From Page to the Stage: A Choreographic Analysis of Felix Akinsipe's *Struggling to Die*[1]

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The juxtaposition of various artistic genres, ranging from the performative to the non-performative, to create an aesthetic whole is not novel in indigenous African society. This is evident in the artistic fusion of dance, mime, poetry, costume, sculpture, and other performative and visual arts in performance, and is a clear reference to the total theatre concept. However, postcolonial developments in contemporary African societies have fostered a new and compelling understanding of performance, which has led to a separation into three distinctive and often independent performative arts of dance, drama and music.

The situation then arose where dance which is considered to embody the idea of performance in indigenous African society lost its autochthonous articulacy in contemporary African performance, a point which is well noted in a 2001 co-authored paper with Sunday Ododo. At the heart of this 2001 paper is the understanding that, "even though, formal drama is considered younger than dance and music, drama often tries to force dance and music as artistic appendages to its own artistic expressions" (Ododo and Igweonu, 2001: 51). However, the paper goes on to argue that dance experiments and productions at the University of Ilorin are specifically geared towards re/asserting the position of contemporary African dance as a distinct artistic genre that has potentials, not just for spectacle, but as a perfect tool for didactics as is the case with performance in indigenous African society.

What is Contemporary African Dance?

In the co-authored paper cited earlier, we defined contemporary African dance as "a deliberate attempt at distinguishing between dance as a traditional/ cultural entertainment form and dance as a theatrical aesthetic form" (Ododo and Igweonu, 2001: 54). Contemporary African dance clearly goes off on a tangent in relation to dance in its indigenous role, as dance cannot move from its indigenous base to a theatrical setting without undergoing a functional alteration which also affects its style of presentation and sequence. Perceptions are culture bound and as such our understanding of things, or the meanings we attach to images, are rooted in our socio-cultural disposition and worldview. Whenever a dance form leaves its indigenous context for a contemporary theatrical one, new realities

[1] *Struggling to Die* is an unpublished dance libretto written by Felix Akinsipe and choreographed by Kene Igweonu. The production premiered at the University of Ilorin on 20 May 2001.

usually have to be worked out as its connotations often become distorted and transmuted because of this transition.

Writing on a topic she calls "National Erotica: The Politics of 'Traditional' Dance in Tanzania" Laura Edmondson notes that tourism and the commodification of indigenous African culture has led to performances in which excessive emphasis is given to movements that perpetuate "western stereotypes of the 'bestial' sexual license" (Edmondson in Harding, 2002: 79). Edmondson describes the sexual overtone of the *sindimba* in which, as she puts it, male dancers perform "improvised comic routines around their pursuit of the ever-smiling, hip-swaying women" (Edmondson in Harding, 2002: 79). That the connotations of this dance changes with recontextualisation from its indigenous framework is evidenced in Edmondson's distinguishing of urban (mostly by educational institutions) and local (indigenous) versions of the dance. For instance, she observes that in the local contexts, the *sindimba* is danced in response to "immediate local concerns" (Edmondson in Harding, 2002: 83). In urban performances, however, undue emphasis is placed on the gyration of the feminine waist and buttocks, and the unrestrained sexual movement it invokes in male dancers. In fact, the change is such that it has been noted that the *sindimba* "when performed out of context, as it is at the schools, borders on obscenity" (Edmondson in Harding, 2002: 83). However, in other to relieve this distortion that occurs as a result of recontextualisation, contemporary African dance relies on the concept of "modern dance." This concept mitigates the distortion in contemporary African dance by engaging the choreographer in the process of realigning the movement codes of the dance.

Modern dance, as used in the essay, is such that inspire choreographers to create movements that are autobiographical from their personal experience, as well as movements derived from other external sources that must be reinterpreted to function expressively within the context of their new usage. For example, a choreographer may draw on dance steps from the Tiv Swange dance to depict swimming action with the possible extension of the arm movement to cover a wider range (Ododo and Igweonu, 2001: 55). This is the context in which I make use of the term "modern dance" in relation to contemporary African dance performance. It is essential to clarify this so that what is intended in this essay is not mistaken to signify a reference to the Euro-American modern dance model.

Dance Literature: The Influence of Oral Tradition

One major problem that has plagued African dance is that of documentation, as there is arguably no established form of dance notation and documentation in use in Africa today[2]. It is possible to argue that orality constitutes some form of documentation, but in the words of Amadou Hampate-Ba, "in Africa every old man who dies is a library set ablaze" (Ajikobi in Carter, 1998a: 16). The absence of a viable notation system for African dance has invariably forced the choreographer to continue relying on oral resources, which cannot be completely relied upon because of its propensity to diffuse its message as it is passed down from one person to another. According to Benita Parry,

> Literature falls into two great parts, not so much because there are two kinds of cultures but because there are two forms. One part of literature is oral, the other written (Parry in Scholes and Kellog, 1978: 18).

