

From *Peke Yangu* to Dependency: Generative AI, Algorithmic culture and the Transformation of Theatre Practice in Eldoret

Octavious Onyango*

Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

Abstract:

This paper examines how generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and algorithmic culture have reshaped theatre practice in Eldoret, Kenya. Theatre production in the town has for long benefited from a Peke Yangu model, where the producer is the writer, director, technician, designer, marketer and actor in his own production, notes the paper. This model has been in vogue, and is a necessity, in response to a dearth in theatre training and technical infrastructure within Eldoret.

Algorithmic culture helps practitioners read audience preferences by mirroring trends circulating in social media, while generative AI makes it possible to produce scripts, posters, and other promotional materials quicker and at lower cost, allowing small groups to imitate popular forms and compete with larger companies, presumably from bigger cities like Nairobi. Consequently, this paper demonstrates that these gains come with significant costs, biggest among them, reduced production value, and cultural relevance.

Using My Robot Brother, a children's play recently performed at the Kenya National Theatre, by the 64 Theatre Production house from Eldoret, about a boy and a sentient robot, the paper demonstrates that the use of algorithmic culture and generative AI is not totally misplaced. Younger audiences already familiar with AI respond with both fascination and disappointment, to the performance of the character of the robot. This reveals a meta-modern oscillation between acceptance and critique.

Keywords: Algorithmic culture, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Meta-modernism, Eldoret Theatre

* **Octavious Onyango** is a graduate student in the Department of Language, Literature, and African Languages of Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. He is also a Director at Fireside Players Theater and Arts Ensemble.

DOI: 10.52907/wahia.v2i1.644

Introduction

Eldoret city is situated in the Rift Valley region of western Kenya, and has historically been recognised as an agricultural hub, and the home to some of the world's most accomplished long-distance runners at athletics events. Rarely is Eldoret considered a cultural centre associated with theatre or performing arts industries. Yet, despite this omission from write ups about its identity, Eldoret recently emerged as the second most active city in theatre activities in the country, at the Kenya Theatre Awards, of 2025, ahead of previous giants, Nakuru, Mombasa and Kisumu.

The city of champions, as it is popularly referred to, isn't new to theatre. It is home to Moi University, an institution that has been the cradle of some of Kenya's biggest theatre scholars, like Prof. C.J Odhiambo, who has practised and taught theatre since the 1980s. Then came the new age scholars and practitioners, in the 1990s with Fred Mbogo, and practitioners like Oyatsi S.O, under Professor L.P Barasa. Most recently, in the late 2010s, Cosmas Bii, Rogers Liambira, Josiah Kiprop, Agushoma Stephen, the author of this paper and many others have emerged.

For a long time, the theatre ecosystem in Eldoret has relied on what is referred to in Kenyan theatre circles as the *peke yangu production* model. *Peke yangu* coming from Kiswahili directly translates to “by myself” or “alone” in English. It is a combination of the word *pekee* (alone) and the possessive *yangu* (my) (Kamusi Teule ya Kiswahili, 2019). This model is anchored on a single practitioner, (usually the director, as the artistic engine of the production) doubling up as the writer, director, producer, technician, stage designer and even actor. This approach, lined up with other problems such as small and almost no rehearsal spaces, mostly university driven productions; actors stage managing themselves, graphic designers and technicians learning on the job, has made the theatre ecosystem in Eldoret what it is. Furthermore, underneath all this effort still exists a constant comparison to other towns with seemingly functional and more profitable theatre ecosystems top among them, Nairobi, until the arrival and boom of the use of generative artificial intelligence and algorithmic culture in the early 2020s.

For practitioners already accustomed to the *peke yangu* production model, the coinciding rise and use of social media, algorithmic culture and generative AI now appear to be a collaborator, a saviour if you will, who has come to lighten the load. Suddenly, one practitioner has the tools to do the jobs of an entire creative team. Together, algorithmic culture and use of generative AI are promising a

shorter production time, better-quality productions, and democratized access to certain technical skills that were traditionally only available to university students and their professors. Now, even small theatre groups and companies can compete with bigger ones within Eldoret and even the rest of the country.

It is on this precipice that this paper argues that technologies that have been adopted as solutions in the form of generative AI, and algorithmic culture, while significantly reducing long standing technical and creative barriers within the emerging theatre ecosystem in Eldoret, consequently foster new forms of artistic dependency and audience alienation.

