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Performing Arts, Civil Society Actions, and Citizens' Agitation

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the intersection between performing arts and civil society activism, with a focus on how music, dance, and drama can effectively enhance citizens' agitations for social change. Drawing from interpretative qualitative methodology and supported by relevant theoretical frameworks such as social capital theory and civil society engagement, the study demonstrates the multifaceted roles of the performing arts in mobilising, educating, and uniting communities. Music is shown to foster collective identity and emotional solidarity through its participatory and symbolic functions, while dance serves as a kinetic language of protest, embodying unity and resistance. Drama, particularly street theatre, is analysed as a tool for public education, symbolic expression, and active engagement. These art forms are not merely adjuncts to protests but are presented as central mechanisms for structuring, sustaining, and legitimising civic movements. Furthermore, the paper underscores the managerial dimension of artistic activism, highlighting the necessity for effective planning, audience engagement strategies, and inclusive performance practices. By transforming protest into a culturally rich and emotionally resonant experience, performing arts reduce the risk of violence and broaden the reach of civic messages. The study concludes that when thoughtfully integrated, the performing arts can transform public spaces into arenas of consciousness-raising and collective action, making them indispensable tools in contemporary advocacy. This work contributes to interdisciplinary discourse within cultural administration and theatre management by illustrating how artistic methods can be strategically leveraged for societal transformation.

Keywords: Performing Arts, Civil Society, Citizens' Agitation, Protest Music, Dance Activism, Street Theatre, Cultural Management, Artistic Advocacy, Social Capital, Public Engagement

Introduction

Public protests and civil society actions are fundamental means by which citizens agitate for political or social change. However, such agitations often face challenges ranging from communication barriers to the risk of devolving into chaos or violence. There is a need for creative strategies that can organize and amplify citizens' voices while maintaining public engagement and order. In this context, the performing arts provide a compelling toolkit for

advocacy. Throughout history, artistic expressions have been interwoven with political movements – from the protest songs of the 1960s anti-war and civil rights movements to theatrical demonstrations in public squares. These examples suggest that music, dance, and drama can galvanize public sentiment and foster unity in ways that conventional protest methods may not (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). Civil society organizations typically serve as forums for people with common interests to collectively address societal issues (Berman, 1997). Citizens' *agitation* can be defined as public expressions of concern or unrest, essentially a state of mobilized anxiety or excitement about an issue (Merriam-Webster, 2010).

Scholars have emphasized that successful civic movements often depend on social capital – the networks and shared understandings that enable collective action (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995). Yet, when traditional civic activism falls short or becomes co-opted, innovative approaches are required to engage communities. Recent discourse on cultural policy and community engagement indicates that participatory arts can produce tangible social outcomes, strengthening community bonds and empowering participants (Matarasso, 1997; Novak-Leonard & Brown, 2011). Performing arts by nature engage multiple senses and emotions, creating a powerful platform for messaging. They transcend language barriers and can transform protests into *performances* that attract and hold public attention. This paper examines how leveraging the performing arts within civil actions could enhance coherence, participation, and impact in citizens' agitations. The aim of the study is to critically evaluate the role of music, dance, and drama as tools for coordinating civil society protests and influencing social change. In doing so, it aligns with the interdisciplinary scope of cultural administration and theatre management, illustrating how artistic production and management techniques can be applied beyond the stage to the arena of social activism.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in theories of civil society, social capital, and cultural performance. *Civil society actions* refer to collective initiatives by non-governmental groups aimed at societal betterment (Berman, 1997). A strong civil society is often linked to healthy democracies, as it provides channels for citizens to voice concerns and hold authorities accountable. However, theorists have debated its effectiveness: while Putnam (1993) famously argued that civic engagement (“making democracy work”) builds social trust and effective governance, others caution that civil society is not inherently benign and can even exacerbate social tensions (Rieff, 1999). Understanding *citizens' agitation* within this context involves recognizing both its constructive potential and its susceptibility to misdirection. Citizens' movements require not only passion but also structure and a unifying narrative. Social capital theory provides insight into how the performing arts might bolster civic action. Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995) describe social capital as the value that arises from social networks, cooperation, and shared norms. Activities that bring people together — such as communal singing, dancing, or collective storytelling — inherently build social capital by forging bonds and a sense of community. In the cultural sector, participatory arts have been shown to increase social cohesion and individual confidence, leading to greater civic participation (Matarasso, 1997). Arts engagement can thus amplify the capacity of communities to organize and act collectively.

