

THE AESTHETIC VALUES OF DANCE DRAMA IN NIGERIA: THE UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT’S INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND CULTURE EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

In every human society, the need to provide entertainment and other recreational activities cannot be overemphasized. This is because man, in his very nature, has the urge and desire for relaxation. Man’s quest for leisure and entertainment is not unconnected to the fact that his immediate environment is largely associated with stress, occasioned by the daily needs for survival. This is because the natural impulses for imitation and socialization are ready factors that spur him to search for entertainment. The medium for entertainment may vary due to its content and form, but the emotional and physical satisfactions are the basics for his desire. Obviously, no matter the form of presentation, its cardinal role is for edification, entertainment, information, and, of course, education.

This theatrical mode seeks to reenact and present or represent man’s environment and activities. In traditional society, it could be presented in the form of folklore, festival, and masquerade performances. In the traditional theatre and others, the dance element is key to the realization of such performances. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defined dance as “a series of rhythmic and patterned bodily movements... performed to

music.” (291). The movement of the body to the patterned rhythm of music is in itself a vehicle for communication. Most times, the dramatic influence of dance brings the graphic details encased in the dance to the admiration of the audience. Hornby also defined dance as ‘a series of movements and steps that are usually performed to music, a particular example of these movements and steps: a dance class/routine. (385). Furthermore, the *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* describes drama as “a composition in verse or prose intended to portray life or character or to tell a story. Involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue and typically designed for theatrical performance (2002). Drama is a reflection of society. Its basic objective is to reenact or present human experience. This singular act helps to stimulate the actions of man. According to Jacobus, drama is:

The art of make-believe. It captivates children and adults from all societies and all walks of life. Make-believe consists in part of acting out events that happened or that we imagine happening. The primary ingredients of drama are characters, represented by players; action, described by gestures and movement;

thought, implied by dialogue and action; spectacle, represented by scenery and costumes; and finally, an audience, who respond to this complex mixture. (1).

Implicit in the above statement is that drama encompasses a whole lot of elements put together for the audience's delight. Dance, of course, is a component of drama that communicates and entertains the audience via rhythmic body movements. When a dance presents and reenacts the society, it therefore plays the role of drama. However, the difference is that while the conventional drama uses dialogue as a key element of communication, dance drama may not. The aesthetic value of dance drama lies in the fact that it explores necessary dramatic features in entertaining the audience. The presentation of dance drama is quite unique and outstanding. Wilson and Goldfarb observe that:

Each of the Asian theaters is unique, but these theaters also have aspects in common that set them apart from Western theater. To mention two: they rely much more on dance than Western theater does (in many instances, Asian theatrical presentations could be called dance dramas), and they emphasize symbolism. (112)

Dance drama is one of the oldest and finest art forms that harness viable theatricalities in the presentation of the environment, man, and society. Irisonanga agrees with this assertion when he says that "dancing is said to be as old as man. It is the desire to express or communicate joys or sorrows, to mourn or to celebrate... Dancing performs a vital function in human society... (156). Dance relieves emotions and creates mental pictures in the minds of the audience. The body movements and gestures are communicative facilities in dance. Hence, dialogue may not be necessary in dance drama; the use of movements, gestures, body position, costumes, and other related non-verbal elements becomes crucial. Hornby defined dance as "a series of movements and steps that are usually performed to music; a particular example of these movements and steps... (385). Like pantomime, the essence of dance drama is to present dramatic actions with minimal dialogue to the audience. This is noticeable in Julie Okoh's *We Are Rivers*, which was performed at the University of Port Harcourt Arts Theatre—*The Crab* on the 24th and 25th of April, 2013. Through the dance steps, the play presents the historical and cultural events of Rivers State via the pre-colonial, colonial, and contemporary periods. The panoramic presentation of the cultural heritage and the history of the oil-rich Rivers State sought for cultural rejuvenation and social reconstruction.

