

## **The Curious Case of *Kykunkor*: a ‘dansical’/musical exploration and reclamation of Asadata Dafora’s *Kykunkor, or the Witch Woman* (1934)**

*Kykunkor* [...] became a Broadway hit in the spring and summer of 1934 [...], drawing spectators from diverse social locations and eliciting praise from Harlem critics, leftist critics, and downtown critics in the dance press and mainstream press. Yet, [...] viewers did not necessarily concur on why they found the production so compelling.

(Manning 2004: 44)

As the above citation by dance historian Susan Manning illustrates, it has never been easy to categorize or define the unique theatrical phenomenon that was 1934’s *Kykunkor, or the Witch Woman*. One constant can be asserted, however: addresses and analyses of this landmark production, created by West African Asadata Dafora (1890-1965), are curiously absent from musical theatre texts, histories, and anthologies. Instead, *Kykunkor* has been almost exclusively claimed, analyzed, and anthologized by dance scholars who frame the work as a formative example of black concert dance and African diaspora. For instance, Lynne Fauley Emery in *Black Dance* (1988) deems *Kykunkor* to be ‘the first performance by black dancers on the concert stage which was entirely successful,’ as well as a ‘great influence on black concert dance,’ ultimately revealing ‘the potential of ethnic material to black dancers’ (Emery 1988: 250). In this article, I refute (and broaden) the sole ‘concert dance’ definition and position of *Kykunkor* by situating the work within the musical theatre arena. Specifically, I cite *Kykunkor*’s Broadway configuration and reception in order to suggest that the production, given its initial conception and presentation, represents an embryonic form of the dance-dominant musical, or what has been termed the ‘dansical.’

In 1934, *Kykunkor* asserted a poststructural paradigm, challenging critics and audiences alike in regards to their preconceived and previously delineated categorizations of opera, musical theatre, ritual drama, and dance drama. Today, the work continues to defy fixed genre classification. Although *Kykunkor* initially opened to an audience of 60 in a small New York studio, it soon moved to Broadway where, as noted by dance scholar Maureen Needham, the production became ‘one of the top ten theatrical productions of the season’ (Needham 2002: 233). In his *New York World Telegram* review, Emmanuel Eisenberg declared the show to be a Broadway ‘success story and a remarkable one’ (Eisenberg 1934: 20). Given these laudatory declarations/descriptions, the omission of *Kykunkor* within musical theatre scholarship is puzzling. I submit that the production’s dance-dominant constitution has muddled its categorization and, along with paradigms of racial and artistic bias, has complicated and possibly negated its rightful and potent place in American musical theatre history.

### **I. The Dansical and the Self-Expressive Choreographer**

To clarify and support this argument, and before specifically addressing *Kykunkor*, I offer my own two-pronged definition of the aforementioned ‘dansical.’ First, it is a dance-dominant production *created by a choreographic auteur and intended as a musical theatre work for Broadway*. Second, the dansical puts choreography and dance at the forefront -- dominating and often diminishing the score and libretto -- while the production’s star is the choreographer, phenomenologically speaking, as she asserts a signature choreographic vocabulary which bespeaks authorial control and content through her proxy dancers. Theorist Bert States addresses the phenomenology of the singer/dancer on stage whose musical performance is a ‘major self-

expressive form of theater.’ In the ‘self-expressive’ mode, the performer steps ‘out of the illusion’ when he begins to sing or dance within a production; and the musical number, itself, becomes ‘an audacious display of the actor's power’ where ‘suddenly the flow is broken’ and ‘artistry becomes the object of our attention’ (States 1985: 162-165). This is a mode in which the Broadway choreographer may also work; specifically, her choreography may figuratively step ‘out of the illusion’ and become more important as an ‘audacious display’ of technical or aesthetic wizardry than a collaborative, integrated element. In this self-expressive manner, the choreographer can phenomenologically step to the front of the stage and garner acknowledgement and acclaim; in short, her choreographic presence often trumps that of the actual performers. Yet, to realize a completely self-expressive work (i.e., a dansical), two developments are seemingly necessary. First, the choreographer must assume an authoritative position by which she can control or shape the other stage elements, most often in the role of stage director; second, she must subdue or silence collaborative or integrative voices (book and score) in order to assert complete choreographic dominance.

