

From Page To Stage: The Technical And Choreographic Challenges In Sunnie Ododo's *Vanishing Vapour*

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Abstract

Dance is a universally acclaimed nonverbal art. However, unlike other non verbal arts, it requires the use of other elements of the performing Arts to enhance or aid the communication of its intended meaning. One of such elements is the technical requirement/ challenges of staging/performing a dance. It is in this regard that our paper explores the technical and choreographic challenges of performing Sunnie Ododo's *vanishing vapour*. Through an analytical methodology, coupled with consultations from relevant authorities, we intend to examine the parameters it has gone through in its scripting/documentation and the technical challenges imbued in the practical actualization on stage. During our research, we discovered that in Nigeria, there is little or no book that discusses the intricacies of writing a dance libretto. Equally, we observed that because of some technical ambiguity, the script is not in total conformity with a dance script meant for practical realization on stage. As a result, we recommend that dance scholars should produce books on how to write dance librettos from the Nigerian, African and general perspective. Also, dance librettists should endeavour to ensure that their scripts are movement and technically plausible.

Introduction

Dance is a unique medium of artistic expression in the performing arts. Interestingly, the word dance has developed to become a globally accepted aspect of the arts. Its importance, relevance and even sustenance has proven in all spheres of art as a means of transmitting and communicating emotions, beliefs, ethics, sentiment and other aspects of human endeavour. Arguably, there is virtually nothing man does without exerting an amount of energy through movement, and wholesomely the rudiments of dance lies in the movement of the body. Shawn (1946:9) exemplifies this assertion, saying;

We know that body movement is life itself-our movement begins in the womb before our birth and the new born infant's need for movement is imperative and continuous. When we sleep there is constant movement, our hearts beat, our intestines work; in fact as long as there is life there is movement, and to move is hence to satisfy a basic and external need.

The above is a justification of the essential nature of movement in human being. Movement of the body therefore is a constant feature in man's day to day living. Among the numerous constituents or parameters of appreciating dance, culture is one which cannot be overlooked especially within the framework of this paper. Dance in culture is an unfathomable artistic aspect which predates modern times; it is vested in the people's day to day lives, their activities and importantly their communion and togetherness which bond them together. Royce's opinion is that African dance is;

an integral part of social life, important aspect of African ritual, addressing metaphysical being or powers. It is a poetic, non-verbal expression continually created and recreated by countless performers and interpreters for several generations (1977:12)

These countless performers are progenitors of both dance and their respective cultures, engaging in daily performances that projects both. Fortunately, this experience has continued. Even though the word performance within the theatre in Nigeria (especially dance) has experienced diverse scurrilous attacks from the public, it has continued to portray our cultural continuity. Unfortunately, despite efforts made by practitioners in Nigeria, many still pass unscrupulous statements at theatre practitioners within the town as much as they pass unsavory comments to students of dance within the tertiary institutions, thus debunking its rightful place within the education system. Its ability to communicate, inform, educate and exhibit the profundity in the African and consequently Nigerian culture has been severely debased beyond normal.

Unfortunately, they forget that the diverse happenings within the society are what the theatre artist use as instruments of social construction, cultural propagation and towards a positive society. This is where scripting/documentation, rehearsals and performances contribute immensely to

reconstruct the society. Spitzer (1970:21) consolidates the above that; "the best document of the soul of a nation is its literature..... can we perhaps not hope to grasp the spirit of a nation in the outstanding work of its literature". In this light, Ododo's vanishing vapour represents one of the numerous works of art which contributes in one way or the other to the growth of the nation.

Writing or scripting in the theatre is systematic, consequently writing dance is a more technical job considering that while its documentation may be short and lucid, its performance is expected to be expanded and communicative. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, very little or no Nigerian book or document explicitly teaches how to write a dance script or libretto.

