

MUSIC AND SOUND IN YESIDE DOSUNMU'S 'ALAJOTA': A PERFORMANCE REVIEW

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Abstract

This essay examines the use of music and sound in Yeside Dosunmu's 'Alajota', a dance theatre performance, which took place in 2013 during the PFA 499 special project in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. Through the participant observation methodology and an analysis of the performance video, coupled with consultations from books and journals, this study identifies and discusses the areas where both have been effectively used or underused. In the course of the study, it was discovered that despite her robust dance performances, the Department of the Performing Arts has no standard sound equipment in its Theatre, mainly depending on laptop technology, which is considered fragile and sometimes unreliable. Similarly, in the department's curriculum, there is only one course on sound, which is not focused on the application of sound to performances. The paper concludes by emphasizing that a more viable application of sound in dance and theatre productions is essential to the success of dance productions.

Keywords: Alajota, Sound, Music, Dance Theatre.

Introduction

Dance and sound are two distinct elements of the theatre that work together. Although dance is a nonverbal artistic medium of

communication, sound remains a most crucial propeller of meaningful details in any dance performance. Thus, sound enables an audience to give meaning to some ordinarily expressed actions or actions that require an intrinsic application of sounds that are recognised or affiliated to such action. From a general perspective to its importance to the theatre, Emesealu (260) avows that:

Theatre transcends a mere display of visual objects under light for audience appreciation. This is so because, apart from appealing to an audience through vision, theatre appeals through the **crucial** element of sound. Sound in this regard would include everything that is received audially. Such audial reception embraces verbal communication in the form of language, songs, chant and ululation. (emphasis mine)

Emesealu's opinion above provides a clue to the two-dimensional quality of appreciation from the audience's perspective. The first is that while the indispensable visual effects of illumination are evident, the audial counterpart is equally an apparatus for engaging the audience in a thought-provoking, educating and entertaining journey of a re-enactment of life. A cursory look at Wale Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* and *Kiriji War*, Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, and Ahmed Yerima's *Yemoja*, as well as other historical/myth and legend based performances with 75% verbal rendition, will reveal that sound indeed registers as a medium of communication. This importance is reflected in Orok's evaluation that:

Sound effects contribute to creating the overall mood or atmosphere for a production and help convey a special illusion to the audience. In order to succeed, it is often necessary to combine both sound and visual effects simultaneously. (37)

It is this simultaneous combination of sound and visual effects that enable some aspects of a dance production to relay directly the exactness of the actions relayed and enacted to them. Thus, the presentation is of an aesthetic appeal laced with mere movements but heightened with real actions. Music, on the other hand, is generally known to be an arrangement of agreeable sounds to the ears. To this end, our focus in this paper is to examine the use of music and sound in the performance of 'Alajota', our use of sound following Emesealu's opinion of "verbal communication in the form of... songs, chants and ululation."

Literature Review

In the 2006 film *High School Musicals* (Part I), the character Darbus asserts that "the theatre is a temple of Art, a precious cornucopia of creative energy. The theatre is the place where the true expression of the artist is realised, where inner truth is revealed through the actors' journey." The subjectivity of the above assertion lies in the illusory nature of theatre being merely a "make-believe" art or, as perhaps better articulated by T.S. Coleridge (1772-1834) as requiring the "willful suspension of disbelief."

Consequently, this vibrant nature of the theatre robustly needs the effectiveness of sound and sound effects for it to be aesthetically appealing even as it communicates. This is why

proven scholars in the field have defined sound, and developed ways of applying sound for theatrical productions. For instance, Collison (10) opines that "sound is essentially the movement of air in the form of pressure waves radiating from the source." The fact that the source is an auditory object enables the transmission of such pressure waves in a distinctive capacity that is capable of eliciting certain effects. From another viewpoint, Daniel (56) quotes Johnson as stating that "Sound has been described as the perception of air molecules in wave-like patterns sticking to the ear." Johnson in Daniel (56) added that "when the patterns are discordant in arrangement, the result is 'noise'".

