

Playing the Medley Game: Training and Practice of Dance in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Dance training and practice constitute a significant part of Arts and Education in Nigeria. Consequently, this study, through Jacqueline Smith-Artaud's midway theory, examines dance training and practice in Nigeria, with focus on the Performing Arts Department, University of Ilorin and Ijodee Dance Company, Lagos. It was observed that in the dance art, those who yearn for professionalism preferred the town to gown, owing to its practicability and experience in terms of performances. It was also noted that fewer universities lay much emphasis on the dance aspect like University of Ilorin does. This is because of the multiple sections that other universities have other than the three represented in University of Ilorin. Consequently, students studying dance in these universities, particularly University of Ilorin find time to go to private owned dance companies for practices even with the consent of their lecturers. Similarly, while theory is a basis for practical in the University, derivation of styles and re-arrangements of existing cultural movements and steps have been the basis of practical forms in the private dance companies. It is, therefore, recommended that stern combination of extensive training and practice be designed in the University, while also implementing a strong collaboration of both town and gown in the training and practicing of dance among students and enthusiasts.

Keywords: Dance Training, Dance Practice, Town, Gown.

Introduction

It is sad to note that parent's unacceptability of their wards to study dance is prime in the challenges of dance training and practice in Nigeria. It is heartwarming to know that few parents are always glad to

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watch their children on the television dancing, and even together with other family members who willingly join such children when the requirements of their dance task demands such. While the former holds more percentage than the latter, both when substituted, could be used as an instrument to wedge the interest and qualities of dance training and practice into the hearts of adamant and underestimating parents. From the educational point of view, Kolawole (2009, p. 10) laments that:

It is disheartening to observe that dance has not been given the opportunity in the schools to contribute its own quota to the development of the Nigerian child. The expressive arts of dance, drama and music have been relegated to the play group level and termed recreation by most people because they are used to reduce the rigors of cognitive learning.

In most of these schools, they have limited time for dance rehearsals, instead of an ample, recognised and scheduled time for dance classes. Such rehearsals however, occur only when competitions are drawing nearer or when the schools end of the year party is close by. It is particularly bothering that dance is not given the required attention even in primary school education, given the impact of dance in the transformational growth of a child from his birth to maturity. From the foregoing, the crux of this paper lies in elucidating on the qualities and equally the shortcomings of dance training and practice in Nigeria from the perspectives of the town and gown.

Theoretical Framework

Over the years, several theories have emerged on dance training, practice and dance studies generally. However, the discourse on dance training and practice from the perspective of harnessing the various qualities of the town and gown has not received proper attention in Nigeria. Interestingly, Jacqueline Smith-Artaud's midway theory is an important Scholarly work that addresses this merger.

In 2008, Ashley explored Smith-Artaud's midway model and discovered that the model is situated within a "piagetian developmental framework. Primary school creative dance progressed to more skill based learning of composition and technical skills into secondary and tertiary education". By piagetian developmental framework, Ashley believes Smith-Artaud infuses Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental Stages into her mid-way model. It is therefore necessary to understand how the

Piagetian cognitive developmental stages fit into Smith- Artaud's midway theory.

The piagetian Cognitive developmental stages is a four dimensional theory about the nature and development of human intelligence, it deals with the nature of knowledge and how humans come gradually to acquire, construct and use it. Jean Piaget's four aspects of these stages are: the sensor motor stage, the pre-operational stage, the concrete operational stage and the formal operational stage. Each stage according to piaget, is a fundamental aspect of man from birth to old age. The correlation of Jean Piaget's stages of development and Smith- Artaud's midway theory lies in its blending of ideas relating to childhood to adulthood.

Smith-Artaud (2002, p. 23) emphasised dance as process and product suggesting a range of learning experiences. They are

- The Importance of Physically acquiring skills in genres from a variety of other cultures.
- The rich diverse dance cultures brought into schools by students themselves.
- The study of socio-historical context and with it the issue of adequate provision of a range of relevant resources.

