



Choreographing “Sunset at Noon?” Towards the Exploration of a Theatre of “Shufflism”.

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Abstract. Live theatre practice in Nigeria is arguably suffering from the effects of poor documentation of the wonderful experimental feats practitioners have stumbled upon in the course of their relentless search to push forward the frontiers of theatre practice. Scholars have therefore at best struggled to fit such works (for the few that have been attempted) within the tenets and norms of established theater traditions and conventions of old. This paper has attempted in the face of the many performance poetics that gave credence to the cultures and emerging cultures in music, dance, drama and the technical theatre idioms that gave identities to experimental tendencies wrapped in the traditions of postmodernism, globalization, hybridism, etc, to give scholarly voice to one of such brilliantly put together experimental bid haven come into existence since 2004. Shufflism that is pushed forward as a new radically postulated theatre tradition in this paper was a product of an experimental class by the 2004/2005 M.A class of the Performing Arts students of Unilorin, Nigeria through the production of their play ‘Sunset at Noon?’. The paper discovers amongst other things that the tenets that are linked to the new theatre approach are new, original and creative innovations and approaches that suited the cause to which they were set. The paper is both descriptive and analytical of the content and context that gave birth to the new theatre tradition. It is therefore hoped that the paper will generate reactions and counter reactions that will not only give deserving voices to the articulation and spread of this brilliant theatre tradition, but others also which has suffered stunted growth over the years like it shall be liberated.

Keywords: Choreography, Sunset, Shufflism, Exploration, Theatre.

1. Introduction

In the annals of the Nigerian live theatre history, it is noteworthy to emphasize that theatre practice is indeed going through a recession in terms of experimentally evolving newer and better functional theatre traditions that may atone for the limitations of the already

established four theatre traditions in Nigeria. Indeed, Effiong Johnson hinted on this gap before now, when he lamented that much attention has been devoted to dramatic theory and criticism in the Nigeria theatre, while little attention is paid to the documentation of the works of the directors. This prompted him to submit that all directors of the experimental works must evolve an approach which;

...guards the aesthetic of ... the practice. Haven had one whose work-ability, has been rested... you have the more demanding responsibility of having it documented for the benefit of mankind (Johnson, 2003, p.107)

This is why, adding to the four known theatre traditions, namely; - the indigenous/ traditional theatre tradition, the popular theatre tradition, the literary theatre tradition, and the postmodern theatre tradition; the experimental phase must also be nationally acknowledged while identified prospective endeavors such as the Shufflism tradition be examined in all its ramification and if found adequate, can be adopted and made to flourish like others.

2. Shufflism: A Postulation

This is a performance concept that emanated from the root word ‘shuf’ which implies, to “walk without lifting the feet or with clumsy steps and a shambling gait. to scrape the feet over the floor in dancing. to move clumsily...” (The Oxford English Dictionary). In the same vein, the term ‘shuf’ in Arabic public language context means “look”, neither “see” nor “lips”. This is because “Shuf” is an order for someone to see, which in English means “look”. In the case of card playing situation, the term ‘shuffle’ is used to denote the action of randomly re-arranging or changing the order, placement or position of the cards before dolling them to the players on the table. With all the varieties above, the idea of Shufflism can be said to be eclectic of the total variables as it gained its appropriacy from the constant shuffling exercise that was used as a changing device for the scenes, characters and moments in the card playing theatre-

performance sessions. Besides, a prominent feature of Shufflism is the shuffling movements and actions that the actors engage at the close of one scene in order to transit to the next.

Our artistic yearning draws inspiration from the fact that true art must constantly engage in the quest of finding out what it was fundamentally about as against what it is, and certainly not about the limitations people places on it. This is a quest, Noguchi hinted upon as wanting to “find a way of sculptor that was humanly meaningful without being realistic, at once abstract and socially relevant (Roose-Evans, 1984, p.4)”.