Of course, these defining characteristics have often complicated the position, status, and legitimacy of the dance-dominant musical within the musical theatre arena. Although many critics, scholars, artists, and audience members applauded (and awarded) contemporary dansicals such as *Dancin’* (1978), *Fosse* (1999), *Swing!* (1999), *Contact* (1999), and *Movin’ Out* (2002), there were prominent parties who resisted and/or questioned the genre ‘purity’ and viability of these works. For example, Mark Grant laments that such models, initiated and proliferated by all-powerful, self-expressive director/choreographers, ‘exploded the paradigm of the integrated book musical,’ complaining: ‘When the primary language of theater is no longer word, character, or music but rather gesture, movement, and staging, the power and legitimacy of language and music are undermined’ (Grant 2004: 298). Joseph P. Swain concurs, writing that when a director/choreographer’s control of a production enables him to emphasize certain elements (notably, staging and choreography) at the expense of others, ‘it does change the nature of the art’ and the musical ‘becomes something else’ (Swain 1990: 360). Thus, in the case of *Kykunkor*, Dafora’s pioneering engagement and exploitation of a liminal dance-dominant paradigm possibly confounded and undermined his seminal work’s musical theatre classification and consequent legacy.

## II. Dafora and the Development of *Kykunkor*

Asadata Dafora (Horton)<sup>1</sup> -- choreographer, dancer, director, singer, librettist, and composer - was born and raised in Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa. He received an upper-class upbringing and a Western education with an emphasis on the arts. In *African-American Concert Dance* (2001), John O. Perpener details the ‘privileged environment’ in which Dafora was raised and the degree of cultural/ethnic hybridity which would surface in his staged works:

Several members of his [Dafora’s] family were distinguished in their community [...]. His father, the town treasurer, was educated in England. His mother studied in Vienna and Paris and became an accomplished pianist [...]. The Dafora family’s African heritage in combination with their European education provided a broad cultural background that eventually shaped his art.

( Perpener 2001: 106)

After finishing Wesleyan Boys' High School, Dafora spent time in England and Russia, then moved to Milan and studied voice at La Scala for two years, touring with various opera productions. Eventually, his focus turned to dance (specifically, West African dances from his homeland); and during the 1920s, Dafora taught dance in Berlin while performing in local nightclubs. This shift in focus was significant; for, as noted by Manning, Dafora never lost his strong interest in and appreciation for his native arts, often returning home to travel through West Africa 'learning dances, drumming, legends, and dialects' (Manning 2004: 45). Summarizing her interview with Dafora, Margaret Lloyd details this development: 'After seeing European dance and other art forms, he realized the distinctive beauty of African art and culture, and resolved to devote his life to setting it before people' (Perpener 2001: 107).

Dafora eventually arrived in New York in 1929 while touring with a group of African dancers who, like Dafora, were of the Temeni tribe. After he attempted, unsuccessfully, a concert singing career, Dafora joined with other African expatriate artists living in New York, specifically singers, dancers, and drummers from the all-male Native African Union. With this group, he created a 'musical drama' in 1933, one which would prove to be a forerunner to and germinal moment for *Kykunkor*. A section of this dance/music concert work, titled *Zoonga*, was performed at the opening of the YMCA Little Theatre on 180 West 135th Street. An archived advertisement flyer for the production announces 'A Night in Africa,' presented by 'Asadata Dafora Horton of Sierra Leone' and describes the production as a portion of Dafora's 'African Musical/Drama called *Zoonga* [...] to be staged on Broadway in the near future' (Needham 2002: 235). In self-expressive fashion, Dafora intended a Broadway staging for his 'musical/drama' and positioned himself as the auteur of the production. Needham notes: 'Dafora took credit for the original music and lyrics, but undoubtedly he was the choreographer as well' (Needham 2002: 236). Even more significantly, Needham classifies *Zoonga* as an early conception and partial configuration of *Kykunkor*. Specifically, an existent souvenir playbill, containing penciled notes for the production, details a narrative which includes a tribal wedding infused with ceremony, dance, and song. Needham posits that the notes 'are important clues to Dafora's artistic development over the next year, when the fully mature opera, *Kykunkor*, went into production' (Needham 2002: 236-37).

*Zoonga* was eventually seen by Anne Kennedy, manager of the Unity Theatre (an informal New York performance space) who commissioned Dafora to develop a full-length version. Dafora served as director, choreographer, composer, librettist, and leading man for the resultant production, *Kykunkor, or the Witch Woman*. Recruiting local African-American women to join his all-male African company (Shogola Oloba),<sup>2</sup> he preceded to teach 18 dances and 20 songs to his cast; all were replications or variations of West African works which he recreated from memory. As 'composer,' he worked closely with a musical assistant/pianist, Margaret Upshur, who notated the songs as he sang them to her; while the drumming component of the production was left to four African drummers. The production opened on May 5, 1934, at the Unity Theatre. Unfortunately, an audience was almost nonexistent for four days until Kennedy prevailed upon influential dance critic John Martin to review the production. His highly positive *New York Times* review caused an upsurge in ticket sales which, consequently, resulted in the extension of *Kykunkor*'s one-week run. Complications ensued, however; for the small theatre was licensed for 150 spectators but nearly twice that number were attending nightly, creating standing-room-only crowds and fire code violations. Consequently, warnings were issued by the New York Fire Department, and the production was moved to City College at Lexington and 23rd. However, the City College auditorium was deemed too large for the

intimate work; and the production was transferred to a smaller auditorium atop the Chanin Building at East 42nd Street. Yet, once again, this space did not meet the audience demand; and on June 15th, *Kykunkor* finally arrived on Broadway at the Little Theatre on West 44th. There, the production ran for three months, much of it to sold-out houses.