In the process of writing, many often focus on how to write a dance libretto/script. However, we observed that how "not" to write a dance libretto/script will help tailor the procedures and processes of writing in the right perspective. 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. From a general but artistically suitable point of view, Turner (1973:8) avers that; "writing is a special, careful, elaborate, shuffled, pruned and tidied form of language, very different from the everyday spontaneous normal language". However, in picking from the above assertion, the "every day spontaneous normal language" referred to are usually fractions of creativity which embellish a dance libretto or script. Fundamentally, the audience is a great motivation which needs to be adequately considered. In this vein, Sande (1997:5) epitomizes the dance production/audience experience, stating that "a successful dance concert invariably leaves the audience with feeling of having had a significant experience whether emotionally moving; visually stimulating, kinesthetically exciting or simply clever and entertaining".

Sande's opinion can only be possible first with ensuring a structured and well written dance libretto/script which forms the cardinal of the eventual production process. Stemming from the fact that no dance script is without its own faults or challenges, this paper seeks to examine Sunnie Ododo's vanishing vapour given its technical input in scripting and production.

Story: An Overview

A story is the lifewire of any production; short or long, written or improvised, for the radio, television, stage or any other medium. It represents the direct source from which ideas are developed, scenarios are worked out and where creativity is limitlessly explored. The story is to a production what a key is

to a door; it describes situations, experiences, histories and myths which provides the production with a basis for performance. It is usually culture oriented as it could stem from the in depth oral traditions of a people. King and Ogungbesan (1975:148) establish that literature generally has been defined as a "crystallization of the emotions, expectations, experiences, joys, sufferings, hopes and aspirations of a people. It also forms an integral part of a people's culture".

However, the story of a dance libretto/script is usually in gamut. It comes with the librettist indicating the process of achieving the script in a sequential story format with each sequence leading to another without a distortion in flow. This is why it is arguably impossible to find an episodic plot in a dance libretto/script.

From mansions of thoughts, to archetypes of occurrences, situations, happenings and histories, the librettist work is set to blossom as he applicably knits all these to suit his ideas and produce a compact libretto/dance script. Sunnie Ododo's *Vanishing Vapour* is one of the dance libretto/scripts that have been written for performance practice. Although Ododo says that vanishing vapour is not an appendage of facekuerade theatre, Emoruwa (2012) thinks that Ododo's vanishing vapour is a "thesis script" which represents one of the canons of his proposed theory of "facekuerade theatre". However, in examining facekuerade theatre Ododo (2004:26) opines that it is;

A performance masquerade character without mask even though his audience encounters him face to face, the spiritual essence of the masquerade character is not devalued. He is still revered and held in high esteem. Facekuerade is an engaging metaphor in action capable of transforming events, performance realities and even mediates between structures of social system.

From the above, particularly in view of the script considered, we find some reflections of the theory in the script. Although, it gives it an experimental outlook, it has however gone through productions and has eventually been published as a ready material for all. With this in mind, we objectively review the synopsis as published, and use it as a background for our further study and analysis.

Style

Coplan (1985:4) opines that style is "a distinctive system of meaningful forms of method of creating characteristics elements organized around the expressive purpose and outlook of its practitioners". In the process of writing a work of art, style is an apparent aspect of such work, it is what defines the artist's intentions in how he express himself. Adejumo (1992:78) exemplify the above, asserting that;

Writing is a private and individual enterprise. It is borne out of habit and is also very idiosyncratic. Idiosyncratic in the sense that two different individuals cannot write in the same way and manner even when handling a similar subject. The difference in individual writers is brought about by differences in outlooks and perceptions of life in general.

Suffice to say that Ododo who is the librettist is more of a technical theatre specialist who weaves his style and expertise into the libretto under study. The experimental nature of his ideas are immensely more of technical rather than artistic and as such the libretto in different ways explore different styles akin to him and the suitability of the technical aspect of the theatre in general. While it may be concluded that Ododo would not want to write a script without immense technical input, we are of the opinion that his focus more on technical areas as his style asks questions on the content of the libretto being realistic for stage presentation.

His style place more value on technical aesthetics than movement aesthetics, it equally presents the fictional aspect of the script as esoteric as possible which in our own view accommodates the canons for which his facekuerade theory is known for; some of which are to;

Humanize with a sense of renewal

Excite an audience into primal feelings beyond mere entertainment;

Explore the physical and metaphysical (actual and virtual) worlds of man so as to penetrate the human soul;

Emphasize balance of actions, voice and scene (design);

Collocate images to create visual metaphors that can excite the imagination.