In essence, both orature and ecriture are acceptable forms of literature, but ecriture has often been privileged over orature in contemporary discuss. Dance in Africa, unlike drama has mainly relied heavily on oral materials for performance, but with the need to be as independent as drama with its play-texts; researchers at the University of Ilorin are at the forefront of ongoing efforts aimed at promoting the writing dance scripts or librettos that are movement driven not dependent on dialogue to move its narrative forward.

The development of dance librettos has been greatly resisted by those who believe that dance, unlike drama, does not need to be written, but displayed with the body. Ojo Bakare amplifies this position in his earlier exposition of the qualities of a choreographer.

> Like every other creative personality, the dance creator has something to say. But while the play creator (playwright) for example, can use written..., the dance creator can only say what he has in mind through the rhythmic movement to the human body…It therefore means that dance is to the choreographer what written words are to the playwright (Bakare, 1994: 3)

From Bakare's point of view, it would seem that dance has no business being scripted. Bakare's position is embodied in his definition of the word choreography, which he views "as a qualifying word for the art and science of creating and structuring movements of the human body in space and time to communicate ideas, messages or the creator's intentions" (Bakare, 1994: 1). Even though this definition is not altogether incorrect, I am more favourably disposed to Felix Akinsipe's analysis of the word choreography in which he contends that:

[2] Peter Badejo OBE informed me during an interview with him on 4 October 2004 that he was working on *batabade;* a notation system for *bata*, the national dance of the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria. He hopes that when finished, it will be a model for documenting other African dances.

> Choreography is the anglicised form of the Greek word "choregraphie" (a fusion of two Greek words, "choreia" – dance and "graphein" – to write) meaning "the art of writing down of dance" (Akinsipe, 1999: 87)

Chris Ugolo supports this analysis, noting "choreography involves the composition of dances, the structuring and arrangement of movements, writing of dance-scripts and dance notation" (Ugolo, 1998: xi). The key point to note is that whereas it is not unheard-of for a choreographer to compose dance movements based entirely on oral resources, it is necessary for African choreographers to take a keen interest in research into the art of writing and notating dances led by the University of Ilorin. This development if fully supported will foster a better understanding of choreographers' work, as a fully developed dance script or libretto can be picked up and performed by another choreographer, just as is done with play-texts, thereby addressing the problem of dance notion and documentation.

Things have not been easy for those that have ventured into the writing of dance librettos. The absence of an effective notation system for African dance has meant that contemporary African dance practitioners have only succeeded in writing what can best be described as "stage directions" in a play-text. In most cases however, the choreographer is the same person who writes and implements these scripts and as such can readily re/creates movements during rehearsals leading to performance. In situations where the person who writes the dance script is not the same as the person that choreographs the dance, apart from maintaining the plot, choreographers often find that they have to utilise dance movements other than what the librettist may have had in mind. Case in point, by way of explanation, is a 2001 dance production titled *Struggling to Die* written by Felix Akinsipe and choreographed by Kene Igweonu (the author of this essay).

The Libretto: *Struggling to Die*

Akinsipe's *Struggling to Die* adopts a simple and linear plot structure, as is the case with most of his earlier works such as *No Cause for War* (2000) and *United We Stand* (1998). The story x-rays societal problems such as avarice and survival of the fittest syndrome. It opens with three male beggars (two blind and one lame) asking alms from passers-by, which later gets stolen by the lame man.

> After a while he leads them out and re-appears almost immediately to pack all the things he had gathered into a bag. It makes a huge loot. He dances to express success and departs another way. (Akinsipe, 2001: 3)

This particular beggar and thief, who also happens to be lame appears next at a wedding ceremony where he receives more alms which he stuffs inside his bag thus arousing the curiosity of some young miscreants who waylay him and steal the bag from him.

> The boys then do a dance to express success, strength and bravery. After some time they begin to untie the bag at the same time, a fight ensues. (Akinsipe, 2001: 4)

This struggle for dominance is what characterises the entire dance as one group after the other snatches the bag, believing it to be full of money. The next movement opens with armed robbers snatching the bag from the boys after which the librettists direction to the choreographer reads, "the robbers then do a jazz/disco/dance to express victory" (Akinsipe, 2001: 5). It is worth noting that this is as near as the script gets to the suggestion of specific dance form.

