

CHAPTER THIRTY:

DANCE TRAINING AND PRACTICE IN THE PERFORMING ARTS THEATRE, UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN: AN INTERVIEW WITH FELIX A. AKINSIPE

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Introduction

Dance training and practice is gradually gaining ground in the academia and the entertainment industry at large. Though, it is yet to be thoroughly entrenched into the fabrics of education in all levels of learning, dance scholars and practitioners have continuously intensified these trainings and practices/performances in all parts of the country. In the western world, dance is regarded as a powerful tool of communication, expression, education and information; suffice to say then that the Nigerian notion that dance is a general phenomenon that needs no studying is wrong and shallow. Several scholars all over the world have produced theoretical, practical and culturally oriented evidences to justify the viability of the training and practice of dance. One of such is Hanna's opinion that "*dance is an important medium of education, one of the ways which culture is disseminated within a generation and transmitted from generation to generation*" (1973, p. 25). From the foregoing therefore, this interview with Felix Akinsipe's experience and perspective reflects on the dance training and performances in the Performing Arts from a purview of the blend of theory and practice, curriculum strength, uniqueness, possible parental involvement, etc., please read excerpts from the interview.

K.O- Good Afternoon sir

F.A- Good Afternoon, you are welcome

K.O- Sir, I would like to take you through some questions on dance training and performances in the University of Ilorin Theatre and some other questions.

F.A- Okay, good

K.O- Sir, you are a former student of the department, how did you develop the interest in dance?

F.A- Let me start by saying that by the time I was admitted into the Department, of the Performing Arts, I was not aware that dance is a course of study in the Performing Arts, but in introduction to Performing Arts, we were made to know that it is a tripartite course where we would take courses in drama, dance and music. For the first two years, we were all to take the three courses (aspects) and by the third year, we were expected to specialize in one area. By the end of my first two years, I had taken part so much in drama and to an extent in dance that I saw dance as a new and viable area. I developed interest in it because it was new and somehow strange. I was familiar with drama to a large extent, I was a playwright, a director and I was into technical theatre so it was dance that I knew nothing about and I felt if I go into dance, it would be an opportunity to learn new things. I also found out that there were no lecturers in dance. In our first year, a lecturer came from America to take us for two months what we are to do in a year, the following year, someone also came and left and so I felt that there is need for people to study it so that there could be lecturers and that was in my mind even then, that is why I opted for dance. Also, during the training, the experience I had in the first two years, I found it really interesting, many of my mates could not cope because of the body structure, but because of sport, I was able to bend and adjust and that made it interesting for me and made me further in it to develop myself.

K.O- You were the first fulltime dance lecturer in the Department how was it like when you joined?

F.A- Actually, I was not the first fulltime dance lecturer, Mr. Chris Ugolo then, now a Professor in the University of Benin was the first fulltime dance lecturer in the Department. He joined in 1989

and left in 1991. It was actually his leaving that I can say paved way for my coming in because by the time, he took up appointment with the University of Abuja, there were dance majors in 300level and 400level, so the department made an arrangement with him to come on part time so that those students could be taught and graduate. However, they needed someone else to be on ground who will take up from where he stopped and being one of the first dance graduates, I was employed. I worked with him for a year before I took over permanently. When I took over, it was not easy because I had to teach all dance courses from 100 level to 400 level and if we are three or four now and it is not easy, you can imagine how it would have been with just one person taking all levels. In fact, it became more difficult because during that time also, I had to go for my master's degree in the University of Ibadan, so I was shuttling between Unilorin and UI. I was teaching from 7am to 7pm on Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays and I had to be in Ibadan on Tuesday morning for 9am lectures, my lectures in Ibadan ends by 6pm on Thursday and I will ensure I return to Ilorin that day so as to take up my 7am lectures on Friday. That was how I ran the year 1995-1997.

K.O- Thank you sir. How will you access the concept of training and performance in the Performing Arts theatre?

