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MANAGING DANCE THEATRE AND THE ENVIRONMENTS: TEXTS, PERFORMERS AND THE AUDIENCE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Contemporary theatre in Nigeria, in its attempts at cultural renaissance has demonstrated an atavistic tendency impacting on the natural and the spiritual environments. This paper attempts to study the relationship of theatre texts, the physical and spiritual environments as they affect theatre dance performers and the audience. It examines understanding of reality in performance and how efforts to aesthetically demystify the esoteric in Nigerian theatre end up in further mysticism. Pluralistic cultural analysis method is employed to examine two different productions of Rhythm of Life (a dance theatre) one of which culminated in serious cases of spiritual possession of the performers and some members of the audience. The paper reveals that spiritual reality can be invoked by touching on the cultural codes which appear dormant but ignitable in dance theatre performances in Nigeria and must therefore be carefully managed.*

KEYWORDS: Atavism, Environments, Efficacy- entertainment dyad, Dance theatre, and Cultural renaissance.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional view of theatre as a story told or presented in a performance to enact some form of traditional ritual observance cuts across all world cultures. As time went on, people began to rethink the values of theatre and this gave way to modern performance practices, but most of the emerging texts still source their creative materials from the traditional. According to Johnson (2014, p 3), Literature is about “a people’s life experiences captured in their widest ramification, it outlives the period that produces it”. All that are coded can be decoded at any time, once the situations are recreated whether in strictly religious reenactment or in a situation of aesthetic representation.

Many African contemporary theatrical performances though not ritual in context anymore, still address the issue of interrelationship between the secular and spiritual world. This is in consonance with the worldview of most ethnic groups in Nigeria about the coexistence of the spiritual and the physical. The failure of anyone to play his role effectively leads to a destabilization of the delicate balance and brings about the communal nature of African tragedy. Atavism therefore becomes evident and the resultant effect of which is the invocation of ethereal forces who then invade the physical world by possessing human-performers and audience in spiritual ecstasy. Schechner, (2013 p83) while explaining rituals in theatre, dance and music, observes that “...older rituals have long provided grist for the artistic will or have been used as a kind of popular entertainment. There is a long history of importing “authentic rituals” and showing them at colonial exposition”.

This practice has also strongly occurred in plays and in performances in Nigeria, because many sources their materials from the traditional and by so doing, dormant spiritual and ritual codes are brought into life. In consonance with Schechner (p 52), ritual and play lead people into a second reality and the performers are often temporarily transformed beyond the physical into the trance like state of possession. This phenomenon further highlights Schechner's efficacy-entertainment dyad where "the basic polarity is between efficacy and entertainment, not ritual and theatre" (p79). When the performer has now experienced the spiritual ecstasy in performance, the efficacy mode decoded through the performers now influence the audience through a kind of spiritual synesthesia, primarily because "...Performers engage in shared comparative activities with each other and with the audience" (James Hamilton, 2006 p594).

The Arts and Culture have always been a means of accord, community reformation, enhancement, order, integration, discovery, intensification, expression, interpretation, entertainment, education and enlightenment/information. In all these, throughout the ages, they have been used to draw attention to individual and group political agendas, social issues, religious, economic as well as educational state and wellbeing of the community. Globally various visual and performing arts of both the traditional and contemporary mould abound to attest to the benefits derivable from them.

The story in performance does not just emerge into the efficacious but are strongly influenced to a reasonable extent by the authenticity of the text in documenting/encoding the potentially active words from the traditional. It retains potency through this authenticity of the ritual objects, signs and symbols employed in transmitting the play text/story into performance text. An authentic performance is defined "...as one that sounds (and in the case of opera, drama and dance, looks) as its composer intended", it is what Young (2006) refers to as 'intentional definition'. In the idea of environmental aesthetics, "...the physical and the spiritual environments can be as aesthetically rich and rewarding as are the best of our works of arts" (Carlson, 2006, p552.)

Like all other Africans, according to Ologundudu (2008, p130), the Yorubas believe that there is life in all elements and things are referred to like human...that God manifest in all elements, especially the supernatural energies of nature like the Sun, the Seas, the Ocean, the Rivers, Mountains...and even though there are symbols or human attributes that describe these energies, during worship the focus is on those energies and not in the symbols

This paper examines dance theatre performance, and the physical and spiritual environments of the performers and audience. It focuses on the spiritual experience of some performers and audience members during the production of a dance theatre, *Rhythm of Life* by Ijeoma Akunna. The story of *Rhythm of Life* explores the cultural context surrounding existence by probing into the portrayal and interdependence of god/goddesses, spirits and human in African traditional milieu, i.e. the interaction of man and spirits in his aesthetic environments. It is a performance exploration of the mores, values which emblematises the cultural terrain of diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The methodology engaged in this study is the new historicism and cultural analysis. Part of the key principles of this method is that the literary, performance and other cultural texts are

connected in complex ways to the time period in which they were created. Everything can be decoded once the situations are recreated whether in strictly religious reenactment or in a situation of aesthetic representation

At this juncture, it is crucial to put certain key terms in proper perspectives in this paper. Such terms are; atavism, environments, efficacy- entertainment dyad, dance theatre and Cultural renaissance.

