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To Build Dancing Steps On A Story



Creating new dances: members of Ghana's National Dance Company (The Dance Ensemble) in dress rehearsal

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CREATING NEW DANCES TO SATISFY GROWING THEATRICAL ASPIRATIONS OF GHANAISANS has been the concern of choreographers for sometime now. This concern has grown out of theatre-goers' lukewarm attitude towards continued staging of traditional dances in their original state.

Presentation of 'raw' traditional dances was necessary in the 1950's, when agitation for self-rule was rife, with calls by local politicians for the people's identification with traditional cultural forms, as against the excessive assimilation of foreign ones. Traditional dances, therefore, were at the centre of the culture emancipation envisaged, and were performed during political rallies and in major social events. The small theatres of Accra, the national capital, were filled with traditional dances performed mainly by amateur groups. Today, the love for dance as pure theatre has brought about new creative approaches in dance and professionalism

in presentations.

New artistic enlightenment brought about by education in aesthetic feelings and choreographic art at the School of Performing Arts since the 1960s, has influenced people's quest for educational and theatrical dancing. They want to see well-developed choreographic structures in dance presentations, and are prepared to look at the forms for their own sake. In other words they want a total theatricalisation of dance, which also portrays new illusions. The people, therefore, feel that whatever resources that would be borrowed from traditional sources should be adapted to fit into the process of creative dance.

While theatre-goers, with cultivated artistic taste, shun the presentation of traditional dances in their 'raw' forms, they appreciate new developments of dances that combined varieties of artistic techniques, as well as creative uses of traditional models. Sensitive Ghanaian choreographers have been working towards this realisation.

The following discussion examines some aspects of the creative technique of one such choreographer.

The Story of the Orphan

When I was asked by my colleagues, towards the end of 1992, to do a choreography for the Dance Division of the School of Performing Arts and the University of Ghana, I decided on a traditional folktale for a dance-drama. I sat down one evening to review some story telling sessions I had participated in during my childhood days and chose one portraying the problems of the orphan.

The story is about a young female orphan who has been expelled from home by the uncle's wife for breaking a jug. She journeys through the thick forest, meets animals, sleeps in the rain, eats fruits and finally meets the ghosts of her deceased mother, father and four sisters, who eventually give her a new jug to be taken to the uncle's wife as replacement. The ghosts also give the orphan a mirror as a parting gift. When she returns to her home the orphan presents the jug to the family, but her mirror is taken by the two daughters of the uncle. The family struggle for the mirror, in the process it drops and breaks into pieces. The ghosts appear in the house to retaliate the punishment of the orphan, by causing the family to die in a flame.

In order to make the traditional story convenient for dance-drama, I had to recreate it, inserting new characters, properties and ideas, and arranged it into four sections of Prologue, Act I, Act II, and Act III. These sections, with titles, are described below.

Prologue - The Wicked Family

The orphan lives with a wicked family, consisting of her drunken uncle, the wife and two daughters. The orphan shabbily dressed, wakes up at dawn and does the house chores. One day she over-sleeps. The uncle's wife wakes her up, beats her and forces her to wash the utensils. As she washes, a jug drops and breaks into pieces. The orphan is assaulted by the uncle's wife and two daughters and expelled from the house to find a replacement. She carries along the broken pieces. The drunken uncle foolishly supports the misdeeds of his family.

Act I - Forest Life

The orphan arrives in the forest and meets friendly frogs by a lake. They carry her around and console her. They sing for her, she falls asleep. Frogs depart. Dwarfs find her asleep and carry her into the deep forest. She is laid in a hammock. The dwarfs perform a ritual dance around her, discover that she comes from a wicked home and has never been loved. They therefore make her fall in love with the gorilla for her to experience the pleasures of love. Gorilla treats her well, carries her around and feeds her with fruits. They dance together. Unfortunately gorilla is killed by a hunter. The orphan mourns. The dwarfs and representatives of the families of crow, python, monkey, horse, kangaroo and tiger join the orphan to mourn the dead gorilla.