F.A- Training and practice of dance is actually the fundamentals of the Performing Arts Department. The Performing Arts department is different from Theatre Arts, Dramatic Arts or Creative Arts Department because training and performance are compulsory, you cannot be in the performing Arts without performing. The idea is that what you are doing here you must be able to put into practice. The concept is therefore entrenched in the curriculum and programme and that is why at each level there are practical courses to be taken and at the final year, we have the final year project, PFA 499 where it is compulsory that you produce and present something in your area of specialization. The concept is a two in one and it is not separable in the performing Arts programme.

K.O- Do you think dance is relevant to the development of a nation?

F.A- Very much, from its inception in the traditional society, dance had been very useful in the running of affairs of a society. In the Yoruba land for example, and in many other communities we have the age grade dances that gives an opportunity to have control over the people in that age grade, to pass instructions to them, to oversee them and to ensure that they work together to form a united front. There is also the maiden dance, elders dance etc and people look forward to joining them, particularly the elder's dance. When you want to see the elders, you can just call for the elders dance which will enable all of them gather, then it is easy to talk to them, ask questions or confront them. The African society has different methods of controlling and governing their society through the dance culture.

K.O- Why is it that many people have erroneous beliefs about dance? Beliefs that make them refer to dance practitioners as alajota's.

F.A- There are many factors responsible for that:

1. The typical African and Nigerian believe that everybody can dance, it is believed that dance is not something to be studied i.e. it is a natural activity so when someone says what he wants to study is dance, they count him to be lazy, they feel instead of going for medicine, he is going for the easy way out.
2. The attitude of some professional dancers also is culpable. The way they dress, do their hair style, the men plaiting and using earrings is not acceptable to a typical Nigerian and so once you say you want to go into dance, they assume that you are going to become a tout.
3. When the Yoruba travelling theatre began, there is usually the opening glee and closing glee where dancers would feature so when they move from place to place, they sell their dances and that's what brought about Alajota (the one that dances about and collects money for it). However, it is not a term meant for only

dancers, it is used for travelling theatre generally, the dramatists, musicians, and dancers at that time who were all called Alajota. At that point, they use the dance to attract people so that there would be crowd and an audience.

K.O- Sir, I think that erroneous belief is why parents try to dissuade their children from studying the course, were your parents in support of you being a performing artist/dance practitioner?

F.A- Well, my father was a civil servant with the judiciary, he was a registrar in the high court and naturally, he wanted me to be a lawyer but right from secondary school, I had been involved in the dramatic society and he was aware of my involvement in many plays through photographs, but he would have loved me to be a lawyer because he was a court clerk, a registrar and a senior registrar and he would have loved his son to be a lawyer like those he had worked with. When I took my decision to go into theatre, he could not object because he knew all along that I have been a theatre person and so I didn't have much opposition in studying theatre. By the time I took the decision to go into dance, I didn't discuss that with him, he just knew I was studying performing arts, he didn't know where I was specializing and fortunately, my certificate didn't reflect dance.

K.O- Okay sir, what about your mum, you know mothers are sometimes passionate about what their children study.

F.A- I want to say that my mum is also in the same category. That awareness that I was into drama was there. For example, I went for HSC before coming to the University. There I would come and take permission that we are going to perform somewhere, sometimes my fellow dramatists would follow me home, we would pack costumes, drums and go together. In fact, before I got to the University, I joined Olu. Erinola's Performing Troupe in Akure. He was just starting and I was with them for three months before I got admission, we used to meet at Ideal Guest House so my parents

were both aware that I was going for rehearsals in the evening and they had no choice than to accept that reality.

K.O- I understand that two of your children are Theatre Arts graduates. What role did you play in this?

F.A- Erm, let me say I didn't play any role. I am not the type that would say this is what you should study however; I have to agree that I being a performing artist also had influence on them. For example, when they were young, they used to follow me to the theatre to see performances and naturally, they could have developed interest in that, they are aware I am a playwright and some nuances that I display at home, the way I play with them, the way I create things out of what they do, the way I task them on creative things could have influenced them also, but I didn't have any direct influence.

K.O- Okay sir, Lets come back to the Performing Arts. You teach a course on the synergy between the town and gown?

