

COLLABORATIVE AUTHORSHIP IN PERFORMANCE: THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND DANCE CHOREOGRAPHER AS CO-CREATORS.

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Abstract

Contemporary performance creation increasingly reflects a shift from hierarchical models of artistic production toward collaborative frameworks in which multiple creative agents share authorship of theatrical and dance works. Among the most critical relationships in this evolving structure is that between the Artistic Director and the Dance Choreographer, whose interaction significantly shapes the conceptual, aesthetic, and experiential dimensions of performance. This study investigates collaborative authorship in performance by examining how these two practitioners function as co-creators in contemporary theatre and dance production. Drawing from qualitative research methods, including document analysis, production reviews, and case study interpretation, the study explores the dynamics of artistic negotiation, shared decision-making and interdisciplinary integration. Findings suggest that performance outcomes are strongest when creative authority is distributed through mutual respect, continuous dialogue, and shared artistic vision. The study concludes that contemporary performance is best understood not as individually authored but as collectively constructed through collaborative creativity.

Keywords: Artistic Director, Collaborative authorship, Creative collaboration, Dance Choreographer, performance studies,

Introduction

Contemporary performance practice has experienced a major structural and conceptual upheaval, especially in respect to the definitions of artistic authority and creative ownership in theatre and dance production. According to Sawyer, the conventional approach, where the director or playwright was the main author of a performance, has been increasingly challenged by collaborative structures that emphasise shared creative responsibility among many artistic players

(15). In this shifting paradigm, performance is no longer seen to be the result of a unique vision, but rather as the product of a communal interaction amongst directors, choreographers, performers, designers and technicians whose contributions overlap along the production process.

In this collaborative environment, the Artistic Director and Dance Choreographer play very important responsibilities. The Artistic Director is responsible for the overall vision of a production, the thematic interpretation, coordination of artistic departments, and cohesion of different parts of performance (Bogart 41). But more recent studies argue that the role has changed from being one of authoritative control to being one of facilitative leadership, where meaning is made via negotiation and collaboration rather than unilateral decision-making. (Readman 132)

The Dance Choreographer, however, creates meaning through movement composition, bodily expression and spatial design. Choreography is not only cosmetic movement, it is a system of structure and communication, through which narrative, emotion and symbolic meaning are conveyed (Blom and Chaplin 56). In contemporary performance practice, choreographic practice is gaining importance in dramaturgy, staging and audience perception, and the choreographer is therefore becoming a key creative creator instead of a marginal specialist. Where the two roles meet is a dynamic location of creative negotiation, and artistic meaning is a shared production. Artistic Directors and Choreographers do not work within strict hierarchical limits but instead have ongoing conversations that determine the aesthetic of a production (Butterworth and Wildschut, 73).

This collaborative conversation is a micro-example of larger trends in performance studies toward distributed authorship, when creative ownership is shared among numerous participants rather than assigned to one person. In these cases, the artistic content is developed through improvisation, experimentation and group development, and not through pre-written scripts or predefined choreographic forms (Bogart 42). Authors, therefore, are not defined by fixed or pre-assigned responsibilities; rather, authorship emerges through interaction, collaboration, and the continuous exchange of creative ideas. The study consequently aims to investigate collaborative authorship in performance through an analysis of the connection between Artistic Directors and Dance Choreographers as co-creators in contemporary theatre and dance shows. It examines the negotiation of artistic choices, the distribution of creative control, and the impact of collaboration on aesthetic outcomes and audience response.

Literature Review

Barba and Savarese argue that:

The authorship of performance has been a subject of much scholarly debate, especially as contemporary theatre and dance practices continue to dispute the concept of single creative ownership. Traditional performance theory was inclined towards privileging the role of the director, playwright or choreographer as the main author of meaning. Contemporary study has however shifted towards the idea of performance as a cooperatively authored event, moulded via several levels of creative contribution (45).