Atavism refers to reversion to the primitive, adapted here to mean reversion to primitive culture. It is a kind of throwback in civilization, in this instance made possible by certain observances in a situation of representation, cultural tendency of reversion.

“Environments” is a term used to refer to the various spaces; geographical, social, political, economic, emotional and spiritual environments. Primarily these environments are represented under two main classification namely; the spiritual and non-spiritual environments. In addition to the above, it also includes the mind consciousness as well as the artistic environment. Ironically however, the various environments are inextricably linked because man can be described as either a spiritual being on a physical sojourn or a physical being on a spiritual journey

Efficacy- Entertainment dyad refers to the situation that no performance is perfect as ritual, pure efficacy or pure entertainment. This dyad culled by Schechner (2013p79) will be employed in discussing the mix in the *Rhythm of life* performances. Dance theatre refers to performances that are theatrical in nature but do not engage the use of dialogue as in drama text. The dialogue is not spoken most of the time but represented through bodily movements and dances and of course other theatrical appurtenances. It is therefore a dance performance that uses pure movements to enact its story and communicates its message with the audience (Akinsipe 2017p330), and according to Ugolo (Qtd in Akinsipe2017p331) “as a dance production in which a number of theatrical elements such as costume, props, lighting, make-ups, sound effect and music are employed in its realization”

Cultural renaissance is not about changing the authentic but dwindling cultural values but changing back to revive them to make them not only acceptable to the owners of these cultures, but also lift them up and develop programmes to make them attractive to other people as well.

Authenticity in Performance

One can identify a society through their different dances because dance typifies all aspects of their lives from the physical and spiritual environments. Ritual dance to celebrate gods and purify society is a communication between him and the Supreme Being. This spiritual ecstasy can be evoked in the dancers/performers and vicariously in the audience. According to Ugolo, (2006p 127) “a whole lot of attitude and intentions are brought to play in African dances... Stressing further that Africans do not dance for nothing, but for a reason”. Traditional dances and even poetry can still retain their potency in an extra-textual context on the modern stage. Authenticity in performance is usually the goal of many performing artistes and audiences in drama, dance and music, be it historical or personal authenticity. This brings about the issue of environments.

Theatre and the environments

Environments transcend space although space is a crucial element of the environment. The concept of space like environments also transcends just the physical realm. For a theatre, live performance takes place in a 3D space environment- audience, spectator become part of that performance. The environment of the text i.e. the content encoded determines largely the spiritual environment. The Physical space primarily consists of the set and scenic environment but the representation of this goes a long way to determine the spiritual environment. Proxemics advances the set and scenic environment beyond just the physical in any production. Proxemics according to Hall (1966) quoted in Folabo Ajayi (1998 p16) is the systematic analysis of space...relationship of space between actors, objects, set, audience's physical distance, authentic distance that people can relate to socially and culturally. He identifies three types of space; fixed feature space, semi fixed feature space and informal. The artistic environment therefore consists of the diverse geographical, emotional, knowledge environments, environment of consciousness and spiritual environment, because it is a basic human condition. According to Himizinga (2013 p155-158), "Life as a stage shows that performance and culture are actually interwoven", hence the efficacy of performance even in a situation of theatrical representation

Ritual as Liminal performance

Everywhere people mark the passing from one life to another- birth, social puberty, marriage and death etc. According to Schechner (2013 p66) Liminal is a period of time betwixt and between social categories or personal identities. During this phase, the work of rites of passage takes place. At this time, in specially marked spaces, transitions and transformations occur. Transition is a very prominent feature of the dance libretto *Rhythm of life* and dances contribute significantly in communication of the fluidity and constant flow and movement in transition.

