THE DIRECTOR'S EXPLORATION OF DANCE-IN-DRAMA IN THE NIGERIAN THEATRE

AbdulRasheed Abiodun Adeoye

Introduction: Dance in the African Total Theatre Aesthetics

> ...Tender steps - I say!
> Purposeful steps - I reiterate!
> Ginger steps – irreverent to many – but the matter is
> really beyond Good and Evil
> Don't stop! Don't look back! Whoever puts his feet to the
> dance and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of Arts!
> M – as in Movement
> M – as in Motion
> M - as in Motivation
> .....
> Who can stop movement?
> Who could hold motion?
> Who – I say – can demotivate motivation?...
>
> (Abodunrin, 2003:ix).

In the above excerpt from the 'Preface' to *The Dancing Masquerade*, Femi Abodunrin describes the everlasting power of dance through movement, motion and motivation – the 'three Ms', which he refers to as the 'hallmark of the masquerade's rhythmic steps.' The metaphor of the dancing masquerade celebrates the masquerade's dynamic prowess, highlighted by his ageless flowing costume, and provides the basic maxim on which this paper is anchored: *for the masquerade to dance well, he needs to keep strictly to the rules and refrain from donning the proud toga of 'I know it all'*. As the excerpt warns, no dancer should look back while dancing, unless that head movement is part of his spatial-rhythmic pattern.

A starting paradigm for our analysis into the African dance aesthetics is the '*yanke* dance', accompanied by its song sequence, a Yoruba folk dance, popularly performed by children in playgroups, especially during moonlight games. But 'yanke' is a Hausa word, which literally means 'cut', and must have been imported into the Yoruba language. The song is normally accompanied by a particular rhythmic dance pattern which involves the children, legs apart, holding their waists with both hands, and swinging harmoniously to

the left, then to the right, and back to the centre, getting progressively faster as the children enter the spirit of the song, which takes them to the climax. The lyrics of the song run as follows:

Ijo ti mo jo l'ana – yanke	The dance that I danced yesterday - *yanke*
Gbogbo ara l'o n romi – yanke	I feel the pains all over my body - *yanke*
Ijo ti mo jo l'ana – yanke	The dance that I danced yesterday - *yanke*
Baba o gbodo gbo – yanke	Father must not get to know - *yanke*
Iya o gbodo gbo – yanke	Mother must not get to know - *yanke*
Yanke, yanke – yankeee!!!	*Yanke, yanke – yankeee!!!*

In the course of the singing and dancing, the children would clap, jump and improvise sound rhythm with available wood or metal objects, nostalgically reflecting the naturalness of dance to the African child, and confirming the mimetic theory in the evolution of theatre. By describing it as pain-inflicting, the dance underscores the seriousness and vigour of the dance art, even with little children. The fact that father and mother must not get to know is not out of disapproval of the art of dance, but that children must not allow it to get in the way of other domestic responsibilities, because of the accompanying physical pains. This calls for total commitment and endurance on the part of the children involved in the dance, thus projecting the dance art as being both serious and energetic in nature. It also underscores the irreducible essence of dance in African communal life as well as its primacy in African total theatre aesthetics. This provides the framework for our investigation into the mathematics of dance-in-drama, and the numerous opportunities available to theatre directors, in spicing up their dramatic performances with various dance forms.

Dance is the hydra-headed language of a dynamic universal art, giving expression to the reality of human existence. In its entertaining power, reflective energy, cultural expressiveness and didactic essence, dance celebrates a people's way of life. This is why, in Africa at least, dance is seen as the live wire of the theatre, the undying art that constantly undergoes frequent transformation in tune with the mutation of culture and the society. Whether in dance drama or dance-in-drama, the director-choreographer needs rhythmic, energetic, esoteric or romantic dance movements, as appropriate, to bring out the power of his drama. Traditional African drama (from which modern African drama derives inspiration)

cannot be totally independent of dance, without negating the African total theatre aesthetics, and celebrating the dialogic theatre of the Western world. Our analysis of dance in the context of drama will be spiced with relevant illustrations from past performances, either seen or directed by the present writer.