F.A- The town and gown course in the performing arts is a good one because when our students graduate, they are going to the town and the focus at this point in time is to give them a foresight into what awaits them in the town, how the town is organized and so forth. For the past four or five years, we have been bringing different groups from the town. The first year we brought the Asa Dam Local Government dancers here in Ilorin. The following year, we brought Okoto Olayiotan Dance Troupe. Last year, we brought Alabi Ogundepo and his cultural organization and this year we worked with two groups; the Amazing Crew (hip-hop) and the Edo Women group to interact with the students and the experience has been wonderful. Students have learnt from them and they have also learnt from the students. You will discover that during the PFA 499 some of the Amazing Crew were part of a dance, it may not have been so without the previous interaction.

K.O- The Nigerian entertainment industry is replete with lots of dancers and various dance competitions that promote raw talent. From this point of view, shed more light on the dichotomy between talent and training of dance

F.A- well, there is a popular saying that actors are born and not made, from our own experience it is better to say that actors are born and can be made. However, in any artistic work, talent has a role to play, there are painters that are three years old, there are flutists, drummers, singers, dancers that are under three years, they have not been trained, but if they are all harvested and trained, they would obviously do better than when you live them at the raw stage. I want to believe also, especially with our interactions with the town that they also have their form of informal training, our interactions with the Alabi Ogundepo cultural organization shows that they train and even graduate students through the apprenticeship model of training. In fact, some of them told us that before you graduate you have to spend four years like in the Universities. Those talents you see on display, some of them are trained informally, only that it is not in the University, when we talk about Hubert Ogunde, he was trained in the church by the choir masters who are foreign Theatre Artists or who have had link with the theatre world so he was not a novice, they have one form of training or the other.

K.O- You have taught in another University apart from University of Ilorin, can you do a comparison in terms of curriculum and dance practice?

F.A- It is only University of Ilorin that has this idea of having a balance between music, dance and drama, other Departments are Theatre Arts, Creative Arts, Dramatic Arts or Music Departments, and I have written so much on this. These departments derive their focus from their names, it is only by the African nature that once you have music, there is dance so where there are 20 music courses, you have one or two dance courses and it is the same with the dramatic arts departments too. When you add the number of

courses they have from 100 levels to 400 levels and it is up to 25, you may find out that there are only three that are dance courses. This is because the focus is not dance and it is only because even in drama there are some dances needed that these dance courses are infused. Therefore, in other departments, because their focus is not dance, you cannot find the kind of practice we do in the Performing Arts. Here, from the 300 levels, students would specialize in drama, dance or music and each section takes more courses from within till 400 levels where they produce a project play and theoretically defend it on their specialization. This is unlike some departments where most of their courses are drama and theatre related with just one or two courses in dance and because you wrote your project in dance, you are a dance major.

K.O- So in essence, is it comfortable to say that a dance major in the University of Ilorin can do better than that of another university by virtue of the combination of training and practice?

F.A- Obviously, you discover that there are dance graduates from other universities that would not be able to teach at the University of Ilorin, for instance, that person has not done dance kinesiology, dance analysis and criticism, dance and the society, trends in African dance, 20 century dance, professional dance practice etc, in most cases what they do is Introduction to Choreography and Advanced Choreography and that is not just enough. There is Intermediate Modern Dance, there is Modern Dance, Dance History and so on, so if a graduate in another university that has taken two or three courses comes to University of Ilorin, he will not be able to teach because there are so many dance courses here that he would probably not have heard of and he has not done.

K.O- Thank you sir. There is a burning question I have here and I think some dance scholars have raised same. Till today, there is no degree awarding institution that has dance as a department, what do you think about this and what is the way forward?

F.A- The Theatre Department itself, before it was accepted as an academic programme took time and it has come to stay, I think dance is still in that era of acceptability. People still ask can you examine people in dance? Can you grade in dance? What are the parameters? I remember when I presented a paper at Ahmadu Bello University precisely in 2008, one of the questions that came to me from a fellow Theatre Arts lecturer is that if I am advocating for a dance department, then there should be a department of directing, of playwriting, so they see dance as playwriting, as directing and I was so happy that I had the opportunity to respond so I had to tell them that there is directing in dance which is choreography, there is playwriting in dance which is the libretto and that dance has its equivalent of what we have in drama so dance is not like directing, it is like drama which has criticism, history, culture and so on.