Act II - Ghost Town

Sad and lonely, the orphan continues her journey in the thick forest in search of a jug, and meets four young female ghosts. They recognise the orphan as their only living sister, and take her home to meet their ghost father and mother. The ghosts are happy for seeing the orphan and celebrate the occasion with a meal. The orphan is supplied with new clothes and gorgeously dressed for the occasion. However, she must return to her earthly home since the living does not live among ghosts. On the day of departure the orphan is given a new jug to take to the wicked family as replacement. In addition she is given a mirror as a parting gift.

Act III - The Punishment

The orphan returns to her earthly home and presents the jug to the wicked family. The daughters see the mirror in her bag, struggle with her and take away the mirror. The drunken uncle collects the mirror from his daughters. The wife joins the husband and two daughters to look at themselves in the mirror. They see their reflections and are happy, for this is the first time of seeing a mirror in their life. Suddenly they begin to struggle for the mirror, each wanting to take custody of it. In the process mirror

drops and breaks into pieces. The orphan laments. Trumpet is sounded by ghosts and wind blows. With the wind appear the ghosts in the house to punish the wicked family. They are kicked and beaten. They struggle and drift into a flame and burn to death.

The following analysis shows the choreographic treatment of the prologue.

Analysis of Prologue

Wife is seated on a low stool. She is furious and uneasy. Stands, looks around and walks towards downstage in quick steps looking around all the time. Stops at downstage for a moment and returns to her stool. She sits, slaps the air with hands, and speaks to herself. Forcefully, she rises, stands behind stool. Uncle enters wearing an old unwashed pair of trousers, shirt and tie. Shirt and tie hang loosely on pair of trousers. He is heavily drunk and smells of alcohol. He staggers towards wife and wants to speak to her, but wife insolently walks away towards downstage left.

Pitiful! Pitiful! It is Pitiful!

The devil's home, I have come

(Words by Kakaiku's Band: Translated)

Instrumental music accompanies song. Music continues as uncle rolls slowly towards upstage and back to centre of stage. He shrinks continually. Slowly, he rises on feet and staggers around, contracting his whole body, then feels like vomiting. He finds a bucket standing at downstage right and vomits into it. Wife watches him scornfully. He falls on the stage and wife drags him towards upstage and then downstage, leaves him, collects the bucket and attempts to pour the content on him. Then two daughters enter forcefully to restrain her. They struggle over the bucket, it falls but struggle continues on the floor, bucket lies ahead of them. They stretch their arms towards bucket. Uncle is amused and staggers away, teasing them. Wife collects the bucket and follows him (exit).

Daughters sit, looking round for wife, they tie their clothes around waists. They stand quickly, panting and run around stage, looking for wife, stretching their left arms in front, with pointed forefingers. They perform pivot turns and sit on stage; furious, they turn heads from side to side. Wife hurriedly enters with bucket in both hands in search of Uncle. She finds him not and with great shame pours the content on the stage. Daughters clap and hoot at her. (exit. Light off).

(Dawn). Wife enters dragging along Orphan on the floor. Orphan shabbily dressed with bandaged leg, weeps. Orphan is pushed down by wife and dragged towards downstage left. Wife pricks and twists Orphan's ears, then drags her towards upstage right, and pushes her down. Orphan lifts herself back. She writhes in pain. Wife stamps her, then kicks her, and she rolls towards downstage left. Wife watches scornfully as Orphan writhes in pain. Hurriedly,

wife walks out of stage.

Orphan sings a sad song, joined by chorus: she stops abruptly as wife enters, carrying a bowl containing various utensils. She places bowl in front of Orphan, pushing her to wash the utensils. Orphan begins washing. Uncle arrives, staggering and pushes Orphan's head towards the floor. He murmurs and walks away, but stops to piss on stage, before leaving.



**Leader of
Dwarfs dances
around
Orphan as she
sleeps**

Uncle follows, pointing his left hand at wife to caution her for such rude behaviour. She walks away hurriedly towards downstage right, furious and speaking to herself. Uncle walks towards wife, but he is heavily pushed down by her. He falls at centre of stage. Lying on his stomach, he sings;

The devil's home, I have come.

The devil's home, I have come.

Helper, I have none.