Sawyer contends that creativity is essentially social, originating in interaction, not in solitary intellect (18). This view is particularly pertinent to performance studies, because outcomes are produced dialogically, experimentally, and iteratively through rehearsal procedures. Creativity in this sense is not something that happens inside the person, but something that arises from the interaction of a group. The Artistic Director is crucial in setting up this collaborative atmosphere. Bogart characterizes directing as a process of “architecting attention” in which the director guides attention and at the same time allows other artists to contribute (52). However, this role is

increasingly being recognized as relational rather than authoritarian, and as needing attention to the contributions of other creative practitioners.

The Dance Choreographer is also a creator and interpreter of movement-based meaning. Blom and Chaplin contend that choreography organizes physical expression into coherent systems that communicate emotional and narrative information (60). Contemporary performance choreography is no longer limited to the dancing sequence but often extends into the dramaturgical framework, impacting timing, tone, and spatial interactions in the context of a production.

The relationship between directors and choreographers has thus become a central subject of scholarly research. Butterworth and Wildschut suggest that choreography nowadays is more a collaborative endeavor, typically arising in interaction with directors, actors and designers rather than in isolated creative preparation (78). This interconnectedness means that meaning in art is a matter of negotiation rather than authorial imposition.

This is also supported by John-Steiner's theory of creative collaboration, which shows that long-term artistic collaborations allow for the combination of intellectual and creative resources in ways that create complex solutions not possible when working alone (61). In performance, such teamwork enables directors and choreographers to merge visual, kinetic and narrative components into coherent artistic forms.

Devised theatre techniques confound traditional authorship models even further. Oddey points out that devised performance rejects hierarchical hierarchies in favour of collective creativity, in which all participants contribute to the generation of performance material (42). Similarly, Govan, Nicholson and Normington propose that devised procedures spread authorship amongst the group, erasing established boundaries between positions such as director, choreographer and actor (88).

In the African and Nigerian theatre cultures, joint writing assumes significant cultural significance. Yerima asserts that; contemporary Nigerian performance often fuses indigenous dance traditions, narrative practices, and modern theatrical approaches, necessitating tight coordination between movement professionals and directors to ensure both aesthetic coherence and cultural authenticity (33). This hybridisation points to the importance of collaborative creative systems in modern African performance practice.

Performance theory more broadly complicates any straightforward attribution of authorship to a single figure. Carlson observes that performance resists fixed definition precisely because the term is used across theatre, ritual, and everyday life to describe actions that are self-conscious, framed, and put on display for an observer (4). This framing quality is significant for collaborative authorship because it suggests that a performance's meaning is not authored prior to its being watched but is completed, in part, through the relationship between what is presented and how it is received, an idea that resonates with the collaborative, negotiated model of authorship this study proposes.

This relational understanding of performance is anticipated by Brook, who reduces the theatrical event to its simplest components: a person crossing an empty space while another person watches, an act he argues is sufficient on its own to constitute theatre (9). Brook's minimal definition is instructive for the present study because it locates the origin of theatrical meaning not in a single author's intention but in the relationship between performer and observer, a relational logic that extends naturally to the relationship between an Artistic Director and a Dance Choreographer as co-creators of that same encounter.

Cardullo's account of dramaturgy reinforces this relational view, describing dramaturgical practice as fundamentally interpretive and collaborative, mediating between text, director, and production rather than issuing directives from a position of singular authority (7). Although the Artistic Director and Dance Choreographer in the present study occupy different roles from the dramaturg Cardullo describes, his emphasis on dramaturgy as a negotiated, relational function within the production process supports this study's broader argument that meaning in performance is distributed across multiple creative roles rather than concentrated in one.

Pavis similarly argues that analyzing performance requires attending to the interaction among the many systems that constitute a production, including text, movement, design, and sound, rather than isolating any single element as the primary bearer of meaning (24). This multi-systemic view of performance analysis lends further theoretical support to treating movement and dramaturgy as co-equal, interacting contributors to a production's overall meaning, consistent with the collaborative relationship between director and choreographer examined in this study.