Dance as communication art

For dance to be an effective medium of communication, movement, music, drama, gesture, mime and characterisation are important, in addition to the various other misc-en-scene such as scenenography, light, sound, props, costume, and make-up. Energy, Space and Rhythm are three strong elements in dance as a communication art, and according to Ajayi (1998 p16), it is the rhythm that binds the other elements in harmonious structure. In dance aesthetics other concerns are also important. Mcfee (2013p545) identified three parts of dance aesthetics namely; Concern over the role of intentions for understanding of his/her artworks recur vis-a-viz choreographer, issue shared with other performing arts, and having characteristic issues of its own. However, apart from the details of content there are questions about intentions and expectations that affect the relationships between performer and audience in much the same sort of ways (Hamilton p557)

"Rhythm of Life" by Gladys Ijeoma Akunna**Synopses**

Rhythm of Life by Ijeoma Akunna celebrates the duality and dialectical nature of life and its complexities. It revolves around a young man Emeka who sets on a voyage to unravel the mysteries behind his sufferings that are threatening his existence and even manhood. His personal Chi accompanies and helps him through all his miseries. In the course of this earthly

journey, providence brings him in contact with a lady, Adah whom he marries. Adah happens to be possessed by a spirit husband who out of jealousy deals severely with Emeka after killing her on their wedding day. However, Emeka is able to defeat the spirit husband with the help of a Dibia and his Chi, but could not save Adah from death.

Performances and the environments

We shall now explore the performances of *Rhythm of Life* by Ijeoma Akuuna to observe all the above and primarily to advance reasons for the different response to the environments of the productions. One performance was in 1999 while the other was in 2012. The 1999 performance was at the entertainment end of the efficacy-entertainment dyad. Response and involvement of the performers stayed primarily at the entertainment level. During the 2012 performance however, the audience and the performers experienced some kind of spirit possession that it necessitated the employment of spiritual exorcism and deliverance to calm the affected cast members and some audience members. The possession was so intense that it lingers for more than two days in some people. It manifested in hysterical shouts, laughter, crying/weeping, going into trance, and all other pronouncements that depict a kind of spiritual trance and possession.

During the first performance of 2012 production of the dance theatre, one of the acolytes was noticed to be hyperactive in performance. This was considered to be just a situation of mere overacting. The Choreographer had to wade in to calm down the acolytes off stage when her reactions turned to hysteria, and ironically no sooner than this happened than the Choreographer herself started to weep for no apparent reasons. This hysteria and spiritual ecstasy affected a number of the performers especially female and few members of the audience. The attendant hysteria continued for up to three days after the performance. It was also observed that actresses sporting hair braid were more seriously affected than others.

At this juncture we shall examine the environment of the performances under the following heading; theme, genre, setting, choreographic concept, interpretation, technique and style, technical production; props, make-up, costume, and sound effects and music. This is with a view to arrive at how the dance theatre impacted on the spiritual environment to elicit the differing response and reactions to different performances of the same dance libretto.

In 1999, the focus of the production was "Man's passage through life" while the emphasis of the 2012 production was "Man: A victim of his own choice..." This goes a long way to impact on the approach in production. We evolve a table to illustrate the differences in perspectives employed in the two productions.

| Items | 1999 Production | 2012 Production |
|--|---|---|
| Themes: | Transient nature of life | Transient nature of life |
| Genre: | Satire: life satirized as Emeka passes through it. | Melodrama: melodrama ends in death of one or more people at the end. |
| Concept: | Complexity | Choice |
| Interpretation: | Man's struggle through life | Man as a victim of his own choices. |
| Choreographic technique and styles: | Modern and traditional dance approaches. Symbolic and representational. | Simplified realism with elements of surrealism |
| Setting: Technical Production: set, lighting, sound effects and music, properties, } costume. } Props: Make-up: | Igbo setting White predominant colour with taints of blue. General flood lighting as a result of power outage. Performance ran on Generator with limited capacity to carry effects lanterns. Spirit voice effects According to concepts, mood, images and characters No totem for spirit husband. Spirit husband represented as "Esu" and not as Emeka's look alike. | Igbo setting Three locales: Chike's house, Adah's house, Supernatural world. Cyclorama painted sky blue. Low current also affected use of lighting effectively, but coloured gels were used. Riverine, forest animal effects Bright colours Spirit husband in white and purple Totem for spirit husband. Spirit husband-character make-up. Acolytes had long flowing hair like water spirit. Emekas Chi- Emeka's look alike but half human and half spirit. |

A discourse of *Rhythm...* and the Spiritual environment

From the above we do an analysis of the reasons for the impact that one of this productions had on the spiritual space and environment of the performer and the audience. We can deduce that myriad of artistic; choreographic, "danceturgical", dramaturgical, and technical decisions accounted for the display of potency and efficacy of the seemingly dormant codes, detonating the invocatory tendencies inherent in the potentially highly ritual libretto, and the resultant productions and its impact on the physic-spiritual environments of the performers and audience. Igbo worldview is conceptualized into three broad categories viz; Elu Igwe-Sky, Ala Mmnanuo-land of spirits and Ala Mmnanu- land of the living, each one depends on the other. The perception of life as being exciting and fascinating, full of adventure and travails which involve man in no small measure in the 1999 production mellows down the tragic and spiritual impact of the performance on the audience and the performers. On the other hand, the 2012

production sees the story as horror and suspense filled and that the interchange between the physical and spiritual world can only be achieved through exaggerated serious action which is melodramatic. This could be a strong factor responsible for the high emotional involvement that culminates in spiritual possession. According to Edwin (2004 p 201) Melodrama ends in two ways, either a victim is murdered or is overcome by evil or the victim overcomes evil. The distinct delineation of characters as evil and good not just on a voyage is the strong determinant of the intense spiritual possession in the 2012 production.

