Addressing National Security through Contemporary Dance and Motif Conception: Arnold Udoka's "Black Skies" as Paradigm

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Abstract

Dance is a product of expression. When humans move in a formalized and ordered pattern in time and space and with rhythm to express an idea or tell a story, dance is said to have taken place. This goes to say that dance is a vehicle of communication. In every movement, there is an expression of idea. The choreographer plays on motifs which are subsequently transformed into movements. The Contemporary dance has been a style of dance that has bestowed on the choreographer the freedom of expression via movement and patterns, which was explored by Udoka in "Black Skies". Udoka clearly highlighted, with dexterity, the vast vocabularies that could be used in addressing the pertinent issues in the Nigerian State especially as they relate to national security through the motifs of violence, religious intolerance and insecurity. This study therefore analyzes the form and content of the dance production and its relevance to the society especially this time the national security of the country is threatened through the Boko Haram insurgence, ethnic rivalry and religious intolerance. The study concludes that dance through movement is capable of addressing issues of concern. Finally the study recommends that proper training and education should be given to dancers and choreographers for this task.

1. Introduction

Right from pre-historic times, dance has been a source of expression. Humans used dance to express their moods, emotions and or feelings. It was, and still is, a form of body language that encodes emotions, aspirations and goals of a people. In dance, "The motor, visual and kinaesthetic channels predominate instead of vocal and auditory channels …" (Hanna, 2001 p. 40). The human body is the pivot upon which dance rotates. This means that the main or major instrument of dance is the human body which gives life to the movement. Fowler captures this assertion when he says that "if life is movement, then the art of that movement is dance." (2) He continues by saying that:

> To step, glide, turn, dip, reach, shake, bend and leap to the rhythmic flow of one's inner impulses; for it is in feeling one's energy bristle with life that the nature of this expressive art is revealed (2).

Fowler, in this work, reminds us that the mind is the body, and that indeed the body is the primary instrument of life. Dance therefore is one of the few means people have at their command to gain access to their self-feelings or what might be called their subjective reality.

The nature of dance generally and contemporary dance in particular is that which makes for change and conscientization. In dance, both the dancer and the choreographer become instruments of change and critical commentators in issues that affect or concern their society through body movements. The role of performing arts, which dance, of course, is only a part of, cannot be over-emphasized especially in capturing into a piece of art work

the frailties of the society as they relate to the socio-economic, cultural and political sphere of the country.

The choreographer as a creative artist draws on the experiences and inspirations from and within the environment. Ejiofor, captured in Ekweariri and Onyemuchara (2012, p. 9), writes that as a creative artist;

> His inspiration for … creative activities sometimes, stem out of observation of events and activities as they unfold in their environment. It may for instance be as a result of chaotic situation engulfing the socio-political scene, the corrupt and inept attitude of leaders or greed inherent in them.

Ejiofor's assertion succinctly points to the potency of Arts generally and dance in particular as an instrument of change despite its ephemeral nature.

The spate of insecurity in the world generally, Nigeria inclusive, has become a subject of conjecture, for it is near impossible to state for certainty what happens the next moment. Nigeria as a country has continued to live under the siege of fear and terror in recent years due to insecurity. Chika Otuchikere, while commenting on the Nigerian situation as it relates to bomb blast writes that "…incidents has left Nigerians who are suddenly faced with the threat and said reality of the entry of bomb blasting renegades and Militants into the nation's political sphere, in shock" (allafrica.com/stories/201010251542.html)

Although the current situation in the country has left much to be desired because of the Boko Haram insurgence, there are also many others that constitute security threats to the socio-political system in the country. These include religious intolerance, ethnic rivalry, communal clashes, militancy to name a

few. Abdulsalami Abubakar in reiterating the issues of national security challenges in the country opines that:

> Apart from military coups there are other security issues that have challenged and indeed rattled the democratic political system. Among them is civil or organized rebellion resulting from a number of socio-political development including ethnic disagreements and national resource contentions

He maintains that "the recent international debate have also raised the need to see security in the broader sense as the struggle to secure the most basic necessities of life; food, fuel, medicine and shelter. This broader human security is important for the attainment of physical and national security and overall peace and development as social unrests arising from the absence of such basic human security can indeed lead to security problems and conflicts" (www.dawodu.com/abubakari.htm).