University of Port Harcourt: Institute of Arts and Culture – History and Performances

The University of Port Harcourt was established by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1978. The school is located at Choba town in the Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The Choba community is located along the East/West Road, Port Harcourt. The university has common boundaries with the Aluu communities and Alakahia towns along the East/West Road, Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. The need to harness and cultivate the traditional and the rich cultural heritages/activities in and around the university communities, among others, were the motivating factors that necessitated the establishment of the Institute of Arts and Culture (Arts Village). The Institute of Arts and Culture, University of Port Harcourt is an

International Arts Institution established in 2011 under the able leadership of Prof. (Mrs.) Julie Okoh. It is designed to function in collaboration with national and international arts institutes and academics and also in partnership with arts and entertainment industries to organize certificate and diploma programs in performing arts, visual arts, photography, film, television, radio, creative writing, costume, fashion, and makeup for various categories of students. (Culled from the journey so far (A report of the Institute of Arts and Culture, 2015).

Philosophy: It is our conviction that artistic experience is transformational. Exposure to the arts, particularly to the experience of production, helps people to give meaning to their lives and the lives of their neighbors. Through artistic productions, one can work against ethnic sentiments, gender discrimination, injustice, and oppression while canvassing a system that has value for peace, justice, equity, and respect for human dignity.

Vision: To create a world-class centre of excellence in the teaching and promotion of classical and contemporary artistic skills as well as nurture individual artistic talents as a way to advance innovations that challenge traditional norms in creative arts (Culled from a report of the Institute of Arts and Culture, 2015). Since its beginning, the Institute of Arts and Culture has lived up to its task. The Institute, under the leadership of Prof. (Mrs.) Julie Okoh, has presented a series of play productions, songs, dance, and poetry dramatization. Among the popular plays presented by the Institute are: *The Nativity*, *A Haunting Past*, and *We Are Rivers*, among others.

***We Are Rivers*: The Synopsis**

Set in Rivers State, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the dance drama presents the historical antecedents of the Rivers State via the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial (contemporary) periods. The play emphasizes the lifestyle, culture, and traditions of the people of Rivers State before, during, and after colonization. Basically, agricultural activities were the major livelihood of the people before the coming of the white men. The people were at peace with their traditional religion, masquerade display, new yam festival, wrestling, and other cultural and traditional exigencies before colonization. The dance drama reveals, "Culture is the ways of life of a people; our traditional culture has been eroded by alien cultures and influences" (iii).

The colonial period witnessed the introduction of foreign religions such as Christianity, among others. This period also witnessed the signing of the treaty of protectorate between the people and the colonial masters. At this period, the people of Rivers State in particular and Nigeria in general were under the rulership and control of the colonial masters. The post-colonial period is said to be the time of liberation and freedom from the colonial influences. At this period, the people clamoured for control of their mineral resources due to total neglect of the area by the federal government and other multinational companies. This agitation turns to anti-social behaviours such as militancy, kidnapping, and other social violence. The play also presents Rivers State from two perspectives: The upland and riverine dichotomy. The upland people are hardworking farmers, traders, and hunters, while the riverine people of the state are good fishermen/women and traders. *We Are Rivers* seeks harmony and economic, political, and social reconstruction of Rivers State.

Dance: A Brief Review of Rudolf Laban Laban Dance Theory

Rudolf Laban was born in 1879 and died in 1958. He was a teacher, dancer, choreographer and theoretician. He developed labanotation which is widely used and accepted as movement notation system. "In the 1940s Laban expounded and formalised his belief that there is an inner impulse that supports movement and a visible representation of that impulse through man's organization of space and the qualities of the movement, which his collaborators called effort. (www. exhibitions.lib.und.edu). Rudolf Laban, a Hungarian born choreographer also emphasised on "Laban Movement Analysis". Woltmann informs that "Laban Movement Analysis provides a vocabulary and framework to better understand how to use the body to express emotion through movement" (www.backstage. com). It is further noted that Laban Movement Analysis helps, actors and dancers to better and enhance their skills. The basics or Laban Movement Analysis Theory anchors on the utilization and functionality of: body, efforts, shape and space and other variables. Other key aspects or LMA theory that must not be glossed over include but not limited to observation, movement, body language and characterization amongst others. It is believed that for a good dancer/choreographer to achieve his/her goal for the admiration of the audience, the Laban Movement Analysis theory must be employed and utilized, hence, the deliberate effort to emphasis this theory as a critical pivot in the discussion and analysis of Julie Okoh's *We Are Rivers*.

