

## The Choreopoem or Poetic Drama by the African American Feminist Author Ntozake Shange

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(long abstract)

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A choreopoem is a form of dramatic expression or, more precisely, of performative writing that includes poetry, dance, music and acting. The term was first used in 1975 by Ntozake Shange, an African American poet, playwright, dancer, actress, director and feminist, in defining her first work, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*.

The language (especially the use of slang) is the key trait of Shange's choreopoem which differentiates her from traditional American literature, with which she has not been able to identify as an African American. Despite stressing the importance of movement (with the emphasis especially on the female body as a labelled element) and non-verbal communication, the choreopoem has the effect of dramatic work based on narrative and lyric scenes; these are conceived as poetry monologues and dialogues. The choreopoem is therefore not limited to poetry and dance, but functions as a total and well-rounded performative work.

We can attempt to define choreopoem as poetic drama because of its limited action and number of characters as well as because it is primarily intended for the portrayal of emotional states. Shange's first choreopoem consists of the confessions of seven "ladies" who perform dressed in the colours of the rainbow and, by focusing on the emotional relations (the sense of inferiority, violence against women, abortion, extortion, having one's child killed, the loss of virginity), they renounce and avoid the principles of action, character and dialogue.

The paper also briefly describes some other works by the same author: *Spell#7*, *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* and *From okra to greens: A different kinda love story : a play with music & dance*. In them, Shange thematically expands choreopoem upon the more complex issues of African Americans and also includes jazz music, the boogie woogie dance and a parody upon the racial perception of African Americans in minstrel shows.

## Choreopoem as a rebellion - a form of African American poetic drama?

In his article "Problemi poetične drame" ["The Problems of Poetic Drama"], Gašper Troha points out two Slovenian definitions of poetic drama (those by Janko Kos and Matjaž Kmecl), but places considerable emphasis especially upon Szondi's theory of lyric drama, arguably the best research made on the problems of poetic drama:

Szondi therefore considers lyric drama as a transitional form between traditional and modern drama, which is reflected in the disappearance of dialogue and act as well as in the passivity of the characters and death as its main themes. In Hofmannsthal's one-act plays, he notices a dividing upon two visions of life or the world, perhaps we could even say upon two worlds, of which one is the aesthetic and the other the real one. Interestingly, the real world can be seen by the characters in the presence of death and through the mediation of some other characters. (89)

As a basic factor of poetic drama, Troha also points out the existence of a character that is the intuition bearer. Intuition bearers are described by Lado Kralj in the following manner: "The characters who have a gift of greater intuitive sensitivity, so-called intuition bearers, will sense the arrival and presence of a third person (the invisible reality) whereas the other dramatic characters won't and will even contradict or belittle their statements." (23) The intuition bearer is supposed to be a mediator between the two worlds that poetic drama consists of. These two worlds are those of the irrational and the rational, with the intuition bearer establishing the transition between them, also as a sort of supernatural being, in which death is the only possible transition.

Already in its title, the choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* triggers associations upon the transition between life and death. The thought of suicide is by all means a thought of death, and the dramatic characters are classified according to the experiences that led them to that thought. In this way, they come across as potential intuition bearers. Certain characters focus upon the conveyance of their own experiences, emotions and events (Lady in Red, Lady in Blue, Lady in Brown, Lady in Green), but simultaneously connect with the invisible world. In the first scene, Lady in Brown expresses a sense of being completely lost, which connects with the loss of voice, speechlessness and forced silence. Rather than a realistic picture, she conveys thoughts of ghosts, haunted houses and the death of a woman who has been dead for too long and now calls for birth.

The fact that the author Ntozake Shange is a feminist activist should not be disregarded. In choreopoems, she applies death to the position of African American women in the

20<sup>th</sup> century. She points out violence, abuse, rape and the silencing of the woman's voice. This makes her choreopoem quite difficult to compare to the texts of European poetic dramas because it is a rebellion against them as well. The fact that she connects the improvisation of the labelled female body with speech and thus establishes dance as the determinant that intertwines with words makes her text different from the traditional authors of poetic drama like Christopher Frye and T.S. Eliot (Lester 4).

Dance is also a space in-between life and death in terms of being the movement that keeps the dramatic characters alive. Although dance is not mentioned in any definition of poetic drama, it certainly belongs to the choreopoem as a type of poetic drama that is not static but gives rise to movement and motion as a basic need for survival. The dance and the poetry are one, connected into a lyric and dance drama based on remembering. We could therefore define the dance in the choreopoem as the main intuition bearer because it represents the connection between a certain real world and the world of the invisible. The dramatic characters often use dance as a space of pure life. When comparing the choreopoem with poetic drama, quite a few similarities can be noticed. Drawing on Kmecl's theory of poetic drama, we can notice that choreopoem also contains a dramatic conflict resulting in the emphasis on various lyric states. These dramatic conflicts come about in the form of inserts of "male talk" into the individual monologue confessions of the female dramatic characters. In this way, various lyric states that form the drama as a whole come to the foreground. The dramatic characters are not overly characterised as persons, but focus on the portrayal of emotional relations.

Gášper Troha's theory defines poetic drama by means of the symbolist dramatic technique, which foregrounds the existence of two realities (empirical and invisible) as well as the intuition bearer, who connects and enables the two (97). In the choreopoem *for colored girls*, we can also notice two potentially different realities and the character of Sechita, who corresponds to the role of intuition bearer.

Despite the similarities, however, the choreopoem also shows certain digressions from the aforementioned definitions of poetic drama. Especially evident is the fact that it is based on the African American tradition of storytelling, rhythm, physical movement and emotional catharsis. Intertwined with the words and actions of the performers, dance and movement are essential elements in it. The dramatic characters are not static and passive, but in constant physical movement. In this way, all the seven dramatic characters in *for colored girls* find themselves in a timeless moment to express their feelings of fear, pain, sadness, loss as well as joy. Their voices collectively transform into one voice representing the African American woman (Lester 6).

The transition from African American poetry into the choreopoem is explained by C.W.E. Bigsby:

The essence of black poetry, particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s, had lain in its public nature, its performativity. It was never a closet poetry (unless, as LeRoi Jones once observed, the closet be "as wide as God's eye"). Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and many others performed their poetry at large public gatherings in which the symbiosis between audience and performer was a vital part of the aesthetic. Such occasions shared something of the atmosphere of the storefront church. They trembled, in other words, on the brink of ritual and of theatre. Shange's choreopoem is a natural extension of this. Poems with music and dance, forming a narrative account, become a play. (411)

Shange's choreopoem creates certain potential parallels with poetic drama (the intuition bearer, the existence of two realities, the dramatic conflict for the creation of various lyric states). Nevertheless, it sometimes gives an impression that the text could also be defined as a poem or a collection of poems with certain traits of a dramatic text. The intuition bearer in the choreopoem does perhaps not stand out enough to establish a firm transition between the empirical and invisible worlds. The text itself contains plenty of imagery of the empirical world, but there is not so much emphasis on the invisible one to be able to claim that the choreopoem is poetic drama. However, drawing on the studies of African American drama by Neal A. Lester, I can propose that the choreopoem is an African American variant of poetic drama. It is one that roots in the African tradition of storytelling, rhythm, physical movement and emotional catharsis, focuses on the relation of African Americans to the world, the Other and their own existence, and resists European and American classifications of poetic drama in a unique manner.

*Translated by Urška Zajec*

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