The above statement by Abubakar summarizes to a large extent what we may call major security challenges in the country. Addressing them and leaving these threats solely in the hands of government is indeed a herculean task that must involve all stakeholders; choreographers and dancers inclusive. Aware of this fact, Udoka in "Black skies" captures the essence of movement and gesture in communicating pertinent issues as it relates to national security through the motif of violence, fear, religious intolerance, bomb blasts to mention a few. Through freedom of expression, which contemporary dance offers, dance has the ability to pass across or communicate an idea. Onyemuchara captures this when he writes that "through movements and gesture, moods and feelings are expressed and or communicated to both the dancer and the audience during performances. It

(dance), remains a tool for information and entertainment" (116). While affirming the above assertion, Sofola quoted in Ekweariri and Onyemuchara (2012), notes that arts generally, dance inclusive, has the capacity to

> ...heal and restore the life of the sick and battered humanity. To create a new vision for growth, renewal, regeneration and edification of man for a wholesome life and a better community. To mobilize a collective conscience for a particular desired objective (360).

Based on these premises, therefore, this paper proposes adequate training and professionalism in dance especially in the area of dance techniques, dance composition and motif conception. Choreography is not excluded here because it has a major contribution to make in relation to resolving the contentious issues of national question which national security is only a part of. This paper is an analysis of the form and content of "black skies" as choreographed by Arnold Udoka for the National Troupe of Nigeria's entry for the 2002 dance festival organized by Alliance du France tagged "Dance meet Dance".

2. Definition of Concepts

2.1. Contemporary Dance

Unlike modern dance which came as a radical shift and change and which also developed in opposition to classical ballet, rejecting the latter's structural formality and sometimes thematic frivolity (Crain and Mackrell, 328), contemporary dance combines modern dance elements and the classical ballet elements. It can use elements from non-western dance cultures, such as African dances with bent knees as a characteristic trait. The dance which developed in the 1950's revolves around the desire of attaining an

improved range of movements as expression of styles that are detailed from one that is viewed as traditional. Contemporary dance has no boundaries and as such draws from and develops movement vocabularies across cultures. Its flexibility, fluidity and availability of movement vocabularies serve a great purpose and define a new perspective to tackling various societal issues that need urgent attention.

Contemporary dance practitioners, choreographers and dancers alike, draw their techniques and styles from modern dance pioneers such as Martha Graham, Ruth St Dennis, Isadora Duncan and Doris Humphrey, and later the post modernist, Merce Cunningham. Notable among these techniques include; fall and recovery, improvisation, contact release, floor work, and lift in partnering.

2.2. Motif

Dance does not exist in isolation. It draws its movements from and within us. Everything around the human society can be turned into movement despite its abstract form. The human body if adequately trained obeys command and responds to dynamics, levels and dimensions as demanded by the phrase in question. Motif is a dance composition speech which refers to a small choreographic unit (a gesture, movement or phrase) that is the main reference from which a bigger choreography (or dance piece) is built and composed. In a nutshell, Motif informs and conditions a particular dance piece and it is upon it that the creative choreographer draws his/her inspiration from. It is the pivot upon which movement vocabularies rotate.

2.3. National Security

National Security as defined by Wikipedia is the requirement to maintain the survival of the state through the use of economic diplomacy, power projection and political power. The above definition is not a true meaning of National Security where the concept has become somewhat problematic because there seems to be many views to the actual meaning of the concept. While others look at it from the political angle, others view it from the philosophical, economic, military might, environmental and technical aspects.

For a better understanding of our subject matter, this paper will adopt the 1996 definition propagated by the National Defence College of India which states thus:

> National Security is an appropriate and aggressive blend of political resilience and maturity, human resources, economic structure and capacity, technological competence, industrial base and availability of natural resources and finally the military might. (en.m.wikipedia/wiki/national_secuirty).