The cosmogony of African Dance: An overview

African dance, like the dance of any other race, is pre-historic because dance is as old as the human race. As a symbol of culture, dance is mostly used for the expression of human feelings and emotions, of joy or sorrow, arising from success or failure. The study of dance thus has an anthropological dimension, involving the dialectics of cultural evolution, preservation, revival, transplantation, or even cultural flight.

Relative to music and drama, dance has not had its fair share of scholastic attention or critical evaluation, perhaps, arising from the various misconceptions about the art of dance and the dancers. An apt remark, quoted by Emoruwa (2005:347), says that 'no art suffers more misunderstanding, sentimental judgement, and mythical interpretation than the art of dancing.' Over the years, dancers have also been pejoratively described as *'alajota* (one that dances for economic reasons), *alagbe* (a beggar), *alarinjo* (strolling dancer), *alaini ise* (a jobless person) and other derogatory expressions (see Ojuade, 2005:367). Yet, dance remains central to their socio-cultural and socio-political affairs.

Arnold Udoka (2005), of the National Troupe of Nigeria, also bemoans the unfortunate attitude of the Nigerian public towards the dance art, especially in our present democratic experiment. He submits, as follows:

> It is common knowledge that dance in Nigeria is synonymous with airport receptions, gala nights and independence anniversary performances. The public sector, which, incidentally, supports the development of dance and theatre has misconstrued the purpose and function of the enterprise, especially in a democratic setting (339).

In the same vein, Ojo Rasaki Bakare (2002) metaphorically reflects the poor social image of the dancer with the popular Yoruba adage, which states as follows: *'Were dun wo, ko se bi l'omo'* [a mad

person is an entertaining spectacle whom nobody wants as a child]. He concludes that

> in traditional Nigerian societies, dance is held in high esteem. Ironically, the same society treats professional dancing scornfully, especially in contemporary times, and, as a result, dance has become one of the least developed professions in contemporary Nigeria (81).

This suggests the paradox in which the dance art is caught: between the contradictory feelings of love and hate, respect and disdain, acceptance and rejection, and a general dissatisfaction with its custodians and practitioners. This partly accounts for the poor scholarly attention that dance has received in the academic circle. Nevertheless, significant efforts at documentation have been made by well-known scholars such as J.A. Adedeji (1981), Joe Amankulor (1981), Meki Nzewi (1986), G. G, Darah (1986), Arnold Udoka (1987), Fidelma Okwesa (1988), R. O. Bakare (1994 & 2002), Chris Ugolo (1996 & 2002), S. E. Ododo & K. Igweonu (2001), and a host of others.

For the purpose of this paper, we adopt the definition of dance offered by Bakare (1994:2) as 'the rhythmic movement of the human body in space and time to make statements.' This is because, the notion of space, the harmony of rhythm, the use of the totality of the human body in a variety of movements, are the underlying factors in the practice of dance, be it traditional, modern or postmodern in form and context. Even in the avangardist context of the absurd theatre, the apparently meaningless uncoordinated rhythms and movements impose a meaning on the meaninglessness of life itself.

Furthermore, African dance is culture-bound and culture-oriented, aesthetically based on the language of movement, and reflective of the society at the different stages of development. This position contradicts the views of dance historiographers such as Lincoln Kirstein and Steven Lonsdale, cited by Iorapuu (1994:147) as claiming 'that dance was an activity of life force with primitive people.' Dance is, by no means, a primitive art or done mostly by primitive people in Africa; dance encapsulates the totality of the African way of life, cutting across time, space or social class.