### III. *Kykunkor* on Broadway: content, context, signification, and reception

As *Kykunkor* became one of Broadway's 'hottest' tickets during the '34 season, it also garnered industry attention with notices in the press asserting and validating its 'Broadway hit' status. Manning notes, 'Once *Kykunkor* moved to Broadway, [...] articles and advertisements flooded [...] the downtown dance press and mainstream press. Even readers outside New York read about Dafora's production at the Little Theatre' (Manning 2004: 46). Yet, along with its mainstream popularity, the show was positioned as a 'legitimate' African exemplar of 'high art' (according to the binary of high/low art existing in America at the time). That is, instead of being categorized as a musical, it was designated to be an 'opera' -- more specifically, as Needham notes, *Kykunkor* is regarded to be the 'first opera presented in the United States with authentic African dances and music, performed in an African tongue by a mainly African-born cast' (Needham 2002: 233).

Dafora's three-act libretto for *Kykunkor* was loosely derived from a Mende folktale and set near the village of Kamlawoo, Sierra Leone. The narrative depiction of an African tribal wedding and exorcism was conveyed through traditional African dance and song, with little spoken dialogue (in this respect, the work foreshadowed the contemporary sung-through or danced-through musical). As this production has fallen into obscurity today, I think it is necessary to describe its unique structure and content. Perpener offers a synopsis of the first act, paraphrased from a souvenir *Kykunkor* program:

The story takes place in a maidens' village [...]. The curtain rises upon a scene of young women preparing food under the watchful eye of the Otobone, or chaperone. Drum beats announce the arrival of Bokari, a young man from a neighboring village who has come to choose a bride. He [...] makes his choice from among the young women who have danced the Bundo, or Maidens' Dance, for him. Bokari and his chosen [...] dance the Susu, an engagement dance. They also dance the Alogobole, which expresses their growing love for each other.

(Perpener 2001: 108-109)

At this point, it must be noted that Dafora played the role of Bokari, and throughout his career, he consistently performed lead roles or featured solos in his works. Further, although the action was conveyed largely through dance, a significant portion of the action/drama was also portrayed through song. For instance, after the engaged couple danced, Bokari serenaded his intended bride; and during the engagement ceremony, the company performed various choral numbers to appease the gods and exorcise evil spirits.

Act Two commences with Bokari's sung declaration of love for his bride to his father, Chief Burab. Next, slave girls, offered as gifts to the chief, proceed to dance and are subsequently freed. Finally, the marriage ceremony begins, only to be interrupted by the witch woman, *Kykunkor*, who has been sent by a jealous rival of the groom. Needham details the dramatic, musical, and choreographic events which impede the wedding and lead to the production's climax:

In a highly dramatic scene, she [Kykunkor] screams a curse and Bokari slowly sinks to the ground as his life ebbs away. [...] A 'devil dancer' is called in to exorcise the evil spirit with the Oummoie Dance, but the magic is unsuccessful. [...] The witch doctor enters, playing on a reed pipe, calling upon the gods [...] and trapping the evil spirit in a cow horn. Using his considerable magical powers, he summons the witch woman to return. [...] The two engage in a contest of strength, but in the end she is forced to swallow the evil spirit lying dormant in the horn.

(Needham 2002: 243-244)

Thus, the groom is saved and the wedding ceremony can recommence. Consequently, Act Three is almost entirely a festival of dance and celebration. *Kykunkor*'s program notes illuminate the high priority of dance; for it, in concert/exhibition fashion, closes the show, serving as the production's visceral exclamation point: 'There is first the AGUNDA, the dance of joy, then the EBOE, the jester, dances. The BATTOO, or dance of challenge follows, then the war-dance, and then the JABAWA or festival dance' (Emery 1988: 248).