The performing arts also offer a theoretical framework for communication and emotional resonance. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) note that music and other cultural traditions carry the memories and identity of social movements, functioning as “mobilizing frames” that inspire collective action. Artistic performances create *multi-sensory experiences* for participants and observers (Ajayi, 1996), which can make political messages more accessible and impactful. In protest contexts, this means that a song, dance, or dramatic act can encapsulate complex grievances into symbolic acts that the public can easily grasp and rally behind. Additionally, the concept of audience engagement from theatre management is relevant. In the arts, success often hinges on understanding and engaging the audience; similarly, a protest movement must engage both its participants and the broader public. According to Novak-Leonard and Brown (2011), engagement in the arts takes many forms beyond passive attendance, including creative expression and social interaction. Applying this idea to activism, we can view protest

participants and onlookers as an “audience” that needs to be drawn into the cause. By framing advocacy in performative terms, movements can potentially broaden their reach and influence public opinion more effectively. In summary, the theoretical premise of this paper is that integrating performing arts into civil society activism leverages social capital and communication advantages. It creates emotionally resonant experiences that can unite citizens (Putnam, 1995) and potentially lead to more sustained and focused agitations. This framework underpins the subsequent analysis of how music, dance, and drama function as practical instruments of protest.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology to explore the nexus between performing arts and civic protest. Rather than gathering new empirical data, the study conducts a conceptual analysis of secondary sources including scholarly literature, historical records, and documented examples of protests where artistic elements were present. This approach is appropriate for the exploratory nature of the inquiry, which seeks to synthesize existing knowledge from the domains of arts and social movements. The analysis is structured as a case-informed discussion. Relevant examples are drawn from various contexts to illustrate key points – for instance, references to protest song traditions in the United States and South Africa, or the use of street theatre in community activism. While not a formal case study of one particular movement, the paper reflects on events such as the Occupy Nigeria protests of 2012 and anti-apartheid demonstrations, treating them as illustrative cases where performance and protest intersect. Scholarly works on cultural activism provide the basis for identifying the mechanisms through which performing arts influence protests.

In conducting this research, an interpretative lens is applied: the emphasis is on understanding meaning and implications rather than measuring frequency or causal effect. The literature on social movements and cultural performance is interpreted to draw out themes of engagement, emotional impact, and organizational strategy. By comparing insights across studies (for example, findings on protest music efficacy or dance in public demonstrations), the paper develops a coherent narrative on best practices and potential outcomes. The methodological orientation can be described as a qualitative content analysis of texts and contexts, supplemented by an analytical discussion that integrates theory with practice. This design allows for embedding a *conceptual framework* (as outlined above) into the examination of real-world activism, thereby ensuring that the discussion remains grounded in both theory and practice. The lack of quantitative data is a conscious choice given the subject matter; metrics for the impact of art in protests are beyond the scope here. Instead, the strength of the methodology lies in its holistic consideration of cultural, psychological, and social dimensions of citizen agitation through the arts. This approach aligns with an interpretative research paradigm, aiming to provide depth of understanding and new perspectives rather than generalizable statistical conclusions.

Analysis and Discussion

Organizing a protest as a form of performance can transform how its message is delivered and perceived. In this section, the roles of music, dance, and drama in civil society agitation are examined, highlighting how each contributes to advocacy efforts. Also discussed are practical considerations for implementing artistic elements in protests, drawing parallels to audience engagement strategies in arts management.

Music and Protest Movements

“One good song with a message can bring a point more deeply to more people than a thousand rallies.” This famous assertion by folk singer Phil Ochs (1962) encapsulates the profound impact of music on social movements. Music has long been at the heart of protest culture across the world. From anti-colonial freedom songs in Africa to civil rights anthems in America, songs provide an emotional soundtrack to political struggles. They are often easily remembered and passed on, helping to spread the movement’s message beyond the immediate protest

audience. Protest songs can be defined as musical expressions of dissent and solidarity that galvanize listeners toward a cause (Denisoff, 1966). Such songs typically combine powerful lyrics with evocative melodies to inspire hope and unity among participants. Many protest songs employ call-and-response patterns or repetitive choruses, encouraging crowds to join in and voice their support. This participatory nature of music fosters a sense of kinship among protesters, creating what Eyerman and Jamison (1998) describe as a collective identity rooted in shared tradition and experience. Indeed, when people sing together in unison, barriers of ethnicity, class, or language tend to diminish in the face of a common rhythm and message.

