

THE POPULAR THEATRE IN GHANA

"Come to laugh away your sorrows and hear their latest and charming songs... Make no mistake, but remember the Akompi's Band are the composers and singers of your favourite songs which you hear every morning and afternoon on your radios....."

"Come to laugh when it is time to laugh and cry when it is time to cry. We are prepared to give our fans their moneys worth". (An extract from a poster of Akompi's Concert Party).

"BRONG/NORTHERN & UPPER REGIONS; Concert fans! Be prepared for acrobatic and wonderful special two-in-one: Super Okubi's and Akwaboa's Guitar Band wonderful display; watch posters carefully. Never miss!" (Daily Graphic, September 28, 1966).

These advertising extracts are a useful and pertinent guide to the popularity of Ghanaian 'Comic Plays' and the extent to which they are enjoyed throughout the country. The extracts are typical of those which appear daily in newspapers and posters about the plays.

It is worth while defining here what we have termed 'Comic Plays'. The past three or four decades have seen phenomenal social and political changes in Africa generally. These changes have brought in their wake, among other things, different types of artistic creation in the form of dance, music and drama! The 'Comic Plays' are a Ghanaian type of popular drama which, despite the acculturative influences they reflect, are African in content and features. They provide one of the commonest and most popular means of entertainment in Ghana today. They are

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1. See J.H. Nketia: Ghana Music, Dance and Drama. Published by the Ghana Information Services and Printed by the State Publishing Corporation (Printing Division) Accra-Tema, Ghana, pp.37-47.

staged by itinerant guitar bands who call themselves 'Concert Parties', 'Trios' etc. and describe their principal actors, who like the Shakespearian actors of Elizabethan England are all men, as comedians. In keeping with popular usage therefore we have adopted the term 'Comic' to describe the plays which are generally intended to be laughter-provoking. The Comic Plays are comparable with variety entertainment comprising singing, dancing, short plays etc. provided in some night-clubs and musical halls in Britain and the type of entertainment provided by what in the United States of America are called Vaudeville Companies. In fact, our Concert Parties can conveniently be regarded as Ghanaian equivalents of Vaudeville Companies.

Ghanaian comedians have been staging comic plays for well over forty years but of late the plays seem to have become a more lucrative business than they were before and the number of young men and sometimes quite elderly men engaging in them as a full or part-time means of earning their living has been increasing at a remarkable rate. This fact has aroused our interest in the plays and we are engaged on collecting data on them for a sociological study which, it is hoped, will cover such aspects as the history and the themes of the plays, audience's responses to them and their social functions.

One peculiar and distinctive fact about the Comic Plays is that they are not written.¹ This distinguishes them from the traditional Western Plays. The actors rely solely on their memories from the time they begin to learn their parts of the story they are to dramatise right through to its presentation to the general public. This very fact, of course, gives the comedians ample room for necessary adaptation and improvisation.

The actors show ingenuity in the reliance on their memories as well as their construction and adaptation of stories for their plays.

1. Scripts of some of these plays prepared from transcriptions of recordings of the plays are available in the Library of the Institute of African Studies. They include plays by the Ahanta Trio, the Fanti Trio, I.E. Mason's band, Bob Cole's Ghana Trio, Kakaiku's band and E.K.'s Akan Trio No. 1

Our enquiries have revealed that when a story which reflects some life problem occurs to a comedian or when he constructs such a story, he gathers his colleagues together and describes it to them. After hearing and satisfying themselves as to the suitability of it for a play, they share its parts for dramatisation. They select appropriate songs and fit them into their parts. Now conversant with the portions of the story they are to act, they meet on several occasions to practise and rehearse the play before critical judges who correct and amend parts as it is rehearsed. In order to make a play meaningful and enjoyable to their audience, the comedians introduce into it local names of places and people and change them according to the locality where the play is being performed.

The Stage Of the Comic Plays

The stage of the Comic Plays stands out as an interesting feature. It varies from a small platform made of boards or cement in the courtyard of a village compound house to the modern stage of a city theatre. The stage is not normally fitted with differently coloured electric lights. Where there is a supply of electricity, a few electric light bulbs hanging on the stage and providing enough light for the actors to be seen clearly by the audience are all that the comedians require. Where there is no supply of electricity, two or three hurricane or Aladdin lamps serve the purpose.

