

A Historical Overview of Theatre in Ghana

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Introduction

Traditional

Concert Party/Popular Theatre

Theatre for Development

Literary

Traditional

Festivals

Rituals; funerals, marriage ceremonies, religious rites etc.

Storytelling

Traditional Dance and Music

There has been heated debate as to whether drama did or did not exist in pre-colonial Africa, and to what extent it could or should be distinguished from rituals. I believe that much of this confusion is caused by using English words like 'drama' 'theatre' and 'ritual', which are loaded with meanings derived from European rather than African culture. (David Kerr, 1995:1)

Festivals

Odwira by the Akwapems in the Eastern Region,

Homowo by the Ga people of Greater Accra

Damba by the people of the Northern and Upper Regions

Hogbetsotso by the Anlo in the Volta region

The Adaekese of the Ashantis

A Scene from a Festival

The Ashanti Chief at the Adeakese Festival



STORY-TELLING

The spider, (Ananse in Akan or Ayiyi in Ewe) is the major stock character in these stories. Thus stories known as *Anansem*

Stories told on moonlit nights to small participating audiences.

Moralistic stories meant to teach the mores and norms of the communities in which they are told.

The story-teller is not just a narrator but also an actor

Traditional Dance and Music

Ubiquitous and an integral part of every traditional community

Part of funerals, festivals and all other occasions

Highly participatory

Markers of Traditional Theatre

No gate fees are charged.

They are a part of the people's everyday lives and have functions beyond mere entertainment.

They are participatory.

Concert Party

An indigenous form of itinerant theatre which dates back to the early 1900s.

American vaudeville, Al Jolson and Charlie Chaplin silent movies said to have influenced its initial development. (Cole, 2005, Barber et al, 1997)

Glass and Grant, an African American couple performed in Ghana between 1924 and 1926.

Ishmael Johnson, Bob Ansah and Benjamin Hutton were the first trio act - 'The Two Bobs and the Carolina Girl'.

Axim Trio in 1937 – Addition of guitar band music

Proliferation of 'trios' and great popularity- 1937-1957

Independence in 1957- Governmental support and rapid growth

First truly professional theatre in Ghana where artists lived off their art. At its' peak in the **1970s** there were over 200 hundred concert party troupes registered in the country. (Barber et al, 1997).

1980s- Economic hardships and decline of CP

Mid- 1990s- Attempts to revive the tradition by the Ghana national theatre. 'Key Soap' CP

2000-date – metamorphoses into home video production

Form of the Concert Party

A hybrid form described as on the side of tradition and innovation (Bame, 1985)

Opening Glee- Guitar band music

Comedy skits and jokes

An improvised moralistic play on a contemporary/topical issue interlaced with music/songs

The process starts all over again.

Key features

Local languages

Improvisation

Largely broad humour/slapstick comedy

Commercial and itinerant, performing in found spaces

Theatre for Development

Aimed at communicating developmental messages to target communities.

Roots in Ghana go back to colonial times when the colonial administrators employed drama as a propaganda tool.

Introduced onto the curriculum of the Theatre Arts Dept. early 1980s

NGOs and Government agencies make use of it for their educational campaigns

Theatre for a Change (TfAC Ghana) actively employ theatre for HIV/AIDS education and youth empowerment

Literary Theatre

First Ghanaian play *The Blinkards* by Kobina Sekyi. Written and produced 1915 but not published until 1974.

1900-1957 –dominated by European texts

1957- Independence and nationalist theatre

Efua Sutherland and her Anansegoro

Sutherland was concerned with producing theatre that did not begin with 'William Shakespeare and end with Sheridan', but that 'which would obtain its strength and inspiration from Ghanaian life' (1962)

Anansem- Ananse stories/words

Anansegoro- Ananse play

The Marriage of Ananewa – result of her research and experimentation



Plays in the *Anansegoro* Tradition

Martin Owusu- *The Story Ananse Told , The Legend of Aku Sika*

Asiedu Yirenkyi- *Ama Praana*

Yaw Asare- *Ananse in the Land of Idiots and Secrets of an Ancient Well*

Mohamed ben Abdallah's Abibigoro

'Abibi' as in Abibiman- Black nation

'Agoro' - play'

Abibigoro- Play of black people/African play

Traditional performance forms of ritual, story-telling, music, dance and mime in combination.

A Pan- African aesthetic

Plays

The Trial Of Mallam Ilya And Other Plays (1987)

The Fall Of Kumbi And Other Plays (1989)

Land of a Million Magicians, (1993)

Song of a Pharaoh- most recent play not yet published.

Other forms

Realistic/naturalistic plays without any reference to traditional performance modes.

Bill Marshall- *The Crows, Son of Umbele, The Queue* and *In the Shadow of an Eagle*

J C, DeGraft -*Sons and Daughters*

Experimentations of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe

The Prison Graduates- Makes use of role play, mime and a complex plot structure

BBC World Service and British Council International Radio Playwriting Competition in 2009 award winner

“imaginative”, “muscular” and “hysterically funny”.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0053h57>

Ebow Whyte's Roverman Productions

Comedies

Relationships oriented

Use of a guitar band and popular music

Written texts, but fluid

Highly commercial

Highly popular

3-4 plays each year since 2008 (one play every quarter)

Festival of plays in December-January each year

Conclusion

Traditional forms of theatre continue to exist and evolve and remain very much a part of Ghanaian life

There are movements towards a professional theatre industry, but we still have some ways to go.

A more stable political and economic environment will aid this process

In Africa theatre matters. African theatre is entertainment, but it can also be aesthetically, politically, socially and spiritually committed, and often it is all of these things simultaneously. ... At its best African theatre is a total experience of mind, body and soul which engages with, and feeds off a highly responsive, involved and vocal audience. (Banham and Plastow, 1999:vii)