

**BEYOND DISABILITIES, THERE IS
COMMUNICATIVE POTENCY IN THE
PERFORMER'S BODY:
A STUDY OF ONE-LEGGED SOLO
PERFORMERS IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA.**

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Abstract

The non-disabled dancers have appreciated the essence and value of dance more because of their body flexibility, displays, and the chronological patterned movements created by a choreographer. However, dancers with disabilities, especially in Nigeria, have been dehumanized as non-performers rather than mere side attractions for comic relief and pity based on their disabilities. This narrow assumption has led notable dance troupes in Nigeria to use these disabled dancers only for fundraising, excluding them from performances. This narrow perception has demoralized many talented disabled performers, causing them to shy away from dance as a profession and communicative tool. This research analyzes a notable disabled one-legged dance performer in Enugu state, Nigeria, who has used his disability in dance performance as social propaganda to mirror the negative ills happening in the country. The disabled dancer has reawakened the consciousness of the

masses in Nigeria to understand, believe, and appreciate that beyond disabilities, there is communicative value in their performance. To support my research findings, the sense-making theory by Brenda Dervin, which says “every dancer's body, be it disabled or abled, passes information across; all it requires is a seasoned interpretation and not an assumed interpretation,” will be used as my theoretical framework. In conclusion, the performer understudy continues to perform in Enugu State, Nigeria, and has proven beyond a doubt that disabilities are not limitations in dance, but rather a means for performers to be valued, recognized, and accepted as seasoned artists.

Introduction

In Nigeria, dance and the use of dance as a communicative tool were traditionally reserved for non-disabled dancers who displayed choreographic movements and impressed the audience. Everybody in Nigeria believes dance starts and ends with people who are physically complete and pass through different stages of the choreographic process toward producing a meaningful dance. Chiamaka Nmez (an interview on 9th January 2025) said, “Dance in its original form is meant for physically strong performances, abled-bodied, and can dance for aesthetics.” John Paul in another interview on 20th January 2025, said, “Beauty of any dance is in the body flexibility of the dancers and their pattern movements.” Helen Kings, in an interview, stated that “Dance and its aesthetics have nothing to do with disabled rather able strong dancers.”

Helen King's submission illustrates how some Nigerians react when they see a person with a disability dancing. To the average Nigerian, disabled dancers are not to be counted as actual performers; instead, they are accepted as jokers used to raise funds or for mere attraction to hold people's attention on occasions or events.

This myopic ideology has restricted a lot of talented disabled dancers from dancing based on societal stigma about them as mediocre, thereby, discouraging disabled people from being professional dancers. Some notable scholars in Nigeria have seen and assumed that using a disabled person in any dance is weakening the choreographic muse. The act of disability, especially in the lives of dancers, automatically sidetracks them from active performers into pitiable human beings who require monetary help, even though, there is nothing like that said by the disabled dancer.

Disability among dancers, whenever they are seen performing, has turned the majority of them into a laughing stock, unless the dancer possesses exceptional skills that surpass those of non-disabled dancers. What now attract people to watch a disabled dancer in Nigeria are their skills and unexpected displays. Radhika Sharma said

In real life and the performing arts, the disabled dancer can put on skillful displays that persuade the spectators and audience to react to the performance of disability. (8)

Therefore, it is only extraordinarily skillful displays that make a disabled dancer relevant, valued, and appreciated in Nigeria during any performance.

Disabilities Are Not Limitations for a Dancer

The true potency of any dance lies in the ability of the dancers, whether disabled or able, to interpret, understand, and communicate the message in the dance. Disabled dancers are core professionals in the field of dance; their disabilities do not limit them, but instead, they work diligently to interpret their dance movements in accordance with the choreographer's instructions. Nili Broyer and Gili Hammer observed that “the disability as a performance perspective examines actions of individuals in social situations and acknowledges the active role of each dancer in understanding choreographic concepts. (189)

The dancers' disabilities make them work extra hard to develop extraordinary skills, which compel the audience to watch them. On stage, the disabled dancer is seen as an individual rather than a seasoned professional aiming to entertain the audience and prove themselves beyond their limitations. Kaufman, as cited by Nataliya Kolesova, opined that.

The ability to dance as a disabled dancer relies on five key components, including body awareness, spatial awareness, the ability to follow oral instructions and music cues, the capacity to imitate

movement, as well as visualization and recall skills. (5)

The disabled dancer can perform some of the same tasks as a non-disabled dancer; all it requires is for the choreographer to understand the following.

