

AFRICAN THEATRE:

STUDIES IN THEORY AND CRITICISM



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ISBN: 978-978-54690-2-8

Published by
The Department of Theatre Studies,
Methodist University College, Ghana
&
The Department of Performing Arts,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Kehinde Olalusi's "Counter Mission" And The Controversy Between *Dance Drama And Dance Theatre*

Felix A. Akinsipe

Introduction

Dance drama and dance theatre are two distinct terminologies in the Nigerian dance vocabulary. These terminologies have however generated much controversies and confusion in the understanding, practice and studying of dance in Nigeria. Edwards, (1984, p. 10) posits that "while dance and drama each have their own identity, they have a very closely related history and at times they overlap inextricably". He concludes that "sometimes the borderline between dancing and acting is almost nonexistent". This is probably why the two are often seen as the same and interchanged or placed side by side with each other.

The misconception is even noticeable among dance practitioners and scholars. While some agree with the dance drama nomenclature others disagree that there is nothing like that and advocate dance theatre in its place. And so the controversy rages on. Emoruwa's experience at the NAFEST 2013 held at Ilorin, Kwara State is apposite here. According to him "the competition called for a dance drama package from the participating State Arts Councils". At the competition, participants came up with varieties of dances ranging from dance drama to dance theatre and/or total theatre experiences (Emoruwa, 2014, p. 56). Obviously, what constitute dance drama and dance theatre is not decisively determined. That is precisely what this paper is set to do. The performance of Kehinde Olalusi's "Counter Mission" by the students of the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, PFA 499: Special Project group 7 for their final year examination at the University of Ilorin, Performing Arts' Theatre on the 14th of June, 2016, at 5.00pm is used as a paradigm of a typical dance theatre as distinct from a dance drama.

The Concept of Dance

Dance apart from being a natural activity is also an art of the theatre capable of enacting lives experiences like music and drama. This implies that when dance is not being used as a means of personal enjoyment it is performing a duty on stage. Edwards' definition of dance as "the art of moving the body in a rhythmical way, to express an emotion or idea, to narrate a story, or simply to take delight in the movement itself" (1984, p. 6) captures the artistic nature of dance that is intended in this paper. Like other art forms, dance has distinguished itself as a form of artistic idiom that is explore for the purposes of education, entertainment and information in the theatre. Dance is non verbal communication that is employed to

make clear statements in the theatre. A story can be told through dance and an idea can be well expressed through it.

Though an art on its own, dance has at the same time, enjoyed a good relationship with all the other arts of the theatre. It blends smoothly and inseparably with any of it that it is involved in. Thus we find dance in musical performances like operas, as well as, in dramatic performances like plays and the total theatre performances.

The Concept of Dance drama

The practice of drama took the fore front very early and gained ground on the stage, especially in Nigeria, than dance. Therefore, when dance came on stage it was seen as "dance behaving/acting as drama" hence it was termed dance-drama. Not only this, the foremost practitioners of this new form, were drama experts and those who actually had their training in core drama. So, they invariably could not do a pure dance performance without adding dramatic scenes to earn the term dance-drama. Those who moved closer to dance engaged the use of mime to enact actions to musical stimulations. That is why Akinsipe, (1999, p. 90) described dance drama as "the term generally accorded the earliest attempt to create a dance theatre because of its heavy dependence on mime and drama... However, what is done is pure miming to music". Ohwofasa, (2007, pp. 151-152) captures this point thus:

The dramatic use of music and dance finds its highest expression in the dance-drama, that is, mimed actions incorporated into the dance or used as the extensions of the dance proper. A dance drama may be based on one or many themes without necessarily having a single coherent story line.

Ododo and Igweonu, (2001 p. 53) also concur with the assertion that "At the earliest stage of modern Nigerian theatre, a storyline realised in movements, mime, chants, songs, music and a *little dialogue* came to be regarded as dance-drama" (emphasis mine). Many are with elaborate dialogue or had their story connected by a narrator at quick intervals. So much that "what is referred to as dance-drama could still pass for drama because of the heavy presence of oral resources which are the chief communicative vehicles of drama which are only transformed in performance with other theatrical elements of gestures, movement, dance, music, costume, lighting, make-up, etc." Ugolo, (2007, p. 40) contends that the use of the term dance-drama is contradictory and posits that the term dance theatre is better. He asks how can dance be dance and drama at the same time?

Conversely, this trend that had been established over the years where dance and drama have been forcefully performed together is recognized on the Nigerian stage as dance-drama. Therefore, simply put dance drama is the presentation of dance with drama. It is the dance performance that includes dramatic actions like dialogue and narrations by the dancers or other actors and actresses during the performance. Dialogue

is the main distinction between a drama and dance performance. As soon as dialogue is introduced into a dance performance, no matter the percentage, it becomes a dance drama.