Dafora's composed, or more accurately, compiled score was considered a conglomerate of North and West African music, American gospel or missionary influenced music, and Martinique melodies -- all sung in various African dialects on stage and accompanied by an orchestra of four drummers from the Mende ethnic group (Abrodun Salako, Uno Eno, Sakor Jar, and Ezebo Ejiho). The performance was billed by Dafora and company as a 'Native African Opera by Asadata Dafora.' However, the actual construct and genre categorization puzzled the media; and the designation of 'opera' became a niggling point for almost all critics who seemingly felt compelled to address the issue in their writings, either by way of argument, redefinition, and/or confirmation. In John Martin's earliest review of the production at the Unity Theatre, he not only praised *Kykunkor* but pointedly placed it within a broader theatrical context. He wrote: 'The performance is eminently worth seeking out, not only by those who are interested in dancing, but by anyone who likes genuine and exciting theatre-art' (Perpener 2001: 111). Yet, John Mason Brown contentiously described the production as a 'baffling [...] mixture of folklore, ritualistic dance,' while Julian Seaman in the *Daily Mirror* referred to the production as a 'dance drama' (Needham 2002: 245). In the *New York World Telegram*, Robert Garland stated, 'Actually it is a ritual drama but opera is what it is called' (Garland 1934: 10); and *New York Sun*'s W. J. Henderson wrote: 'This so-called opera is properly to be classed as a folk drama' (Henderson 1934: 18). Louis Horst, in his *Dance Observer* review, felt that 'dance-drama' was a more apt designation (Horst 1934: 54), while Lincoln Kirstein found *Kykunkor* to be a rewarding 'recital' (Emery 1988: 248); and Eisenberg asserted that *Kykunkor* was an 'authentic African dance opera' (Eisenberg 1934: 20). Gilbert Seldes in *Esquire* gave nod to the critical dissent and discourse by declaring the production to be 'a spectacle, dramatic dance, opera, or study in folklore -- whichever you like' (Seldes 1934: 137). Even Martin seemed to narrow his initially broad and inclusive perspective in a subsequent review in which he wrote: 'For some reason *Kykunkor* is called an opera, though it is actually more of a ritual drama' (Martin 1934: 6).

As indicated by the above notices, it seems that a work which transcended narrowly Western defined genre boundaries caused consternation and set into motion strategies by critical authorities to position the work in order to maintain genre 'purity' and preserve classification strictures. In this respect, *Kykunkor* is revelatory in its potential to upset genre codification and

incite action, with those in the arts establishment assuming the role of ‘genre police.’ The confusion and anxiety may be understandable, however, as the production was a truly unique hybrid of Western and African art forms. In a dansical context, it was also a hybrid of concert dance and musical play. And ‘play’ is an operative word here; for a libretto was supplied by Dafora as he revisited and restructured an African folk tale to meet the Western musical theatre dictates of the day. Perpener notes, ‘The material was [...] shaped to fit the logical needs of a dramatic plot that adhered to the Aristotelian structure of beginning, middle, and end’ (Perpener 2001: 110). Yet, Perpener, who refers to the work as a ‘dance opera,’ places the libretto within the concert dance arena as opposed to musical theatre. He writes:

One can only speculate about the similarities between certain elements of his [Dafora’s] dance opera and the themes that run through many Romantic ballets -- the amorous encounter [...], a wedding scene or some other celebration that includes a royal entourage and functions as a pretext for danced divertissements, the sudden arrival of a supernatural being who heightens the dramatic situation, and a joyous finale of many dances.

(Perpener 2001: 110)

One may argue, however, that this tale also fits within the musical theatre tradition, loosely characteristic of the many boy-meets-girl plots, with subsequent complications, happy resolution, and big dance finales. Yet, arguments over the constitution and categorization of *Kykunkor* (found in contemporary scholarship as well as historical criticisms) are limited solely to opera or concert dance designations. In a telling parallel, George Gershwin had just begun composing *Porgy and Bess* as he attended several performances of *Kykunkor*. Needham posits that ‘just as with Dafora’s work, *Porgy and Bess* was billed as a “folk opera” when it opened on Broadway’ (Needham 2002: 248). Similarly, *Porgy and Bess* caused consternation among critics due to its categorization as ‘opera.’ Yet, unlike *Kykunkor*, it was also argued to be a ‘musical.’ No such argument was made for *Kykunkor* -- of all the alternative designations assigned to the work, it was never deemed a ‘musical,’ even given its ultimate Broadway setting and reception. I suggest that the American *high art* versus *low/popular art* paradigm is partly responsible for this situation; for one cannot ignore the critical consensus that *Kykunkor* was a crucial moment in the positioning of African dance as a legitimate concert idiom in America and, as such, a *serious art*. Perpener claims Dafora to be the ‘first native African artist to exert a strong influence on American concert dance’ (Perpener 2001: 101). Emery posits that *Kykunkor* ‘proved’ that black dance ‘on the American concert stage [...] could be considered seriously as an art form’ (Emery 1988: 250). Further, Manning cites dance critic Leonore Cox who commended *Kykunkor* in 1934 for ‘staging an alternative to what she perceived as the commercialization [...] of jazz dancing at venues such as the Cotton Club.’ Manning concludes: ‘Adapting the rhetoric of modern dance, Cox opposes Negro dance to jazz dance and envisions Negro dance as a high art, [...] thus [...] redeploying the binary of high and low’ (Manning 2004: 53).