In the scholarly realm, the study of dance manifests itself in different forms such as dance-in-drama, dance-drama, dance theatre,

dance arts, and other aesthetic canons. The distinctions between the various forms have been an unending source of academic controversy. Ododo and Igweonu (2001) attempt to distinguish between dance-drama and dance theatre in the following words:

> Dance-drama obviously arose due to the practices of early theatre practitioners, who used dance as embellishment in dramatic or musical performances...Dance drama could still pass for drama because of the heavy presence of oral resources, which are the chief communicative vehicles of drama (and) which are only transformed in performance with other theatrical elements of gestures, movement, dance, music, costume, lighting, make-up, etc.(53)

Dance theatre, on the other hand, is conceptualized as 'a deliberate attempt at distinguishing between dance as a traditional/cultural entertainment form and dance as a theatrical aesthetic form' (Ododo & Igweonu, 2001:54). This is in sharp disagreement with earlier views expressed by Ojo Bakare (1994) and Peggy Harper (1999), among others. The present writer is, however, strongly of the view that the distinction between the two concepts cannot be divorced from the seemingly unending controversy between drama and theatre. Although sometimes used interchangeably, theatre is usually considered more eclectic in nature, more all-encompassing and more engaging than drama. Dance theatre invariably shares these attributes with theatre, in relation to dance-drama. In other words, while dance-drama mostly becomes idiomatic within the context of narration or story-telling, and incorporating elements of dialogue, mime and pantomimic dramatization, dance theatre accommodates numerous theatrical abstractions as a result of cultural dynamics and shift in paradigms. Dance theatre also expands the performative canons of the story through various theatricalities, which end up as an extension of performance semiotics or semiology.

Dance-in-drama, the focus of this paper, is certainly different from both dance-drama and dance theatre. At the literal level, dance-in-drama means the role of dance in drama, which can be extended to mean the role that dance plays in a dramatic or theatrical presentation. Whatever the combination in nomenclature, the unifying factor is the essence of dance as an indispensable medium of communication in the configuration of the performing arts.

Dance is also a dynamic art, which responds to changes in cultures imposed by cultural transplantation and modernity, resulting in such concepts as traditional dance, cultural dance, contemporary dance, indigenous/ethnic dance, multicultural dance, modern dance and postmodern dance, to complete the picture. Jacqueline Smith (cited by Ojo Bakare, 1994:4-6) classifies dance into 'pure dance, study dance, abstract dance, dramatic dance, dance-drama and comic dance,' from the perspective of dance composition. And, for the 'principal overt functions' of dance in terms of its centrality and functionality to humanity, we accept Peggy Harper's (1999:44) identification of the multiplicity of dance functions, 'often reflected in the variety of occasions' for which dances are performed. The identified functions include the following:

1. Religious, ritual or ceremonial;
2. Expression of a pattern of social organisation;
3. Expression of political hierarchy or organisation;
4. Economic or occupational;
5. Expression of history or mythology;
6. Educational;
7. Recreational;
8. Entertainment.

In concluding this general overview of dance aesthetics, our point of view is that the theatre director is expected to explore each dramatic or theatrical performance for its potential for dance communication. As the one in the engine-room, the theatre director coordinates the performance with, in the words of Morrison (1984: 14), 'a finger in every pie.' This necessarily includes the art of dance, in which notable experiments have been recorded in the Nigerian theatre.

Directors' Experimentation with Dance-in-Drama

The directors of the numerous indigenous festival performances in Nigeria (usually identified as leaders, coordinators or managers) often provide close supervision to ensure that the dances are not corrupted, but enacted undiluted within the indigenous cultural rhythms, steps and styles. Every growing child in a typical traditional community knows the dance styles and patterns of his culture, which he or she comes in contact with through various festivals, and is able to perform. This is made easy for all initiates or

participants because emphasis is not placed on formalized choreography, although the dance steps differ from one culture to another. The energetic dance steps of the Ekpe Festival is different from the slow and graceful dance steps of the Osun Festival, reflecting the unique mood and atmosphere of each celebration. Directors are, therefore, expected to work within the physical and aesthetic contexts of the festivals they are directing for their total theatre scripts. It should also be noted that dance is additionally regarded and employed as ritualistic accompaniment in most Nigerian indigenous performances. Before the birth of professionalism in the Nigerian theatre, the director had little to do in terms of floor pattern and choreography, since the dances were used with minimum artistic modification. Today, most of the ritual-based dances have been incorporated into the Nigerian traditional and modern dances.