K.O- Wonderful, erm it is often said that there are no books on dance, how true is this and what have you been doing personally to ensure that books are published in dance?

F.A- Well, when we say that there are no books on dance, we are talking about Africa and Nigeria, overseas, there are numerous books and I want to add that some of them are not relevant to us. In teaching dance, even though it is right to know what is happening in other areas, there are no indigenous books on our own dances and on the training we have had or done so far, I think we should begin to write and that is why I want to express my gratitude to the establishment of the Association of Dance Scholars and Practitioners of Nigeria (ADSPON), which came into existence about three years ago. Knowing well that it is one of the major problems of dance, we started a publication of Dance Journal and under two years we had a Journal with over 20 articles- The Dance Journal of Nigeria. Some individuals like Ojo Bakare and Chris Ugolo have published some books on dance. Personally, being a Performing Arts graduate where we emphasize performance, I have decided to look into the area of performance and what I have

decided is to ensure that there is a book to talk about performance and make available scripts for performances. You would discover that a play by Ola Rotimi can be produced in London because it is published and it is available everywhere, but until recently there are no published dance scripts that we popularly refer to as librettos and the demand has been on our students year after year to do a performance and they look for scripts here and there. Sometimes they travel to Lagos and other parts of the country and when they return, we find out that some of these scripts are not suitable because it might be a script that has just been used for a festival/competition somewhere and not academic in nature and does not need to have conflicts, climax and resolution. This has been a burning issue that I aim to resolve and so in 2003, I published four of my librettos which I titled Talking bodies: A collection of dance librettos and in 2014, I encouraged choreographers, dancers to send in their scripts so that it can be published in a volume and we can begin to have dance scripts, this gave birth to the publication of another book Dance scripts for the stage. Vol. I, volume II is almost in press now. I want to say that since the publication of the volume one, some scripts from it have been done in Unilag, Lasu and two were done recently here in Ilorin and so the aim for making the book available is already being achieved.

K.O- I want you to talk about the performativity of our dances in Nigeria, I am so happy that even the Westerners from London, America would come over to Nigeria to conduct researches, I want you to respond to that and comment on how we can properly document the dances for posterity.

F.A- The dance on stage or in the society?

K.O- The dance in the society

F.A- Well, efforts are ongoing, the problem of documentation of dance in Africa or Nigeria are numerous. First, the number of the dances themselves, in Nigeria we have many tribes who have

many dances, a tribe may have 2-10 dances and we have over 400 tribes. The second problem of documentation of these dances is that people almost do not practice this dances again. People are moving to urban areas, going to school, the religious aspects that this dances are for the pagans and illiterates is also a factor, so many of the dances too are going into extinction. The encouragement and the need to do this dances is also winning down. Again, availability of funds is a problem, for you to travel down, to record them, document them is a problem except you have sponsors, most researchers in Nigeria use their own money, there are no sponsors from the government and even many universities, the attention is on technology rather than Arts, if they are to give grants now they may rate the sciences 80% and even among the arts, if your own research is on dance, it is not likely to be approved except in a university like ours where we have entrenched dance into the curriculum.

K.O- Lastly, having trained and practiced in dance for at least two decades, can you say that a dance graduate can survive on dance in Nigeria today?

F.A- Presently, even some bankers don't survive on banking alone because of the economic situation of the country and that is why we see teachers also doing something else, lawyers attempting to do something else, almost nobody in our country today survive solely, even those in the medical practice would work for the government and have their private clinics to make ends means. This is the same with dance, for now it is difficult to survive and maintain a family with dance alone because the patronage may not be able to provide the funds you need. However, you can be a professional if you have something else to do like the bankers and teachers do and you have something that can help cushion the effect, I want to believe that if you are persistent and eventually known you can survive. However as lecturers, we have been surviving, I am teaching only dance and I have been surviving, but as a professional and practitioner, it may be difficult except in Lagos and even there, you must have something else you do, even

if you enter for a competition and you win a lot of money, you may not win another in two years so you still need something else to support.

K.O- Thank you so much sir

F.A- You are welcome.

Reference

Hanna, L. (1973) African dance: the continuity of change in:
Journal of international folk music council, Vol. 5.