Definitely, sound is different and more useful than noise in a production. Enendu (18) comments on the usefulness of sound thus:

Sound is a positive component of theatre production which, by its nature and signification, contrasts with silence and noise. Sound creates primarily dramatic meaning, moments and atmosphere: Silence is the state or condition of absence of sound; noise, unwanted sound, a disturbance that does not represent any part of the show is, by nature, utterly negative and undesirable. The elimination of noise ensures perfect audibility of the show.

By analysing the trio of sound, silence and noise, Enendu's justification is that for effective communication an applicable sound is vital and essential. However, noise has no place in effective communication, except perhaps when specifically designed. From an analysis of sound and noise, particularly to justify the usefulness of both within different

understand this, especially in relation to its importance to the communication in the dance, the sound engineer must have foreknowledge of the movement sequence and the time the exact sound is needed.

To better understand the application of sound in dance productions, then, it is pertinent to view it from two angles: the implicit sound and the explicit sound.

Implicit sound: This helps to indicate or suggest without being direct. However, it elevates the dance movement in that it accompanies the action, thus making it real to the audience. For example, the sound that is used to accompany a slap, gunshots, birds squeaking, or cockcrow are implicit sounds because they merely accompany the action and suggest that the action is occurring or indicating something.

Explicit sound: This helps to identify both the character and the action and is an attempt at creating an illusion of the actions and movements on stage. For instance, the appearance of a beastly character dancing on stage with the appropriate sound effect helps to drive home the required effect of fear and danger in the audience. This is in line with Ododo's (156-157) observation that the

use of sound or combination of sounds in a production activates specific sensation and emotional response in human beings, like melancholy, alarm, danger, death, serenity, peace, love, joy, etc. In essence, while implicit sound suggests the action as real, explicit sound identifies the character and action while creating the illusion of reality.

The above, which has been used in Nigerian theatre, is particularly documented here to situate its use in dance performances.

'Alajota' in Performance

Alajota, written by Yeside Dosunmu and as produced in the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, is a dance theatre performance that merges traditional aesthetic elements with contemporary choreographic/dance entertainment paraphernalia, which in turn added vim and vitality to the overall performance. The performance was two nights (7th and 8th) of May, 2013 with dance movement patterns coloured in the garb of overall aesthetics via the arts of the theatre, not disregarding a few errors.

The performance opened with tableaux, a creation scene where Ajala, the Yoruba deity of destiny moulder, performs his manoeuvring and finishing touches on four creations. After this he bestows upon them a gift which they are to make a living out of. One of them was given a gun, another a fishing net, the next, a cutlass and the last a talking drum. Each of them represents four tribes of the nation's many ethnic groups. They dance to show the peculiarity of their gift and exit. The first movement is the naming ceremony of the four babies where the Chief Priest presents their gifts from Ajala to their parents. Alajota's parents were the first to have their baby named and given a gift; however, as each of the other three children is named and the parents given gifts, they begin to mock Alajota's parents, indirectly implying that the talking drum is of no relevance compared to the gifts given to their children. Alajota's parents are discouraged as they dance out rather in disappointment.

The next movement sees the four of them grown and each

of them shows the others his occupation through dance. When it comes to Alajota's turn, they wonder at what good it would bring and though they were initially reluctant, they eventually learn the dance she teaches them. Now it is time for each of them to account for how he or she has managed the profession. Ajala watches as the farmer, hunter and fisherman and their groups present their products in joy. When it is Alajota's turn all she and her group have to offer is a series of dance movements. Eventually, Ajala is impressed by the dances done such that he rewards Alajota and her group with all the proceeds of hard work brought by the other three groups. This creates an obvious polarity that breeds jealousy, hatred and envy, which eventually leads to their plotting against Alajota. They soon succeed in forcing Alajota out of the village; unknown to them, however, this is to Alajota's success. Alajota, having been sent out, experiences much difficulty initially, but she eventually gathers people around her. She trains them in dance en route winning the international competition which is staged in the new place she finds herself. Meanwhile, the village priest who presided over their naming ceremony, having been informed in his dream, warns the malicious three to bring Alajota back in order to avert Ajala's anger; they do so and seek Alajota's forgiveness.

