

Spatial Narratives in Motion: How Set Design Shapes the Interpretation of Choreography in Segun Adefila's *Mi o Ni Choice*

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Abstract

In performance, space is never passive as it is active in the production of meaning, identity, and agency. This research examines the interplay between set design and choreography in Segun Adefila's *Mi o Ni Choice* by placing the work in both African contemporary dance and performance studies. Using Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, the research claims that scenography is an active storytelling partner that frames choreography as a discourse of freedom and constraint and cultural identity. The study examines set design in relation to materials, props, set design, and movement in order to demonstrate that dancers negotiate the space of the stage and turn it into a socio-political discourse. The space, in cooperation with the audience, generates meaning by a self-creating feedback loop of space, movement, and spectators that is an expression of collective memory. Adefila's spatial dramaturgy brings Eurocentric models of contemporary dance into question and offers African contemporary dance within its own aesthetic frameworks. This research argues that set design in *Mi o Ni Choice* is integral to the performance of the work and contemporary performance research in meaning, memory, and politics.

Keywords: Spatial Narratives, *Mi o Ni Choice*, Set Design, Choreography, African Contemporary Dance, Cultural Memory, Scenography, Segun Adefila.

Introduction

Nigeria is an excellent example of the cultural negotiation that occurs during the blending of contemporary and traditional ways; dance is a contributor to that example. In the midst of this, Segun Adefila has established himself in the realm of contemporary performance as a choreographer, actor and artistic director for the Crown Troupe of Africa (New Telegraph, 2026). He has created that works that integrate music, theatre, and dance. This creates a performance that is complex and layered, similar to the traditions of performance in Africa, where these art forms intersect (Adefila, 2023).

This integration is seen in *Mi o Ni Choice*, which was performed by Adefila and the Crown Troupe. Its initial performance was in Tunde Kelani's Arugba project, which places the negotiation of choice in regard to

activism and cultural identity in a political and social context (YouTube, n.d.). It is more than a dance performance, as it works in conjunction with the choreography and set design to create a dialogue. Because the design sets in conjunction with the choreography of the dance, and merges to create an environment for the dancers to interact with. This interaction presents a guide for the dancers and creates a narrative for the audience.

Performance studies now widely acknowledge the importance of space in interpreting artistic expression. Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory on the production of space provides applicable ways in understanding the socially constructed physical environments that are redefined by the performance. When considering Adefila's work, this theory imparts how a set of designs can work as a narrative tool, creating the

dancers spaces that can be the conditions they can challenge or transform. This broadens what is considered in spatial aesthetics, and in particular, what is offered in African choreography in terms of global performance research, as is the case with *Mi o Ni Choice*.

This paper focuses on *Mi o Ni Choice* and places particular focus on how spatial narratives impact audience perception of the dance. The study recognizes the importance of scenography in African contemporary dance, and works toward the growing concerns of performance studies that focus on the importance of the space, the body, and what they can convey.

Conceptual Clarification

The analysis of *Mi o Ni Choice* involves understanding key concepts: spatial narratives, set design, choreography and interpretation. These concepts are not simply technical jargon, they are lived experiences and cultural histories that influence the creation and reception of performance.

Spatial Narratives: Spatial narratives concern the ways in which space holds and communicates meaning in the context of storytelling. Space is an active participant in performance. It is produced and re-imagined through movement and audience participation (Lefebvre, 1991). McAuley (2000) describes theatre space as a semiotic system that directs meaning and shapes the dramaturgical experience. In the African context, space holds cultural memory and is a vault of communal and ritual identity (Nwosu, 2014). In *Mi o Ni Choice*, during the performance, spatial

narratives arise as the dancers interact with the set.

Set Design: Set design, also referred to as scenography, encompasses design of the visual and spatial frameworks of performance. It is a critical component of meaning. Carlson (2015) expresses that scenography composes the “visual dramaturgy” of performance. Within African contemporary dance, set design integrates an indigenous aesthetic, and utilizes a conceptual scaffolding that incorporates traditional elements with contemporary stagecraft (Adedeji, 2019). Adefila’s props and use of architectural frameworks showcase this design philosophy.

Choreography: Choreography involves the arrangement of movements deliberately in both time and space. Aside from technical formations, choreography includes the embodiment of cultural values and social or emotional commentary (Banes, 1998). In African dance traditions, choreography includes improvisation, rituals, and storytelling. These traditions are both individual and communal (Ajayi, 1998). In *Mi o Ni Choice*, Adefila’s choreography expresses both individuality and collectively through sequences that include movements that are improvisational in nature. These movements create a communication with the set choreography.