The Concept of Dance Drama

As stated earlier in this paper, dance drama is a dramatic performance that emphasizes mainly on the use of dance to tell a story. It is dramatic because every aspect or element of drama and theatre is represented. There is conflict, surprise, action, non-verbal dialogue, actors, stage, storyline, and of course the audience. It is claimed that "dance drama is mostly professionally referred to as narrative dance. The intention of dance-drama is to narrate a coherent story and do it through a sequence of actions and movements" (178). It is on the foregoing assertion that Uwah informs that:

Dance dramas are narrative performances imbued with choreographed dance steps, gestures and mimes. Whereas actors are mainly dancers in such a drama, the tool they use is essentially their body...When writing about an ethnic group, one has to portray their way of life which cannot be complete without including their dancing styles (2019, p. 350)

When dance is majorly used as a theatrical genre targeted at entertaining the audience, it is called dance drama. Dance is an ephemeral art that helps to relieve tension and create atmosphere. Also, dance drama is a theatrical performance that is characterized by dance to tell a story. In the light of the above assertion, Musa says that '... for theatre to happen, two people, actors and audience, must come together at a certain time and in a certain place.' (175).

The Aesthetic Values of Dance Drama in *We Are Rivers*

Use of Dance Sequences/Songs

The beauty of the play lies in the use of dance to show the various periods and events that happened in Rivers State during the period under review. Through the use of dance sequences and songs, the gap between the three major periods in the play was graphically vivified. As a basic technique explored in the play, dance did not only serve as an interlude but also helped in

communicating the themes of the play to the audience. "Dance sequences and pantomime capture the traditional ways of life in the region before the first white man stepped into its shore" (iv).

Song is yet another element that highlighted the aesthetic value in the play. Like dance, song tells the message or the idea of the play to the audience. It also reinforces the action of the play. The song reads:

Yes, we are Rivers from Rivers State.
The Treasure base on the Nation
Made up of upland and lowland
Our lifestyle reflects the unique
Landscape of our region (3).

The Use of Costumes/Make-up

The use of suitable costumes and make-up in the performance paraded high aesthetic values. This is because the costumes revealed periods of action and historical antecedence. The use of costumes helped in separating the actions and events of the pre-colonial period from the colonial era and the post-colonial activities. The play reads:

Costumes should be used to highlight the different periods of history. From raffia palm clothing, loom-woven materials, woolen materials, and Holland's wax material to India George, velvets, damask, and contemporary materials... to indicate dress culture... (v)

Despite the artistic use of clothes (costumes) on stage to reenact events, every occupational engagement uses one form of work dress (clothing) or another. The essence of it is not only to protect human skin but also to suggest, or rather tell, or distinguish one profession from another. Also, costumes help in delineating periods and class and create emotion and atmosphere. Based on the above statement, Hornby defined costume as "the clothes worn by people from a particular place or during a particular historical period... the clothes worn by actors in a play or film/movie..." (262).

The Use of Storytelling Technique

As a classical example of episodic plot structure, the play is presented in parts; hence, the use of a storytelling device. Most, if not all, the scenes were introduced by a narrator. The narrator presents the actions or events to the audience via storytelling. The use of this technique lures the audience into participating in the performance. The play reads thus: (*Moves towards the audience*)

I am the leader of the group.
You may call me the storyteller.
They are my fellow Rivers' men and women.
They will join me to tell our story.
Hoping that after listening to our story
You'll take appropriate steps.
To look into our case seriously... (3).