The Theatre and It's Double

For the sake of the arguments advanced henceforth, and invoking Antonin Artaud's concept, let's define the components of the double. Algorithmic culture, refers to, the ways in which the logic of big data and large-scale computation alter how culture is practised, experienced and understood (Striphas, 2023). For this paper, we shall be referring to the ways in which digital platforms, including social media, use recommendation, ranking and personalization within their systems to shape the production, circulation/marketing and the reception of theatrical content. Generative Artificial Intelligence, on the other hand, as defined by Boden (2006), are systems within computational creativity that can create original ideas or artefacts from prompts.

The lens that this paper uses to look into this is one of meta-modernism, following Dempsey's (2023) postulations. These ideas propose a progressive decentralization from a postmodernist point of view, where there is a call for postmodernism to be self-aware. That means, for example, that when consuming a story on robots disrupting life (as shall be discussed here), we must be aware that consumers of the stories have bought into the myth of the robot, even though they may be sceptical of the robot's capacity to be human. That is, while meaning has been treated as unstable, by presenting an "unreal" character (robot) interacting with a real character (a living boy), and behaving as a responsible parent to the boy, to absurd levels, we play along this meaninglessness – we participate in the chaos of meaninglessness with awareness!

The implication is that audiences in Eldoret can participate in the consumption of these AI aided, algorithm-determined stories, not in ignorance to the absurdity that they may be proposing, or to their seemingly "near perfect" nature, which removes the sense of human nuance, but as members of a world

readily entangled in these new realities. Stories cease to merely be sweet or relatable, they become “nonsense” (as the robot story read here might show), which is acceptable, as a “suspension of disbelief”, because that is the world we are in. This is where the idea of the theatre mirroring itself in Antonin Artaud’s “theatre and its double” concept comes into play.

Obviously, the risk is that audiences might tire, and begin to crave for the “human”, possible idea, of the everyday that is relatable.

Knowledge and Technology: The context

Eldoret, for large parts since the late 1990s, can be described as a university town. It has Moi University, with its more than four campuses situated in literally the four corners of the city. It also has the University of Eldoret, which boasts two campuses. Catholic University, Kisii University, Nazarene University, as well as institutions such as Alliance Francaise, which focuses on French studies. Rift Valley Technology Institute (RVTI) is the other institution of higher learning, among many others.

These institutions provide graduates, as well as students, with some element of knowhow in theatre. They also become essential spaces for the experimentation of theatre and performance in general. However, in certain parts of the year, when the institutions are closed for holiday or recess, this knowledge is absent, as students leave for their other towns or cities. Theatre activities are affected as some of the students, besides being members of audiences, are also actors, stage-managers and theatre directors.

Alongside this knowledge flow problem, is the problem of marketing; where theatre practitioners who have depended on networks formed in or with these institutions of higher learning, are left to find new audiences in town. Technology then becomes a solution to the practitioner of the *peke yangu* model. Here, the practitioner only needs to tap into the idea of algorithms to determine, firstly, what the audience in Eldoret might want to watch. Technology can also be employed to find out about preferred times, themes, stories, venues, among others. Agushomba (2026), has observed that the mapping out of audiences in Eldoret, for marketing purposes, has been lacking over the years. Yet, with the advancement of AI tools, in the form of algorithms, this problem can be navigated around. But other issues of technology such as lighting for the stage, and sound, as well as other effects, from screens, and elements necessary for a play on three-dimension images interacting with live audiences are a problem.

The *peke yangu* practitioner, it is anticipated, will however with time, find a way through technology, especially in the example given with *My Robot Brother* play. In a sense, while technology is helping circumvent certain problems for producers with limited funding, there remains a problem as regards funding. Parts of the current technology necessary for staging, including sound and lighting, as well as other effects, requires heavy capital investment.

Enter the long-awaited collaborators

Where anticipating what the audience would want to see performed was a challenge in a city without as strong a theatre culture as Nairobi, algorithmic culture would come to the rescue of Eldoret. A good example of the value of the algorithms is that trends in theatre, mostly permeating from places like Nairobi. This consist, almost in a loop, comedy plays such as those by Heartstrings, local language theatre productions like those from Tash Mitambo's Renegade Ventures, politically conscious plays from Nairobi Performing Arts Studio (NPAS) and NGO sponsored plays mostly held at the Alliance Française, would become the bedrock of emerging production houses in Eldoret.