From the foregoing, it is evident that Smith-Artaud's range of learning experiences could navigate the town and gown. With adequate consideration of the three points, a well patterned transition of the theory and practice of dance from the nursery, primary, secondary and through university is realisable.

Performing Arts Department, Unilorin (Gown)

The Performing Arts Department is one of the many departments in different universities across the country where theatre is studied and practiced. The study in the Department is a holistic approach to the theatre, and this meant there is a division into parts of the three major aspects of the theatre i.e. music, drama and dance. Students are therefore, given a background in the various areas of the performing arts, before focusing on a desired or preferred section of the performing arts, and with an acceptable understanding of others. Ugolo (2007, p. 211) attests to this when he asserts that; "only the university of Ilorin has a fairly comprehensive study of dance because of the nature of its programme which segments performing arts into drama, music and dance". It is a course studied in a unique way. Students in the first and second year take courses in all aspects of the theatre which serves as a background

knowledge and then in the third year, students who want to study dance specialize in dance. Even with this in place, there is an attempt at producing an all round graduate in performing arts because dance students still take courses ranging from music and drama directing, criticism, contemporary African theatre, technical theatre, aesthetics and philosophy of the performing arts etc. Although there is a clamour for more dance courses, this notwithstanding has not reduced their productivity after graduation.

In the four years programme of the Department, the highlights of dance courses are as follow:

100 Level

PFA 101	Introduction to Performing Arts (Dance, drama & music)
PFA 103	History of Performing Arts (Greek, Medieval etc) (Dance, Drama & Music)
PFA 104	Traditional African Festival Theatre
PFA 125	Rudiments of Dance
PFA 126	Dance Studies I

200 Level

PFA 205	History of the Performing Arts I (African) (Dance, Drama, & Music)
PFA 206	History of the Performing Arts II (Western) (Dance, Drama & Music)
PFA 208	Performing Arts workshop II (Drama, Dance & Music)
PFA 209	Departmental Production WorkshopII (Dance, Music Drama)
PFA 225	Basic choreography
PFA 234	Dance Studies II

300 Level (General)

PFA 323	Dance Workshop
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Dance Majors

PFA 321	Dance & The Society: Town- Gown Confluence I
PFA 322	Dance & The Society: Town- Gown Confluence II
PFA 324	Intermediate Modern Dance Techniques
PFA 325	Advanced Choreography I
PFA 326	Dance Analysis and Criticism I
PFA 327	Dance Kinesiology

PFA 328	Trends in African Contemporary Dance Practices
PFA 329	Dance Studies III

400 Level

PFA 421	Dance Analysis and Criticism II
PFA 422	Advanced Choreography II
PFA 423	Advanced Dance Workshop
PFA 424	Twentieth Century Dance
PFA 425	Dance and the Media
PFA 426	Professional Dance Practices
PFA 427	Dance Studies IV
PFA 499	Special Project (in Dance, Music and Drama)

With these courses, and courses in other areas of the performing arts, certificates are given as B.A Performing Arts (without indicating student's specialisation) after the four years of study in the university. However, postgraduate study in dance is also available in the department for students who want to further their studies in dance.

Ijodee Dance Company (Town)

Ijodee Dance Company is an international organisation that is involved in dance in its entirety. It is a contemporary and African dance centre located at an accessible site in Lagos. According to Liadi (2010), "it is a centre that focuses on training, research, talent discovery and promotion of African dance, producing/managing contemporary dance companies".

Ijodee Dance Company is the initiative of Adedayo Liadi, a dancer and choreographer who had the opportunity (together with others) of being trained by the club de promotion and Benjamin lamache led initiative through the efforts of the Lagos state alliance francaise and the French cultural centre. This training and workshop galvanised him into initiating what is now known as the "Ijodee Dance Technique." In an interview, Liadi (2010) explains that:

I discovered Ijodee technique years ago after my dance studies and research in Austria, dance web Europe sponsored by U.N.E.S.C.O where I was given a two years scholarship. I finally discovered the Ijodee technique and I used it to create works for different competitions and all the competitions I went to with Ijodee dance technique, I was always the best.

