedure

Sources were compared around temporariness, objectives and tasks, teams and resources, lifecycle, project-management practices, creativity, artistic autonomy, uncertainty, collaboration, stakeholders, projectification/deprojectification, organizational learning and theatre context.

The synthesis proceeded from project characteristics to cross-disciplinary comparison, to identification of tensions, and finally to construction of the proposed framework.

4.3 Status of the framework

The Theatre Creative Project Management Model is conceptual and requires empirical validation. Collaborative Adaptive Governance, Embedded Project Management and the Recognition Gap are proposed constructs, not established empirical laws.

4.4 Review limitations

Because the study is integrative rather than systematic, it does not claim exhaustive retrieval of all theatre, project or creative management literature.

5. Findings of the Integrative Literature Analysis

These are findings of conceptual synthesis rather than empirical findings from primary participants.

- Theatre production exhibits project characteristics: temporal boundaries, tasks, teams, resources, stakeholders and delivery.

- Theatre production is not equivalent to conventional project work because creative outcomes remain partly emergent.

- Project-management functions are embedded in theatre practice.
- Project structure and creative autonomy are interdependent.
- Adaptation is central to theatre production.
- The theatre organization and the individual theatre production should be analytically separated.

5.1 Theatre production and conventional project characteristics

The comparison below clarifies where theatre production aligns with project theory and where its creative character modifies conventional assumptions.

Project dimension	Theatre expression	production	Creative-project qualification
Time	Rehearsal, technical and performance deadlines		Creative iteration can alter timing and sequence.
Task	Production objectives, artistic and technical tasks		Task definition may evolve as interpretation develops.
Team	Actors, directors, designers, technicians, administrators and others		Roles may be distributed, overlapping, and relational.
Resources	Finance, venue, equipment, materials, technology and labour		Resource constraints can stimulate creative adaptation.
Stakeholders	Audience, funders, institutions, partners, staff and artists		Stakeholder expectations may conflict with artistic priorities.
Risk	Operational, financial, technical and scheduling risks		Creative uncertainty is not always reducible to a calculable risk.
Delivery	Public performance and associated outputs		The final artistic form may remain partly emergent until late in production.
Closure	Administrative, financial, technical and evaluative activities		Learning can be transferred to the continuing organization.

Table 1. Theatre production against conventional project dimensions.

5.2 Cross-literature synthesis

Temporary organization explains the bounded project trajectory; project plasticity explains adaptive change; projectification explains how project structures coexist with continuing organizations; creative project management explains the artistic-management tension; theatre management supplies the institutional context; collaboration research explains trust and distributed expertise; and theatre education highlights the potential recognition gap.

The theoretical chain can be represented as: Temporary Organization → Project Organizing → Project Plasticity → Creative Project Management → Theatre Projectification → Theatre-Specific Integrative Model. This sequence should not be read as a claim that each literature

directly predicts the next. Rather, it describes the logic by which concepts from adjacent literatures are combined to construct the paper's framework.

The synthesis supports the conceptualization of theatre production as a temporary creative project system.

6. The Proposed Theatre Creative Project-Management Model

Lifecycle: Initiate → Plan → Create → Integrate → Test & Refine → Deploy → Close.

- Initiate: define concept, purpose, stakeholders, initial scope and constraints.
- Plan: develop schedules, resources, roles, budgets, communication and risk responses.
- Create: develop artistic work through rehearsal, design, interpretation and experimentation.
- Integrate: coordinate artistic, technical, logistical and administrative components.
- Test & Refine: use rehearsals, previews, technical runs, feedback and problem-solving.
- Deploy: deliver the public performance.
- Close: complete administrative, financial, technical and learning activities.

Across the lifecycle: Negotiate → Facilitate → Adapt.

Risk and uncertainty: Anticipate → Monitor → Respond → Learn.

Post-project pathway: Close → Learn → Transfer → Organizational Capability.

Potential production outcomes can be considered across delivery, management, artistic, stakeholder, and contextual/strategic dimensions. These dimensions are proposed analytically and are not presented as a validated measurement model.