Therefore, our search looked for theatre in odd places to see if theatre and sports, and indeed, theatre and card playing sessions can ever share same water source. We intend to move further to know how and the extent to which it can go? To carry such a mantle, we first had to negotiate if from the path where six performance factorial inducements meet. These inducements are identified as being the:

- essence of a performance
- performer
- performance as constituted
- audience
- performance space
- kind of adopted/ required performance elements

The quest, whether seen as a purely radical tendency or a realistic gab to keep stretching the walls of human reasoning in the case of unveiling Shufflism, necessitated an alien approach at looking at theatre both in content and context.

3. Emergence of Shufflism: Stroll down the Memory Lane

The performance was on the 11th of August, 2004 at the Performing Arts Courtyard of University of Ilorin (mini campus) a total of about seven members of the M.A in Performing Arts students that incidentally were the first set of Postgraduate programme were saddled with the task of conceiving and executing a theatre tradition away from the known conventions in existence. The course was taught by Prof. Ezekiel Kofoworola and ???, Being a performance workshop course where each of the pioneering students; Tayo Arinde (Artistic Director) Emoruwa Felix Damilola (Choreographer and Musicologist), Peju Shuaib (Costumes), Adeshina Adegbite (Technical Theatre) and Gbenga Rotimi (the Stage and Business Manager) etc, were expected to bring their expertise to bear.

4. The performance of game and the game of performance in “Sunset at Noon?": towards a Theatre of Shufflism

Following most major postulations in the theatre, there will always be a play to test the weakness or appropriacy of the hypothesis. This is what *Oedipus Rex* did to Aristotle’s poetics, it is also what *Death of a Salesman* did to Author Millar’s tragedy of the common man, *Mother Courage and her Children* did to Bertolt Brecht's Alienation Theory, what the *Slave Girl* and other plays did to Effiong Johnson’s Folkism, Adeoye’s the *Smart Games* did to his Neo-Alienation theory, and what *Mountain of Wealth* did to Akinwale’s Straight-take performance technique, amongst several other examples. Fort the production of the “Sunset at Noon?”, the pre-production and the production phases were done thus:

4.1 Performance approach

In our bid to experiment, the class decided on setting some grand rules that will govern and condition every inch of the production. The card session was considered and adopted in all its entirety. Poka game can go in any direction so there is no rule favoring any actor, be you considered as the protagonist or antagonist, you are temporarily and basically reacting to the antics of the opposition before you. First, each member of the class was made to device a theatre production that essentially highlights their individual areas of interest. Haven done this, we then cut out fragments from these plots to make a new whole story. Based on this, it was not mandatory for the story to teach morals or end well or fall within the expectations of the audience. After all, it is a game and depending on the virtuoso of the gamer/ artistes and their power to enforce and exhaust the power of spontaneity and resilience to match and counter the antics of their opponent.

This is why it is possible for a production to end-up differently if performed more than once. The theatre tradition borrowed from the technique of inquiring from the audience how they want the play to end as seen in the Theatre of alienation by Bertolt Brecht, AbdulRasheed Adeoye’s ‘Neo-Alienation Theatre’, Felix Okolo’s ‘Aruku Shanka’ Theatre tradition and Ayo Akinwale’s ‘Straight Take’ theatre technique, amongst others.

The entire performance duration is flexible. The scenes/ movements/ gamuts in-between the progression is characteristic of sectional game sessions within the complete whole that accounts for the beginning through to the moment the gaming

session is finally called off. This is why at the end of each sectional game/ scene, a re-shuffling ritual of all cards (actors) is a compulsory device. This reshuffling is achieved by the momentary and instantaneous flooding of the entire nooks and cranny of the stage, the duration of which must be very brief, precised and definite according to a deployed rhythm. The dust of event must settle as quickly as possible to set the stage for the next scene. The music and dance is of importance here as the jamming, crisscrossing and entangling movements and actions in the name of re-shuffling must be fascinating yet functional, in creating the ambience for the next scene.

Distortive tendency approach and devices were creatively applied to the play through the characters as weapons to help dislodge whatever obstacles the opponent might intentionally want to pull. Hence, the dialogue in this kind of play is deliberately kept short, rhythmic and repetitive by the dancers/chorus on stage.