Historically, music has been a unifying force during times of upheaval. Enslaved African communities, for example, used spirituals and work songs as coded forms of resistance and to maintain morale under oppression. During the industrial revolution and labour movements, workers' unions often rallied with songs that articulated their demands and bolstered their courage. In the anti-apartheid struggle, freedom songs known as *isicathamiya* and others served both to protest injustice and to reinforce community bonds. These examples underscore that music not only reflects social conditions but also actively shapes the trajectory of movements. Contemporary evidence of music's power in protests is plentiful. In South Africa's recent post-apartheid protests, liberation songs have been adapted to address new social issues, demonstrating the enduring salience of musical protest (Jolaosho, 2019). Similarly, Nigerian activists during movements like Occupy Nigeria have invoked popular songs (including Afrobeat anthems by Fela Kuti) to rally crowds and assert cultural ownership of the protest narrative. According to Noko (2021), music in African liberation movements functions as a transnational language of resistance, carrying revolutionary sentiments across borders. By singing together, protesters transform a political gathering into a choir of dissent, which can be profoundly moving for participants and observers alike.

In practical terms, incorporating music into a protest can serve multiple purposes. It maintains morale during extended demonstrations, turning what might be tense or monotonous moments into opportunities for encouragement through song. It also attracts media attention – a crowd singing in harmony is both newsworthy and hard to ignore. Moreover, songs have longevity; a catchy protest song can continue to spread and reinforce the movement's message through recordings and social media, well after the physical protest ends. In sum, music infuses protest with a unifying energy and a memorable message, making it an indispensable tool in the repertoire of civil activism.

Dance as Protest

Dance, as an embodied form of expression, adds a powerful visual and kinetic dimension to citizen agitation. Throughout history, dance has been used in various cultures as a form of storytelling, celebration, and even dissent. In the context of protests, *dance as protest* turns the act of demonstrating into a living, moving expression of solidarity and hope. A striking example is the “toy-toy,” a spontaneous militant dance that became emblematic of anti-apartheid protests in South Africa – participants would chant and stomp in unison, symbolizing both unity and defiance through movement. The strength of dance lies in its ability to communicate emotion and intent without words. A person dancing energetically at a protest can signify joy, resilience, or collective empowerment. As Ajayi (1996) notes in the study of African dances, movement rituals carry deep meanings and can serve as vehicles for spiritual and social messages. In a protest scenario, choreographed dances or even simple coordinated gestures can convey a message of harmony and determination. For instance, groups protesting gender violence globally have organized flash mob dances (such as the One Billion Rising campaign) to draw attention to their cause; the very act of dancing in public becomes a statement that contrasts life-affirming creativity against the injustices being protested.

Music and dance are naturally interconnected, and this synergy enhances their impact on protests. Often, a rhythmic drumbeat or song will drive a protest dance, aligning participants' movements and hearts to a common tempo. The presence of music can embolden even hesitant individuals to join the dance, dissolving social barriers as bodies move collectively. Conversely, even in the absence of melody, rhythm alone (clapping, stepping, or drumming) can propel a

dance of protest, as human bodies have an innate responsiveness to rhythm. The group choreography itself can illustrate themes: for example, dancers breaking free from a formation might symbolize liberation, or a circle dance might symbolize unity and inclusion of all. Modern protest movements have increasingly embraced dance because it is photogenic and shareable, amplifying the movement's visibility. Videos of protesters performing dances often go viral, capturing public imagination in ways that conventional protest marches might not. Dancing protesters present a starkly non-violent image of resistance – one that is hard to perceive as threatening, yet is incredibly engaging. This helps in winning public sympathy and media coverage, thereby extending the reach of the protest message.

Moreover, dance at protests can uplift the spirit of participants. Physical movement releases tension and can transform anger or frustration into a creative outlet. It also invites a wider community to participate; bystanders may feel encouraged to clap or sway along, effectively becoming part of the demonstration. In essence, protest dance turns spectators into participants, which is a crucial step in building broader support. By making demonstrations more inclusive and emotionally resonant, dance complements other forms of protest, reinforcing the movement's solidarity and resolve.