Socio-cultural festivals, mask and masquerading, traditional satires, puppetry, acrobatic displays, and so on, have various indigenous dance forms associated with them, each differing in context and motif. For example, 'the dances of the Ekong drama of the Ibibio are usually performed by a chorus of eighteen men through detailed preparation' (see Ogunbiyi, 1981:12-13), and can be likened to the rhythmically poetic and mathematically precise *bata* dances of the Yoruba people, which have been variously examined by Adedeji (1981), Bakare (2002) and Ojuade (2005), among others. African dance is also known to have a trance-inducing capacity. Many scholars, not least of which is Adelugba (1981), have written about trance and possession in African theatre. Adelugba (1981:216) goes on to conclude that 'there is element of "theatre" in trance, as manifested in traditional African ritual and festival practice.'

Hubert Ogunde started what is today known as the Nigerian professional theatre. As a choreographer, an actor, a musician, dancer and director himself, Ogunde made the opening glee or curtain-raiser of his plays, which he simply titled *ijuba*, a delightful and well-choreographed dance and movement spectacle. The *ijuba* also played the spiritual role of "pacifying the spirits" to ensure a successful performance, which often ended in a closing glee – a final dance sequence. Ebun Clark (1979), relying on J. A. Adedeji and G.

B. Kuyinu, recalls the forms, styles and power of dance as used in Ogunde's theatre in the following words:

> The opening glee in Hubert Ogunde's theatre has always been a song and dance unit in the programme... He maintains the traditional opening song and dance sequence of the Alarinjo Theatre, in form, if not in style. In the opera phase, the dance was slow and simple and was inspired by traditional dances. The dance in the Concert Party era was jazzed up, and in it "lightly dressed girls" went "wild on saxophones." By the early 1970s, the dance sequence was complex, highly sophisticated and polished, once more based on traditional dances (101).

Concluding, Clark says that 'Ogunde has drawn his inspiration, not only from the Yoruba dances, but from dances all over Nigeria.' He was said to have carried out 'intensive research into various national dance steps before forming his Dance Company in 1966,' and this 'imaginative choreography' of his helped him in the development of his theatre's excellent aesthetics.

Ogunde was reputed to have once used a set of masquerades to perform his opening glee (Adedeji, 1981:247) in the adaptation of the "Alarinjo" theatrical mode into his modern/popular theatre tradition. Dance, in Ogunde's theatre, transcends sheer entertainment, to include didactic and functional movements, as witnessed in numerous performances within the Concert Party family. It was Ogunde who 'liberated the Native Air Opera from the Church...with beautiful Yoruba music and dances' (Gbilekaa, 1997:16). This has positively influenced the development of the indigenous theatre tradition in Nigeria.

Other notable practitioners of the Yoruba popular travelling theatre such as Duro Ladipo, Eyiwunmi, Ayinla Olumegbon, Isola Ogunsola, Ade-Love, and so on, evolved similar but individualised dance patterns in their theatre repertory as graphically described by Biodun Jeyifo (1984) below:

> ...dance steps alternating between measured, stylized (and ritual) expression and fast, vigorous, mimetic jigs to the fulsome power of Bata music, a visual spectacle of swirling movement and extravagant colouration...there is also a considerable amount of choreographed, arranged movement and dances. It is well-known for some troupes to incorporate in their productions, the routines and dances executed by the members of other professional troupes of

> acrobats and dancers, who are specially hired for particular productions (16-17).

In these various ways, the leaders or directors of the Yoruba theatre tradition used dance movements to make clear statements within the context of their theatrical performances.

Similarly, in the Nigerian literary theatre tradition, directors, playwright-directors, and choreographer-directors, as the case may be, have made use of the dance medium in their drama. Playwright-directors, such as Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Zulu Sofola, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Harry Hagher Iyorwuese, Ahmed Yerima, Olu Obafemi, Tess Onwueme and Don Pedro Obaseki, have incorporated numerous dance forms into their scripts. Wole Soyinka, for instance, considers dance and music as inevitable ritual elements in the director's synchronization of all total theatre aesthetics in Yoruba (indeed, African) tragedy. This is further conceptualised in his seminal essay, "The Fourth Stage" in the following words:

> Tragedy in Yoruba traditional drama is the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self. Its music is the stricken cry of man's blind soul as he flounders in the void and crashes through a deep abyss of aspirituality and cosmic rejection. Tragic music is an echo from the void. the celebrant speaks, sings and dances in authentic archetypal images from within the abyss (Wole Soyinka, 1976:145).

Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* is one script that copiously celebrates the metaphor of dance in the Nigerian theatre tradition. The various dances enacted in the play include:

- the dance of exorcism
- the dance of welcome
- the dance of the Half-Child
- the dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice
- the dance around the totem

all of which Soyinka has used 'to give a local habitation and a name to his play, while, at the same time, using them as dramatic tools' (Maduakor, 1991:179). These dances are purposively used to advance Soyinka's ritual motif, which dominates his tragedies.

His comedies also have their own fair share of dance sequences. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, dance is used as a medium of

historical recollection and reflection, through flashback. One of such dances is "the Dance of the Lost Traveller", with dance steps that slowly build up in light-hearted mockery of Lakunle. Apart from communal/festive dances in the play, individuals such as Sidi, Sadiku, Baroka and Lakunle himself, are involved in solo dances at one time or the other. Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*, is equally soaked in dance sequences to highlight the satirical message of the play. Adapted from Bertolt Brecht's *Three Penny Opera* and John Gay's *The Beggars' Opera*, the play is Soyinka's satire of the left and their socialist ideology. In spite of the controversy which it generated when it was first produced at the then University of Ife Convocation, in 1977, the play remains an important contribution to African Theatre.

The various illustrations drawn from Soyinka's repertory clearly exemplify the trend in the use of dance in Nigerian literary drama. Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan are two other notable examples. In *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, Osofisan employs dance as a central metaphor for the political struggle for the soul of Nigeria by various ethnic groups. Muyiwa Awodiya (1995:212) observes that Osofisan uses the traditional African theatre forms to 'unmistakably convey an African atmosphere where skilful use is made of singing, dancing, drumming and miming, (which) help to reinforce the ritualistic and festival aura.' Of the younger generation of contemporary artists, Rasaki Ojo Bakare stands out as a skilful Nigerian choreographer-director, whose special training in the art of dance has enhanced his productions, notably, *Rogbodiyan*, *Drums of War*, and *Once Upon a Tower*.

The present writer has had his stint in the exploration of dance in dramatic performances, having so far directed many plays in different parts of Nigeria. These include the scripted plays of Sofola, Soyinka, Osofisan, Ngugi wa Thiong'o & Micere Mugo, among others. He has also served either as stage manager or assistant director to some other productions mostly in the total theatre performance idiom.

Directorial exploration of dance-in-drama

Like a mathematical equation asking to be solved, dance-in-drama has many layers, which the director must painstakingly hunt for and discover for use in his dramatic performances. In this process, the

director is advised to investigate the type of dance needed, and the specific role it is expected to play in the production. Ojo Bakare, in an interview granted the present writer on the 2nd of July 2004, at the University of Lagos, Akoka, Senior Staff Club, provided this sound advice to a would-be director-choreographer:

> There are principles that you follow if you are choreographing dance in dramatic productions. The first is to study the script and understand the role that the playwright wants dance to play in the script. You have dances in plays that are meant to add just spectacle. You have dances in plays that are part of the plot...

The artistic director must, therefore, decide from the onset, if dance, in his production, is meant to perform any of the following functions:

(a) To expand the plot structure of the play;
(b) To serve as spectacle for entertainment;
(c) To comment on the major and minor happenings in the play;
(d) To build on and sustain the cultural ethos of the play;
(e) To mock or ridicule the protagonist or antagonist of the action;
(f) To serve as a bridge for scene changing; and or
(g) To serve as flashback.

In the process of investigating the above, the director invariably becomes a researcher and hunter in the field of dance, whose findings will help to achieve good choreographic interpretations, concepts and images.