On the other hand, positioning *Kykunkor* as a dansical (that is, as a musical) was, and possibly still is, to rob it of its artistic gravitas and import for those who, consciously or unconsciously, prejudicially view the Broadway musical -- and its distant cousins -- as a form of popular entertainment (or low/popular art). Thus, a dansical/musical designation for *Kykunkor* may dilute or negate the work’s high art standing, given the historically negative bias often directed toward the popular (i.e., musical) theatre. Interestingly, Dafora, himself, asserted and

reinscribed this reading. He noted in numerous interviews that his early works, which were ultimately intended for the Broadway stage, were deemed too ‘highbrow’ by potential backers. According to Dafora, they didn’t fall into the ‘same old stereotype of African arts,’ that is, ‘the moving picture and side show idea of Africa’ (Needham 2002: 237). Indeed, race and ethnic considerations/contexts must be taken into account when exploring both the audience and critical reception of *Kykunkor*. At the time, African dance/music was defined and delimited by an *exoticism* paradigm incited and reinscribed by authoritative, critical communities in both the concert and theatre arenas. Before pioneers such as Dafora, African performing arts, for the most part, were relegated to world fairs or international exhibitions, presented as ethnic and racial ‘curiosities.’ Further, Perpener notes, ‘Whereas African plastic art [...] was attracting serious attention during the early twentieth century, authentic African dance was not held in equally high esteem’ (Perpener 2001: 104). Thus, Dafora’s work became an instrument capable of shaping public and critical opinion, asserting African dance/music’s concert-stage suitability and artistry. Perpener posits that Dafora adjusted his production spatially, temporally, and structurally in order to fit the Western concert/proscenium stage and to ‘achieve his goal of having African art accepted as serious art according to Western standards’ (Perpener 2001: 110).

I believe it is through this lens and under the auspices of the serious art objective that *Kykunkor* was, and continues to be, positioned chiefly as a concert dance achievement -- undermining its landmark status as a precursor to the contemporary dance-dominant Broadway musical. Indeed, the few disparaging remarks made by critics were directed toward any element they felt smacked of popular or jazz (read ‘musical theatre’) influence and/or reference. For example, Gilbert Seldes praised what he viewed to be ‘authentic’ African folk art while voicing consternation over the fluidity present in the production’s movement as it not only suggested concert dance (high art) but also popular/show dance:

Some of it [...] might be a page of Frazier’s *Golden Bough*<sup>3</sup> come to life and some of it, as I muttered a little sullenly to myself, might be just Harlem. [...] When some little dancers, quite frankly, recruited from Harlem appeared and patted their hips and thighs, I might have been at the Cotton Club.

(Seldes 1934: 163)

#### IV. *Kykunkor* Today: dansical antecedence and musical liminality

As previously stated, I do not concur with *Kykunkor*’s purely ‘concert dance’ delineation, for I also consider the production to be a significant dansical antecedent. Further, I would assert that the dansical, itself, can be traced back and/or attributed to the African tradition of communal celebration, rite, storytelling, and performance, consisting of a music/dance symbiosis in which much of the narrative is conveyed and celebrated through a form of kinetic, danced expression. In short, the fluidity of *Kykunkor*’s categorization, construct, and aesthetic (opera, concert dance, ritual?) only confirms this designation/lineage, as the contemporary dansical is also a liminal site (musical or ballet?), fueling critical dissent while fusing (or confusing) genres of musical theatre and concert dance. Yet, other characteristics of the production do not entirely meet my dansical criteria and, instead, suggest more of an integrative, traditional musical form/aesthetic. For instance, did *Kykunkor*’s dance dominate other components, such as the score? In self-expressive form, choreographer/director Dafora controlled the score as he compiled and configured the music for the production. Needham notes that ‘Dafora compared his function as composer to that of a weaver who made use of the music of the Mende ethnic group’ (Needham

2002: 247). This compilation method prefigures the contemporary practices of dansical auteurs, as well as jukebox musical creators, who ‘weave’ their scores from already existing sources to fit their choreography and production concepts. Further, Dafora interpolated some Western compositions, which is not surprising given his vocal training in the European concert tradition. Thus, the hybridity of the score very much reflected its self-expressive ‘composer;’ yet, this aspect of the production was also one of the few components criticized by the reviewers. For instance, composer Paul Bowles complained that ‘when any sort of sustained melodic line was introduced, [...] the atmosphere was automatically destroyed.’ He elaborated as follows: ‘These *cultured* voices brought everything right back to New York where it decidedly did not belong; and then the musical associations ran amok, suggesting anything from Stephen Foster to “Aloha Oe”’ (Needham 2002: 247, Bowles’ emphasis).