Foster's concept of kinesthetic empathy further illuminates the choreographer's contribution to collaborative meaning-making, proposing that audiences come to understand a dance work partly through a bodily, empathetic response to the movement they observe, rather than through purely intellectual interpretation (3). This suggests that the choreographer's contribution to a production operates on a distinct experiential register from the director's more textually oriented dramaturgical work, reinforcing the complementary, rather than hierarchical, relationship between the two roles that this study investigates.

The Nigerian and broader African context of the present study is further illuminated by scholarship on the country's traditional and modern theatre traditions. Adedeji traces the professional Yoruba traveling theatre tradition, known as Alarinjo, to its origins in Yoruba masquerade and court entertainment practice, showing that Nigerian theatre artists such as Hubert Ogunde drew directly on this indigenous performance heritage in developing the modern professional companies from which contemporary Nigerian collaborative practice descends (224). Adelugba similarly documents the institutional developments that shaped Nigerian theatre practice through the twentieth century, noting a gradual movement from itinerant, artist-led companies toward more structurally differentiated production teams in which directing, choreography, and design became increasingly distinct, if interdependent, specializations (15). Obafemi extends this account into the contemporary period, arguing that Nigerian theatre and performance today routinely integrate drama, dance, music, and ritual elements in ways that require sustained collaboration among specialists rather than the singular authorial control associated with earlier dramatic traditions (22). Taken together, this scholarship indicates that collaborative authorship, as examined in this study, is not a departure from Nigerian theatre history but a continuation of practices rooted in the country's traditional and early professional performance traditions.

Theoretical Framework

The research is based on two main theoretical frameworks: Collaborative Creativity Theory and Performance Authorship Theory. Sawyer's Collaborative Creativity Theory states that creativity is not a lonely cognitive activity but a phenomenon that emerges from social interaction and group dynamics. This theory, applied to performance contexts, posits that artistic innovations are created through experimentation, dialogue, and initiative refining in rehearsal. Artistic Directors and Choreographers do not create in isolation, therefore, but co-construct meaning through ongoing contact (18). Sawyer also notes that group creativity generally leads to products that are unpredictable and non-linear, as ideas are generated through collaborative exchange rather than

planned development (30). This theoretical perspective is especially pertinent to performance production, since creative decisions are often altered during rehearsal on the basis of collective input. John-Steiner develops this argument by introducing the idea of “complementary collaboration,” in which persons with various artistic skills combine their abilities to achieve complicated creative solutions (61). This is reflected in the interaction between directors and choreographers in theatre and dance, where there is a continuing cooperation that integrates dramatic structure and movement design.

Performance Authorship Theory rejects the idea of individual authorship by contending that performance meaning is formed through collective involvement and not individual control (Phelan 52). In this conception authorship is spread among actors, directors, designers, choreographers and even spectators who are all involved in the formation of meaning. In this context, the Artistic Director and the Dance Choreographer are co-authors, their creative input being an inseparable part of the final performance output. Their partnership marks a departure from hierarchical modes of production towards more decentralized systems of creativity where meaning is in constant flux.

These theoretical frameworks, taken together, offer a holistic perspective on collaborative authorship as a creative process and a structural condition of modern performance.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study in which the Researcher is also a participant observer, adopt the Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation style sheet and the core method of investigation is the interview method. The primary source includes the performance of *The chosen* written by Nsikan Bassey and *Red is the freedom road* written by Femi Osofisan as directed by Olugbenga Covenant Babatunde and Choreographed by Femi Segun Junaid, media documentation of the rehearsal process and the documented interviews with the director and Choreographer while the secondary source material includes, production book, textbooks, journals, anthologies, Ai and internet sources.