An evidence of this is Ijodee Dance Company's participation in the 5th African Indian ocean choreography contest in Madagascar 2003 where its performance of "ori" came first. Over the years, ijodee dance company has premised its various dance practices and productions on its derived "ijodee dance technique". Emoruwa (2005, p .356) sums up Ijodee dance company presentation style thus:

Dance performances by the Ijodee Dance Company are abstract – formatted dances that are ritually inclined. The plot sequences are always in fragments – gamut of movements – and artistically linked by some innovative theatrical devices to aid the skillful body manipulations, which are synchronized in an expressive manner that is tailored to contain the inner most thoughts, desires and aspirations of the individual dancer, whose movements must constantly fall within and outside the groups designs.

The above indicates that ijodee dance company's productions are non conventionally fashioned, and are therefore based on experimentations that suits "ijodee dance technique". Olalusi (2012, p. 105) highlights some identified features of Ijodee dance technique thus:

- Emphasis on the skillful and flexible manipulation of the body in an expressive manner.
- Toning down any paraphernalia of arts that may ward to be more revealing or glamorizing than the body itself.
- Controlled use of music in place of emphasizing the dancer's inner rhythm and county.
- Character thrifty production where minimum of five characters could be used to depict possibly a whole nation.
- Usage of adornments, properties etc in a manner of simplicity and necessity.
- Use of words as a means of further expression.
- Acrobatic movements of the body in varying degrees.

Ijodee Dance Company represents one of the numerous dance companies who engage in contemporary dance practices everyday and this has become their trademark over a long period of time.

Gown and Town: Millitating Issues

Although our case study as we have discussed above are from two different angle, both are appendages of the dance art, and have over

the years formed the nucleus of dance training and practice in Nigeria. However, despite this, we discover that there are contending issues that particularly needs appropriate attention for a holistic and more favorable training and practice of dance in Nigeria. While there are common problems militating against both, there are different problems too which when tackled would enhance the productivity of dance in Nigeria.

In the dance art, the academic and professional are two enclaves that readily come to mind. Even though they are often viewed from different perspectives, they are apostles of practices when it comes to dance. However, the degree in which this is done vary between the two. Because the professional world (town) is a constantly practicing one from a holistic point of view, the extent at which they practice far outweighs that of the academic (gown) where a combination of theory and practice of dance is compulsorily considered. However, the challenge of the professionals is lack of education. F. A. Akinsipe (2011) in an interview expresses that:

The town especially has been able to take care of the area of practice which the gown lacks. Unfortunately, many of the practitioners in the town do not come to the university to back it up; they remain fully in practice without the theory. Unfortunately, without the theory they can't develop a technique.

This is why most of the practices in the town are entertainment based, with education, information and other aspects given very little or no consideration at all, this perhaps is due to the audience category that has come to identify with their style and the contemporary dance.

From an experience and situation this writer witnessed in 2003 at the University of Ilorin, Department of the Performing Art, Miss Nneka Umeigbo a very good professional dancer in Lagos and equally an astute member of ijodee dance company got admission into the University of Ilorin and not long afterwards decided to renounce the admission when Ijodee dance company had to tour Europe and America. This exemplifies our earlier submission that those who yearn for professionalism in dance have constantly preferred the town to the gown. This is a lack of foresight on their part as there are alternatives and options that could enable such dancers enjoy the luxury and experience of travelling abroad and equally give them the opportunity to study and become learned in the same art.