Overall, however, the West African components of the score were praised. Julian Seaman wrote, ‘The drums beat an incessant rhythm, weaving a curious pattern in percussion, and the singers chant and moan. Weirdly lovely’ (Needham 2002: 246). Significantly, the drumming was often singled out by critics as the dominant and superlative element of the production. Further, as detailed by Needham, ‘the drums were not notated but left to the lead drummer to cue’ (Needham 2002: 247). This was an area that Dafora did not control and could be seen as superseding or, at least, matching the choreography. John Mason Brown echoed the sentiments of many spectators and critics when he declared: ‘It is the four tireless drummers at one side of the crowded stage who give the most astonishing and compelling performance of the evening’ (Brown 1934: n. pag.). Even the influential dance critic John Martin, who wrote that *Kykunkor* consisted ‘by far the greater part of dancing,’ with its ‘musical aspect’ being ‘secondary,’ also suggested that the percussive (which is, of course, the musical) component of the production was equally powerful:

There are, to be sure, several enchanting songs, and an unceasing background of rhythmic drumming by three [sic] extremely skillful drummers, who become almost possessed as the action progresses by the very hypnosis of their own playing. It is, indeed, this possession that gives the performance its unique quality.

(Martin 1934: 6)

Still, there are clues that *Kykunkor*’s dance did supersede both its music and libretto. While Martin conceded that the drummers beat ‘hypnotic rhythms sometimes of extraordinary composition’ and lauded ‘the beautiful voices of the singers,’ he persisted that ‘more often the terrific vitality of the dancers vents itself’ (Perpener 2001: 112). Further, in an *Opportunity* article, Alain Locke waxed rhapsodic over the ‘African drum orchestra’ that had been ‘developed into something of a vital artistic device’ in the production (Locke 1934: 367). Yet, he also wrote to his patron Charlotte Osgood Mason of the import and power of the ‘twelve dances’ which he felt were not only ‘characteristic of the situation’ but were ‘the plot [...], as direct as expression can be’ (Manning 2004: 54).

One other reading must be considered here, however. With its powerful melding of dance, music, and narrative, *Kykunkor* may more properly constitute the integrated, interactive, and transformative musical theatre construct sometimes termed the ‘Total Work,’ or as coined by Richard Wagner in the mid 1800s, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In defense of the ‘opera’ moniker for *Kykunkor*, an unnamed reviewer in the *Amsterdam News* pointedly cited the fact that Dafora took ‘a wide variety of native dances and blended them skillfully with a filmy network of music



against a background of throbbing drum beats, providing a pungent and gratifying concoction' (Anon. 1934: 7). In short, the dance may not have completely subjugated the production's other elements due, much in part, to an African dance/music dynamic that exemplifies, as denoted by Perpener, a paradigm of 'symbiotic energy.' He explains:

The special symbiosis that exists between dancers and musicians in traditional West African dance [...] enables performers to exchange cues and leaves room for sparks of improvisation to ignite within the structure of the dance. These improvisational moments, in turn, enable the performers to *catch fire* [...]. The energy [...] has the potential of taking the participants (as well as the observers) across the threshold into the altered state of consciousness.

(Perpener 2001: 112, Perpener's emphasis)

Dafora reiterated this 'symbiosis' as the crux of his craft, explaining his choreography to the *New Yorker* in a 1934 interview as follows: 'Africans, instead of having music written down on paper, they have it in the head; they have it in the body. Then the drum signals, and they dance' (Needham 2002: 247). As opposed to the authority and supersedence of choreography as found in the conventional dansical, the dance in *Kykunkor* seemed to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* component, i.e., a vital, connective part of an intersubjective music/narrative/dance archetype through which performers and audiences are invigorated, enlightened, and, perhaps, transformed.

Another consideration, in regards to the possible dansical character of *Kykunkor*, is whether the production can be viewed as the work of a self-expressive auteur. Although there does exist the self-expressive stamp of hybridity by Dafora, one must question whether Dafora, *as mediated by the critical establishment and read by his audience*, actually meets the criteria for a self-expressive choreographer. To shed light on this dilemma, it is significant to note that there exist numerous dance productions today (such as *Riverdance*, *Tap Dogs*, *Burn the Floor*, *Forever Tango*, etc.) which do not fully qualify as dansicals, although they have enjoyed successful Broadway runs and/or international theatre tours. Because such works were not originally created or primarily positioned as musicals, they do not meet my previously delineated dansical requirements. Further, and most importantly, the works are not wholly defined by and attributed to self-expressive choreographers who are acknowledged as the productions' dominant and omnipresent auteurs. As a result, the works frequently feel more communal and organically evolved (no authorial stamp by one specific choreographic personage), with the choreography somewhat subservient to the virtuosic performers or an already established dance tradition. In short, such productions are most often categorized as *imported dance spectacles/events* and treated as entities separate from the musical theatre genre.<sup>4</sup> This is not the case with dansicals such as *Dancin'*, *Fosse*, *Dangerous Games*, *Contact*, *Swing!*, and *Movin' Out*, each being deemed a 'Broadway musical' from the onset and bearing the signature, guiding hand of a proprietary choreographer/director, i.e., Bob Fosse, Graciela Daniele, Susan Stroman, Lynn Taylor-Corbett, and Twyla Tharp, respectively.