Interpretation: Interpretation involves the meaning-making of performance. This varies across different people and experiences and different performance elements. For Fischer-Lichte (2008), interpretation is a collaborative

effort. In *Mi o Ni Choice*, interpretation is shaped by the set design and the choreography as a representation of agency and identity.

This study aims to situate *Mi o Ni Choice* through its focus on the connections of space and design through movement and meaning. This provides a balance of an analysis that is both human and performance based.

Theoretical Mooring

Building on Henri Lefebvre (1991), in *The Production of Space*, space is socially produced rather than an empty container. Lefebvre examines spatial practice, spatial representation, and representational space. Lefebvre's dimensions are best examined through performance. Through performance, choreography and set design can easily translate Lefebvre's ideas of abstract representations of space into narratives.

Segun Adefila's *Mi o Ni Choice* offers an interesting case study for Lefebvre's theory. Lefebvre's theory shows how a performance transforms a stage by negotiating the relationship between a physical (set) space and the spatial practice of the dancers. Each of the spatial practice movements by the dancers, in combination with the design of the set, creates space that is interpreted by the audience as a narrative dealing with issues of choice and identity as well as the cultural meaning of belonging. This is an example of Lefebvre's theory of how space creates and actively participates in social meaning.

Performance theorists have examined the ideas of Lefebvre as they relate to theatre and dance. For McAuley (2000), the creation of theatre meaning is primarily the result of the

organization and use of theatre space. Expanding on McAuley, Fischer-Lichte (2008) claims performance creates numerous novel meanings for dancers, space, and the audience that far exceed what is contained in the actual performance (words or movement). From an African perspective, scholars such as Adedeji (2019) and Nwosu (2014) write about space as a culturally collective identity container.

Using Lefebvre's spatial theory in this analysis of *Mi o Ni Choice* allows this study to move beyond an explanation of the choreography and set design. Here, space operates as a narrative element. Lefebvre's theory gives agency to the performance, as the dancers not only occupy but also resist the structures of space. It demonstrates how the stage is a dynamic space for the manifestation of cultural and political discourses. Lefebvre's theory is also useful for examining choice and agency in the work of *Mi o Ni Choice*. It shows set design and set spaces not as passive backdrops, but as a dynamic component of the process and of the performance.

Methodology

This study engages the qualitative interpretive methodology of performance analysis and cultural hermeneutics. Such methodology is appropriate for the research question under consideration, as it focuses on the impact of set design on the interpretation of choreography in Segun Adefila's *Mi o Ni Choice*. Unlike traditional audience studies which engage the quantification of audience response or the analysis of stagecraft, this study is concerned with the processes of meaning-making; the intersection of space

and movement and the role of design in communicating the idea of choice and agency. The main sources for this analysis consist of the video documentation of *Mi o Ni Choice*, documentation of the production, and contemporary reviews. These sources facilitate access to both the verbal and visual texts of the performance and provide the opportunity to analyze the interplay of choreography and set design. Where possible, the interviews with Adefila and members of the Crown Troupe of Africa have been used. These provide insights into the practitioners' perspectives on the meaning of their work. This triangulation addresses the need for an analysis beyond observation and the use of Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) argument.

The interpretive lens is informed by Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space, and stipulates that the stage is a design of a socially interactive (and therefore not a neutral) conceptual space. This theory is used to analyze the ways dancers both inhabit and contest the room, and how audiences interpret these to mean various narratives. The methodology then integrates text analysis of performance with theoretical analysis. This situates *Mi o Ni Choice* in relation to debates on spatial design within the context of contemporary African dance.

Every method has its limitations. Recorded performance is different from live performance. The presence of dancers and spectators as well as the immediacy of the performance get lost in the recording (Phelan, 1993). An understanding of a performance is subjective. It is affected by the researcher's background and the theory in which the

researcher is situated. However, this study draws on multiple sources and builds the analysis on theory to extend a more detailed and reliable understanding of how set design works as a narrative device in Adefila's choreography.

Analysis

Mi o Ni Choice presents an interesting case for evaluating the relationship between set design and choreography. This work illustrates the tension between choice and restriction by situating the work within the socio-political and cultural context of contemporary Nigeria. The set is not just the background to the dance but an active participant, influencing the way the dancers move and the way the audience interprets the work.