Another situation that struck our mind in this same issue was during ijodee Dance Company's annual "Trufesta Dance Festival" when the company scheduled University of Ilorin as one of the universities it

visited. As it is the trend in the department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin for questions to be asked (in a viva session) after performances, students and lecturers were sited, soon a question was raised by a lecturer in the department concerning the performance style of the Ijodee Dance company tending towards the Avant Gardist theory. In his response after a brief silence, Mr. Liadi said "I don't know any Avant Gardist theory; all I do is contemporary African dance". From this indication, his practical abilities lack theoretical basis which therefore stood as hindrance in encapsulating what the performance itself really meant.

The above is a pointer to the commercialisation of dance and its fast increasing embrace even in the growing importance of education in the world. From the theoretical and practical angle also, University of Ilorin (and many others) cannot claim to be perfect as there are several loose ends to be tied. The University is the home of amateurs, a group of individuals whose artistic and creative knowledge is still within the grooming stage and who are constantly tutored in the Arts. However, such training and practice has so far being slow due to certain issues constituting hindrance which seems to contend with the desired output required. The Government itself cannot be exonerated as its attention towards theatre based education is still not encouraging. The facilities that are very important for study and practices of dance are not available in the Performing Arts department and other theatre departments across the nation. F. D. Emoruwa (2011) in an interview comments that;

There are no standard facilities and equipments that are required to train and teach a dancer. For instance, the dance studio is to be fully equipped with mirrors, bars etc and then the swimming pool which is meant to train the dancer for flexibility, speed and fluidity is essential. A couple of other essential instruments are also important in training a dancer.

Apart from the above which is not limited to University of Ilorin alone, there are a few other challenges. We discovered that the time for real study and practice of dance is not there due to the requirements of other courses, this in turn limits the time for practical which should even be more than theory. The case of university of Ilorin seems to be better, F. A. Akinsipe (2011) relays his experience thus;

At A.B.U, we only have three dance courses throughout the four year program and we manage to squeeze a lot of

things. So some of the things in a semester here, we just mention in 2 to 3 topics over there.

This is below par and needs urgent consideration in the harmonization of curriculum and syllabuses of theatre schools in the country. Akinsipe (1999, p. 38) laments further that also the omission of the study of dance in the primary and secondary school is prime to the problem of dance training in the university. He enthused that;

In most western countries, dance is thought in the primary elementary school, most of these dance schools therefore admit pupils between the age of 7 and 11. The modern dancer, for example, begins training at age eight or nine, which is (also) mandatory

This becomes a biting issue as student's first taste of proper dance training and practice is when they are admitted into the University from the age of 16. Thus, their bones are stiff and almost too rigid to satisfy the expected level of flexibility required. While the above can be evidently experienced in the professional world, it is still a frightening process because some of these young lads eventually forsake education in place of professional dance practice.

Playing the Medley Game: A Necessity

In the world today, particularly professional, there are not many fields that enjoy participation in the town and gown like Theatre/Performing Arts related courses do. Its diversity, creative exploration, various demands in entertainment, information, traditional and cultural exhibition and so on has allowed for a constant participation of both.

Although their medium and purpose seems different at some point, their filial relationship cannot be questioned. Beyond pontification, the town and gown represent a nucleus of theatre /Performing Arts in its totality. However, considering some issues that seem to be germane, it is thought-wise that a medley would contribute better to the development of dance from a general outlook.

In contemporary world, Education and practice are viewed differently. However, in the Arts/Performing Arts, one may not be conveniently divulged from the other and it is this unexplored or rather seemingly inconvenient union that we feel should take pre-eminence. The town and gown in the training and practice of dance enjoy very different successes, hence what one has in abundance, the other lacks and equally vice-versa.

