

Book Review

Paul Schauert, *Staging Ghana: Artistry and Nationalism in State Dance Ensembles*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015. 342 pp. ISBN: 978-0-253-01742-0 (pbk); ISBN: 978-0-253-01749 (ebk)

Mabel Evwierhoma

University of Abuja, Nigeria

It is crucial to note that within Africa, national peculiarities often distinguish performances from one another. These peculiarities, with regard to dance, politics and nationhood are what Paul Schauert's *Staging Ghana: Artistry and Nationalism in State Dance Ensembles* provides. While the author discloses his period and place of tutelage under local masters of Ghanaian traditional performance, the kernel of *Staging Ghana...* is African dance on stage and the survival politics around it. Questions raised early in the book are: How is African dance representational of Africa on stage in Africa and in the West? How do they reify in the academic set up? Are white academic tourists qualified to (re)present African dance? The answers clearly expose some of his reservations on staging culture, the legitimacy of those who stage it *ex vitro* and the competencies they tender. The factors of the discreet and tactful uncritical audience and the tourist/stranger audience bear the reservations mentioned above. The 'stranger' and indigene (in)authentic claim over dance exegesis is made obvious in the Drid Williams vs Mawere Opoku conflict (pp. 105-108). Schauert's denigration of Ghanaian dance is not very obvious in the text. Rather, what runs through the book, is the deep appreciation of cultural life in Ghana and the opportunities of a fifteen-year study of the culture that enabled him to transit from amateur to professional ethnographer in the areas covered by *Staging Ghana* (xii). The criticisms of Ghana as a post-colony (pp. 160-168) under different leaders seeps into the book and

of President Kuffuor during the Ghana @ 50 celebrations in March 2007 is rather bitter. The term *kalabule* or corruption is underscored.

The book reveals the triadic link between the nation, individual performer and dance ensemble on the triple lines of possible dominance for each entity. In staging national identities, the nation *à la Dumont* is considered an entity of individuals, and an individual collective. This signifies why the metaphor of 'crossing crocodiles' used in the first chapter is apt. The crocodile feasts in turbulence and nation building in Africa as well as ensemble building amounting to feasting in diversity, multi-culture and turbulence. Throughout the book, the dancer's body is reflected as the bearer of the national image of Ghana, carrying also on it, the signs and signals of nationalism, which are of course in states of flux. The book provides the origins of the University of Ghana-based Ghanaian Dance Ensemble (GDE) founded in 1962 by Kwabena Nketia and its offshoot, the National Dance Company (NDC) led by Nii Yartey, established in 1992 and based at the National Theatre. The foundations of the National Folkloric Dance Company, an affiliate of the Arts Centre, Accra also founded in 1962 and led by Robert Ayitte are also established. The reader is provided the chance to scrutinize the dialectics of staging and performance, where the audience, observer, or tourist can be an outsider, insider, or a combination of both with the options of critiquing the dances of Ghana. Apart from providing ethnographic information on the diverse dances of Ghana, the reader is immersed in the politics of Nkrumaism, African Personality and Pan-Africanism constructed by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president. The place of the disciplined 'self' or militaristic embodiment in the staging of these political identities across the nation of Ghana even during national mourning covers the field of the text.

The obverse stance of 'fakelore', as opposed to folklore, is employed by the author to place side-by-side, sensationalized traditional performances and urban and modern trends of dances as well as authentic culture. Fakelore therefore stands for the loss of authenticity, a fake dramatization or (re)presentation of culture by reconfigured national dance ensembles. Here the dialectics of the dancer's body, its sociology, spatial and relational politics as well as the basis of the choice of what to perform are central. The dancer's freedom of choice, and her/his acceptance of what to perform work together to prove her/his forte, sense of worth and economic power. Another kind of power concerning the performer's role, which is distinct from political power, according to what Schauert observed in the national ensemble, is the power of dissent or opposition. One of such is the use of the wind to typify the liberty of the dancer's body, her/his will and spirit, or shifting sands to reflect fluid na-

tionhood (p. 116). The gains that accrue from the dancer's roles range from self-gratification like monetary profit to national acclaim, migration across international borders and global artistic presence. The Ghanaian Diaspora of dancers' achievements in the markets and schools of Europe and America is focused upon. The commodification of dance, in domestic and foreign markets, through dance instructor business, drum building, recording labels provide the entrepreneurial and not the escape option in Ghanaian artists in the diaspora.

