

THE INFLUENCE OF CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN TRADITIONAL DRAMA ON THE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR OF PLAY-GOERS

K. N. BAME*

Commenting on the influence of fine art in general and drama in particular on human conduct, Benard Shaw once wrote:

"Fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the effective means of moral propaganda in the world, excepting only the example of personal conduct; and I waive even this exceptional in favour of the art of the stage because it works by exhibiting examples of personal conduct made intelligible and moving to crowds of unobservant, unreflecting people to whom real life means nothing." (Quoted by Vincent, 1923, 143.)

Despite the fact that many playwrights and sociologists may share Shaw's opinion expressed in this quotation, an examination of the relevant literature reveals that not much sociological research and writing has been done on the influence of drama on the attitudes and behaviour of play-goers.

One of the few sociologists who have paid some attention to art-forms including drama and their influence is Melvin Vincent. In a study similar to that reported in this article, Vincent (1923) concludes from his findings that drama affects its audience in the following ways:

- (1) The heroes or heroines who appear in plays serve as patterns or models for the behaviour of some members of the audience.
- (2) The plays make some members of the audience aware of the social problems of contemporary life and make them think seriously about the solution of the problems.

As a part of a study of the diffusion and social functions of "Comic Plays"¹ in Ghana, we conducted a survey on Comic Play-goers, reactions to the plays and the plays' influence on their attitudes and behaviour.

The hypothesis tested in the survey is that:

The incidents which Ghanaian Comic Play-goers see in the plays on the stage influence and guide their daily lives.

A sample of approximately one thousand play-goers were interviewed in a "focused interview"² in all the nine regions of Ghana. Each of the respondents answered questions in a schedule consisting of fifteen items. Six of the Yes-or-No items considered germane to our present analysis are:

- (1) Have you ever seen somebody shedding tears while watching a Concert Party play? If yes, why do you think he or she wept?
- (2) Have you ever shed tears while watching a Concert Party play? If yes, why did you weep?

*K. N. Bame is a Research Fellow, Institute of African Studies, Legon.

1. What have been termed Comic Plays are a Ghanaian type of popular drama staged by itinerant guitar bands (troupes) who call themselves "Concert Parties" 'Trios' and others and describe their all male actors as comedians. The term 'Comic' has been used to describe the plays because they are generally intended to be laughter-provoking.
2. The 'focused interview' is a technique in which a structured questionnaire is used to interview persons known to have been involved in a particular concrete situations (they may have seen a film or a play or heard particular broadcast etc.) For detailed discussions of the technique see Merton, *et. al.* (1956) and Young 1966: 211-212.

- (3) Apart from entertainment, do you get or learn anything from Concert Party Plays? What do you get or learn from them?
- (4) Have you ever witnessed in a Concert Party play something similar to an incident in your life? Describe the incident.
- (5) Do you think Concert Party plays do anything for your town or village? If yes, what is it?
- (6) Do the morals or advice which the comedians give at the end of their plays help you in your daily life? If yes, how? Tables 1 and 2 below show a country-wide distribution of responses to these questions.

In answer to the first question, out of a total of 885 respondents, five hundred and twenty-nine (59.8%) stated that they had seen somebody shedding tears while watching a Concert Party play. Of these, two hundred and ninety-five felt that the play-goers they saw weeping did so because they were sorry for a character's sad situation; one hundred and seventy-five thought an incident in the play reminded those who wept of similar incidents in their lives; and fifty-nine could not tell why the play-goers wept. However, to a personal version of the same question given as the second question, asking the respondents whether they had themselves ever wept in the course of a Concert Party play, the number of those who replied in the affirmative reduced considerably; of 885 respondents only one hundred and ninety-nine (22.5%) admitted that they had ever wept, sixty-five of them wept because they were reminded of an incident in their life and the remaining one hundred and thirty-four were moved by the pitiful circumstances of a character such as an orphan or a deserted wife.

The following are some of the more interesting reasons³ which individual respondents gave in support of their affirmative replies to the personal version (i.e. Question 2).

- (1) I was very sorry of how a woman helped her husband to amass wealth and the husband divorced the wife.
- (2) I wept because the play reminded me of how my lover once deserted me for another girl.
- (3) It reminded me of how I suffered in the first month after I had lost my job.
- (4) I have lost both my mother and father—someone in a play also did the same and her sufferings were too pitiable.
- (5) I wept because they (comedians) said divorced women are morally weak (the respondent herself had been divorced by her husband).

The third question pertaining to what the respondents get or learn from the plays apart from entertainment brought forth a very high percentage of affirmative responses. Seven hundred and thirty-nine, (83.5%) affirmed that they had some other benefits apart from entertainment. Five hundred and ninety stated that they learnt from the plays moral lessons such as how to treat other people and how to lead a good life. Forty of them acknowledged that they learnt something about marital life and problems—about love and relations between husbands and wives—from the plays. One hundred and nine stated that they had specific and concrete gains from the plays such as fashion in dressing, how to dance, new songs, meeting girls and women.