4.2 The dancers as human props, actors and set properties.

It should be noted that any one of the dancers on stage can assume any character provided he or she is adorned with the identifiable props or costume fragment that has helped to establish the character in the first place. This is why the actors can dress up in the full gear of the audience the spontaneous maneuvering of any human props to enhance the action of the actor is seen as an applaud-able device.

No narrator is required.

All actors must come on stage from the point of tableaux including the (drummers) and remain visibly on stage from the beginning to the end (curtain call)

No new characters can be introduced following the rule that it is only the doled-out cards that can be used for a game and that it costs one a chance to play if he or she were to seek a bale out card.

All characters on the table must continue to breath to qualify them active and through a metronome beat that was introduced by a striking a gong from the moment the play begins permeating through to the curtain call. The gong device becomes integral to the Shufflism kind of production as it clearly bridges the artistic and gaming notions rolled into one of the theatre traditions.

Minimalist props and costumes on stage since both elements are meant to be symbolic and highly representational. First all, the entire cast wore black

leotards serving as basics upon which fragments of cloths, caps or any other pieces of item is hurriedly attached or removed to suggest characters enhanced with the movements, mannerism and action quality of the actor in question.

Theme and character song is helpful. Lighting the production was highly blended as some hand torches were introduced for emphasis sake. Dancers were positioned and made to momentarily climb on one another to form street poles of about??/? height upon which the turn on and focus on a given area of the stage/ character that is meant to be highlighted. Other dancers/ actors too their own personal torches used at times to demarcate any given performance area for a scene. Doors and entrance positions were creatively achieved using ropes that was held by two dancers and at times just a dancer's arm that is spread out but maneuvered to open in or outside the imaginary set that is created only by the outlining layers of the dancers.

No physical set properties required because it was argued that the game of card can be played anywhere and anytime. It is therefore a formalist inclined theatre technically. This serves both artistic and aesthetic functions. For instance, the ease with which the human lighting poles were erected and dismantled at precised timing was priceless and seamless.

Therefore, "Shufflism" as we have it coined, is anchored on the transitions and the medley of actions whereby movements are explored randomly inward and outwardly to lead the plot lines from one bus stop to the other. It also allows the dancers to change and be prepared for such changes and above all, it allows the audience to relay or detach themselves from any registered or fixated locale/setting/period, into the ones that are newly arrived at by the ingenuity of the performers

4.3 The Audience

The audience in this kind of theatre are defined only in respect to what we expect from a game's session; that is of particular interest to card playing. Often, the audience or onlookers to such instances are rapt in the flow of the game/theatre, while at other times they may just choose to observe the game/theatre but detached nonetheless from it. So, let us say simply that the audiences we expect for this kind of theatre are at liberty to choose how and whether they are going to be at variance with the artistic product or not. Therefore, we expect a mixed reaction from the audience at the end of the day, some disappointed that we did not play a card the way they expected us to, implying that a

scene or action may not be realized in the order(convention) that they are used to, nor expected to be.

Naturally, the gamers/producers are ever out to pull surprises even if it means odd and awkward tricks at times, just to beat the imaginations of their audience. Nevertheless, while the game must abhor cheating and boredom which may arise from not playing according to the agreed criteria, we shall also ensure that the audience understands the plot structures meaning that the story is expected to be as simple as possible.

4.4 The performers

Talking about performers, we shall be talking about two different sets of entities or levels of commitment. First, there is the crew, who in reality are the conceivers and designers of the product and the actors/players who are parts of the medium through which the artistic products are produced, advertised and sold.

Expectations for the crew, in thinking and application of their artistic wares they must first resolve to make the actors come first. If an effect can be achieved using the actors, then it is mandatory that such a member of

4.5 The Performance

The plot structure and synopsis has been discussed fully in the general introduction section but here lies the sequence of actions for emphasis sake, emphasis because there is need to show clearly how the treatment of the workshop emphasizes our postulations and most essentially its identity- “Shufflism”.