Synergy of Dance and Sound in the Production

From an evaluative point of view, it is impossible to overlook the impact of sound in the success of the performance of 'Alajota'; interestingly, the aspect which was adjudged to be the most interesting and intriguing was backed up with the gradual introduction of sound. The performance itself began with the gradual introduction of sounds to usher in Ajala, who came in an esoteric form.



Fig. 1: Ajala dancing with his totem of power as he performs series of movements akin to that of moulding from head to toe (photo by Adebayo Badeji, 2013).



Fig. 2: Ajala's acolytes dancing to "Yellow instrumental" music, as they perform a choreographed movement that signifies their angelic characters (photo by Adebayo Badeji, 2013).

The pictures above indicate movements that were well presented via the syncopation of the body parts in conjunction with the music. The choreographer utilised the "yellow instrumental" by cold play for the movements in that scene, as she merged abstract movements with bodywork to better enhance the illusion of creation. Also, the acolytes and the four beings created were choreographed to time their movements in and around the instrumentals. To better aid the understanding of the dance sequence, the choreographer enabled the harmonisation of the costume, set construction, the smoke effect

accompaniment, the sound effect and other arts of the theatre. This was particularly reflected in Ajala's dance. This was why after the performance, Yeside Dosunmu, the librettist, commented that "actually, that is not how I conceived the beginning." She further admitted that the choreographer and crew members' creative option was impressive and it gave the dance another performance perspective.

In dance, flashback and dream scenes are commonly avoided or discouraged, partly due to some choreographers not being able to technically handle the transition. Equally, it is frowned upon because of the fear that the message may not be clear enough and may distort the flow or linkage. However, in the production of 'Alajota' sound instrumentals, which were built into storytelling movement choreography, enabled the choreographer and crew members to succeed in this aspect. Since Ajala's acolytes are cherubims, the choreographer utilised their role as a doubling storytelling medium to inform the priest (in his dream) of the plot of the other three creatures of Ajala. So as the sound/ instrumental went on, the four angels enacted the four characters, using each one's gift and occupation as a medium of showing how they drove Alajota away. The effect of the ballet movements cum storytelling technique via the instrumental, sound and music did not go unnoticed as the audience responded with applause and ululations of satisfaction.

Apart from the esoteric and angelic accompaniment of movements through sounds and instruments, there was sound produced from the human voice too. This occurred during the naming ceremony movement. Usually in students-based productions that run on low budgets, property managers tend to resort to packaging dolls as babies. One interesting aspect of this dance production is the introduction of four living babies. The

effect of this real use of babies was evident when some of them began to cry.



Fig. 3: The priest naming one of the babies. He moves to the rhythms from the drums and flute accompaniment (photo by Adebayo Badeji, 2013).

The effect was applauded by the audience, who had been used to seeing dolls in such scenes; this therefore elevated the quality of the dance production as the priest manoeuvred the babies with simple but expressive movements. The combination of live music via songs and traditional drums made the performance unique. Moreover, the competition movement where several dance groups vied for a trophy reflected the dance and music diversity which gave the production a seal of performance aesthetics. In this movement, there were seven groups representing different countries and musical traditions: Zimbabwean dancers, Togolese dancers, hip hop dancers, Belly dancers, Salsa dancers, Nigerian dancers, and Makossa dancers.

Some performed to beats from traditional drums while others performed to recorded music played from the sound system. The belly dancers, for instance, performed to an instrumental of Shakira's (a Colombian/American musician) "la tor tura". While the dance exhibited slick, smooth waist/body movements of different forms, the length of the music was so long that the repeated movements left the audience a bit bored waiting to be rescued by the next group. This was evident as noise erupted from the audience. This probably happened because the choreographer did not consider the length of that particular music and rather choose to be slavish. To avoid such a situation, Abelling (44) prescribes that:

In selecting music for choreography it might be useful to think on two levels. One is what might be thought of as the "nuts and bolts" (tempo, counts, **length** etc), and the other could be considered the aesthetics. Both are the basic considerations and are, for the most part, specific.



Fig.4: Ajala's acolytes enacting the plot of the other three creatures at the dream movement (photo by Adebayo Badeji, 2013).

