

CHAPTER ONE:

THE DANCE LIBRETTO

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Preamble

Plays have scripts and operas have scores, but dance sometimes live only in the bodies of the dancers (Gord Mc Laughton).

From the above, the body of the dancer becomes the object, the content of the libretto becomes the subject of artistic and movement consideration that must be critically understood and interpreted. In Nigeria today, it is sad to note that despite the burgeoning reputation of African dance performances from the traditional and contemporary genres, the writing of dance librettos is still intensely low compared to that of the playwrights. The pioneering efforts of Chris Ugolo and specifically Felix Akinsipe are perhaps the only published document we can lay claim of as dance librettos. That is why Akinsipe (2003, p. vii) in his last, and consequently Nigeria's last published collections of libretto encouraged that "We should begin to write librettos for our dances and publish them to make these works available to choreographers all over the world." Many librettos that have been performed across Nigerian Universities and theatres have been abandoned due to its considerably less quantity unlike drama scripts. Akinsipe (2003, p.vii) equally observes that:

Most Nigerian Choreographers have created works from their unwritten ideas or at most from mere sketches on paper, which are usually dumped, once these ideas are fully passed to the dancers. Such works are therefore not documented and made available for other choreographers to use.

SECTION ONE

DANCE DISCOURSE

That is why writing and publishing of dance librettos is a unique endeavour for posterity.

What is a Dance Libretto?

Historically, “a libretto is an Italian word that means a 'little book', used mainly to denote the words, as distinct from the dance and the music, of a dance performance or opera or musical play. However, the dance libretto is a written text, mostly in verse or in prose, of the complete, plot of a dance performance” (Tomassini, 2003, p.1). Similarly, Ugolo (2003) notes that;

The writing of Librettos to go with dance is a tradition of the classical ballet form. It is a western tradition unlike the traditional African dance tradition that is basically oral in nature and therefore makes it possible for the dances to exist without a libretto. Even in modern Nigerian dances tradition, the writing of a collection of librettos is an innovation that is worth embracing.

Therefore, a dance libretto is not different from a drama script and a music libretto in terms of the end product however, its concept and content is usually different considering the non verbal nature of dance. Contextually, however, a dance libretto (together with its drama script and music libretto), should necessarily possess a beginning, middle and an end, hence it should flow from the development of the plot, the point of crisis and the resolution. Olalusi (2014, p.71) consolidates the above when he asserts that “a dance libretto/script is not an artistic epistle, but rather, a compendium of creatively and chronologically arranged sequence of events that forms a package. This package must exhibit movements, motifs and dance patterns that comfortably substitute for spoken words.” It is apparent from the above that writing a libretto is a technical, yet rewarding endeavour. There are approaches to consider when writing a dance libretto, these are:

The Libretto as a Social Text:

The quest to write a dance libretto must certainly be borne out of the need to address an issue, perhaps a problem which engulfs a society. From the foregoing, it is essential that a libretto carry messages that are didactic thereby identifying, addressing and where applicable, proffering solutions to those problems. These problems which could range from economic to political, to religious issues are narratively documented in prose form, needing a robust interpretation via movement. Johnson (2012) strongly believes that:

Art can go through where other things can't... it breaks through your prejudices, breaks through everything that you have as your mask. In a world where attitudes are so difficult to change, we need a language that reaches through (www.theworlddances.com)

Johnson's opinion above becomes valid, and therefore, a proof of the cruciality of ensuring that the content, concept and context of the libretto is socially inclined. This is in order to “reach through” to the society on the diverse socio-cultural, political and other problems.

The Libretto as a Means of Communication:

Within the axis of communication, anything written and cannot be comprehended is not worth reading. In the same vein, anything written and performed and still cannot be comprehended is at best couple of irrelevant papers and a joke in terms of performance. As such, one of the first considerations when writing the dance libretto is content and context. Because of the non-verbal mode, it is the most difficult performance related art to write, that is why the following questions need to be taken care of:

- i. Why do I want to write a dance libretto?
- ii. What story do I want to write?
- iii. How do I present the story in a dance thought out way?

The Libretto as Cultural Exhibitor:

Within the Nigerian context, it is essential to creatively align the content of the libretto to a particular culture. Thus, it becomes the base and the parameter through which the intended messages are properly disseminated. Since art and consequently dance do not evolve from a vacuum, it is considered a basic requirement for the libretto to wear a cultural/traditional garb. Even when the ideas generated from the thought process is alien to our nation and continent, it is still essentially supposed to evolve from a culture, and however, because of the multifariousness of our diverse problems in the country, it is advisable to use the Nigerian culture as a template for writing the libretto.

The Libretto as a Recount of History:

It is often said that history is a constant locomotive aspect of a people; it continues to shape and reshape a people's understanding of what is and what should be. Equally, several heroes, heroines, legends, gods and ancestors whose remarkable achievements have shaped and marked the history of the community can be portrayed in our librettos. Legends like Moremi, Efunsetan Aniwura, Madam Tinubu, Queen Idia, and deities like Sango, Ogun have stories built around their existence. It is the duty of the librettist to creatively employ some of these as mediums of expression and communication when writing their librettos to pass comments on the contemporary society.

The Libretto as a Product of Extensive Research:

Felix Akinsipe, who is an accomplished playwright and librettist in an interview with this writer, says "he does not write a play or any creative work without adequate research". This is a required standard for the writing of libretto. No one on earth can claim to have knowledge in his or her palm, and that is why it is constantly and continuously acquired. Again, the libretto must quest to present facts that are borne out of huge research. Considerations even if it is his or her cultural domain means research has to be carried out in order not to misrepresent the values of the cultures and also in order to properly disseminate the intended message.

The Libretto as an Adaptation of an Existing Art Work:

Several art works have been written and done throughout the ages, and overtime, new works have been generated from reconstructing, remodelling, readjusting, reproducing and re-performing such works within an entirely different context. Some have developed new ideas akin to present contemporary times from seemingly old works, while others have used such works to advance a theory. Adapting scripts to dance, either prose, poetry, drama or narratives is considered creative as it presents such content and contextual form of the original work in an entirely new version. In many cases, it opens up hidden perspectives of the original work and presents this new medium in dance thereby opening a new channel of analytical and performance discourse. For instance, Wole Soyinka's poem Abiku when adapted to dance elevates the intended meanings in the poem from a mere poetic/lyrical envisioning to a movement/visual performative context. The resultant effect of this is that with a deeper insight into the world of the Abiku's, the libretto presents the poem in an elevated movement/choreographic and visual form that can only be merely imagined when reading the poem.

From the foregoing, it is vivid that the writing of a dance libretto is an expression of individual creativity through the use of happenings around, essentially with the aim of passing across a salient message which is ultimately expected to positively affect lives. However, for it to be cogent enough for performance, the discussed points above needs to be considered.

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