As with the above-mentioned 'imported dance spectacles,' one might also perceive a lack of choreographic authority and accreditation when perusing accounts of *Kykunkor*. In 1934, a *New York Times* notice for the production described Dafora as the 'author, musician, choreographer,<sup>5</sup> and director, as well as the player of the central role' (Anon. 1934: 3). Yet, the choreography of *Kykunkor* mostly consisted of pre-existing folk dances, researched, compiled, and then staged by Dafora -- a characteristic that was documented and publicized during the production's initial run. Significantly, this aspect is still cited by current scholarship as the

defining character of the production's dance, as opposed to an original tapestry of signature 'Dafora' movement.

At the root of this obfuscatory situation, as recounted by Perpener, is the fact that Dafora's role as choreographer did not garner much attention or analysis when *Kykunkor* was at the height of its success. Perpener summarizes, 'There was little written description of his actual choreography or movement style' (Perpener 2001: 113). Indeed, as mentioned earlier, much of the critical attention paid to Dafora throughout his career was emblematic of the exoticism paradigm affecting African dance (and black dance, as a whole) in America, with the novelty aspect of the overall African 'aesthetic' overshadowing and muting any serious or specific analysis of Dafora's choreography. Further, if reviewers did address the choreography in his productions, they generally focused on the anthropological, exotic, and curious aspects of the folk dances Dafora had transported to the American stage. Often, these reviews contained critical assertions and interpretations by certain 'authorities' in the concert dance world who were uneducated, uninformed, and/or inexperienced in regards to African dance idioms and, therefore, were often racist in their treatment and assessment of such. For example, as late as 1963, John Martin, one of the most powerful dance critics in the United States and an early champion of 'Negro' dance and Dafora's productions, stated that the 'Negro' had been 'wise enough not to be drawn into' classical ballet as its 'wholly European outlook, history and technical theory are alien to him culturally, temperamentally and anatomically.' Martin concluded his 'expert' dance analysis as follows: 'When the Negro takes on the style of the European, he succeeds only in being affected' (Martin 1963: 178).

In addition, Perpener notes that when influential Western, white critics such as Martin 'began taking a more analytical look' at Dafora's choreography during his later concert career, they never referred to a 'Dafora style or technique' in their writings (Perpener 2001: 113). Instead, the critical establishment turned analyses of his choreography into generic descriptions of 'African dance,' informed by their own Western, limited, essentialist (and often racist) beliefs and biases. Ultimately, they viewed and positioned Dafora as simply the performer and purveyor of the dance -- not a signature author. Thus, the dance aesthetic and contribution most commonly attributed to Dafora is, to date, not one of personally stamped choreographic authorship but, as Perpener writes, one 'based on the technical brilliance of an established dance tradition, [...] removing the dance from its ritual usage and shaping it to fit the priorities of a Western theatrical setting' (Perpener 2001: 127). Paradoxically, I assert that this hybridization/amalgamation of Western/African aesthetic and stage practice suggests a self-expressive strategy by Dafora which most likely extended to his choreography. This aspect, however, was neither recognized nor documented by those in authority, at the time, to accord the self-expressive status to its auteur and, accordingly, facilitate a reading of his production as a dansical.

Further muddying the reading of Dafora's work is the fact that many critics cited and lauded what they claimed to be the 'improvisational' quality/component of *Kykunkor* -- somewhat using its folk/ritual underpinning and character to undermine and negate Dafora's craft and artistry, as well as the production's consciously applied musical theatre construct. For instance, in his review, John Martin summarily described 'every high moment' of the production as 'appearing to be improvisation' (Martin 1934: 6). It is not too strong to suggest that this 'improvisational' quality extolled by Martin (and his colleagues) was an operative term, characteristic of the aforementioned exotic, essentialist, and racist strategies of criticism employed by many in the arts community of the day. Specifically, the black artist was

positioned as an exotic with ‘naturally endowed’ attributes, rooted in and relying on primitive feeling or instinct (i.e., improvisation) as opposed to technique. Per reception theory, whether or not any *Kykunkor* performance was actually an improvised or, as asserted by Gilbert Seldes, an authentic ‘savage rite’ (Seldes 1934: 163), it was deemed such by those in authority to shape public opinion as well as future scholarship. The self-expressive, musical theatre aspects of Dafora’s work -- that is, his compilation of a score and adaptation of traditional dances (most often participatory, circular dances/songs of unfixed space/duration) into a spectator’s form, reconfigured for a proscenium stage and structured as Western narrative drama -- were largely ignored, mediated, and/or undocumented by the authoritative theatre and dance critics of his time. Most important, such historical reception models and mediative activities continue to hinder attempts by contemporary scholars to assert Dafora’s particular contribution to the *musical theatre* field.