Drama and Street Theatre in Activism

Dramatic performance and theatre techniques offer another potent avenue for enhancing civil society actions. *Street theatre*, guerrilla performances, and dramatic skits have been utilized by activists worldwide to bring social and political issues to life in the public sphere. The performing arts in this theatrical sense can translate abstract grievances into relatable scenes, characters, and narratives that engage the public on an emotional and intellectual level. One way drama serves protests is through symbolic acts or enactments that draw attention. For example, activists may stage a mock trial of a political leader on a public sidewalk, use puppets and props (as in the tradition of the Bread and Puppet Theatre in protest rallies), or re-enact scenarios of injustice in city squares. These performances can provoke onlookers to stop, watch, and think, effectively turning the street into a temporary theatre of civic engagement. Because these acts are often unexpected and creative, they capture interest in ways that a standard speech or signboard might not.

The dramatic arts also allow complex messages to be simplified into story form. By presenting an issue with identifiable characters – victims, villains, and heroes – street theatre can humanize social problems that might otherwise seem distant or theoretical. For instance, a short play about a family struggling with the impacts of corruption can make the issue personal and urgent for an audience, stirring empathy and a call to action. In India, for example, the tradition of *nukkad natak* (street plays) has been used to great effect in educating communities about issues like domestic violence, sanitation, and political rights, proving the efficacy of drama in activism. Importantly, drama at protests is interactive. Performers can engage the crowd by asking questions or inviting participation, blurring the line between actor and audience. This interactivity mirrors techniques from Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," where spectators become "spect-actors" who can step into the performance to suggest or enact solutions to social issues. While the context of a protest is more impromptu than a workshop, the underlying principle is similar: people are more likely to internalize a message when they are actively involved in its telling.

In terms of outcomes, incorporating drama and acting into protests can educate and inform onlookers (who might not be aware of the nuances of the issue) even as it rallies those already invested in the cause. It adds an element of *edutainment* – education through entertainment – which can sustain public attention longer than straightforward rallies. As noted by Matarasso (1997), community arts projects often yield increased awareness and empowerment among participants; similarly, a protest that doubles as a theatrical event can leave participants feeling more enlightened and empowered regarding their cause. Moreover, dramatic performances are media-friendly and memetic. A powerful image of protesters in costume or performing a poignant scene can become a lasting symbol of a movement (much like the image of the lone "Tank Man" became emblematic of the Tiananmen Square protests, or how the visual of

protesters wearing theatrical masks – such as the Guy Fawkes mask – became a global protest icon). Such symbols, born of performative protest, help movements gain narrative power in the public imagination. In summary, drama and theatre enrich protests by conveying messages in story form, engaging emotions, and involving people directly in problem-solving dialogue. Through creativity and narrative, they turn rallies into forums of public consciousness-raising, thereby enhancing the protest's intellectual and emotional appeal.

Organizational Considerations: Managing Performative Protests

Implementing performing arts within protests is not without its challenges. It requires coordination, planning, and what one might call *cultural management* skills applied to activism. In effect, protest organizers must take on the role of producers or directors, orchestrating complex events in dynamic public environments. Key considerations for organizing performance-based advocacy include:

- **Identifying and engaging the target audience:** Just as arts administrators identify their audience demographics and tailor engagement strategies, protest planners should understand the community they aim to mobilize. This involves recognizing the needs, interests, and potential barriers for participants and spectators. For example, using a local popular music genre or an indigenous dance in the protest can resonate more deeply with the target community and spur involvement.
- **Effective communication and promotion:** Successful performances and protests both rely on communication. Organizers should publicize the event and its performative aspects in advance (akin to marketing a show) to build anticipation and draw crowds. Clear messaging about the purpose of the demonstration and what form of artistic expression will occur can pique public interest and media curiosity.
- **Participation and interaction:** Providing opportunities for interaction enhances both performances and protests. In a theatre setting, talk-backs or workshops engage audiences; in protests, encouraging attendees to sing along, dance, or even take on small roles in a street play keeps the crowd invested. This principle of active engagement (Novak-Leonard & Brown, 2011) helps sustain momentum throughout the event.
- **Inclusivity and accessibility:** An important administrative consideration is making the protest performance accessible to a diverse audience. This could mean choosing a location and time that allow maximum attendance, using languages or artistic forms that are widely understood, and accommodating people of different abilities to participate (for instance, incorporating call-and-response chants that everyone can join).
- **Logistical planning and safety:** Just as stage performances require planning for lighting, sound, and safety, protests with performative elements need careful logistical coordination. Organizers should plan for any equipment (e.g., sound systems or musical instruments), designate spaces for performers and audience, and coordinate with security or marshals to protect participants. Managing these aspects ensures that the artistic elements can proceed smoothly without unintended disruptions.