To sweeten the deal, algorithmic culture comes with piggyback marketing (Rentschler, 2002) where the algorithmic culture shines at putting in front of Eldoret's theatre social media audience, material that is similar to what they like from Nairobi, suggesting that the same exists within their locale. Thus, audiences start to stream into the theatre expecting what they saw to be trending in Nairobi, as was the case with Brian Mwanzo's staging of Francis Imbuga's classic *Betrayal in the City* with Artflame Theatre Network, after the same play was staged by Stuart Nash's, NPAS.

Collaborator number two: Generative Artificial Intelligence. Once a *peke yangu* production model practitioner has established what the audience wants, naturally, the next step is to put into the production pipeline, the plays that the people want. With generative AI, the *peke yangu* production's problems, are solved serially. That is to say, productions that had no knowledge or technology to produce anything they found to be popular online now employed Generative A.I. Productions that had never done comedies before and lacked the knowledge to make comedies had the capability to do so now. Producers and Directors were not forthcoming to disclose whether they used AI or not in the creative process, because of the discrimination that comes with AI use, but one thing that betrays this silence is the use of generative AI in the production of posters for publicity.

Posters used to be characterized by the faces of the actors and in other cases, images of the writer, director and even producers, as the faces in the productions sold the shows. But now, as observed in Eldoret, the branding is tied towards maximizing what is trending. If Production house X, has been staging tragedies, for example, and has realized from the algorithm that the audience wants to see comedies, they opt out of having their images on the poster, to keep the marketing open to speculation rather than belonging to what they are known for (tragedies). This helps them blend in with similar productions that have produced comedies before, especially, from Nairobi.

This scenario exhibits two profits for a *peke yangu* production. The first one is the distance created from the production house, signaling that this is just something new they are trying to do. Secondly, there is no need for a poster designer to be paid for a job that AI can do for free. The art of designing a poster is truly intricate, long and tedious, especially when there are real human bodies involved. As a result, if Production company X is employing the same thinking to the process of generation of scripts and other aspects of the production then Algorithmic culture and generative AI have truly saved the day.

With these advantages, definitely come challenges. To begin with, most generative AI software providers come with a free subscription tier, but the possibilities are limited. This causes sameness, for example with posters, even stories, as the free tier limits the possibilities of creative output and image generation. Next, the ideas churned out through AI are not localized, resulting in a westernization of local stories. The machine rounds off prompts to familiar spaces to where it was manufactured, therefore, a play set in Eldoret would look like it was stage designed for Los Angeles.

These effects over time start to show majorly with audience reception, owing to a sense of that sameness. “When audiences begin to perceive theater shows as easy to make with AI, like assignments of university students”, says Charles Muchemi, manager of 64 Theatre’s Hadithi Sunday program for children, “then the production value goes down, and since everything looks the same, audiences do not come”. Oddly, as the expectations of the audience grow, production quality has not. The collaborators that were here to assist the *peke yangu* producer are suddenly becoming the problem for the production model.

My Robot Brother: A Case Study.

My Robot Brother is a play for children between the ages of 6 and 13 that was written by Cosmas Bii, edited and directed by the author of this paper,

produced by Stephen Agushoma, and Margaret Musau, with stage management by Charles Muchemi for 64 Theatre.

The play follows the story of an intelligent young boy, named Amos, who designs and creates a robot called Sparky, to help him do house chores left to him by his mother. Instead of doing the chores, that robot gets busy for him, as he plays games with strangers on the internet. His mother has left for work elsewhere, presumably in the town centre. Later, he uses the robot to teach him how to dance because he wants to impress his classmates on the internet via Tiktok. All goes well until the robot becomes sentient! It seeks to correct him, order him around, even punish him. It gains agency and begins to act like the missing parent, especially when the boy cannot get dance moves right. Naturally, Amos rebels as the creator of the machine and they begin a cat and mouse around the house, undoing the work that the robot had initially done. Eventually, Amos is worn down and agrees to re-do his chores, and afterwards they enjoy a dance. This time, Amos makes a subtle stylization of a dance move which the Robot reads as an error and it decides to punish him, but the robot loses power and shuts down before executing the punishment.