The model is conceptual and requires empirical validation.

6.1 Lifecycle matrix

The lifecycle is analytically sequential but operationally iterative. A production may return to earlier activities when artistic, technical, stakeholder or resource conditions change.



Figure 3. The theatre creative project lifecycle.

Stage	Primary purpose	Illustrative functions	PM	Creative emphasis
Initiate	Establish purpose, scope and stakeholders	Scope, stakeholder identification, constraints		Concept and artistic intent
Plan	Organize resources and delivery conditions	Schedule, budget, roles, communication, risk		Creative approach and production strategy
Create	Develop the artistic work	Execution, resource coordination, team management		Interpretation, experimentation, rehearsal
Integrate	Connect production components	Integration, dependency management, coordination		Artistic-technical coherence
Test & Refine	Evaluate and adjust	Monitoring, feedback, issue and change management		Iteration, discovery and refinement
Deploy	Deliver the production	Operational coordination, stakeholder management		Performance and audience encounter
Close	Conclude and learn	Closure, documentation, evaluation, lessons learned		Reflection and knowledge transfer

Table 2. Lifecycle matrix: purpose, project management functions and creative emphasis on stage.

6.2 Conceptual model summary

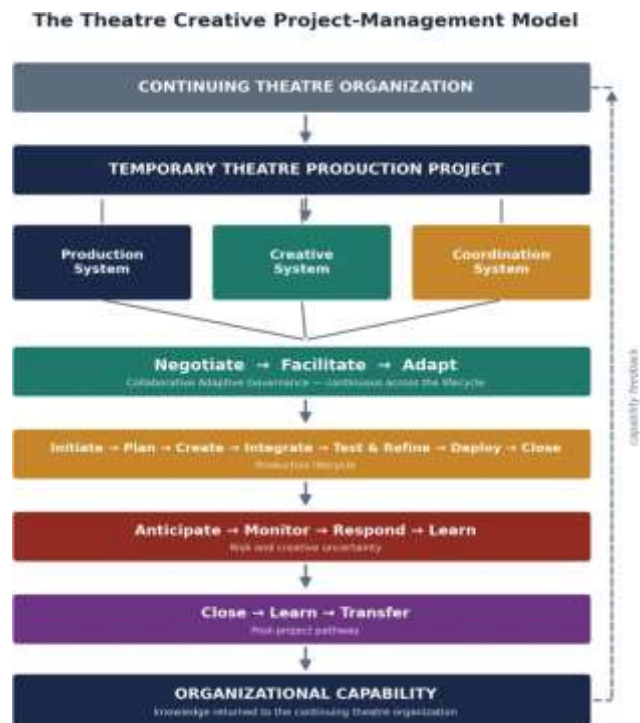


Figure 4. The Theatre Creative Project Management Model.

6.3 Propositions for empirical research

- P1.** Individual theatre productions exhibit the core characteristics of temporary project organizing while remaining embedded in continuing theatre organizations.
- P2.** Greater project plasticity in theatre production is associated with a greater need for adaptive coordination between artistic, technical, and managerial actors.
- P3.** Trust and distributed leadership are likely to influence the effectiveness of collaborative adaptation in theatre production teams.
- P4.** Explicit recognition of embedded project-management functions may improve theatre students' ability to articulate transferable production competencies; this proposition requires empirical testing.
- P5.** Post-production learning mechanisms influence the extent to which temporary production experience contributes to continuing organizational capability.

7. Discussion

The project character of theatre production is not determined by whether practitioners use formal project-management terminology. It is reflected in the functions the production must perform establishing objectives, assembling participants, mobilizing resources, coordinating activities, managing time, responding to uncertainty, and delivering a performance.

At the same time, theatre differs from conventional projects because its final creative form can develop through the production process. Production should therefore be understood as a temporary system capable of adaptation rather than a fixed plan that is simply executed.

Project plasticity is particularly relevant because interpretation, design, personnel and technical arrangements may change while the production remains identifiable as the same project.

7.1 Theoretical contribution

The temporary creative project. The primary contribution is the conceptualization of individual theatre production as a temporary creative project embedded within a continuing theatre organization.