The fourth question ascertaining whether respondents had witnessed some incidents in the plays similar to incidents in their lives did not bring forth as high a percentage of affirmative responses as the third. Of the same 885 respondents three hundred and sixty-one, (40.8%) asserted that they had done so while five hundred and twenty-four, (59.2%) replied in the negative. The following is the break-down of the kinds of incidents described by those who gave affirmative responses to the question: one hundred and forty-four cited incidents about marital jealousy, sixty-eight des-

3. Each reason was given by a single individual.

TABLE 1

Distribution of responses according to respondents' region of origin given in percentages (%)

	Greater Accra		Western		Central		Eastern		Volta		Ashanti		Brong- Ahafo		Northern and Upper	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
Have you ever seen somebody shedding tears while watching a Concert Party play?	84.8 (106)	15.2 (19)	79.0 (41)	21.0 (16)	75.0 (18)	25.0 (6)	61.3 (195)	38.7 (123)	61.4 (27)	38.6 (17)	71.3 (67)	28.7 (27)	48.4 (61)	51.6 (65)	14.6 (14)	85.4 (82)
Have you ever shed tears while watching a Concert Party play?	26.4 (34)	73.6 (95)	10.7 (6)	89.3 (50)	37.5 (6)	62.5 (10)	21.1 (70)	78.9 (262)	22.3 (12)	77.7 (32)	35.2 (30)	64.8 (65)	28.0 (35)	72.0 (90)	6.5 (6)	93.5 (87)
28. Apart from entertainment do you get or learn anything from Concert Party plays?	76.8 (96)	23.2 (27)	100.0 (59)	— (—)	83.4 (5)	16.6 (1)	85.2 (271)	14.8 (47)	100.0 (57)	— (—)	93.7 (89)	6.3 (6)	78.1 (96)	21.9 (27)	65.7 (66)	34.3 (36)
Have you ever witnessed in a Concert Party play something similar to an incident in your life?	47.2 (25)	52.8 (28)	21.6 (30)	78.4 (109)	38.5 (10)	65.5 (16)	46.5 (119)	53.6 (137)	44.4 (20)	55.6 (25)	42.0 (60)	58.0 (83)	54.5 (72)	45.5 (59)	32.6 (25)	67.4 (67)
Do you think Concert Party plays do anything for your town?	86.9 (106)	13.1 (16)	90.8 (59)	9.2 (6)	84.2 (16)	15.8 (3)	89.1 (295)	10.9 (39)	95.3 (41)	4.7 (2)	89.5 (85)	10.5 (10)	79.2 (95)	20.8 (25)	78.2 (68)	21.8 (19)
Do the morals or advice which the comedians give at the end of their plays help you in your daily life?	32.0 (40)	68.0 (85)	87.7 (50)	12.3 (7)	90.0 (18)	10.0 (2)	69.6 (227)	30.4 (99)	90.9 (40)	9.1 (4)	89.1 (82)	18.9 (10)	69.5 (89)	30.5 (37)	26.3 (25)	73.7 (70)

TABLE 2

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES GIVEN BY RESPONDENTS TO SIX PERTINENT QUESTIONS

Questions	DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES		
	Yes	No	Total
1. Have you ever seen somebody shedding tears while watching a Concert Party play?	529 59.8%	356 40.2%	885
2. Have you ever shed tears while watching a Concert Party play?	199 22.5%	686 77.5%	885
3. Apart from entertainment do you get or learn anything from Concert Party plays?	739 83.5%	146 16.5%	885
4. Have you ever witnessed in a Concert Party play something similar to an incident in your life?	361 48.8%	524 51.2%	885
5. Do you think Concert Party plays do anything for your town or village?	765 86.4%	120 13.6%	885
6. Do the morals or advice which the comedians give at the end of their plays help you in your daily life?	571 64.5%	314 35.5%	885

cribed incidents about maltreatments meted out to such people as orphans and step-children. Sixty-three cited incidents pertaining to personal loss, such as the loss of a son, a husband, property, a job and money. The incidents similar to those in their lives which the remaining forty-nine witnessed were about sorrows caused by other people such as telling lies, gossiping, black-mailing, and returning evil for good. Some of the more interesting incidents described by the respondents who gave affirmative responses to this question are reported below:

- (1) The incident was similar to how my lover deserted me and went for another girl.
- (2) A woman was not faithful to her husband (in the play) and that nearly led the man into trouble. I had a similar experience.
- (3) Somebody tried everything he could to earn a living but all his efforts came to nothing; I have been in the same situation.
- (4) I disobeyed my parents some time ago and found myself in a bad situation. Something similar was being enacted.

The fifth question referring to what the interviewees thought the Comic Plays did for their town or village like the third question induced a high percentage of affirmative responses. Seven hundred and sixty-five (86.4%) were convinced that the Comic Plays were useful to their towns and villages because they made them gay and lively, they provided the people with moral lessons and the opportunity to make friends. One hundred and twenty (13.6%) of the respondents on the other hand, did not think the plays did anything for their towns or villages.