An important aspect of this performance is the use of structures that provide both elevated platforms and partitions that delineate both zones of movement and restriction. The structures represent Lefebvre's (1991) concept of spatial practice. The dancers are challenged to navigate around or even climb the structures. The choreography becomes a conversation with the structures of the set. The audience is able to see bending, jumping, and resistance as an animated way of expressing the struggle with choice within restricted spaces. The audience is able to perceive the struggle to choose in the work as a metaphor for the many struggles of the people of Nigeria to choose within the many socially and politically created structures and restrictions.

Further narrative is supported by the use of props and leaping symbols. The paradox of freedom and entanglement is expressed, for example, by the use of ropes and cloths in which barriers and connective threads are created. The expressive movement of the dancers illustrates the legal and socially abstract frameworks that bind and restrict choice within contemporary Nigeria.

Equally important is how the dancers' positions are oriented. Adefila normally sets dancers along the edges of the stage and then slowly walks them to the core as a representation of those who feel excluded moving toward where they will be included. This movement, along the stage, relates to the concept of autopoietic feedback loops, which is created by the intersection of performers and spectators. The design of the set area guides the direction of where the spectators' focus is. This design hits at social structures, and where spectators reflect on social structures, and where some are empowered, and others are marginal.

Shared choreography emphasizes both the shared element and the structure of the choreography. There are multiple instances in which the dancers' moving bodies create geometric shapes that reflect the design of the choreography along the set. Ajayi (1998) denotes the presence of collective identity in untamed dance in Africa. This signifies that in *Mi o Ni Choice*, the design becomes a shared place. The choreography created a metaphor for the community, where the design was being shaped by the presence of community members.

The connection that accompanies the integration of design and movement directs the audience to the spaces that are designed to behave as places. The integration of the set designed and the movements of the dancers invites the audience to think about their situations of freedom and restrictions. According to Nwosu (2014), African performance is rooted in the historical and cultural presence of the community, and in *Mi o Ni Choice*, the set design embodies the collective presence of the community.

The analyses presented demonstrate the significance of set design and its relevance to the overall meaning of a piece in the context of the production *Mi o Ni Choice*. Set design presents the choreography as a spatial negotiation, represents more abstract concepts and directs how the audience should interpret the work. This particular example of African contemporary dance showcases how new ways of approaching set design (scenography) can create spatial dialogues that align with the cultural and social constructs of the contemporary world.

Discussion

Analyzing *Mi o Ni Choice* reveals how set design and choreography can coalesce to create meaning and function as collaborative partners in the dramaturgical process. The work epitomizes the struggle between agency and limitation. It expresses the ways in which people contend with the choices available to them given the conditions set by dominant socio-political and cultural forces. The set actively engages the dancers and the audience. It posits a critical view of the politics of space

by showing how set design can shape dancer movements and audience responses.

Construction materials like wooden beams, platforms, and screens are examples of Henri Lefebvre's idea of the politics of space. They define movement paths and create spaces that can be restrictive or empowering. Dancers can climb, go around, or defy these barriers, creating a choreography that embodies the struggle of the politics of choice. The effort of the dancers can be understood by audiences as a metaphor for the politics of choice imposed by the socio-political and economic struggles in Nigeria. The set design emulates a metaphor for the politics of governance and social order and engages the struggle of the politics of freedom and the politics of constraint.

Beyond architecture, ropes and cloths enrich the narrative as props, introducing symbolic complexities. Ropes suggest both bondage and connection; cloths, both concealment and revelation. This duality graphically depicts the paradox of choice, of entrapment and freedom. Carlson's idea of "visual dramaturgy" is useful here; these props are not merely ornamental, but serve the narrative of the choreography as a conditioned agency. The interactions of dancers with these props serve to humanize an abstract ideology, thus transforming it into a physical quandary, a struggle that is deeply felt by the audience. The props stretch the semiotic and deepen the dramaturgical texture of the performances, embedding cultural memories and political discourses.

Adefila's placing of dancers at the stage margins, and moving them toward the center, is an example of Fischer-Lichte's

autopoietic feedback loops. This progressive spatial movement represents the journey from exclusion to inclusion, which portrays a social narrative of marginality and empowerment. Within the set design, the audience's gaze is captured, as the props and choreography depict movement from the edges to the center. Here, Adefila emphasizes the politics of visibility, illustrating how marginalized bodies strive for acknowledgment and sovereignty of space. Engaging the audience in a journey of social mobility, the choreography reveals the complexities of inclusion and empowerment.