Orphan tensely picks a jug (background music), raises jug upwards (music intensifies) Jug drops suddenly and breaks into pieces. Orphan covers her mouth in sorrow; wife furiously collects the pieces into a cloth, ties it and hangs around Orphan's neck. Wife runs round stage, beating her mouth with right hand (expressing calamity). She is joined by two daughters. They molest Orphan, drag her round stage and leave her sitting. Orphan sings a song of forgiveness, in a sitting position, turning round with open arms and shrugging shoulders. She rises slowly and continues her dance turning clockwise and anti-clockwise towards upstage, then downstage right, and kneels. Forcefully, wife and two daughters dance around Orphan ending with kneels on left leg, facing Orphan. Orphan with begging arms shifts forwards and backwards, but wife and daughters kick her as she rolls out of stage (end of Prologue).

The traditional story of the Orphan appeals to me very much because I have had orphan friends who shared with me about their problems, and the wickedness of their caretakers. They were not given enough food, clothing and had to do the daily house chores without much support. The choreographic treatment of 'The Orphan' is therefore intended to portray these problems in a mythical and dramatic manner.

After I had decided on the story I had to shape it to reflect my dramatic aspirations in order for it to operate successfully and logically within theatrical situation. Traditional events normally operate within social and ritual settings, and if such events must participate as theatre, then they would need to be adapted because the theatre operates in a make-belief situation. Adapting the traditional story of the orphan into a dance-drama was my main concern.

Some Interpretations

Aspects of the dance-drama are discussed below in order to shed light on some techniques of the choreographer.

a) To give a free hand to the Uncle's wife, in the prologue, to molest the orphan without interference, the Uncle is made a drunkard, who in his continuous state of drunkenness is unable to take control of his own life, and therefore fails to see the evil committed against his own niece. The wife also capitalises on his irresponsible state to mishandle him.

b) Dwarfs are normally regarded by our traditional people as 'governors' of the forest, because of their mystical and intelligent nature. In Act I the dwarfs play their expected roles as governors and guardians. They carry the orphan into the forest and make her comfortable by laying her in a hammock which they command from the sky.

c) A Scene in Act I makes the orphan experience 'lover's care' and then loss of it. For this purpose the gorilla is introduced into her life and made to play the roles of a lover by providing her with the necessary care and comfort. Then the gorilla dies suddenly. The death of the gorilla, similar to the death of the

orphan's parents, throws her into a state of uncertainty and confusion, and she feels the discomfort of living in a wild world (forest). The problems of death, she expressed with the following dirge:

Everybody is a debtor to Death.
To be in the hands of Death is
To be in the hands of someone indeed.
Man will die and rot away.

(J. H. Nketia, *Funeral Dirges of the Akan people*,
Exeter, Janes Townsond & Sons, 1955, p. 128)

The orphan then kneels to plead with 'nature' to assist her to overcome her problems; but unknown voices (devils) attempt to discourage her. She rolls, looking round for the voices (devils), but finds nothing. With courage she kneels again before 'nature' and voices are heard again. In fear she runs away but 'nature' guides her into the territory of ghosts who warmly welcome her.

d) In Act II, help finally comes to the orphan through her own deceased parents - ghosts. She is given new clothes and a jug. A mirror is added.

e) Act III, sees the climax of the dance-drama and it expresses the Law of Compensation. That whatever reward or punishment we receive today, the seed has been sown in a past behaviour. So the wicked family must die for their misdeeds on innocent and simple Orphan.

Conclusions

The analysis above attempts to indicate my treatment of the story of the Orphan in a choreographic manner. In developing the dance-drama I have sought to first identify various artistic models of the traditional story-telling session and re-created them for the theatre. I have made use of series of movements, their progressions and meanings. I have examined rhythmic patters, songtexts and melodies and their contributions to movement expression. Performance etiquette within story-telling session has been noted and adjusted to fit into a theatrical situation. I have examined directional paths, levels and movement dynamics within traditional performances and adjusted them to play new roles. The theme and moral ending of the traditional story have been maintained.

The Orphan is intended to portray traditional artistic models within story-telling sessions in the structures of the modern theatre. **GR**

Editor's Note:

Early performances of 'The Orphan' were given in April (29, 30) and May (1, 2) 1993 at the Drama Studio, University of Ghana, Legon. More performances were also given in the Auditorium, Centre for National Culture (Arts Centre), Accra in July (2, 3, 4) 1993, directed by the Choreographer, Adinku.