The librettist also recommended for the dance between the policemen and prostitutes, "some moments of choreographed duets…" (Akinsipe, 2001: 6). Having seduced the policemen the prostitutes drug them, and steal the bag along with their guns. Next some thugs attack the prostitutes, rape, and collect the bag from them. Finally, the king and his chiefs are ushered in to, according to the librettist, perform "some cultic elders dance" (Akinsipe, 2001: 7). The chiefs round up the thugs as they attempt to open the bag. A fight follows, but since the chiefs are not a physically match for the thugs, they (chiefs) deploy their magic to mesmerise them, thus subduing and killing them only to end up coveting the content of the bag themselves. On opening the bag the chiefs discover to their dismay that it is full of old clothes and a little money. At this point the lame beggar reappears on the scene to mock the chiefs who in a fit of anger and humiliation also eliminate him with their magical powers and consequently depart leaving the items scattered all over the stage. The two blind beggars are then reintroduced on stage where they stumble on the loot, perhaps starting the cycle all over again.

The Dance Performance: Choreographic Approaches

The analysis of the performance of *Struggling to Die* that is about to unfold in this essay is based on the production of the dance as choreographed by Kene Igweonu (the author of this essay). The dance production premiered at the Africa Hall of the University of Ilorin Mini Campus on May 20, 2001. There are various choreographic approaches that a choreographer can adopt in the artistic realisation of a contemporary African dance production. Each of these can be employed either independently or mutually, and have been identified by

Akinsipe as consisting of the lyrical/ literal approach, the concept/ theme approach, mood approach, rhythmic/ instrumental approach and the abstract approach (Akinsipe in Oni and Ododo, 2000: 203). Before proceeding with an analysis of these choreographic approaches it would be appropriate to point out two generalised approaches that was used to enhance the choreographic approaches adopted for the said production. Bakare captures the two methods of dance creation succinctly:

> In creating movements for dance production, the choreographer (A) select from movement vocabularies that are already in existence or (B) create his own movement vocabularies. (Bakare, 1994: 37)

One of the problems of selecting from existing movement vocabularies in African dance is that some of these dance movement are often peculiar to certain communities from which they are taken, and as such, may readily take on specific overtones to people from those communities. This problem of communal identity is resolved in contemporary African dance by creating scenarios where dances from the traditional setting such as the hunters dance, maiden dance, or royal dance, and so on are adapted and matched with situations in the dance script where such dances will convey similar sentiments or meaning to viewing audiences (Ododo and Igweonu, 2001: 20).

Let us consider the *agbekor* dance, which is a tribal dance of the Ewe and Foh peoples of Ghana and Benin (formerly Dahomey) respectively. Due to the character that will be described shortly, this dance can be adapted to convey the impression of a hand-to-hand duel between two or more dance characters. By playing on the dominant reading of the dance as a warrior dance, the choreographer can focus on the images that the dance has to offer which makes it easy for anyone watching to identify its intended aim within the main piece of work. The *agbekor* is a male warrior dance that is often performed at social and cultural events such as funerals, even though it once played a historic role as an agency for spiritual and physical preparation for war. It is more or less a dance that re-enacts manoeuvres that have led to victories on the battlefield. In the dance, dancers costumed in colourful loincloths, carrying fly-whisks made from horsetail, and wearing raffia around their ankle perform movements that are reminiscent of battle scenes. Their movements are spontaneous, combining slow and fast actions as they scheme, threaten and advance on their enemies; at the same time skilfully thrusting with the end of their fly-whisks as though stabbing at them with a sword. The second approach on the other hand, involves the construction of dance actions from everyday activities such as is found in work, play, and physical exercises. Choreographers can create their own movement vocabularies "that will convey appropriate messages from exercises,

mimetic actions, and other motor activities like walking, running, jumping, etc" (Ododo and Igweonu, 2001: 20).

The 2001 production of *Struggling to Die* combined all but one of the choreographic approaches mentioned earlier. The abstract approach which is the only approach not utilised in the production is described thus by Bakare:

> When the dance creator has abstracted some ideas about a particular object or a group of objects or when for example he has abstracted some thoughts about a natural phenomenon (e.g. moon, sun, rain, etc) and he is now transmitting these objects or natural phenomenon through movement images that resemble them. (Bakare, 1994: 5)

The lyrical/ literal approach allows the choreographer to arrange dances based on the lyrics of a song or poem and/or the suggested dance movements as are found in the script. For example, "The robbers then do jazz /disco/pop dance to express victory" (Akinsipe, 2001: 5) suggests particular dance types that the choreographer can use to depict the action of the dance and convey a specifically intended meaning to the audience. However, in the practical realisation of the dance script in 2001, the choreography adopted MC Hammer's 1990 hip-hop hit single *U Can't Touch This* to compose the movement sequence. Apart from the notion of invincibility that the lyrics of the song suggest, the choice of this song for the robber's dance was influenced by the notorious reputation of hip-hop (particularly "gangsta rap") as a gang inspired genre. Even though the musical genres suggested by Akinsipe are not particularly reflective of indigenous African aesthetics, its inclusion was justified by the popularity of these genres in contemporary Nigerian society. The prevalence of the hip-hop musical genre in Nigeria is in itself a transcultural phenomenon. This is made apparent by the postcolonial nature of the country, which has left it particularly open to global, indeed Western cultural influence.