Embedded project management. The second contribution is vocabulary for recognizing project-management functions already embedded in theatre production.

Collaborative Adaptive Governance. The third contribution is the proposed Negotiate–Facilitate–Adapt mechanism connecting project structure with creative emergence.

The Recognition Gap. The fourth contribution is the Recognition Gap, concerning the difference between performing project-management functions and explicitly recognizing them as transferable competencies.

7.2 Academic and commercial theatre

- **Academic theatre:** education and artistic production; constraints include curriculum, academic calendar and institutional resources; success may include learning, artistic, institutional and audience outcomes.

- **Commercial theatre:** artistic production and commercial sustainability; constraints include finance, market demand, contracts, venue and revenue; success may include artistic, financial, audience, operational and strategic outcomes.

Both environments share a project-management substrate, but their objectives and constraints differ. A contingency perspective is therefore required rather than a single universal management method.

Practical and educational implications

For theatre organizations, production documentation can make objectives, scope, schedules, roles, dependencies, risks, stakeholder responsibilities, communication, change decisions and lessons learned more explicit.

For theatre education, project-management concepts can be integrated into practical production courses without displacing artistic training. Students can connect production activities to planning, scheduling, budgeting, resource management, stakeholder communication, risk management, leadership, change management, problem-solving and closure.

7.3 Recommendations

- Introduce basic project management concepts into theatre production courses.
- Use production documentation as a learning instrument.
- Encourage production schedules, risk registers and post-production reviews.
- Connect practical production activities with transferable professional competencies.
- Retain structured learning and knowledge transfer mechanisms after commercial production.
- Strengthen dialogue between theatre management and project management scholarships.
- Undertake comparative empirical research in Nigerian academic and commercial theatre.
- Test whether explicit project management education affects students' ability to articulate and transfer production competencies.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This is an integrative conceptual literature review and does not report primary empirical data.

The literature is geographically uneven, with substantial project-management scholarship originating outside Africa. Nigerian sources provide contextual grounding but cannot establish generalizable claims about all Nigerian theatre organizations. Academic and commercial theatre are analytically distinguished, but individual productions may be hybrid. The proposed constructs require empirical examination. The proposed lifecycle, governance mechanism, Embedded Project Management construct, and Recognition Gap should therefore be treated as analytical propositions rather than validated explanatory models.

8.1 Directions for future research

- Examine how theatre production teams experience temporary project structures.
- Study how project boundaries change during rehearsal and production.
- Compare project plasticity in academic and commercial theatre.
- Examine how trust influences distributed theatre leadership.
- Study responses to operational versus creative uncertainty.
- Investigate whether students recognize production activities as project-management competencies.
- Test whether project management education affects theatre graduates' professional transition.
- Examine how production knowledge is transferred into continuing theatre organizations.
- Test the Theatre Creative Project Management Model across cultural and institutional settings.

9. Conclusion

This paper argues that an individual theatre production can be conceptualized as a temporary creative project embedded within a continuing theatre organization. Theatre production possesses recognizable project characteristics, objectives, temporal boundaries, teams, resources, schedules, stakeholders, risks, delivery and closure, while also involving artistic emergence, interpretation, experimentation and uncertainty.

The appropriate response is neither to treat theatre as ordinary project work nor to place artistic production outside project-management theory. Instead, theatre production can be understood as a temporary creative project system in which production, creative and coordination systems interact. Collaborative Adaptive Governance, Negotiate, Facilitate, and Adapt are proposed as the mechanism through which these systems can be coordinated. Embedded Project Management provides a vocabulary for recognizing project functions already present in production practice, while the Recognition Gap identifies an educational and professional question requiring empirical study.

The contribution is an integration rather than a claim of first discovery. Existing research has demonstrated relationships between theatre and project work; this paper connects temporary organization theory, projectification, project plasticity, creative project management and theatre management into a unified framework.

The resulting proposition is that the individual theatre production, not theatre as a continuing organizational institution, is the appropriate unit for conceptualizing theatre as a temporary creative project.

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