- a) **Disability Consciousness:** The choreographer should always understand that the disabled dancer can only perform within their capabilities, so the disabled dancer should not be over-laboured
- b) **Performance Visibility:** The essence of visibility during the performance is always to make the disabled dancer relevant, so that the audience can value and understand their potential. The ability of the disabled dancer to be core visible in performance helps deemphasize the myopic ideology that they are limited, mediocre, and can never be appreciated as a professional.
- c) **Performing Space:** The choreographer should always consider the performing space when choreographing a dancer with a disability, because the type of space in which the dancer finds themselves determines their ability to exhibit the skills. The performing space should always be where the dancer can be comfortable while trying to interpret any movement. The disabled dancer is indeed a performer, but must not be placed in a position where they might do more harm than good while performing. Akas Nicholas observed that

The comfort of performing space in dance, especially among dancers with

disabilities, makes them feel accepted, recognized, and sometimes used as a scapegoat for perceived flaws while dancing. (24)

- d) **Awareness:** It is the choreographer's responsibility to always acknowledge the disabled dancer before the audience and fellow dancers. The awareness presented to the audience helps them understand that disabilities do not stop talented dancers from performing or actualizing their artistic desires. Meanwhile, the awareness among their professionals enables them to accept people with disabilities as professionals, rather than as individuals to be pitted against.

Sense-Making Theory

Sense-Making Theory was propounded by Brenda Dervin in 1983. In theory, he said that every work of art has a meaning attached to it; all it requires is understanding, appreciation, and interpretation. He further added

The value of any work of art, especially in dance, is to understand what gave rise to the creation of the performance and the ability of the dancers to interpret it, whether able or disabled performers. (4)

Sense-Making Theory has significantly contributed to giving meaning to disability dance, a form of dance performed worldwide. It helps the audience to always appreciate the dancing disabled beyond their disability,

as a professional communicator. Naresh Kumar Aganval maintained that.

Sense-making theory is all about reconciling apparent differences and polarities without wishing them away, but rather recognizing them as necessary. (101)

In sense-making theory, the disabled dancer begins to engage in meaningful socio-communicative messages to lampoon, create awareness, or proffer a workable solution through dance movements based on the choreographer's ideology. Dervin Brenda said that for every work of art to be seen as communicative, they must follow the process.

- a) What is the Art: He said here that the audience must always understand the type of artwork being presented to them, whether it is dance, poetry, drawing, or fashion. It is of the kind of art that the ideal communicative meaning will be understood because each art process differs.
- b) The Performing Body: According to Brenda, what matters most in any performance is the performer's ability to convey the required message, rather than their physique. He declared that once a performing body can pass the required message, the physique becomes worthless. (24)

Aspasia Darvia supported this by saying.

In dance performance, what matters is the ability of both non-disabled and disabled dancers to follow the choreographic pattern and deliver a fulfilling performance to the audience without regrets. (24),

While Foreman Wernet submitted

The audience should always try to appreciate the body performing and criticize the disability found. (34)

Therefore, based on the above submissions, the analysis of one-legged solo performers in Enugu State, Nigeria, will be grounded in sense-making theory.

Types of Disabled Dancers in Nigeria and Perceptions of Them

The types of disabled dancers and their perception of them will help readers understand how the Nigerian audience values disabled performers when they are seen in events or on stage. They are classified as;

- a) **The beggars:** They are called the rotten eggs of disability performance in Nigeria. The sole aim of disability performers is to seek financial assistance on occasions such as weddings, funerals, birthdays, and festivals. They always look unkempt whenever they are sighted on any occasion. The disabled dancers here do not follow any cue or choreographic pattern while

performing; instead, they are more conscious of how to display their disabled physique to get money from the audience on the occasion.

- b) **The Pity Seekers:** They are also known as the Lazy gangs in Nigeria. This set of disabled performers does not want to work or utilize their talents; instead, they move around, composing songs to plead for financial support. They can perform under heavy sun and rainfall to attract people's attention and evoke their sympathy.
- c) **The Professionals:** They are referred to as super-talented performers in Nigeria. This type of disabled performer, especially in dance, is one that the audience will always love to watch. They are trained either formally or informally, and they are not like beggars or pity seekers; instead, they make a living from their creativity and artistic displays. This set of performers is well-received in Nigeria whenever they perform. They always follow the able dancers throughout the entire rehearsal process to achieve a complete production. The disabled dancers here are always placed in a way that maximizes their visibility and value. What attracts the Nigerian masses to watch them is the exceptional display of their skills, even in the face of their disability, which was previously assumed to be a limitation. It is under this section that the researcher believes that there is communicative potency beyond every disability.

Brief On How the One-Legged Solo Performer Started

The one-legged dancer by name is Emeka Ikeogu. He was an accomplished dancer who performed with a notable theatre company in Enugu State as the lead dancer. He was renowned for his skillful performances as an accomplished dancer, which earned him numerous prestigious awards from state and local governments.