<u>Action sequences for the play “Sunset at Noon?”</u>	<u>Realms</u>
The tableaux...negotiations and betting	1&2
The 1 st shuffling moment	1&2
Naming ceremony	3
Shuffling	2&3
The flashbacks and the narrator i.e mother, Babalawo, church, mind conflicts	3
The youthful exuberance Tukete and the children	3
Shuffling	2
Aunty arrives for Morenike	3
Lagos/Ojuelegba as shuffling	2&3
Lagos-marriage proposal	3
Shuffling	2
Marriage	2&3
Shuffling+death and burial scenes in dance	2&3
Lagos, Morenike’s sickness persists	3
Shuffling	3
Village to parents, to Babalawo	
- transition to the past, then back to Babalawo	3
Epilogue/score count	1,2&3.
(while in epilogue, the arrangement at ‘1&2’ are as it was in the tableaux)	

Now that this background information has been given, let us now attempt to relate the extent to which dance

crew should use them and disregard other devices. The actors must be accessible to all the crew members as tools to display their skills with, on equal basis.

African cosmology was portrayed through mediums that relays the concept of creation as contained in some African myths. Representative of this is the pile-up of ‘instruments’ as a heap at the Up Stage Centre of the stage comprising props, musical equipment and costumes. Sitting above this heap are the dancers who served as the custodians to these properties or the creator(s)- drummers from whom we believe, the rhythms of the varied actions of the actors/dancers emanates from. They are the only one meant to face the audience from that realm of the stage, ‘USC’ thereby serving as the back stage.

The second realm (below the heap) sits the entire cast. It is referred as their home ancestrally and this explains why they must back the audience throughout the course of the actions in the play. From these two realms the actors move trance-like to act their parts on stage at the third realm and then returns to the second realm only after the expiration of their actions. This is in line with the popular Yoruba saying “Aye l’ajo, Orun ni ‘le” meaning “the world is a place of sojourn while heaven remains our home”.

and music are employed for the final success of the production “Sunset at Noon?”

4.6 Applications of Music in “Sunset at Noon?”

Both the music and dance are mediums that go hand in hand even as we try hard to divorce them from one another. Hence, as the choreographer, I was saddled with the responsibility of treating music along with dance for the workshop. We were resolved and committed to experiment on the old applications of these two mediums, and perhaps, invent new possible ways by which they can be put to use. Therefore, our resolve follows that we cut down on any focus that is aimed at direct entertainment, which implies that the medium is the message and the message remains the entertainment. We cut down/minimized our use of the membranous instruments and concentrated on percussive ones instead.

From the beginning of the piece to the curtain call, a constant beat of the body of a big drum was devised; it remains constant in pitch, velocity and accuracy (of crotchet beat time lag). Other compositional sounds/rhythms fluctuate in and out of this constant beat. The constant beat was devised to serve two functions; first, to synchronize with the flow of constancy that the dancers at the second realm were observing, and to also serve as the heartbeat of this game/performance which stops only when the performance comes to an end. Mainly, the instruments employed ranges from two Sekere, Omele Bata, gongs, wooden body of drums as percussive devices etc. We made use of compositional songs that are witty and satirical in nature, we ensured that chants and clapping are done only as at when they may be seen relevant to the setting and context of the plot line in question.

The most remarkable thing done musically (and perhaps via dance too) was in working with silence. Silence was re-enforced at intervals as we believe that rhythms might either be ‘audible’ or ‘inaudible’ but as long as certain actions can pass in unison, they of course must follow a definite inaudible timing which only their hearts alone can hear, but through which the choreographer must impose and structure their actions. Hence, momentary silence and pauses are regulated segments of the actions adopted to impose musical emphases on situations, actions or character traits.

4.7 Application of dance in the workshop performance of “Sunset at Noon?”

Like music, we had equal considerations for dance. Essentially, our choreographic concentrations were

more stylistic than to appear folk like, by which term we meant that we ran away from dances and steps that have labels attached to them such Bata dance, Swange etc. instead, we created movements that were expressionistic in nature. The choreographic movements were drawn from gymnastic and fundamental loco-motor movements.