Applying these cultural management strategies can significantly enhance the impact of a performative protest. Williams-Elegbe (2015) observes that modern movements often coordinate through social media; similarly, integrating online tools to livestream musical performances or circulate recorded protest dances can expand the audience beyond those physically present. In effect, a well-managed protest that uses music, dance, or drama becomes a hybrid event – part live performance, part social campaign – that can captivate the public both on the ground and in virtual spaces. Additionally, focusing on audience experience in protests (a concept borrowed from audience development in the arts) can help maintain a protest's nonviolent discipline. When participants are actively engaged in singing or acting, they are less likely to turn to destructive behaviors out of frustration or boredom. The performative focus channels their energy into a collective creation. This aligns with the earlier theoretical point that such strategies build social capital: people who feel included and heard are more likely to cooperate and maintain peaceful conduct. A strong “audience” base that is attentive and emotionally invested is vital not only for artistic ventures but also for the vitality and sustainability of activist movements.

Conclusion

Performing arts – encompassing music, dance, and drama – can serve as powerful, ready-made tools in the hands of civil society to shape and direct citizens’ agitations. This paper has argued that by infusing protests with performative elements, activists can create more cohesive, engaging, and ultimately effective movements. The analysis demonstrates that music can unify voices and deliver messages memorably, dance can symbolize unity and energize participants, and drama can articulate issues in human terms and capture public attention. These artistic channels enhance the communicative and emotive dimensions of protests, which are often as crucial to success as the logistical and strategic dimensions. A key benefit of integrating the performing arts into civic action is the mitigation of negative factors such as violence or hijacking of protests by opportunistic elements. When a demonstration is orchestrated as a structured performance, complete with songs, choreographed movements, or theatrical sketches, it establishes an atmosphere of purposeful creativity. This atmosphere can dissuade vandalism or chaos, as the crowd remains actively involved and focused. The case of the Occupy Nigeria protests, for example, showed that organized rallies with music and celebrity performances maintained more peaceful discipline, whereas unstructured agitations were more vulnerable to mischief. More broadly, numerous historical instances suggest that movements anchored by cultural expressions tend to retain moral high ground and public sympathy, reducing the likelihood of crackdowns or public alienation.

Another outcome of performative protest is the dual role of such events in educating and entertaining the public – a manifestation of the classic “*edutainment*” concept in a real-world struggle. Audiences (both participants and onlookers) are not only rallying for a cause but also learning about the issues through lyrics, stories, and symbols presented. They are simultaneously witnessing art and politics in action, which can leave a lasting impression and inspire further dialogue long after the protest ends. In an era dominated by visual media and short attention spans, this marriage of art and activism can produce compelling content that keeps the cause alive in public discourse (e.g., via viral videos of protest performances).

In conclusion, harnessing the performing arts within civil society actions offers a promising avenue for enhancing citizens’ agitation and achieving social change. This interdisciplinary approach requires careful planning and collaboration: artists bring creativity and emotive power, activists provide strategic direction and political context, and cultural managers ensure that the integration is seamless and impactful. Together, they can stage protests that are not only acts of resistance but also civic events that draw communities together. Future research could build on this work by examining specific case studies in depth – for instance, comparing outcomes of protests that employed artistic tactics versus those that did not, or exploring how different cultural contexts modulate the effectiveness of performance in protests. Ultimately, the success of any social movement hinges on winning hearts and minds. The performing arts, with their ability to inspire, mobilize, and educate, are invaluable allies in this endeavour. By turning protests into lively performances, activists can transform streets and public spaces into arenas of change, where citizens are not just agitated, but also enlightened and united in purpose. This synergy of art and advocacy holds the promise of more resilient and resonant movements in the pursuit of democracy, justice, and social transformation.

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