However, on 15th May 2016, approximately 9:45 p.m. Nigeria time, after a successful rehearsal, his company was preparing for a competition for the government of Enugu State, Nigeria, the next day, 16th May 2016. So, on his way back home, according to an interview, he had a fatal accident that affected his right leg badly. The dance company tried everything possible to avoid his leg being amputated, but to no avail. He is first afraid when it is obvious that his leg will be amputated, and he feared losing his career as a professional non-disabled dancer because the majority of Nigerian audiences fully accept disabled dance.

Emeka Ikeogu, in an interview dated 13th January 2025, said, “On the 20th of 2019, he formed the one-legged dance performance, because of his passion for dance, and after he was sacked from his original troupe, because he was seen as not being useful again, based on his new status as disabled.”

He also added that his community did not accept the one-legged solo performance in the early stages because of his disability. Still, as time progressed, he was able to

convince them by staging an annual live dance performance on various topical issues affecting the community, which led to his complete acceptance as a professional and an invitation to perform. He also won several awards as a solo one-legged dancer. One outstanding award was titled “Body Talks in Dance, Not the disability”. He has been performing for over 10 years now.

Analysis of Social Ills Themes and How the One-legged Dancer Interpreted Them

The solo one-legged performer always performed every Friday and annually in his village square for over 10 years. The audience always anticipated his performance due to his exceptional ability and skillful talent in interpreting a wide range of topics. The solo one-legged performer utilizes the communicative power of his disability to convey the message. The solo one-legged dancer has performed over 200 times on various issues. However, for this research, the researcher aims to discuss only three sub-themes and their interpretations. They are;

- a) Failed Politician
- b) Disability is not a limitation
- c) Disability in children is not a curse

a) Failed Politician

The solo one-legged person interpreted this scene through sound design and a decorated wheelchair. He dresses one a very colourful and attractive outfit where he wheels himself around smiling and waving at the

audience in a rhythmic form, while waving at the audience at a point where the drummers slow the rhythm for him, he makes political promises to the audience on what he will do for them as a Politician. Each of the pledges has been backed up with a cue from the drummers. The dress for the one-legged solo performer portrays him as a Politician, while the decorated wheelchair serves as the Politician's expensive car. However, at a point in the dance performance, he was seen on the floor looking unkempt, while the decorated chair was placed in the center of the stage. The dancer was no longer attractively dressed; instead, he looked semi-unkempt, crawling on the floor, struggling to get into the decorated wheelchair, but all to no avail. The one-legged dancer struggled in pain to grasp the decorated wheelchair, but it kept moving away. The message of the one-legged dancer was clear: when politicians did not perform well while in power, it would not be easy to be voted into power again. The decorated wheelchair moving away while the dancer struggles to grab it portrays the moment when the masses have passed a vote of no confidence in any of their failed politicians.

b) Disability Is Not A Limitation

This is an award-winning performance by the dancer. The dance performance depicted a disabled professor at a university who was denied the position of Head of Department because he was blind. This disability has prevented this intelligent academic professor from receiving various notable promotions at the university. One day, the able Head of the Department fell ill and

was unable to function actively again. There was no other senior Colleague to be the Acting Head of the Department. Slowly, the position was given to him, despite his colleagues' assumptions that he would not perform well. However, it was later recorded that he was the best Head of the department.

The one-legged dancer was able to portray this action in his dance using two symbols, “Paper and Key”. The paper symbolically demonstrated that the blind professor was valued for his intelligence and academic achievements, thereby earning him respect.

The key symbol not given to him, shows that he was not trusted to hold any big office or position because of his disability. When the position of the Acting Head of the department was given to him, both symbols “Paper and Key” were given to him, which interpretively means he was entrusted with the position of scholar and administrator

c) Disability Is Not A Curse

This performance shows a disabled dancer who wants to commit suicide because a lot of women have rejected him because of his disability. This rejection has caused the character to have sleepless nights, constant tears, and isolation, so he decides to end his life till unexpected love locates him again, thereby making him not commit suicide.

The one-legged solo performer was able to interpret these using two iconic symbols: “Plastic-filled with water and Colour red flower”. The plastic-filled water

serves as a poisonous substance that he was about to drink before the red-colored flowers started falling onto the stage, which is a sign of love and acceptance.

Conclusion

The acceptance of disability as part of the performing arts has remained an area that requires profound awareness in Nigeria and worldwide. The disabled performers understand all the requirements of a good performance, thereby proving that their disabilities are not a limitation. This research aims to promote and create a positive awareness of disability performance. It is essential to note that this research will encourage disabled artists in Nigeria to take the driver's seat in making the audience perceive them as professionals, rather than as individuals assigned artistic roles out of pity or for financial assistance.

This research, therefore, maintains that for every disabled performance, the paramount aim is to convey communicative values that transcend the disabilities and the myopic assumptions that they cannot perform like abled dancers.

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