Break all spatial boundaries and barriers in performance.
Engage the audience more actively as part of the
performative design, rather than just as spectators.
Unite performers and the audience as one indivisible
artistic entity pursuing the same goal. (Ododo 2004:297)

Commendably, the above canon of the style and model elevates the libretto's standard, but directionally, it encourages many technical oriented scenarios which in dance may not be artistically plausible. It is with this in mind that we discuss the technical challenges embedded in Ododo's vanishing vapour.

Synopsis

Vanishing vapour is an Ebira oriented story that explores the mystic, spiritual and esoteric inclinations of the tradition. Though it is developed through fictional story, it is weaved around the masquerades, festival and cultural dispositions of the people.

The story establishes female dominance through the character of Aze, Anataku's wife who together with her husband are blessed with different occupational gifts from the spirit being. In addition to her gifts, Aze receives the Irakwo (an egg-like object) which possess power to cause both good and evil, she is happy and eventually becomes the leader of a group of weird creatures who are the major stronghold of the society.

With the power of the Irakwo, Aze constantly overpower her husband after which she vanishes, she also initiate women into witchcraft thereby strengthening the cult. During the Echane festival, amidst singing, dancing and celebrations, a competition was conducted with Adomu, Anataku's son emerging victorious, when he is to choose a worthy bride as his reward, he chooses Ize among two others (Asipita and Eyihuri) this angered Ochuuchu and her daughter Asipita. Consequently, the celebrations was altered by the women cult led by Aze and Ochuuchu who all strip themselves naked, transforming into weird creatures after confrontation from the masquerades.

Ochuuchu, still angry with Adomu and Ize snaps his finger at them when Ize's water mistakenly sprinkle on her as she passes, as a result, Ochuuchu conjures Ize and transforms her into an antelope during Anataku's expedition with four other hunters. Anataku unknowingly shoots the antelope before it transforms back to Ize's corpse. On seeing his wife's dead body, Adomu faints and consequently becomes deaf and dumb.

In one of the women's cult meetings led by Aze, Adomu was summoned and

asked to take Asipita as wife in order to regain his speaking and hearing abilities or remain deaf and dumb, he refuses. Owing to this and other problems that has plagued the society through the women cult's strong hold, the elders conclude to establish Eku'rahu masquerade cult to counteract the powers of the witches. Although some measures were taken leading to the capture of the witches they disappear again only to appear with the Irakwo. However, the Irakwo which has been used as a focal point of power for the witches becomes their downfall when after anataku crosses the Irakwo unharmed, Ochuuchu does same and is struck dead. Eventually, the witches surrender, Adomu regains his hearing and speech abilities, and peace is restored amidst singing and rejoicing

Technical Challenges in *Vanishing Vapour*

Artistically considered, there is no production or performance that can completely annihilate challenges, some of which may be technical in nature. However, it is a common phenomenon in the theatre to present artistic recipes that are not extremely challenging and that is not performatively limited to a particular set of people or situation. Owing to the above, we find Ododo's comment that "*yes vanishing vapour is an extremely challenging script*" (2012) a troubling conclusion particularly as it is obvious that technical equipments which could drive such production are not available in most theatre schools or houses across the nation. It may however be okay if its artistic consumption is specifically reserved for boundaries across the African continent alone.

Of no doubt, vanishing vapour is imbued with techno-artistic scenarios which obviously reflect the technophile, creative/artistic and innovative mien of the librettist. It is also unlike some other dance librettos, a firm adherent to the choreographer/technical director aligned portfolio which is constantly encouraged. Such artistic fusion of portfolio would comfortably make a production as vanishing vapour a bit easier considering that the choreographer, who is also the technical director, choreographs the dance within the technical requirements he has set in place. However, with such challenges which the script pose; the unavailability of high tech materials and the few or no choreographers with deep technical prowess, a professional and definitely an upcoming choreographer or technical director would encounter problems in achieving his aim. Adegbite (2009:1) emphasize that;

In the Nigerian theatre, the damages which inadequate technical facilities are capable of doing to the artistry of designers and stage performance as a whole cannot be underestimated. That

explains why in contending with the issue, it places a great demand on the creative ingenuity of designers in the theatre.