The general kinds of fundamental loco-motor movements from where dancers draw from for the execution of their peculiarities include: running, hopping, jumping, kneeling, bending, crawling, walking, sliding, swaying, turning, stepping, springing, twisting etc. In fact, the list here is endless as any kind of action, shape/motif, or posture the body is capable of achieving qualities as a separate unit, a move; that is the idea of movement in the general sense of it. Some of these movements are within the confines of ideational boundaries meaning they tell stories or express implied meanings, while the most concentrative area of movements creation is within the confines of studied movements/dances, by this we mean that attentions are focused on the parts of the body which are isolatedly utilized to function as a dance. Therefore, in outlook, the employed movements might appear acrobatic, subtle, gentle, punctuative and energy packed or may be ritualistically trance-like, swirling, shuffling, or of kicks, jumps etc.

Other determining factors for the degree of execution of these steps ranges from considerations of the extent of the dancer’s flexibility, age sex, agility and bearing within the harmonious dictates of the plot structure. Movements therefore may in any case be of high, medium, low or ground levels. Directionally, movements were composed to follow a forward, backward and/or sideways order of progression as they create patterns, ranging from circular, linear, zigzag, serpentine, triangular, semi-circular and of course in the centripetal and centrifugal order. The latter occurs mostly in the shuffling bits creating a kind of distortion, confusion and or disarray, which allows for scene and character transitions and as an avenue to change costumes for the players.

Using human forms to atone for many demands placed by lack of set and other such (supposedly relevant) materials, the dancers/players were used as stage props, stage sets, decor, cyclorama, step unit, risers etc. For instance, all the sitting players at the second realm were backing the audience and the base line of their backs created an imaginary wall, which atones for the conventional cyclorama. Same effect was recorded in the door-creating device and entrance/exit points using human structures always after shuffling

moments in order to arrive at the next local and scenes in plot lines.

Purposefully, the entertainment values of dance were downplayed in scenes of naming and marriage ceremonies against what might be expected in most conventional theatre practices. However, in order to stress the functionality and independence of dance, two scenes were credited to transmit entirely via dance. These were the 'tableaux' where the summary version of plot-line was most skillfully attempted, and the 'death and burial scene' which entirely was left to dance even as it devoid of songs, chants etc except for rhythmic sounds.

4.8 Choreography as employed

Choreography is defined by Anderson to simply mean "the craft of making and arranging the dance" (1974, p.9). this view was assented to when the new Encyclopedia Britannica (1998:267) that the only absolute rules in choreography are that "it should impose order upon dance beyond the level of pure improvisation and that it should shape dance in the three dance dimensions of space and the fourth dimension of time, as well as according to the potential of the human body".

Whether dance predates the concept of choreography or both evolved using the same umbilical cord, what is essential is that every dance is a product of choreography as choreography directly manifests the choreographer's capabilities. Hence, it is possible to create dances for any and every occasion of life. These may be in pure dance form, as dance drama or dance theatre or even as an experimental outlook such as this, the over-riding aim of choreographing, is to communicate; to tell a story, emotions or sell an idea through the medium of dance. He is to dance, what the artistic director is to drama or what the musicologist is to music. Essentially, therefore, his primary material with which he works, remains the bodies of the dancers while other elements become only but secondary considerations.

Since the choreographer shares a common creative denominator with the music counterpart in terms of rhythms which is central to both. He/she is often seen working very closely with the musicologist and music conductor. Where such offices do not exist such as was the situation in our experimental crew chart, the onus

of devising "music" often falls naturally on the choreographer.

5. Conclusion

The paper has examined the artistic and aesthetic merits in the production of the experimental play "Sunset at Noon?" and have equally brought out the tenets and conventional rules following the propagation of the theatre of Shufflism. The paper therefore, has descriptively and analytically put the Shufflism as a theatre tradition worthy of practice and acceptance by the global theatre community. It is hoped that the paper shall generate more reactions through which the experimental bid can be further improved upon.

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