

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 49

(4R 50 S049P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody, Louis Mahoney here to introduce the drama of fiction - and fact - in "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

Exile, imprisonment, execution: not, thank goodness, something most of us know about at first hand. But it's the stuff of tragedy and writers, actors and now film-makers are trying to tell audiences: "This is what it feels like".

BODE SOWANDE:

When you're doing anything creative, you've got to imagine the real situation - and I did. I tried to think of how a man would react to the fact of execution. I had to imagine that I was in prison, that I faced execution, probably, or any offence - how would I react? And then again, how would the man, who doesn't know anything about philosophy, react? The common man on the street? This is where I had to bring in the base elements, this whole concept of: let's think together, let's hold hands. If you are more than one person in this situation, the Africans believe that you can share it in a communal way. And in this situation, there were three prisoners and they had to come together and share this fear.

MAHONEY:

Those three convicts come from a play "Bar Beach Prelude" by the Nigerian writer Bode Sowande, a play specially written for the BBC's "African Theatre".

It just so happens that I took part in it myself so I can tell you what it's all about. It happens twenty-four hours before three convicts face the firing squad, and all the action takes place in the condemned cell.

As Margrit Prah pointed out to Bode Sowande, it sounds far from the themes of the village versus the city, or the generation gap. Why has Bode chosen this sombre subject?

SOWANDE: I believe that when we talk of justice these days, we don't really have the real meaning of justice and it wasn't very easy for me to find the theme. Then, with the increase of executions on the coast of West Africa (there are about three countries now who have been executing robbers) so I decided to use, to pick a Barabas, if you could say, and try to see if, in fact, others aren't like him. If you, say 'crucify him' if you are without sin? I am not very religious, but that's the way I saw the whole thing. It took me probably a fortnight or so to get the whole thing together.

MARGRIT PRAH:

Tell me, how did you actually manage to get it together? Because that is what I would find extremely interesting.

SOWANDE: First I picked on my central character. Then I tried to limit characters hanging about him: found a sentimental pregnant wife. Then, linking that with the Yorubba myth: the fact that life doesn't end with death. And so I was able to build it up from there. I did not actually depart from the African custom because the whole idea of reincarnation, that the main character believes in, is what gives him the courage to face the guns.

PRAH: Did you say that you picked the central character first and worked it outwards? How did you actually go about it, the detail?

SOWANDE: The first aspect was that of language. The fact that I've written quite a number of sketches in Nigeria and it's always been with this classical type of language, poetry and all that. Now I found that I had to use the language of the street, the language of criminals, and the only thing I could do was to blend it with pigeon English and change the whole syntax of the normal English language to what I felt was acceptable to me and probably would be acceptable to the listening public.

PRAH: I see. So, in fact, you wrote it with a radio audience in mind, not the stage audience?

SOWANDE: Yes, this one I wrote with the radio audience in mind.

PRAH: What, exactly, did this entail?

SOWANDE: This means that: now, when you are writing for the radio, you've got to try and create effects, not only with the situation but also with the words - the verb that you use, the syntax - everything must have a power that will appeal to the minds through the ears. You know, there are plays that you can write and you can depend on visual effects, but when you are writing for the radio you can write words. For instance, there is a particular phrase in this play about the character liking a woman, remembering a woman, and the word that came to my mind was a Yorubba word "labalubi" which means "flowing" - a kind of onomatopoeic thing. And that's the kind of thing that can succeed on the radio. We can use poetry, we can use fine prose but it's the real power of the words that can succeed through the ears. That's the whole thing.

EXTRACT FROM "BAR BEACH PRELUDE"

MAHONEY: A few moments, no more, from Bode Sowande's "Bar Beach Prelude".

We've heard Bode saying that his whole play is an attempt to discuss the idea of justice. And, of course, the other side of the coin, injustice. This injustice is the side that's emphasised in the film "Le Roi est Mort en Exil" - "The King has Died in Exile". Perhaps you've already seen it. It had its first showing at the Pan-African Festival in Algeria in 1969 and has been a subject of controversy ever since. Here's the film's director to explain who was the King who "died in exile".

RICHARD DE MEDEIROS:

Behanzin was the last king of Dahomey - precisely, of Abomey, the Kingdom of Abomey. And he was the one who fought against the Frenchmen when they came for colonisation. And, of course, he was beaten and taken in jail in the West Indies and at the end of his life they brought him back to Africa, to Nigeria where he died in 1906.

MAHONEY: The director, Richard de Medeiros, is himself Dahomean and he began making the film because he wanted to find out more about the rather shadowy figure of Behanzin. But what started as a straight forward piece of biography soon turned into a matter of interpretation and ended as a personal statement by a now committed de Medeiros.

DE MEDEIROS: When I started enquiries about this story, I discovered a lot of things which concern the history of the country of Dahomey. And then the film became a little bigger than what I had aimed for at the beginning.

BARRY TOMALIN:

The film, in fact, is a series of interviews with people in Blida who knew Behanzin and who saw him around the end of his life. Could you tell us something about what these people said in their interviews about how Behanzin lived in Blida?

DE MEDEIROS: I made interviews with two sorts of people, and according to which group the point of view was absolutely different. The French said that Behanzin, like all the former kings of the African countries which were won by French colonisation, was very happy in jail. 'He was not in jail,' they said, 'he was just in a house with a lot of people to serve him and he was treated like a king, really. Very well and very happy. He had a coach with horses and went out in Blida everyday. He did enjoy himself'. But when I talked with Arabs who lived in the native districts where Behanzin was enclosed, they said that all those things were lies because Behanzin was very badly treated: he had no money; he was obliged to work in the fields - forced labour; in spite of his age (and they saw him because they were his neighbours) he was very badly treated.

MAHONEY: Two quite irreconcilable memories. And the conclusions de Medeiros came to, made "The King Has Died in Exile", not into a romantic account of Behanzin in Blida but into a political statement against colonialism in general, and especially against the treatment received by the King of Dahomey from his French conquerors.

Well, it isn't surprising that reaction to the film has been just as divided as the way people had described the exile itself.

DE MEDEIROS: In Algiers, people found that the film was too soft - not hard enough against colonialism - that I was too moderate and I should have been more severe. But I wanted to be really moderate because when you are excessive in a protestation, it is possible that people are fed up with what you are telling. So, personally, I wanted to be moderate enough. When I show a film in France in some festivals, it was absolutely catastrophic and I was very happy of it because they said "Oh no, that was not a historic film, it is a pamphlet, it is a nationalistic pamphlet but not even an intelligent nationalistic pamphlet, it is a pamphlet made by an underdeveloped man for underdeveloped people because really all those things were not possible" And I was very happy of it and, of course, I was quarrelling all the time long during those festivals. And sometimes it was not bad to shout against somebody and to insult him a little - that is sports too and film-making.

MAHONEY: Algeria, France.....so, what about nearer home?

DE MEDEIROS: The first African country that bought the film was Upper Volta and people were very shocked to buy what they discovered through that film. And what I think happened to the film in Dahomey is not words to be said here.

MAHONEY: And I gather that by that last and ambiguous remark, Richard de Medeiros was implying that the very people who had been so critical of the film were the ones who prevented it being distributed throughout Dahomey, once the kingdom of Behanzin.

I'm going to play you a little farewell music from Dahomey, from the court of the King of Abomey. This was recorded in the very palace of the last King of Dahomey. So goodbye until next week's "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC FROM DAHOMEY.

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