However, beyond the technical consideration, some choreographic challenges are equally reflected in the libretto. Through our study, we identified a number of areas that we considered not plausible, we also discovered that a few sequence are elongated or too much. However, the progression of the libretto itself needs to be reviewed.

From our assessment, some aspects in sequence one is technically and movement/choreographically ambiguous. For instance, "up stage centre a spirit being descends from the sky and hangs midway" is not only technically impasse, but also choreographically cumbersome. First, descending from the sky is a scenario that must be real, considering the esoteric nature of such character; more so, "hanging midway" is more or less a freeze which is against gravity and consequently dance, and equally an artistically unrealistic scenario, considering the importance of space to a dancer. Practically, we ask that as a human being only taking the role of an esoteric being, on what platform would the dancer perform his movements, which is expected to accurately suit his role? Or perhaps how can such a scenario be effectively and realistically enacted without disrupting the flow of the dance or creating a scene of an obvious error in front of the audience?

Also, from the next action that follows, the librettist writes that "Anataku, an epitome of strength, ascends into the clouds amidst music and sound effects to receive *edu* (hoe) and *ukari* (cutlass) from the spirit being". The ascension expected here is another obvious challenge. As expected from the librettist, scenarios as ascending and descending to and from the sky are not movement friendly and perhaps can only be artistically/technically suitable in motion pictures and not for the stage. Though his reflection of this in the script is to "explore the physical and metaphysical (actual and virtual) worlds of man so as to penetrate the human soul" Ododo (2004:279), we are of the opinion that movement suitable actions are of utmost importance to dance, especially for promptness and clarity.

From further analysis of the libretto, we discovered that the scenic disposition of some sequences is not appropriately considered. For instance, the locales we can identify are within two worlds (ethereal and physical), however, this two worlds are equally divided into other locales, which a theatre/stage may not be able to entirely accommodate. Though we consider Ododo's style of "breaking all spatial boundaries in performance" an experimental style, which

could be employed, however if not effectively managed, it could entirely foil the whole choreographic process.

The swallow and regurgitative instruction given by the librettist in sequence one is considered a very dangerous action, particularly in dance. In the Performing Arts generally, eating on stage is usually not encouraged because of the amount of energy to be dissipated in speech and scores of physical actions. Equally, the same applies to dance where oscillations of various degrees are what essentially communicate to the audience. First, we view the action as not plausible, secondly, if it is, it is an obstruction to the movement possibilities of the dancer as it would reduce the energy flow of the dance movement as well as choke the dancers esophagus and consequently hinder breathing.

Again, in sequence four and six respectively, we find the transformations required cumbersome and artistically inexplicable on a stage. In sequence four for instance, the librettist writes that "the women strip naked and begin to transform into weird creatures; everyone, except the masquerade runs for dear life. They hatch a plan of havoc against men in dance: impotence, farm disaster (flood), inflammation of the scrotal sac etc" while in sequence six, he writes that "Ize is conjured and transforms into an antelope; as Anataku shoots the antelope, it transforms back to Ize his daughter". The two descriptions given above may only be possible in obsolete live theatre settings where the audience would be asked to wait some minutes for the next set of action after the curtain might have been drawn. However, for a dance theatre where each movement is in itself a communication, such is not encouraged.

Although some technical equipment like the smoke machine can be tried out for such transformation, it would however be an obvious concealment of what should rather be explicitly and artistically shown to the audience. Considering its non verbal medium and the swiftness in dance movement and actions, it would still be a defeated cause judging from the processes of transformation required.