## V. Conclusion

In short, one cannot ignore existent inconsistencies and ambiguities when attempting to categorize *Kykunkor* as a dansical/musical. The work’s seeming lack of self-expressive choreographic auteurship refutes its case for absolute ‘dansical’ status. And although the production, in spirit and construct, may reflect a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, its dance-dominant character simultaneously resists such a classification. In addition, racist and biased reception paradigms obscure detailed, nuanced historical accounts of the production. Yet, such paradoxes and puzzles also highlight the liminal nature of *Kykunkor* -- a liminality which initially puzzled and rankled some viewers whose resultant misinterpretations and equivocations contributed to an overall confusion which informs (or misinforms) readings of *Kykunkor* to this day. In a contentious review, Lincoln Kirstein found the ‘interesting’ production to be ‘neither a consistent dramatic whole, nor an *authentic* piece of anthropology, nor an *artistic* experience’ (Kirstein 1934: 684, Kirstein’s emphasis). This negating account, however, also underscores the exceptional paradigm of *Kykunkor* and may explain (and possibly reconcile) the tension and disparity which hinders its placement within the musical theatre arena. As Perpener notes, ‘His [Kirstein’s] emphasis on what *Kykunkor* was *not* indicated that it was hard for him to categorize it; this further points out the production’s uniqueness as a theatrical experience without precedent’ (Perpener 2001: 113, Perpener’s emphasis). To this point, I fervently add that Dafora’s production can be viewed as having *set the precedent* for musical theatre hybrids, variants, and/or mutations (e.g., dansicals) which serve to challenge, evolve, and invigorate the genre today. Accordingly, it is crucial to recognize *Kykunkor*’s distinctive role in American musical theatre and cement its place in history as an early and potent example of complexity, diversity, and fluidity within the genre.

**Works cited:**

- Anon. (1934), 'African Opera Seen as a Native Record', *Amsterdam News*, 19 May.
- Anon. (1934), 'New Version of African Drama Given in Chanin Auditorium', *New York Times*, 22 December.
- Brown, J. M. (1934), 'Two on the Aisle', *New York Post*, 19 May.
- Eisenberg, E. (1934), 'Kykunkor Hits the Top', *New York World Telegram*, 24 May.
- Emery, L. F. (1988), *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, Hightstown: Princeton Books.
- Garland, R. (1934), 'Native African Opera Proves Entertaining', *New York World Telegram*, 19 May.
- Grant, M. N. (2004), *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical*, Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Henderson, W. J. (1934), 'Native African Opera Moves', *New York Sun*, 21 May.
- Horst, L. (1934), 'Review of Kykunkor', *Dance Observer*, 1:5, p. 54.
- Kirstein, L. (1934), 'Kykunkor: Native African Opera', *Nation*, 13 June, p. 684.
- Locke, A. (1934), 'Toward a Critique of Negro Music', *Opportunity*, December, pp. 367-368.
- Manning, S. (2004), *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Martin, J. (1963), *Book of the Dance*, New York: Tudor Press.
- Martin, J. (1934), 'Kykunkor, Ritual Drama, Given by Native Artists', *New York Times*, 13 May.
- Needham, M. (2002), 'Kykunkor, or the Witch Woman: An African Opera in America, 1934', in T. DeFrantz, (ed.), *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 233-266.
- Perpener, J. O. (2001), *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Seldes, G. (1934), 'Stage-Door Johnny, Pro Tem', *Esquire*, August, pp. 137, 163.
- States, B. O. (1985), *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Swain, J. P. (1990), *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Endnotes:**

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the Horton family were members of the Temeni ethnic group, their surname was acquired from Dafora's great-grandfather who had adopted the name of the Novia Scotia family to which he had been attached as a slave before relocating to Sierra Leone as a freeman. Dafora would alternately use and exclude this surname.

<sup>2</sup> Shogola Oloba is the official name of Dafora's performing company of dancers, singers, and drummers; the company remained in existence until 1960.

<sup>3</sup> *The Golden Bough* (1890), written by anthropologist James Frazer, was the seminal turn-of-the-century work which explored primitive myths and cults.

<sup>4</sup> Akin to these productions are Broadway (and Off-Broadway) works which are movement-based, kinetic spectacles (e.g., *Stomp* and *Blast*). Yet, neither do such productions meet the criteria of the dansical: the stamp of a specific choreographic auteur. Further, they are not considered musicals but have been assigned a new Broadway designation, that is, 'Special Theatrical Event' (the official Tony Award category).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the denotation 'choreographer' still belonged solely to the arena of concert dance in 1934. Broadway would not incorporate the term until 1936 (with the advent of George Balanchine). Thus, at this juncture, one might see an early dance concert positioning of *Kykunkor* by the New York press, as well as the production's own publicity team.