The Concept of Theatre

Apart from a building for live dramatic performances, Etherton, (1982, p. 19) describes the theatre as “the circumstances of a live dramatic performance”. That is a live performance taking place in the present of an audience. Wilson and Goldfarb, (2000, p. 26) posit that:

Theatre is a complex art which requires the coming together of many elements: a story to be told, a dramatisation of the story (the script by the playwright), a meeting place for performances, performers to enact the drama, costumes for the performers, some form of stage, perhaps scenery, and an audience for the performance.

This implies also that any art of the theatre like dance and music that undergo all the above qualities is theatre. Crow cited in Lawal, (2015, p. 3) also defines theatre as:

A type of theatrical performance in which the active participants impersonate, that is, pretend to be people, beings or things other than they really are, and through a usually predetermined sequence of physical actions enact a story for the entertainment of an audience.

This implies that when drama/dialogue is the medium of enacting a story it is a theatre. In the same vein, when dance is employed mainly as the means of enacting a story a theatre is taking place. This is the same idea about Musical Theatre.

The Concept of Dance theatre

The idea of dance theatre is a modern one. All along dance has enjoyed its symbiotic relationship with the other arts almost to its own detriment. The rebellion and activities of the *modern dance* exponents in the late 19th century and early 20th century actually brought dance to the fore as a vibrant art of the theatre that it is and it was globally accepted so. Having been established as an art that can stand on its own to enact a story, idea or any issue, it becomes a theatre on its own.

Dance theatre is therefore a dance performance that depends *mainly* on the use of dance movements as a medium to pass across its message. A dance performance that uses pure movements to enact its story and communicates its messages with the audience is a dance theatre. Molokwu, (2007, p. 242) asserts that:

In a dramatized story making use of the dance, the dancers under the direction of the choreographer tell a story using body movements. The story must be clarified by the dancers' mime, movement and body rhythm to create an atmosphere to communicate with the audience.

This is the same stand as Ugolo, (2007, p.40) who sees the concept of dance theatre as a dance production in which a number of theatrical elements such as costume, props, lighting, make-up, sound effect and music are employed in its realization.

The Performance of "Counter Mission" as a Dance Theatre

The course PFA 499: Special Project in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria, is a project carried out by the final year students under the supervision of a lecturer in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Bachelor of Arts, B. A. (Hons.) degree in Performing Arts. The students are placed in groups containing between five and seven members each who will take up different artistic portfolios are expected to select a work lasting at least one hour at performance in their area of specialization in Music, Dance or Drama. They will raise a cast and produce a stage performance of the chosen work (play/libretto) with full theatre accomplishments before an audience. The students are expected to first theorize about their chosen work before their practical realization. They are therefore examined on the basis of attainment of their set goals and the overall success of a performance.

Group 7 for the 2015/2016 academic session took up the script "Counter Mission" written by Kehinde Adedamola Olalusi, to realize as a dance theatre. It was choreographed by Adeleke Blessing and stage managed by Buko-Ildris Zinat. Other members of the production crew are; Akin-Williams Olamilekan as Costumier, Timi'Odeyemi David as Technical Director, Fasanya Opeyemi S. as Business Manager, Adedoja Jubril as Props Manager, Salami Mubarak as Make-up Artist, Alabi Victor as Drama Coordinator, Olorundami Seun as Publicity Manager and Olalekan Modupe as Music coordinator.

With this composition, all requirements for a viable theatre is set in motion. The theatre that is to be enacted here is through the medium of dance. So, in the welcome note to the audience the Business Manager unequivocally wrote "Tonight, we present to you this Dance theatre..." (Programme Note for "Counter Mission production).

Synopsis of "Counter Mission"

The dance is about two apparent heirs to the throne of their father, Adigun and Akinoye, who are approached in the dead of the night by witches of the land with a demand to enter into the covenant of sacrificing all new born twins to them if they

become king. One accepts while the other rejects. So with the backing of the witches, Adigun, emerges the king. During his reign he fulfils his covenant with the witches and there is trouble, fear and commotion in the land. At the climax of it his own pregnant wife delivered a set of twins which he does not want to offer to the witches but the witches claim them by force. He then engages the services of an herbalist who offered a sacrifice on his behalf that runs the witches mad. The head witch then engages him in a fight where he becomes paralyzed. The people reject a paralyzed king and installs Akinoye in his place. The town becomes peaceful and calamity free again as the witches could not have their ways with him.

“Counter Mission” in Performance

The dance theatre opens at dead of night with a heavily built crown willed to the centre stage as Adigun and Akinoye, the heir apparent to the throne dance in from the different sides of the stage. They are followed with a different dance by a group of scary witches who are carrying a set of twins with them. The witches do a cult dance round the crown and carry it towards Akinoye making a dance to entice him to it. He falls for it but before he grabs it they withdraw the crown from him and instead present him the set of twins. He pauses and rejects the twins. This he does two times the witches leave him and approach Adigun on the other side of the stage in the same manner. Adigun accepts the twins and does a ritual dance of agreement with the witches. They crown him and dance out with him after collecting back the twins to end the first scene.