This qualitative approach aligns with Creswell’s characterization of qualitative inquiry as an interpretive process concerned with understanding the meaning that individuals or groups bring to a social or artistic problem, gathered through data collected in the natural settings in which that meaning is produced (45). It also draws on Yin’s account of case study research, which is particularly well suited to investigating a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundary between the phenomenon and that context, such as the relationship between a director and choreographer within an ongoing production process, is not sharply defined (21).

Primary Sources

i. Production rehearsals and Observation: The researchers are fully part of the production rehearsals from the casting to the production, the researchers are also the Directors and Choreographer of the production understudy, so they went through all the processes the productions understudy, so they are privileged to firsthand data for this paper. Therefore, as participant observer the researchers; engaged with casts and crew.

ii. Interviews: Documented interviews were done with the Artistic director and the Choreographer. The interviewees were asked to share more light into the following headings: Roles of an artistic Director in production, Roles of a Choreographer in a production, The working relationship between an artistic director and a Choreographer the production, The ability of the director and choreographer to work in the same production without a clash of position and creativity.

Secondary Sources:

i. Production book: The production book contained the day-to-day process of the production. The stage manager did a proper documentation which the researchers collected for the review and used as a research material for this paper. The Analysis of production book coverage such as blockings, dance floor patterns, and videos of the performances was done.

ii. Textbooks: Scholarly works on theatre directing, choreography, and performance studies were also used.

iii. Journals: Peer-reviewed articles on Theatre arts, performance, directing and choreography.

iv. Anthologies: Collections of essays and articles on relevant topics.

v. Internet Sources: Online resources, academic databases, Ai and reputable websites.

Data Presentation

Shared Artistic Vision

The interview responses indicate that collaboration begins with the establishment of a shared conception of the production. The director describes communicating thematic, emotional, and visual objectives, while the choreographer describes translating those objectives into physical possibilities. This suggests that the relationship is not simply one in which the director gives instructions and the choreographer executes them. Instead, the initial artistic concept becomes a point of dialogue from which movement is developed.

Negotiated Creative Authority

The data suggest that authority is distributed according to professional expertise. The director retains responsibility for the overall production, whereas the choreographer exercises specialist authority over movement. Nevertheless, neither role operates in isolation. The director may alter staging in response to choreographic discoveries, while the choreographer may modify movement in response to dramaturgical requirements. This pattern supports the conception of collaborative authorship as negotiated rather than as a condition in which all practitioners possess identical authority.

Choreography as Dramaturgy

Both responses position choreography as a dramaturgical resource. Movement is described as contributing to mood, rhythm, transitions, character relationships, emotional intensity, and visual composition. The data strengthen the paper's argument that the choreographer contributes to meaning-making and should therefore be recognised as a co-creator rather than merely a technical specialist.

Rehearsal as a Site of Co-Creation

Both participants describe rehearsal as a space in which pre-existing ideas are tested and new possibilities emerge. This is consistent with Collaborative Creativity Theory because creative outcomes develop through interaction, feedback, experimentation, and revision.

Cultural and Interdisciplinary Integration

The responses indicate that movement is shaped by cultural meanings and by its relationship with music, acting, space, and dramatic action. This theme is particularly important for a Nigerian performance study because choreography cannot be assumed to be culturally neutral. For example, Bata dance was used in *The Chosen* to show the Yoruba culture and setting of the play which the director also used language interjection to show the cultural background of the play.

Collaborative Authorship

The central emerging theme is that collaborative authorship does not require the elimination of directorial leadership. Rather, it occurs when the director and choreographer influence one another's creative decisions and when specialist contributions become materially significant to the final performance.

Results and Discussion

The outcomes of this study suggest that the modern performance production is characterised by collaborative authorship. The relationship between Artistic Directors and Dance Choreographers is a co-creative partnership where artistic meaning is cooperatively generated and not independently authored. The result supports Sawyer's claim that creativity arises from contact rather than from isolated genius (30). This is visible in performing settings as ideas evolve in rehearsal through ongoing conversation and experimenting. Artistic results are not pre-determined, they emerge from collaborative evolution.