The above definition, as beautiful as it may read, still remains a far cry as far as Nigeria is concerned. Two major things militate against the creditability and integrity of national security process - internal and external factors. While external factors involve the foreign and/or western interests and influences on the country, the internal factors includes government's insensitivity to the yearnings of the people as it relates to joblessness, poverty, trait of intolerance, religious fanaticism, ruthless contest for power, human and natural disasters, ethnic rivalry and more recently the Boko Haram insurgence.

2.4. Choreographer

A choreographer is one who is trained in the mastery of the art of and sciences of dance structuring and composition. He is responsible for creating and arranging the steps and patterns of a dance work, (Crain &Mackrell 104). He/she might not be the initiator of the movement, he sure continues from where the initiator stops. The choreographer's mastery of the human body types, shapes and movements make him unique and imposing. He has a good sense of picturization and is usually considered as a general director of scenic art pieces that includes several aesthetic language (music, set design, scenery, lightning, costumes and make-up and any other thing that will boost his artistry are under his creative judgement.

2.5. Freedom of Expression

This is a term or concept used in government and or political science as one of the numerous fundamental human rights of the citizens of a state. It is the right to express views without being molested or intimidated by any one. This is not the actual meaning for which it has been used in this research. Freedom of expression here means that the dancers and or the choreographers are free to express their feelings and emotions without bound. In contemporary dance, the choreographer is not limited to any technique, structure, genre, length and dynamics during his dance compositions and arrangements. Movements are expressed in the best way possible without rules and conditions unlike the classical ballet and most traditional dances.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the modern and postmodern dance theories and/or perspectives in analysing Udoka's "Black Skies". Isadora

Duncan, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Ruth St Denis, Humphrey Limon among few others are regarded as the pioneers of modern dance school of thought. These people were not regarded as theoretician but dance practitioners that changed the face of dance in America and Britain during the 20th century. Modern dance came as a revolt to the classical ballet's rigid conventions. Craine and Mackrell corroborates with the above while writing on the development of modern dance when they opines thus:

> Modern dance developed in opposition to classical ballet, rejecting the latter's structural formality and sometimes thematic frivolity. Modern dance pioneers eschewed the rigid hierarchy of ballet in favour of a freer movement style ... (2000: 328).

Before this time (modern dance era), ballet techniques and conventions were held as the best practice of dance composition and performance and celebrated across the length and breadth of America and Europe. One of its major criticisms was that it did not give room for innovation through creativity. Choreographers and dancers are restricted and regimented to particular stands/postures, movement, gestures, costume design, make-up, shoes, hair style etc. These practitioners as enumerated above felt dancers should be given freedom to explore movements in other to express and/or externalize their inner feelings.

They can draw inspirations from motifs, objects, moods to name a few which can as well become useful materials in their dance creations. Like the classical ballet which gave birth to modern dance, the latter's approach has remained literary and narrative in context. Nora Ambrosio (1999) in her book *"Learning about Dance"* submits that Duncan, one of the foremost pioneers of modern dance left her technical training and began to dance in a

way that seemed to her to be more natural. She was inspired by the movements of the trees, the ocean and by all of nature. She developed a technique that used movements such as hopping, running, swaying and skipping; movements that seemed natural and expressive to her (61). It was also recorded that she dance bare footed.

3.1. Postmodern Dance theory

The postmodern dance school of thought emerged in the 1950s as a result of modern dance restriction of movement and performance as a literary and narrative practice. As a result of this, dancers and choreographers began to feel restricted by the teachings of their predecessors. Until this time records Nora Ambrosio, most dance techniques were very rigorous, requiring the dancer to study and train for many years in order to become proficient at their art. The postmodernists did not concern themselves with the dramatic and the realistic contents of dance, but believe that there are more to dance than these as there are other more important factors that need to be added in a choreographic piece. One of these factors, for example, was to reflect movement, rather than the storyline, as the primary focus of the dance.