Comments: This scene, typical of a dance theatre, may not fully be understood at this point because unlike dance drama, it does not attempt to communicate line by line like in a dialogue but in whole. Where the next scene or even a later one combined will be needed to bring the meaning of the previous out clearly.

The second scene is the coronation. Adigun's physical coronation takes place elaborately. The whole town, chiefs, priests, dancers and all participate appropriately. The witches too are present but unseen by everybody except Adigun who they interact with at interval. Akinoye dances in with some supporters to contend and interrupt the ceremony but the witches rise to the occasion still without the entire community's awareness. Akinoye and group depart and the ceremony concludes.

Comments: The altercations in this scene flow with the same rhythm of the dance as one piece. If it were to be a dance drama, there will be need for several breaks to give room for each of those actions to be explained. But because the audience in a dance theatre is advanced, they are not to be spoon fed. They are expected to visualize, interpret and decode the dances.

The third scene takes place in a farmer's house. The farmer does a little dance with his pregnant wife. Before he leaves for the farm, the wife falls into labour and is delivered of a set of twins. He calls his friends and they dance with him while the dance is going on, the king's messengers arrive and forcefully take away the babies. The scene ends in confusion.

Comment: At this point some members of the audience will be sensing the connection between these actions with the first scene. In a dance drama, this scene will involve a lot more to explain that the king has sent the messengers. A dance theatre does not struggle with such explanations. As the theatre unfolds the understanding is attained.

The fourth scene happens in the palace where the king and the chiefs are merrying. The guards arrive with the babies to the shock of the chiefs. Before anyone could raise a question the witches arrive and the king orders the guards to hand over the babies to them. Meanwhile, the farmer and his wife turn up with some friends at this point. All attempts to protest fall as the witches depart with the babies. The mother of the twins runs mad and everybody scamper out of the palace.

Comment: This scene encapsulates the whole dance from the beginning. The audience now understands that the acceptance of the twins in the first scene signifies a covenant to give to the witches the newly born twins during his regime.

In the fifth scene we see a protest by aggrieved people whose twins have been taken match to the palace. The witches appear in support of the king and hypnotize the people until they disperse.

By the sixth scene we see the townspeople gather in the palace for the annual orisha ibeji (twins idol) festival. At the peak of dancing the witches dance in and pick a set of twins for themselves in full glare of the people and depart with them. The ceremony ends in chaos. The king is embarrassed and very angry.

Comment: It is so clear that the gathering in this last scene was made possible by the hypnotic power of the witches on the people in the previous scene. This is a usual occurrence in a dance theatre. One or more scenes may happen to make a whole sense but a dance drama makes attempts to explain its actions on the spot hence the use of mime, dialogue and elaborate gestures.

The seventh scene takes place at the queen's chamber of the palace where the king's pregnant wife is being attended to by her maids. She eventually falls into labour and delivers a set of twins. The king arranges for the babies to be taken for safe-keep but the witches intercepts and take them away with the king protesting.

The king arranges for his herbalist to fight for him and a sacrifice is made. The farmer's mad wife passes by the sacrifice and she's attracted by it in her state of insanity begins to feed on it. As fate will have it, she becomes healed by it. The witches too come for the sacrifice and confront the farmer's wife who pours the content on them and they all become mad. She runs away leaving the witches in their state of madness.

The eighth scene takes place in the king's palace where the mother-witch comes to avenge the turning of her witches into madness. She paralyzes the king and leaves him glued to a spot. Some chiefs arrive to meet the king in that state. They quickly gather the town people and reject a paralyzed king. They send messengers to bring Akinoye who is then crowned as the new king. A celebration rounds off the entire dance theatre.

Comment: the two scenes above were realized in a series of dance that were not mimetic but communicative. The dances flow as pure movements enacting the above stories without words. All through the dance, there was neither speech nor dialogue. The story unfolded through the use expressive dance movements. Appropriate costumes, props, make-ups, stage décor, songs, drumming and lighting all well blended enhanced the understanding of the dance. This is what marked the performance of Counter Mission as a dance theatre and not a dance drama.

Conclusion

This paper, we believe, has contributed its quota to the arguments about the nomenclature, existence or non existence of dance-drama and dance theatre. It is argued that the terms represent two distinctive performances. What constitute the difference between them have been clarified. The term dance drama can be accommodated as a form on its own. It will be accepted as amateurish approach to creating a dance theatre or the blending of dance with drama that it is. However, dance theatre is the more appropriate term that demonstrates the full function of dance as a full fledged arts of the theatre. It gives dance the much awaited and acclaimed autonomy that it deserves and must be maintained.

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