The choreography illustrates the negotiation of space around a community. In the scenes where dancers build large geometric shapes in unison, which often mimics the design of the set, Ajayi's view of collective improvisation in African dance is represented. Through collective choreography, the set is imagined as a stand-in for an environment of community. Each movement collectively choreographed takes the community and shapes the space around them, expressed in the humanization of the set, and how it embodies the choreography of the community. The set is a cultural community scrapbook that presence memory beyond time. The memory that is expressed through the dance and the structured movements invites the audience to view the set in a new way. The dance performers' movements stimulate memories in the audience of self-made choices regardless of the limitations that may have been imposed. As Nwosu mentions, the dance expresses cultural memories, and in the installation of *Mi o Ni Choice*, the set expresses the cultural memories of struggle

and perseverance. The dance performers actively encourage the audience to see the set in new ways and express memory.

In African culture, performance and environment have been linked. Traditional dances take place in places like marketplace squares, courtyards, and ritual grounds. These places are communal and help provide more meaning to the dances. Adefila's scenography keeps this tradition in mind and recontextualizes modern theatre into art and politics. His use of props and architectural frames are modern interpretations of traditional African structures that are used for negotiating art. This shows traditional African art forms are culturally resilient and represent community struggles.

Many choreographers, such as Pina Bausch and William Forsythe, place emphasis on space and how it helps facilitate movement. Adefila's work is similar in this way, but his work is founded on African aesthetics. His piece incorporates African traditional elements and modern stage elements, and also incorporates techniques that speak to both African and global audiences. Because of this combined use of elements, it shows traditional African performance is rooted in its traditional practices, and is a new form of artistic expression, which helps to decolonize performance studies, especially since African customs and rituals are used for African performances.

The negotiation of space illustrates the everyday challenges faced by the Nigerian people and the way in which they contend with and work through the limits of the structures in which they exist. The set operates as a

metaphor for the ways in which agency is ordered and governed. Here, choreography has the ability to function as political discourse. Thus, *Mi o Ni Choice* carries on the aesthetic and activist legacy of many African performances. These performances utilize movement and space to both critique existing hierarchies of power and to envision alternate possibilities. Via this work, Adefila actively situates African contemporary dance within the discourse of cultural memory and contemporary social issues through the power of contemporary set design. This work aims to enhance the discourse of contemporary performance on a global scale by incorporating elements of politics and dance.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that in Segun Adefila's *Mi o Ni Choice*, set design means much more than a framed picture. It shapes choreography, guides audience understanding, and alters the politics within a performance. Integrating Lefebvre's theory on the production of space, this analysis has shown how the combination of architecture, props, and the designed space, crystallizes the abstract concepts of choice, agency, and identity into physical manifestations of struggle. The spaces were negotiated by the dancers and helped to conceptualize the ideas, allowing the audience to apprehend the struggle between freedom and restraint. Because of this, new ideas were constructed through the set design and shaped how the audience viewed the performance and the set design.

Mi o Ni Choice also impacts performance scholarship beyond the analysis of this performance. It describes the importance of understanding the cultural nuances of a performance when considering the way it has been structured. Lefebvre's theory has shed light on the production of space, but Adefila has shown that spaces of performance in Africa have social dimensions as well as layers of meaning that speak to the struggles of the African people; dignity, togetherness and the struggle to shape a self-governing Africa. This contributes to the ongoing discussions of pluralism within performance studies and moves away from Eurocentric frameworks as Adefila fuses traditional African design elements with contemporary Western design. He places modern African dance within the global performance sphere and in a contemporary decolonized discourse.

This study addresses both art and politics. Mi o Ni Choice scenography illustrates the realities of the Nigerian lived experience, where people endure political and social constraints and attempt to assert agency against structural limitations. The set transforms into an analogy of governance and order, making choreography a political statement. This places Adefila in a line of African performance that is both art and activism as it critiques the imbalances of power and expresses the possibility of different futures through space and movement. This study also shows the importance of scenography in contemporary African dance. Adefila situates the environment in relation to movement and adds greater depth to the

structure of the dance and the limits of the performance. Other studies may seek to evaluate this research in the context of performers and choreographers from outside of Africa; the perceptions of audiences and the relationships performers create through the use of space, and the use of new technologies and digitally generated immersive theatre environments to change the conversation between set design and choreography. These will help locate and articulate the interrelationship of space, body, and meaning in performance that is of a specific culture, a contemporary dance practice with a strong political connection.

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