Because of this philosophy, the works of these choreographers, for the most part, came to be known as "abstract." These people were also commonly referred to as being part of the "avant garde", meaning that they were leaders in a new and unconventional movement-specifically, the post-modern movement. To this group, whatever comes to mind and expressed outwardly in movement becomes dance especially when choreographed (Nora 1999: 64 – 65). Leading this school of thought is Merce Cunningham, who incidentally worked under Martha Graham as a lead dancer. He was later joined by John Cage

(his partner) who made the music for him and together they expressed and practiced another form of dance different from the conventional dance practice of the time. Cunningham did not believe that a dance had to possess a theme or storyline. His concept of dance revolved around the idea of "movement for movement's sake." In other words, movement should be the primary focus in the dance and should not be executed in order to depict a story to the audience (65). According to Sally Banes cited in Nora (1999), Cunningham's philosophy holds the following beliefs:

> ... Any movement can be material for a dancer; any procedure can be followed and used as a compositional method; any part of the body can be used; music, costumes, set design, Lighting and the movements all have their own identity and simply occur in the same place at the same time; any dancer in the company can be a soloist; a dance can be performed in any space; and a dance can be about anything, but it is primarily about the human body moving (65).

The submission as captured in Nora above simply reflects the true position of postmodern dance philosophy. The abstractness of their choreographies gave them the name tag such as “avant gardists” “experimentalists”. Apart from Cunningham, other postmodern practitioners also abound. These include Alwin Nikolais, Paul Taylor, Anna Halprin etc. Furthermore, some contemporary dance choreographers of Nigerian descent such as Adedayo Liadi (Ijodee), Qudus Onikeku, Israel Akpan, Abubakar Usman and few others fall under this category because of the nature of their choreographic works.

3.2. Contemporary Dance and Motif Conception

Contemporary dance as noted earlier in this study is an art whose working material is the movements of the human body. Although the human body is the primary tool for dance generally, contemporary dance involves the articulation of the human body, costume and make up, scenic design, stage construction, lightning, music, props and any other which could add to the overall communication and/or passing of message to both the dancer and the audience.

Movements, as far as contemporary dance is concerned, are not created in a vacuum. Movement is created out of an existing and/or imagined phenomenon upon which steps, gestures, images, phrases, rhythm, shapes, and dynamics are confronted in order to express or pass an idea. It is upon these that the choreographer draws from while making or creating a piece of dance. As a word used within the dance composition speech, motif, according to Maria (online) "refers to a small choreographic unit (a gesture, movement or phrase) that is the main reference from which a bigger choreography (or dance pieces) is built and composed" (www.contemporary-dance.ord/dance-terms.html). This means to say that, there can be no dance if good mental pictures and kinaesthetic are not adequately conceived. The choreographer takes time to imbibe this into the dancer's psyche to enable him or her properly internalise the essence of each movement and pattern.

Once the motifs are conceptualized, the choreographer has the freedom to choose from the avalanche of movement vocabularies across genres, techniques and styles to express himself through his dancers. This is because dance is seen as "the transformation of ordinary functional and expressive movements into extra ordinary movements for extra ordinary purposes"

(Youngerman 1). Here, as opined by Fraliegh, the Choreographer through his creative ability "creates from a radically open base, rejecting forms given in established models. Creativity is thus approached as a value-divested and existentially open process" (52)

It is therefore evident from the above that contemporary dance draws largely from motif and that "the critical standards that apply… involve questions of movement invention, originality and expressive nuance…" (Fraliegh 52). Through motif conception, contemporary dance creates room for expressive movements which invariably communicates one idea or the other.

3.3. Impact of Contemporary Dance on National Issues

There is no society or nation that does not have her peculiar issues, Nigeria inclusive. These issues range from the simple to the most complex ones. Nigeria as a nation has been grappling with series of contentious issues that pose great challenge to her national security. These challenges include, but are not limited to, poverty, joblessness, poor infrastructural development, and ethno-religious intolerance. The rate of unemployment in the country is alarming and induces poverty. The poor and unemployed groups are the most vulnerable, hence they are used to perpetuate such heinous acts as bombing, militancy, killing and arson among others.