Like every other epic drama, the narrator controls the actions of the play. Like the Greek choruses, the narrator

intermittently narrates the dramatic actions. As an actor, his business is to create dramatic sequences and reinforce the action of other actors when necessary.

The Use of Mime

The dramatic action does not solely anchor or communicate ideas through dialogue alone, but the use of non-verbal techniques helps in communication processes. The use of mime or pantomime sufficiently enhanced the aesthetic values of the play. Communication was creatively made effective in the performance due to the use of gestures and other body mechanics. The basic instrument used in pantomime is the body. In this process, the human body becomes a communication indicator or facilities that transmit non-verbal signals. With the use of mime, the actions, emotions, feelings, ideas, and essence of the play could be assimilated by the audience. This is evident in the play's stage direction, thus: "(Simultaneous miming of actions being narrated, especially the coronations, wars, and the exile of the king)." (27).

The Use of Dialogue

Picture Stories of Some Performances Done by the Institute of Arts and Culture, University of Port Harcourt



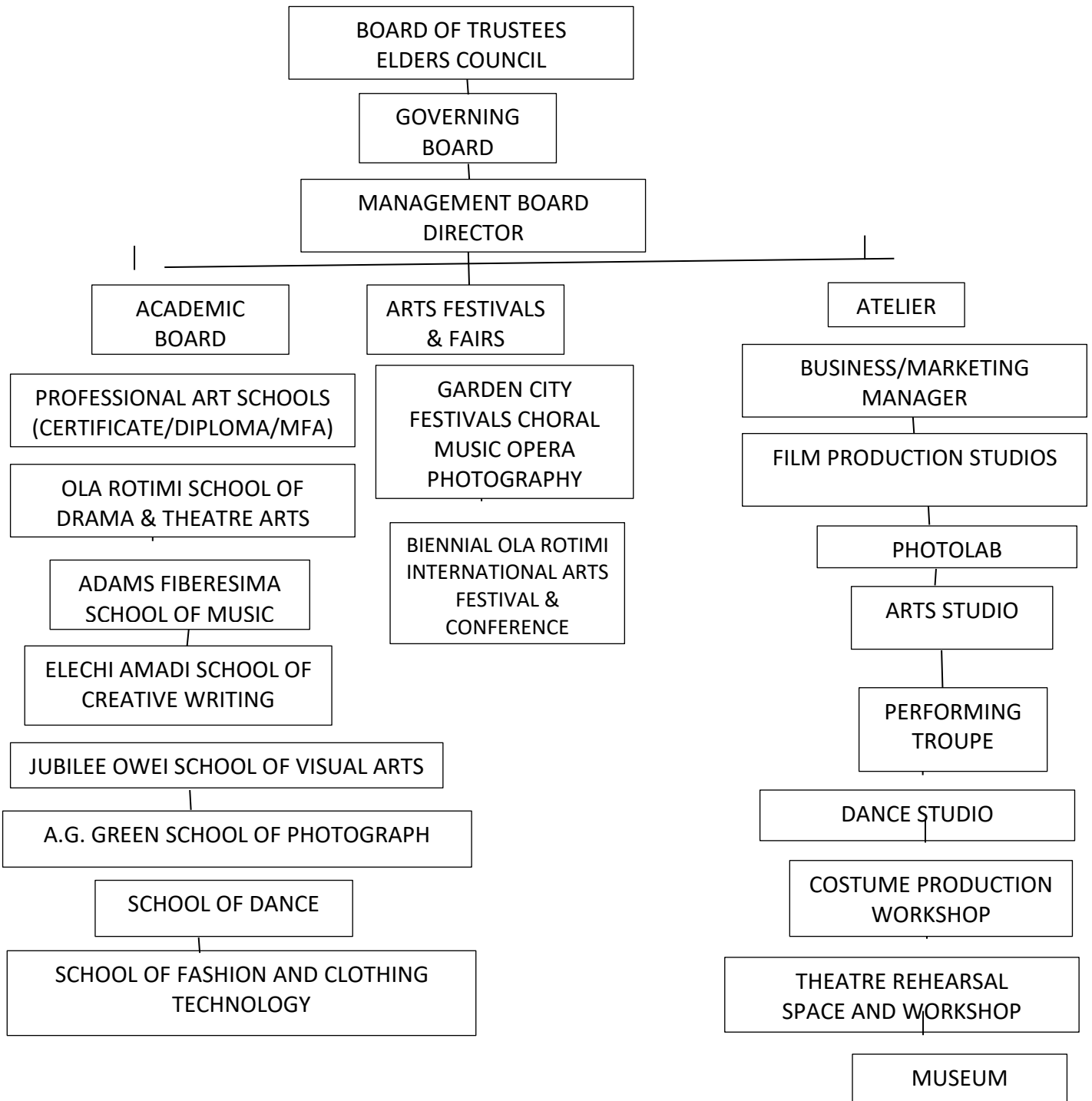
Dialogue is one of the factors that creates beauty in the play. The mastery uses of language enhanced aesthetics value. Simply put, the language of the play is straightforward and effective for communication. Through the dialogue, the various activities and events that took place in the play were graphically presented and communicated to the audience. The Grandfather was able to tell the Boy their experience during their contact with the Whiteman through dialogue thus:

Grandfather: Hmm, since the white men came to our land, everything has turned upside down... At first, the white men came to us in a friendly way. Later, they brought paper to us to sign to cement our relationship. We really thought they were friends.

Boy: You mean they weren't?

Grandfather: They played a fast trick on us. They made our kings sign some papers, the content of which they hardly understood. (24).

ORGANOGRAM OF INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND CULTURE UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT



Culled from Institute of Arts and Culture (A REPORT, 2015)

Recommendations

Having critically examined the aesthetic values of dance drama in Nigeria, with a detailed concentration on the university of Port Harcourt’s Institute of Arts and Culture experience, the paper puts forward the following recommendations thus:

- ❖ It is a modest recommendation of this paper that dance drama and its aesthetic values should be promoted in the

Nigerian nation due to its educative, informative and entertainment importance. This will not only provide requisite theatrical needs but will serve as means of emotional, physical and psychological expressions in time and space.

- ❖ It is also a fervent recommendation of this work that higher institutions of learning and other cultural organizations should as a point in fact, be encouraged to

establish Centres or Institutes of Arts and Culture as a means of preserving and promoting the people's cultural heritage.

- ❖ It is recommended that government and other well-spirited individuals should be encouraged to promote and sponsor arts exhibitions and other cultural activities in the Nigerian nation to meet the performance needs of the artiste (dancers) and the audience.
- ❖ The cultural practitioners should be adequately rewarded in monetary values and other social recognitions to encourage productivity.
- ❖ The paper is of a kind opinion that dance drama be captured or rather included in the educational curriculum in all levels of education in Nigeria to serve as non-verbal teaching model. The dance drama (pentomic dramatization) should be promoted in society due to its rich non-verbal aesthetics values.

Conclusion

In this paper, the aesthetic values of dance drama were critically highlighted and discussed adequately. The paper studied Julie Okoh's *We Are Rivers* as a guide. Effort was made on analysing and evaluating some key aesthetic values such as body movements, dance steps, costume/make-up, dialogue, symbols, and songs, among others. The work noted that dance drama is one of the vibrant theatrical genres that are saddled with the responsibilities of entertaining and communicating ideas, emotions, and feelings to the audience. In the play, the issues/activities that surround the developmental strides of Rivers State were emphasised. Furthermore, the play chronicles the historical antecedence of the state to include the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Each of these historical epochs was presented through the instrumentality of dance sequences and was made graphic through the use of costumes to depict occurrences. Basically, however, the thematic thrust of the play centres on the call for unity, peace, and progress vis-à-vis the cultural and social reconstruction of Rivers State in particular and the Niger Delta of Nigeria in general.

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