The emphasis on length above specifically hints at the earlier opinion of the choreographer not considering editing the music to suit her purpose. Abelling further notes that "whoever is selecting the music, the choreographer, artistic director or music director should ask the following questions about an already composed piece of music". They are:

Does the length of the music correspond to the length of the dance? Does the quality (physicality, energy) of the music relate to the dance in the way you intend? Is the proportion or scope of the music appropriate for the dance? Is the music already familiar to the audience from some other exposure or in some other context? (44-45)

Having been privy to some rehearsal sessions, the author noticed that only one or two of Abelling's highlighted points were sparingly observed as the choreographer took the music and instrumentals hook, line and sinker, without an edit to suit the planned time for each dance in the competition movement. This is considered a failure judging from the opinion that in competitions generally equal time is allotted to each participant. In the case of that movement that was not the case, as some groups had more time than the others.

Nevertheless, the effect of the combination of live sounds with recorded sound was still obvious and instrumental to the success of the production. One thrilling moment in that movement was when the Makossa dancers were performing; suddenly, the sound system stopped. Apparently, it was a burnt fuse rather than the usual power failure. Incredibly, yet not surprising, the dancers continued their movements, obviously based on their constant rehearsals and equally on Abelling's

point number four. This is particularly evident as the audience, who were familiar with that particular song, sang on after the music went off.

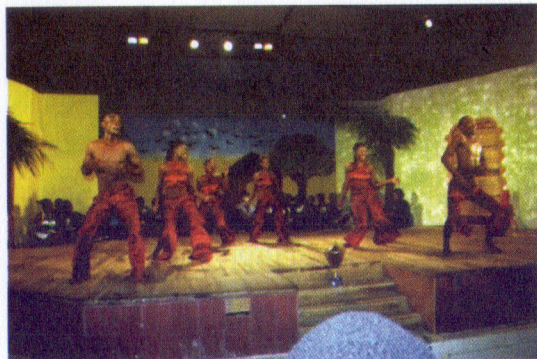


Fig. 5: The Makossa dancers on stage.

Technically, it was wrong that the music stopped; yet this is unavoidable when the required equipment is lacking and there are no competent alternatives to mitigate the effects of any negative occurrence. Again, it should be observed that using a laptop to provide sound and music is better than using a tape recorder; yet this is still not adequate as the laptop is a common tool for the penetration of virus of all kinds which could within moments cause it to crash. Should this kind of situation occur during a performance like 'Alajota', the production is definitely jeopardized.

Another impressive aspect of the competition movement was the display by the Salsa competitors. Their dances were a combination of graceful movements, swift turns, leaps and jumps, body contacts, expressive movements, etc., which were all in sync with the music; in fact, the end of the dance was a design, a clinical end that drew applause from the audience.



Fig. 6: The Salsa dancers competing.



Fig. 7: The Salsa dancers end their dance.

This is perhaps a better planned choreography. Regarding music creation or usage for choreography, Abelling (44) asserts that:

The process of putting movement and music together can happen in three ways. The choreographers can work with an already composed piece of music; a composer can create a score for an already choreographed dance; or a composer and choreographer can develop a piece together; creating a new work simultaneously.

Certainly, the choreographer utilised two of these three prescriptions as the production was in two folds: contemporary and traditional. While the choreographers utilised recorded music for the contemporary aspect, she had the services of traditional drummers who she instructed to add rhythm and beats to the choreographed movements. However, despite the hitches and problems identified earlier, the production could be regarded as successful, particularly as enhanced by sound and music.

Conclusion

Music and sound are two important accompaniments of

dance. Their importance has been constantly stressed in Nigeria and even beyond due to its relationship with sound effects and other arts of the theatre. Although the deployment of sound in Nigerian university theatres has been bedevilled with a lot of challenges, particularly in terms of equipment, it bears stating that the impact it has on the play production process is extremely significant. This paper has argued that sound represents a part of the paraphernalia of message dissemination in dance. Hence, it is crucial that choreographers think of this aspect of their creative endeavour as indispensable and should therefore give it due attention by always securing the services of sound specialists to make their productions better dance theatre packages.

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