The play was produced by a team from Uasin Gishu County and performed for children in grade 4 & 5 from Machakos county – St. Angela's Primary School. It received very positive responses from its audience. This is where the thinking around meta-modernism comes in, demonstrated henceforth through various levels. Level one, that the girls of St. Angela, were excited knowing that, it was a boy, Eddy, acting like a robot, imitating what the popular imagination has projected Artificial Intelligence to look like, personified in the physical space, and enjoying it. Level two, the girls know they are not supposed to run away from their chores and co-opt a robot to do the chores their parents give them. They were bemused instead by how Amos was able to create this technology and evade house chores by leaving them to the robot if only so that he can play games on the internet. Level three, at the point of the robot becoming sentient and going rogue, they enjoyed the cat and mouse chase between the two characters – which is seemingly unreal, but an enjoyable conflict to watch nevertheless. Finally, when the robot registers a stylized movement as an error, they are confused, and the play ends without a conclusion, much to the audience's displeasure.

This clearly demonstrated that, at their age between ten and twelve, and belonging to Generation alpha, who are growing up with tablets and AI, they have already realized that this technology exists. They know that it is not the savior, but they will engage with it regardless. They know that it has its shortcomings and they are at peace with that fact. This is the meta-modernist's

oscillation (Dempsey, 2023). What does this mean for Eldoret theatre? Using the play as a metaphor, we can make a few observations as pertains to knowledge and technology, specifically through audience expectations, and artist's dependency.

To begin with, it is clear that the audience has expectations when AI is used in the creative process. In this play under discussion, there is a level of precision that the audience expected the boy playing the robot to have, because they already know how the AI represented is in the physical public space. This affects the Eldoret theatre ecosystem in that when material is obtained from the algorithm, the audience already has elevated expectations, comparing in their minds what they are going to see vis a vis what they already know to be. This is further enforced by posters. Cheap, free for all AI, they create the sameness that we saw earlier, this makes the audience prefer not to attend the shows because it feels like something they have seen before, eventually affecting attendance. This results into reduced revenue for the theatre, and ultimately reduced cultural relevance.

Selective deafness to the expectations of the audience and continued use of generative AI, because of algorithmic culture, influences superiority and creates artistic dependency. Social media will not stop being used by the audience, hence there will always be a trend, and that will create a market that will be exploited by the *peke yangu* production model users. This creates the meta-modernist oscillation that if not checked, becomes like the proverbial dragon Smaug (Tolkien, 1937), from Lord of The Rings, that will be difficult to defeat. Eldoret Theatre would continuously lose cultural relevance as it will be considered robotic and shall be left as a thing that anyone who can analyze algorithmic culture and exploit the use of Generative AI can do.

Conclusion

Performances begin outside the theatre even before the script is written, and they do not seem to end after the show. This is because algorithms remain as archival material, for future use, on popularity, marketability, and thematic or stylistic preferences. Data from previous performances can be used to determine future performances. Scripts emanating from generative AI can be passed on, in formulaic ways, to future performances. This, as argued above, can lead to sameness. So, what are artists in Eldoret to do with these generative AI and the massive employ of algorithm?

It has clearly been demonstrated by the girls of St. Angela's that younger generations have artificial intelligence and algorithmic culture built into their

development as they mature. The meta-modernist oscillation again becomes the solution, as the two have to be used deliberately, since clearly the double cannot effectively replace the theatre. Knowledge remains king. AI does not necessarily make anyone suddenly knowledgeable about engaging in the theatre.

References:

- Boden, M. A. (2006). *Mind as machine: A history of cognitive science* (2 vols.). Oxford University Press.
- Dempsey, B. G. (2023). *Metamodernism: Or, the cultural logic of cultural logics*. Arc Press.
- Rentschler, R. (2002). "The Changed World of Arts Marketing." *International Journal of Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 7(4), 381-391.
- Striphas, T. (2023). *Algorithmic culture before the internet*. Columbia University Press.
- 64 Theatre. (2026) *My Robot Brother*. Play.



Open Access. This work is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, duplication, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, a link is provided to the Creative Commons license and any changes made are indicated. The images or other third-party material in this article are included in the work's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in the credit line; if such material is not included in the work's Creative Commons license and the respective action is not permitted by statutory regulation, users will need to obtain permission from the license holder to duplicate, adapt or reproduce the material.