Dance generally and contemporary dance in particular has the potency to impact positively on the society especially in addressing pertinent issues such as the national security. Through bodily movements, people are conscientised, informed and educated about old and new developments in the society and possibly looking into the future. The choreographer is therefore saddled with the responsibility of creation of movements based on

the experiences of his own era. Reacting to this assertion, Olomu writes that:

> Dance is life expressed in dramatic terms. The most important events in the community have special dance to enhance their meaning and significances. To us the dance is a language, a mode of expression, which addresses itself to the mind through the heart using related relevant and significant movements … (28).

Olomu's opinion is a clear indication that dance is communicative hence can be used to create an impact. Despite the fact that it comes in the medium of entertainment, contemporary dance has a principle function, which may be conscious expression or reflection of the structure of the society and its way of life (29). Dance is a statement made through body instruments. Conception and development of motifs are the bedrock of choreography. A good and well-trained choreographer can use his vast experience and sound dance vocabulary that must have been acquired through training and apprenticeship to make statements. As Bakare succinctly puts it "The contemporary choreographer is engaged in the business of making personal statements in accordance with the social, theoretical and aesthetic demand of his contemporary audience" (66).

In order to achieve this, dance (contemporary dance) has bestowed in him the freedom and right to use diverse materials – movements, gestures, genres and other necessary apparatus to pass information and make new statements. When movements are developed based on themes (Motifs), issues are adequately taken care of and captured to reflect the mood. This goes on to explain that dance generally and contemporary dance in particular brings to the fore through movements and gestures some landmark

experiences that shape and challenge the personality and character of a given polity.

3.4. Synopsis of "Black Skies"

"Black skies" is a contemporary dance piece of about twenty-five minutes which was premiered in 2002 at the French Cultural Centre Ikoyi Lagos, which is also known as Alliance Du France. The core artistes of the National Troupe of Nigeria (2001 set) performed the dance to mark the 2002 Dance Festival tagged 'Dance meet Danse'. The Dance revolves around bomb blast, militancy, religious and ethnic conflicts among others. It equally looks at the pain and anguish of the people when these tragedies strike.

Udoka summarizes "Black Skies" as the challenges of mutual co-existence in the face of bomb blast, militancy, religious conflicts and the pains of these conflicts in the Nigerian civilization and the national psyche. This was achieved through movements and gestures, sound and effects including lightning.

3.5. Performance Analysis of "Black Skies"

> The world of illusion which the audience expects from the artiste is in fact, the world of their real selves, the translation of their hopes and fears, their joys and sufferings into the magic of the stage. (Charles Weidman 1966) Quoted in Andrea Peters www.wsws.ord/artciles/2003/may/ndt-mo8.shtml)

The above statement as elicited by Weidman is a sensitive and herculean task that faces the performing artistes, which includes both the dancer and the choreographer. As a non-verbal communication, dance is perceived through the body and on an

experimental and kinaesthetic level, which precludes words (Fraliegh, 53).

"Black Skies" is a contemporary dance piece earmarked to celebrate the beauty of the body through movement, to raise awareness on the new form of dance - "African contemporary dance". To create a balance between movement and its expressiveness and communication, the production captured the attention of the audience most of whom broke down in tears. The performance could be summarily divided into three segments.

- The bomb blast
- The party scene and religions violence
- The mass Burial

The presentation began with a man positioned at the centre stage with the motif of running on spotlight followed by other men running following the sound effects of bomb blast. This introduced the pain and anguish represented by the dancers wailing with pieces of blood stained cloths on their hands and good movements accompanied with clear facial expressions. In other to relieve the tension, pain and moody atmosphere, there was the party scene which consequently degenerated into religious violence and then the mass burial of those killed during the bomb blast and those who died as a result of the violence.

3.6. Implication of the Form and Content of "Black Skies" to National Security

Arts generally, mirror the society and help to shape, rebrand, and forestall the needs of the people through the creation of new ideals and challenges especially in the area of creativity. Ideas involve imaginative thinking and the performing/ creative artiste is usually in hand to provide one. Dance is one of the vehicles or media through which the people living in a society are educated,

informed and entertained. Art and creativity requires courage. It is with this courage that new boundaries are broken for an acceptable change. Dance is not left out on this, as it uses the medium of non-verbal communication of the human body to achieve this.