Further support for John-Steiner's thesis of complementary cooperation comes from the data that directors and choreographers offer different, yet interdependent abilities to the creative process (70). Directors offer story structure and thematic consistency, choreographers embodied expression and spatial design. Their connection develops integrated art forms. The study also shows that collaboration increases flexibility in the development of performances. When there are open channels of communication between directors and choreographers, productions in rehearsal are more flexible, and the results are more alive and responsive. Collaborative authorship is particularly pertinent in the Nigerian performance setting because of the merging of indigenous dance traditions with contemporary theatrical forms (Yerima 33). Such cultural hybridity entails intimate collaboration between directors and choreographers to achieve both authenticity and originality in the expression of performance. Overall, the data demonstrates that collaborative authorship is not simply a production approach but a basic requirement of contemporary performance-making.

Conclusion

This study examined collaborative authorship in performance through the relationship between the Artistic Director and Dance Choreographer, with particular attention to the collaborative processes involved in *The Chosen* and *Red Is the Freedom Road* and hereby concludes that, contemporary performance is rarely the product of an isolated creative intelligence. Rather, performance develops through interaction among practitioners who contribute different forms of knowledge, expertise, experience, and artistic vision.

The relationship between the director and choreographer is consequently both complementary and dynamic. The director provides the broader dramaturgical, organisational, and artistic framework, while the choreographer contributes specialist knowledge of movement, physical expression, rhythm, spatial composition, and embodied storytelling. Their responsibilities remain distinct, but the boundaries between them become productive points of creative exchange. The study further establishes that collaborative authorship does not necessarily imply equal authority. Instead, creative authority may shift according to the artistic problem being addressed. The director may retain overall responsibility for the production while recognising the choreographer's specialist authority in movement and physical composition.

Through dialogue, experimentation, negotiation, and revision, these different forms of authority contribute to the development of the final performance while rehearsal ground serves as a site of creative discovery. Ideas are not necessarily fixed before performers enter the rehearsal space; they

can develop through experimentation and interaction. This makes rehearsal an important site in which authorship is negotiated and continuously reconstructed. The director–choreographer relationship demonstrates that when communication, trust, mutual respect, and creative openness are established, collaboration can generate great, expressive, innovative and excellent performances, than those produced through rigidly hierarchical processes.

Recommendations

The study therefore recommends that theatre institutions, production companies, and practitioners should recognise the contributions of choreographers and other creative collaborators in production credits and publicity materials. Where a choreographer makes substantial creative contributions to the meaning and structure of a performance, such contribution should be acknowledged as part of the artistic authorship of the work

It also suggests that choreographers should be involved at an early stage of production rather than being introduced only after the director has completed the principal staging. Early involvement creates opportunities for movement to contribute to dramaturgy, character development, transitions, rhythm, and visual composition. The study further suggests that directors should cultivate rehearsal environments in which choreographers and other creative practitioners can propose, test, question, and modify ideas. Rehearsal should be treated as a creative space rather than simply a site for executing predetermined directorial instructions.

The research recommends that production teams should establish clear areas of responsibility while maintaining opportunities for collaboration. The director may retain overall artistic responsibility, while the choreographer maintains specialist authority over movement and physical composition. Clear boundaries can reduce unnecessary conflict while still allowing creative exchange and establish communication practices based on mutual respect, openness, and trust. Creative disagreement should be understood as potentially productive rather than automatically interpreted as insubordination or resistance.

Theatre training institutions should incorporate collaborative and interdisciplinary projects into their curricula. Directing, choreography, acting, music, design, and other performance disciplines should have opportunities to work together during training so that students develop the communication and negotiation skills required by contemporary professional practice. Documentation habit should be taught so that students can learn the habit of documenting significant collaborative decisions during rehearsal and production. Such documentation can contribute to institutional archives, academic research, future production development, and recognition of creative contributions.

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