The comedians do not use curtains; theirs is a permanently open stage with a dressing corner usually improvised for the play and dismantled when it is over. The open stage is convenient to the comedians because it suits their acting which sometimes begins right from their dressing corner before they get to the middle of the stage.

Members of the audience sometimes sit along three sides of the stage leaving only the side against the wall. As a matter of fact, occasionally parts of the plays are performed on the ground in the midst of the audience, thus still further encouraging 'involvement' of the audience.

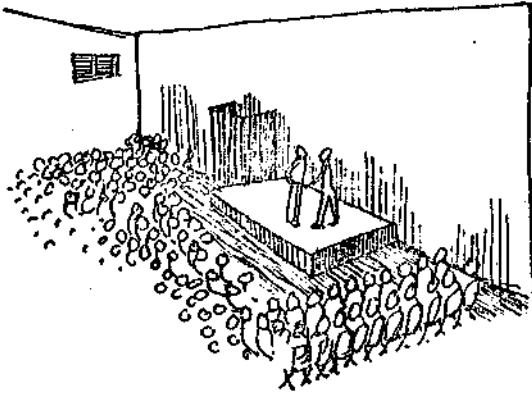
The emotional involvement of the audience in the Comic Plays is one of our important findings in this study. The plays have on their audience emotional effect which is similar to what Aristotle discusses in his Poetics in the theory of Catharsis.¹ In this theory Aristotle examines the emotional effect of Tragedy on its audience and holds that Tragedy enables members of the audience to release repressed emotions like pity and fear and excess of passions. Similarly, our data show that the Comic Plays give the audience a chance to release their emotions and accumulated tensions. In the plays members of the audience are presented with echoes of their own bitter or happy relationships and experiences or of those of their friends. They get the opportunity to purge themselves of the grief which their sad experience caused them or to re-live their happy experiences as the case may be. They feed into the plays the particular emotions and feelings they need or wish to purge. In effect, they attend the plays to find some sort of an internal tranquilizer which the Comic Plays do provide. Some aspects of everyday life are mirrored on to the stage for the audience to be outside observers and at the same time mental participants in the unfolding drama. A woman who witnesses in a play an incident similar to her own agonizing experience bursts into tears and releases painful feelings, accumulated as a result of that experience. She is emboldened in her emotional response to the play by the pity which the echo of her experience rouses from the audience. We regard this Cathartic effect of the comic plays as one of their latent functions² revealed by the analysis of the available data.

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1. For detailed examination of the theory see F.L. Lucas, Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics (The Hogarth Press London 1957) pp. 35-78.
 2. This is based on Merton's analysis of the concept of function. See Robert Merton: Social Theory and Social Structure (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1957) pp. 19-48.

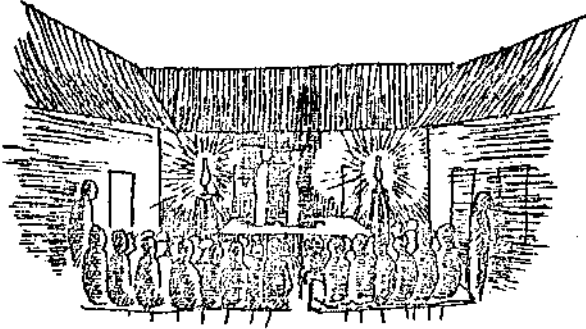
The history and other aspects of the Comic Plays including their other social functions will be examined in subsequent articles. An attempt will also be made to compare the responses given to the Comic Plays with the responses given to Western type of plays.

K.N. Bame.

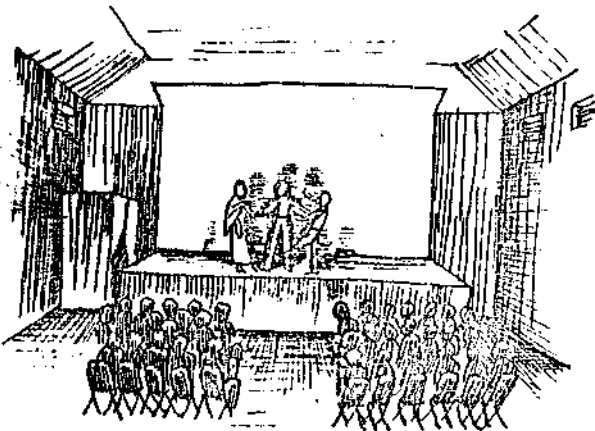
Types of Stage for the Comic Plays



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