Dance as a form of performance art is equally a humanistic art which focuses on motion and movement. Using contemporary dance as a style of dance, Udoka created a piece of work that did not only inform, educate as well as entertain, but one that has added new ideas and frontiers through movement and one that served as therapy to the audience. According to Farleigh "Human beings are inventive creatures, and they are constantly inventing new ways to dance in body means and matters of improvement …" (5).

Farleigh goes further to say that it is the performers' intention and purpose that makes dance "more than movement" (15). The intention of "Black Skies" was to first of all, conscientise the general populace in the dangers of some of these security threats - Bomb blast and religions violence. This was achieved through the shape, which includes the occupation of space, time, body uses and such kind of elements that do not express other contents than movement itself. The dance had more of aerial and ground movements and equally adopted the concepts of contract and release including fall and recovery respectively credited to Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey in prosecuting his choreographic intents.

Every dance, no matter the style, has something to say through movement, structure and material. The content of a dance are qualities, dynamics and/or any expressive and communicative features that contribute to the overall dance performance. Costume, movement choice, music, scenic deigns, set and props

were the contents employed in "Black Skies" by Udoka in capturing the general motif of the dance

The implication of "Black Skies is that, it was able to achieve the following as it relates to national security. These include;

- It was able to inform the audience about contemporary issues. Such issues include the various ethno-religious violence prevalent in the country, the reckless killings, and the Ikeja Bomb Blast of 27th January 2002.
- The dance educated the people on the need to be careful with dangerous weapons, which were captured in the pain and anguish suffered by the deceased relations holding the blood stained cloths.
- It also served the historical purpose of documenting and preserving events through movements.
- The need to stay peaceful and live for one another was also a salient point captured in the mass burial. This is because we need each other if there must be a peaceful co-existence.
- Corollary to the above is the question of concientization. "Black Skies" as a dance piece served the purpose of conscientising the people on the need to remain peaceful while dealing with security threats in the country.
- Lastly is its ability to perform or have a therapeutic effects on the audience, creating a sense of relief.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

Any work of art, dance inclusive, that does not have the ability to pass a message or communicate an idea could be said to be meaningless. "Dance stems from an impulse to express and sustain a vital life and to project and share its aesthetic

dimensions" (Fraleigh, 1987. p. 17). The human body is the source of this movement. The concepts of contemporary dance and motif conception have been elaborated upon and their meanings delineated. The need for movement clarification and definition has been explained because it is through body movements that choreographers and dancers are able to educate and inform the audience while entertaining them.

Udoka's "Black Skies" reflects upon Nigeria and its security threats. The work speaks volume and clearly indicates the potentials of dance generally and contemporary dance in particular in the face of insecurity. A nation that is grappling with insecurity inadvertently remains in the doldrums. The significance and importance of contemporary dance cannot be overemphasized because it allows us direct access to the experience of body and movement freedom especially as it affects our daily concerns. It is based on these experiences that this paper seeks to recommend that:

- Dance creators, composers and or choreographers should choose movements that communicate meanings and ideas so as to join in addressing issues of concern in the society.
- There should be a platform where scholars and practitioners can meet to address the best way forward as it relates to movement definition and clarification, techniques and motif conception and development.
- The 'unlearned' dancer and choreographer should be adequately guided through formal training and apprenticeship.
- Dance generally must, as a matter of necessity, be functional, realistic and informative if it must effectively survive and contribute to the overall well being of any nation.

- There is the need to involve both the government and private individuals in the sponsorship of contemporary dance workshops and contest with themes.
- The media has a role to play in the propagation of this style of dance
- There should be grants and scholarships to prospective individuals who wish to explore and carry out research in contemporary dance.

Udoka's Black Skies has been performed at several places for both private and government establishments. The dance has been added and preserved in the dance repertoire of the National Troupe of Nigeria.

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