The director must also be a lover of dance movements, which he keenly observes as he encounters them on a daily basis. Thus, he finds it easy to recall relevant movements and incorporate them into his dramatic productions. He must seek to increase his dance and movement repertory through innovative techniques, but avoid the danger of tiresome and needless repetition of old dance steps and movements. He must allow the stage instructions or authorial comments to guide him in deciphering dance for directorial interpretation. The following two excerpts from Ola Rotimi's plays will suffice as illustrations:

> "Dundun" drumming hails Abogunrin's presence. He dances briefly, then raises a hand...A crowd of Ijaye townsfolk, lugging palmwine

> gourds and calabashes, bursts into view, dancing, singing to drumbeats (Rotimi, *Kurunmi*, 1971:12)
>
> War drums. War dances, as armed Benin warriors take position along the Gwatto Road...Drummers now storm the stage. Impelling rhythms, attaining frenetic heights. After a while, warriors re-appear, dancing wildly, but this time, the chiefs among them are carrying decapitated heads of white men...(Rotimi, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, 1974:36).

In the first excerpt, Ola Rotimi only makes a vague reference to dancing generally, without specifying the form of dance. The director is free to interpret the dances here as joyous and festive, in consonance with the dialogue before and after the stage instructions and the accompanying songs. However, the second excerpt is direct, clear and unambiguous: a war dance for victory against the white intruders. Stage directions should be cleverly interpreted by the director for maximum choreographic impact.

Similarly, there are some dialogue sequences in a play that have dance potentials, whether or not they are expressly stated by the playwright. This is common with comic plays, such as *The Engagement* and *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (by Femi Osofisan); *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (by Ola Rotimi); *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Beatification of an Area Boy* (by Wole Soyinka).

The director must be a keen observer of cultural festivals and traditional ceremonies, which will assist him in directing plays in the festival mode or total theatre tradition. He will learn more as a close observer or an active participant in these festivals, than relying on second-hand information. Where the opportunity to watch the festival live does not present itself, the filmed version of the same festival will often suffice in assisting him to come to the correct interpretation of the dance movements needed. Modern and post-modern dances, available in the cities and disco halls, should similarly not be ignored.

In so far as dance is concerned, the director of a play should see every member of his cast as a potential dancer, capable of contributing one dance step or the other. If he challenges his cast to produce dance steps, he is likely to be amazed at the discovery of several dance movements from which to choose. While recognising the indispensable role of the professional choreographer in effective dance communication, the present writer strongly recommends that

the director should have a working knowledge of the art to enable him interact meaningfully with the choreographer. The critical function of the director includes giving the choreographer an idea of the dance sequence that he wants, and inspiring him to create it. The ignorant director may find himself at the mercy of the choreographer, if he has no clear idea of the dance steps relevant to his production.

Scholarly efforts have been made at recording and transcribing dance through dance notations. Rudolf Laban's 'Labanotation' and the dance notation developed by Rudolf Benesh are two outstanding examples. Peggy Harper (1999), however, observes that

> these transcriptions are too reliant upon personal and cultural factors to be trusted as a recording technique in Africa where a vast material of great variety needs to be recorded in field conditions (52).

Harper thus goes ahead to design a more flexible notation, capable of solving some of the peculiar problems associated with recording African dance. More efforts are still needed to free the African dance from notations made in Europe and America, with all their inherent limitations. The play director should, as far as possible, be familiar with dance notations, to enable him keep proper record of the various dance movements for his production, and be able to decode recorded dance movements that come his way. This will expand the scope of his hunting grounds for dance steps needed for the production at hand.

Conclusion

In concluding, it should be emphasised that the director cannot afford to be complacent with regard to dance, the nature and vocabulary of which he is expected to understand, to enable him function effectively in the theatre. In spicing up his total theatre aesthetics through dance, the director should take full advantage of the various hunting fields, such as cultural festivals, the playwright's stage instructions and dialogues, the members of his cast, the professional choreographer, the dance notations, and so on, capable of yielding useful ideas for the interpretation of the dance idiom into his drama. In dance-in-drama, as well as in dance-drama, every movement counts, and must be interpreted with adequate precision.

In the African festival or total theatre context, no serious director can afford to ignore the primacy of dance, which goes beyond mere spectacle to celebrate the essence and totality of the African culture, and must be fully integrated into the authentic African theatre whether traditional or modern.

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