Our focus on Performing Arts department, University of Ilorin and ijodee Dance Company has revealed some of that. However, there are some other areas which reveal these differences more. They are reflected below;

S/N	Town	Gown
1	Admits trainees from the age of 6 and 7 years old	Admits students not younger than 16 years old
2	Enjoys at least 8 hours of practice daily	Enjoys at least 8 hours of theory daily
3	Rehearse/practice solely for entertainment purposes	Rehearse/practice mainly for educational purposes
4	Focus on re-arrangement of existing cultural dances and derivation of new styles	Focus on curriculum, research, training/theory and practice
5	Profit making	Certificate awarding
6	Non-fixed duration of practices	Four years of theory and practice with a higher percentage of theory
7	Can practice extensively without theorizing	Can theorize and practice, but no extensively
8	Training basically in dance practices	Training in several aspects of the arts, including writing.

The above identified is a pointer to the differences that permeate the town and gown. While we experience a few problems here and there, it is considered prerogative that a medley of the town and gown will do the training and practice of dance in Nigeria a lot of good. Here, we are confident that there would be a unified and a more holistic approach to the training and practice of dance in Nigeria. The dance training and practice atmosphere would then not be a bidding war between the academics and professionals when both are considered children of the same parents who should work together to achieve great and enviable results. Therefore, to bring this to actualization, a lot of measures need to be taken.

- The Federal Government of Nigeria needs to support the training and practice of dance in Nigeria. The responsiveness of the government to dance in Nigeria must be reflected in the budget of the nation and the allocations to the theatre arts department in each university should be seriously considered. Equally, the professional dance outfits should be structuralized and given

government backing in terms of some allocation. Also, laws that are binding must be created and implemented towards the standardization of dance art/artists and education in Nigeria. This would help solidify the medley initiative we propose.

- Nigerians, particularly parents should not debate their children from studying and practicing dance because of their frail and inexplicable excuses about dance, rather they should support them and see dance as part of education and national development. Hence, they should let them study dance in the university or allow them practice and train in professional dance companies without affecting their education.
- More companies in Nigeria, in conjunction with the theatre arts department in Nigerian universities should join others in the discovery of talents in the dance field through the annual sponsored television reality shows, where scholarships to further in dance in any Nigerian university would be part of the prizes to be won. This would create a balance in practice and training/education which should be the focal point in dance.
- The Federal Government of Nigeria needs to sponsor the exchange of dance troupes from different states on tour of Nigerian traditional dances to grant the dancers more experience and exposure outside their domain. This however should include the students and lecturers in the university too, as the two dimensions of theory and practice would be properly exemplified through research, notation, documentation. e.t.c
- The dancers within the town and gown or better, the authorities involved should design a process of collaboration among each other. Here, the tertiary institutions can design special certificate courses that would be available for these professionals during the institutions long break where they would learn theoretical basis on which they can premise their practical, they would also have opportunity to read and learn more than they know. Dance practitioners should not be carried away by the glamour of local, national and international experiences; they should give themselves the required education by enrolling for fulltime or part-time courses in higher institutions of learning where certificates will serve as proof of their education. This will give

them advantage over other uneducated dance artists when national and international dance jobs open up.

- Sequel to the above, students of dance in the Nigerian tertiary institution should also be sent to the private or Government dance companies in form of a practical (industrial training) to cushion their theoretical and practical knowledge of the arts. Preferably, each theatre department in the Nigerian tertiary institution should create an artist village where the collaboration and medley would be fortified with daily and consistent dance practices

Conclusion

The quality and acceptance of dance in Nigeria is still below par when compared with our counterparts in European countries. This has been a challenge among dance practitioners across the country. Despite growing influence in its practice nationwide, its casual essence has been played beyond the borders of reasoning and its valuable, profitable influence and impact on the lives of an individual and the nation at large is underestimated. Thus, many have ignorantly substituted the training of a dancer for the identification of his so called "God given talent", while the glamour of modern education has suddenly meant studying dance in a formal school (Primary, secondary or tertiary institution) is invariably defeating the objectives of modern education. The issues discussed in this essay become biting and crucial as it holds the key to unlocking the various potentials of dance in art and education. It is believed that the various points used as parameters of discourse in this paper and the useful realizable prospects identified, will help in attaining the numerous but achievable objectives of dance in Nigerian Art and Education.

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