According to the librettist, sequence nine is supposed to exhibit a rather questionable situation/occurrence. He writes that "Eku'ahete, clad in palm fronds and *ireha* (metal hollow rattles) holding iron gong and hanging cutlass, saunters across the arena to disorganize their meeting". However, what we find troubling is his stage instruction that (this must be realized in stark darkness as Eku'ahete must not be seen; adequate use of sound effects should suffice here). From the visual representation perspective, this holds little or no value, particularly because theatre and consequently dance thrives on illumination. However, while such instruction may be based on cultural phenomenon akin to

this particular ethnic group, the librettists use of the word "must" suggests that no other alternative is welcomed, and this means a set of actions of not less than one minute would be lost to the audience. Unfortunately, the choreographer or perhaps the technical director is given the discretion to decide when the "stark darkness" ends as it is not indicated in the libretto. Somehow, we find the libretto, a technically oriented but extremely challenging one; however, in structure and artistic scenarios, it seems to be superfluous and cumbersome for dance movement sequence. Although, we cannot take away the fact that the technical challenges it pose are daunting enough to cause a transformation in theatrical performances, it is pertinent to say that productions where words are completely substituted with dance movements needs the clearest of actions to drive its intended messages to the audience.

From the performance of the libretto, we found out that it has been staged only once, i.e. in 2005 by 300 level students of the Department of the Performing Arts, before its publication in 2006 and 2012 respectively. Incidentally, this researcher witnessed the performance in question and can say that the amateurish nature of the students understanding of the script and production process sunk them a little bit. However, their efforts were evidently beyond doubt encouraging. In a conversation with Adumati who was the costumer then, she reveals that;

Vanishing vapour is one dance script that will always pose a challenge to anybody. The esoteric, spiritual and even physical actions are all built into each other that you take into cognizance minute details as well as huge details. As regards costumes, I had to travel down to Kogi State to gather costumes. However, it was more than gathering costumes and more of brain work. For instance how do you costume a spirit being descending from and ascending to the sky? Though we could not achieve some of the extreme and unbelievable actions, we tried our best to project the message in the simplest way we could (2012).

Like we addressed earlier, vanishing vapour is a script that would be extremely challenging for any choreographer or technical director, particularly with little or no technical materials available. Such was the case of the only performance of the script till date. To our knowledge, only a few lanterns with some gels were available, leaving the choreographers, crew members and cast members

with movements and other derivative alternative to use. Unfortunately, it is the technicality of the script that gives it a practical bearing as it is a weaving of the esoteric, spiritual and physical worlds through various transformational processes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With fewer dance libretto/script than expected available in Nigeria, vanishing vapour adds up as a technically challenging script capable of turning around the theatrical proficiency of the nation. However, such feat would be achieved only if the technically huge aspects of the libretto/script and the implausible dance movement actions/scenarios are watered down to conform to existing dramatic, artistic and choreographic realities.

From the discourse in this paper, it is obvious that writing a dance libretto/script requires a very systematic approach which considers primarily movements in relation to its suitability with the arts of the theatre. However, because dance practice or writing of dance libretto/script is not an incestuous endeavour, we find it pertinent to suggest a few points for the improvement of dance libretto/script writing among dance enthusiast and equally others within the theatre arts in general. They are that;

1. Dance specialist/scholars within the academia should endeavour to produce books which indicate stepwise approach on how to write a viable dance libretto or script. Although writing is an individual endeavour, following a set of rules is equally pertinent in ensuring the libretto is suitable to movement, cultures and other required areas of consideration, particularly arts of the theatre.
2. Cumbersome technical aspects of scripts be watered down considerably or given alternative measures where applicable. This will lessen the technicality of the production and make the dance movement sequences more compact and explanatory. Also, technical areas that have to do with the dancers movement and energy or physical conditions be seriously considered, as the dancer's body is prime to communication in dance.

Surely, if the above highlighted and other identified viable points can be adopted, there would be a more favourable practice and availability of dance librettos/scripts from both dance specialist and theatre practitioners across the nation.

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Interviews and Conversations

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- A conversation with Dr. Emoruwa in his office, Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, June 2012.
- An interview (via internet) with Professor Ododo, a Professor of Performance Aesthetics and Theatre Technology in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Maiduguri, August, 2012.