Being engaged and committed to the nation matters in the artist, especially with regard to the dancer's role in the nation. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to ask: "why desert your country if you are a nationalist or use dance as an exit plan?" (p. 147). How is the nation staged in the face of artist desertion, ethnic opposition, conflicted allegiance at different times? Why would a state as employer of dancers not show commitment to them? In these questions are highlighted the impact of governance and the ultimate symbioses between the leader and the led along different spheres, especially of dance and dancers and the staging of them all.

The author reveals the metamorphosis of the Ghanaian Dance Ensemble into the National Dance Company in 1992 and the earlier dissolution of the National Folkloric Dance Company in 1985 (p. 197). This provides a historical account of fractured histrionics, politics and divided tradition. The management of dissidence framed in the Nii Yartey-Ben Abdallah arts and professionalism versus the Opoku-Nketia arts and education conflict remains instructional (pp. 202-204). This further questions the authenticity of the dance performances, fidelity to tradition, how national and unifying both bodies are in staging Ghana. The split evidently pits local, and contemporary dance against the pursuit of global perspectives in dance. While the Ghana Dance Ensemble was seen as traditional, authentic and folkloric or even a repertory of 'cultural relics', the National Dance Company epitomized 'fakelore' and all that signified borrowings, imitation, and pastiche often seen in the staging of contemporary dance by academics who studied other dance forms apart from the traditional. To fuse these models, Schauert highlights the roles of traditional choreographers and performers within and outside the University of Ghana, who epitomized both standpoints and he displays how they trained and encouraged dancers to express the self, teamwork, frame the body sacrificed for the common good and enact the typicality of Ghanaian ethos, aesthetics and nationhood. To him, the possibilities of performers to become the architects of nationhood, a national dance culture, using the African Personality are very highly recommended. However, once the foundations or origins of the Academy are not African, Africans

have no total claim on pastiche or variegated dance forms, often staged on a borrowed stage structure.

The politicization of art administration, personalized contestations, competing interests in the ensemble and companies, in the development of contemporary dance and its acceptance in Ghana are also disclosed. Here, matters of personality, expertise, collaboration, experimentation, ownership and legacies leaving often divided the choreographer, artist and administrator and their interests. At times, the local performers were torn between tradition and modernity. (pp. 249-252) Political regimes often perceived the dancers as enemies of the state. The book demonstrates that the passage of time affords people the chance to prove whose artistic contribution made impact on the performer and performing groups. The reader of *Staging Ghana* does not miss the fact of selectivity in performing and seeing what is staged, that is, the life as lived, not necessarily as expected to be lived. To the author, this is the crux of the misunderstanding between African knowledge construction and what Westerners expect from Africans. What is not staged, erased or reconfigured, lost for mercantile uses or worse still, commodification remains historically relevant and culturally worthy. Despite the claim not to assume, or suspend judgment, he eventually arrives at *epoché!* (p. 24).

As a cross-cutting resource material, *Staging Ghana* provides figures and the Persistent Uniform Resource Locator (PURL), 23 in number, which enable easy access to the links on staged performances. Despite regarding the book as a 'manuscript' (p. xiv) it comes strongly recommended because of these locators that help to furnish the visual needs of the reader. It provides a platform for dance and performance as ethnography and the mutual interface between both. Also, the inclusion of the participants' experiences provides audibility and agency to the voices of subalterns. The power of indigenous performers and how they can spur socio-political agency through the staging of nationalism is clearly situated in the book. The notes (pp. 295-305); ready-reference index (pp.327-342) give the book lucidity and precision. Clearly, the body is proved to be beyond an object, but the subject of culture evident in the author's use of the term 'corporeal ontology'; where dance projects the lived experience of the dancer and those who encounter it instead of life as it ought to be lived. This is a book of records, memoranda, official files, personal memoirs, and archival documentation (p. 196) as proof that the absence of records (p. 171) could be a major challenge. The proficient record of the lived life of performers and dancers in staging the nation of Ghana, presented without ambiguity and in accessible language makes *Staging Ghana* relevant to African theatre and performance studies and practice.