In the concept or theme approach, the choreographer creates dances based on a particular situation in the text, whereas the abstract approach deals more with objects or natural phenomenon. Akinsipe opines that the concept or theme approach "comes into use when the script is not prescriptive of particular movements to be used" (Akinsipe in Oni and Ododo, 2000: 203). This particular approach forms a substantial part of choreography in *Struggling to Die* as instances abound where the script is silent on the movements required such as in Movement One and Movement Five of the libretto.

> The king flanked by his chiefs joins the couple together after which they dance round the people…The policemen arrive and hide to watch the ladies. They are gradually mesmerized and one by one they come out to dance with the ladies. Some moments of

choreographed duets after which the ladies collect the police guns and take them away. (Akinsipe, 2001: 3, 6)

Another approach is the mood approach, which enables the choreographer to arrange dances based on the mood and emotions in the dance. This involves analysing the events in the script with a view to understanding how the various characters might feel at different times, and then to embody them through the dance medium. This approach is extensively used in productions where the emotional response of dancers to events around them cannot be downplayed or restrained. For instance, situations that require the expression of joy are often articulated with fast movements that are light or flicking, while sadness or sorrow is expressed using such movements that are heavy, sustained and slow (Ugolo, 1998: 39). Hence choreography based on mood has to be woven around dances that exhibit qualities such as is expounded above by Ugolo.

The rhythmic/ instrumental approach simply relies on the identified rhythm of vocal or instrumental music to be effective. This approach can be used when a specific vocal or instrumental music is suggested in the script or even where the same is not specified. In the case of *Struggling to Die*, vocal or instrumental music is not specified in the script, but since the dance is set to music in the performance context, this approach was used extensively to create movements based on the vocal or instrumental music employed. Rhythmic/ instrumental approach featured prominently in the production of *Struggling to Die,* but this approach can only be utilised where its product is not in conflict with the message that is intended in the performance. The vocal and instrumental music used in realising some of the choreography included MC Hammer's *U Can't Touch This* (1990), *Zombie* (1977) - Fela Anikulapo Kuti's Afrobeat hit sensation, and an instrumental musical piece that specially composed with the help of Kayode Omosa using an electric keyboard with built-in synthesisers. In keeping with the rhythmic/ instrumental approach dance movements were created based on the music and rooted in exercise routines and everyday actions like walking, jumping, bending, and so on. The movement phrases derived by combining basic steps from exercises and everyday actions were then combined to form various dance sequences that were synchronised with music to produce most of the dances for the production.

Conclusion

Dance performance and the art of scripting dances has continued to gain a strong footing in contemporary African performance practice, and has advanced continuous inroads in the

positioning of dance as a relevant performative art in contemporary African theatre and performance. This development is however more prominent in the educational theatres in universities and colleges where dance is taught in the performing and theatre arts departments. However, the dance scripts or librettos that have been written for contemporary African dance are still far from being fully formed, thus the challenge is for librettists and choreographers to imbibe a more detailed description of movements in their texts.

Description as suggested here basically entails the graphic presentation of step-by-step arrangement of dance movement sequences. In which case, the arm, legs and body movements are explained as much as is graphically possible until such a time that an adequate and generally accepted dance notation has been developed for African dance. Such a notation system must duly recognise the poly-rhythmic nature of African dance and the importance of capturing movements that convey the performed narrative without relying on dialogue or the spoken word. It is important to note that this observation does not imply the complete absence of a system for notating African dance; rather it is the inability of existing techniques to find effective application in the notation of intricacies of the African dance genre that is being referred to here.

Greenotation, for instance, was specifically designed for notating African percussion instruments, but being aligned with Labanotation, which is a system for writing European classical dance, made it possible for both African music and dance to be integrated on a single score. This system of notation was created by ethnomusicologist and certified teacher of Labanotation, Doris Green in 1962. The basic symbol for the Greenotation is a rectangle, with different shadings and designs within the rectangle indicating the instruments played and quality of the sound produced. Greenotation uses a vertical three-lined staff and is read vertically from bottom to top. Symbols that are placed side by side are played together while symbols that are placed consecutively on the staff are played in sequence. Despite inherent potentials in this system of notation, it has not received sufficient attention by African dance researchers, and as such it has not gained wide recognition and acceptance. By engaging in this choreographic analysis, I hope to have demonstrated that despite present imperfections in scripting and notating of African dance, dance librettos as they currently stand, can still be transformed into an adequately communicative dance performance using the outlined choreographic approaches. These approaches continue to be used in similar experimentations with dance scripts at the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin as evidenced in the many brilliant dance productions that continue to be showcased there.

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