In answer to the sixth question concerning the guidance and controlling influence which the moral lessons and advice embodied in the plays have on the daily lives of the respondent, five hundred and seventy-one (64.5%) acknowledged that the moral lessons and pieces of advice did regulate and guide their daily lives. Three hundred and fourteen (35.5%) of the interviewees did not feel the plays had any influence on their daily lives. One hundred and fifty-five of those who gave affirmative replies to the question testified that the lessons from the plays influenced their personal relations—

they helped them to know how to treat their husbands, boy and girl friends, other people, to obey their parents and how to live in harmony with other people. Four hundred and sixteen declared that the lessons from the plays helped them to shape their attitude to life—helped them to avoid bad company, lead decent lives, not to be profligate or liventious, be economical and avoid borrowing money or clothes from other people. A few of the more interesting replies given by respondents to this item are reported below:

- (1) A lesson I drew from the unfaithful woman's behaviour guided me in how to handle my own life.
- (2) I learnt from the plays that to allow men in your life too early is dangerous for a girl's happiness.
- (3) The plays show me that the consequences of leading an evil and criminal life are very grave in the end.
- (4) The plays have made me become very particular about the type of friends I move with.
- (5) The lessons from the plays have made me decide to discontinue my travels and stay at home and look after my aged mother.

These responses given to the last question support the hypothesis of this survey in that they clearly indicate that the Ghanaian Comic Plays exert direct influence on the out-of-play-house behaviour of the play-goers.

The general and a few specific responses of 64.85 of all the 885 respondents outlined above clearly demonstrate that the plays guide and regulate the daily lives and behaviour of the play-goers, their attitude to people, with which people they relate, which people they choose as friends and their general behaviour. In short the plays contribute to the mechanism of social control in Ghana.

But do the male play-goers react differently to the plays than female play-goers? Do the effects of the plays on male members of their audiences differ from their effects on female members? In order to provide answers to these questions; statistical tests were employed. The responses to three of the questions (2, 3, & 4) made by a systematic sample of 100 respondents⁹—comprising fifty-five males and forty-five females—selected from the entire 885 respondents, were subjected to the statistical tests as shown below.

TABLE 3

Emotional Reaction Expressed by Play-goers cross-tabulated with sex and analyzed by Chi-square Test.

		WEeping		
		Weepers	Non-weepers	
SEX	Male	8 (13.2)	47 (41.8)	55
	Female	16 (10.8)	29 (34.2)	45
		24	76	
		$\chi^2 = 4.8932$		
		Corrected $\chi^2 = 0.3052$		
		$\chi^2 = 5.849$		
		Uncorrected $\chi^2 = 0.2155$		
		3.841 (Yates' correction used. Significant at .05 level)		
		3.841 (Uncorrected. Significant at .05 level)		

9. The data on a systematic sample of 100 respondents were used for convenience.

TABLE 4

Similarity of incidents in Comic Plays to incidents in Respondents' Lives cross-tabulated with Sex.

		Identical	Not Identical	
S E X	Male	27 (24.2)	28 (30.8)	55
	Female	17 (19.8)	28 (25.2)	45
		44	56	

$$\chi^2 = 1.6791 \quad 3.841 \quad (\text{Yates' correction used; not significant at .05 level})$$

$$\chi^2 = 1.28 \quad 3.841 \quad (\text{Uncorrected; not significant at .05 level})$$

TABLE 5

Influence of the Comic Plays on Respondents' Lives cross-tabulated with Sex.

		Yes	No	
S E X	Male	39	16	55
	Female	32	13	45
		71	29	

$$\chi^2 W = .0397 \quad 3.841 \quad (\text{Yates' correction used; not significant at .05 level})$$

As Tables 4 and 5 clearly show, there is no significant difference between the sexes as regards the similarity of what happens in the plays to some incidents in the lives of the respondents and also as regards the influence of the plays on the play-goers' lives. In other words, the influence of the play on the lives of male as well as female play-goers is about the same.

The data from Table 3 on the other hand, indicates a significant difference between the overt emotional reaction of male and female play-goers to the plays. There is some association (the corrected $C = 0.3052$) between a play-goer's sex and the way he or she expresses his or her emotions about the unfolding incidents during a Comic Play performance.

By examining the proportions and sexes of weepers and non-weepers in Table 3 we find that female play-goers rather than male play-goers are more likely to react to touching scenes in the play by weeping. This is not surprising; it merely bears out what is expected in Ghanaian and many other cultures. Women are expected to express their emotions somewhat differently from men. It is the women who more often resort to the shedding of tears as a means of expressing their feelings. Men rarely do so because according to custom it is unmanly to do so.

Thus as Vincent (1923) found in his study of drama in the United States of America that events in the plays serve as patterns and models for the behaviour of some members of the audience so have we found in Ghana that incidents in Ghanaian Comic Plays exert influence on their audiences. The evidence examined clearly shows that the Comic Plays radiate conditioning influence on the thinking and attitudes of Ghanaian play-goers and this influence, in fact, to some extent guides and regulates their daily lives and behaviour.

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