The alignment of the production style of realism and surrealism with literary style of the libretto and the classification of genre as melodrama can be said to be instrumental to the spiritual possession experienced.

According to Oyewo (2015 p531), "the fact that traditional festivals existing within a conventional museum have been relocated from their original context, denied of their socio-ritual relevance does not render them impotent nor deny them of their inherent spiritual power, but only make them dormant". In the same vein, the coded artifacts or props can take on potency if the original poetry or incantations are chanted during the period of enactment or re-enactment. All these are observable in the 2012 production, thus largely responsible for the spiritual possession experienced.

Two prominent "polarity" in Schechner's efficacy-entertainment dyad are discredited in the production under review. Schechner (2013p80) had identified among others that while the performer is possessed and in trance under the efficacy mode, he is self aware and in control in the entertainment mode. The possession exhibited debunks this assertion. The other assertion is that Audience believes in the efficacy while it only appreciates and evaluates in the Entertainment mode. The spiritual possession experienced further reinforces the believe that even in the entertainment the audience engage in the concept of a truthful lie, and in suspension of disbelief also exhibit spiritual ecstasy and possession.

In consonance with Schechner (2013, p 52), ritual and play lead people into a second reality and the performers are often temporarily transformed beyond the physical into the trance like state of possession in an efficacy-entertainment dyad. The performer's spiritual experience then influences the audience through spiritual "synesthesia". Ologundudu (2008, p130), reiterates the African "believe that there is life in all elements ...that God manifest in all elements, especially the supernatural energies... during worship the focus is on those energies"

Our arguments are that cultural renaissance focus of many contemporary plays, dance librettos and theatre performances leads to atavism, the words decoded in performance affect the environment of the performers and audience. Our findings reveal that some traditional play texts/dance librettos make use of potent literary materials which as exemplified in *Rhythm of Life* are energised by the realistic use of props, sound and music, make-up, totem items in a production style that unlocks the spiritual force and energy embedded in the script/librettos. This phenomenon is potentially dangerous for the various environments of the performers, performance and the audience and it is this that the paper attempts to address in the management of the environments in productions of African traditional dance theatres in the emerging trend of cultural renaissance.

CONCLUSION

Our conclusion is that though theatre has to do with aesthetic representation of reality, the world represented and encoded to be decoded in performance affect the environment of the dramatists/performer and audience. The cultural renaissance prominent in many contemporary dance librettos/plays leads to some form of atavism. The more contemporary plays and performances attempt to demystify and deconstruct the gods/goddesses and the esoteric, the more they unlock them through performance and reinforce the mysticism surrounding the esoteric. A proper understanding of the source material of these contemporary plays/performances is the only way to control the ethereal forces properly, because a lack of understanding will only lead to inadvertent territorial violation that will unlock a power beyond the control of the choreographer, “danceturgist” and dramatist.

This work also reveals among other things that the theatre goes a long way in the understanding of reality in Nigeria. That the environments affect each other, and in the situation of representation that the theatre is, reality can be invoked by touching on the cultural codes which appear dormant but ignitable through stage presentation of the dance librettos and play texts. The type of production styles engaged in translating the script into performance determines to a large extent the level of invocatory tendencies that could result and the degree of its impact on the physic-spiritual environments of the audience.

Finally, as long as there are dance librettos and plays addressing revival of interest in past African cultures and civilisation, atavism will continue to emerge in performances of such stories touching on the cultural codes which appear dormant, but ignitable through stage presentation of the libretto, and plays will continue to invoke the physical and spiritual environments of the performers and the audience-in a performance/efficacy mode phenomenon. The choreographer and Director must properly channel the energy for positive ends. We advocate non-realistic literary and production styles for culture based stories/ plays to prevent detonating the invocatory tendencies inherent in such scripts and the resultant productions and its impact on the physic-spiritual environments of the performers and audience.

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Student Projects

Macaulay, Temitayo O. et al (1999) "Man's Passage through Life as Conceived in Ijeoma Akunna's *Rhythm of Life*" Unpublished Long Essay Submitted to the Department of Performing Arts, University of Ilorin.

Folagbade, Kemi et al (2012) "Man: A Victim of His Own Choices as portrayed by Gladys Ijeoma Akunna in the *Rhythm of Life*" Unpublished Long Essay Submitted to the Department of Performing Arts, University of Ilorin.

Brief Bio:

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