

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, welcoming you to Arts and Africa. A special programme this week to mark a very special occasion. Just ten days ago Zimbabwe was the scene for this year's most important event in the literary calendar: the Zimbabwe International Book Fair; not only a first for Zimbabwe, but also a first truly Pan-African Book Fair to be held in Africa - it was a unique chance for writers, publishers and readers to get together to exchange ideas, argue and collaborate. One of the chief organisers of the fair was David Martin, Chairman of the Zimbabwe Publishing House. He told Julie Frederikse how the idea of the book fair came about.

DAVID MARTIN

It was really started by the Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Comrade Robert Mugabe a couple of years ago when another director of a Zimbabwe publishing house and myself were telling him what we were trying to achieve. He asked us what we were doing about literature in French and in particular, francophone authors. And we said nothing. And he said he thought we ought to do something. We were very surprised by this question because he doesn't speak or read French. We went away and thought about this and the fact that he didn't speak or read French seemed to us to be the very point that he couldn't communicate with authors from those parts of this continent. This was the factor inhibiting development and co-operation and so on. So we mentioned this to the French government and Charles Mungoshi... The literature director said Peter and myself were invited to Paris. We met a lot of francophone authors, French publishers and then we went on to London with Phillis Johnson to the UNESCO Second World Congress of Books. This was about fourteen months ago. And there a thing called "Book Week Africa" was opened at the Africa Centre in London by the Director General of UNESCO, and he said that he hoped this would go beyond the bounds of London to Africa. Thereafter things got slightly out of control, from having a smallish exhibit of "Book Week Africa", the idea of a book fair evolved. Then how do you have a book fair unless you really have the people who made it all possible, the authors? By a series of accidents and designs the whole of the thing evolved into what is occurring here this week. We made the decision to stage the book fair and writers workshop before we thought about the problems.

DAVID MARTIN

That was probably the most sensible thing to do because had we worked out the problems first, we might not have done it at all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But in the end they did. And Somali writer Nuruddin Farah for one had only praise for the end product of this chapter of accidents.

NURUDDIN FARAH

I haven't attended any conferences for a long time in which there has been so much efficiency about. I've been quite impressed with the work of the people who work at the Zimbabwe Publishing House. I've been immensely impressed also with the dedication of Emanuelle Nkara who is the chairman of the Department of English at the University of Zimbabwe. I've also been impressed with David Martin, who is the chairman of the Zimbabwe Publishing House and also Phillis Johnson. I've also been impressed with the Zimbabwean writer, Charles Mungoshi and Chenjerai Howe. These have all been very, very friendly, you see. They have given help every time one needed help. When one was depressed, they came and somehow lifted you up and out of it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And South African poet Lewis Nkosi saw the fair as an event of special importance to the Zimbabwe people and their government.

LEWIS NKOSI

Government Ministers have taken time off the appear with us as you know. The Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, Mr. Zvogbo was chairman of one of the sessions. And the Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, visited us at our stands and we chatted with him.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Lewis Nkosi. It's nice to think that the likes of organiser David Martin were around not just to organise, but also to cheer people up - participating in the writers workshop which ran concurrent with the exhibition of books, could be quite a daunting experience, particularly if you choose, as Nuruddin Farah did, to tackle head on a major controversial theme: The relationship between writing and politics.

NURUDDIN FARAH

Some of us got the stick, as it were. My paper was about the confrontation between the writer and the politician and usually the confrontation ends us with the writer being thrown out of the country into exile or into prison. And then the paper was also about the writer's wish to believe in justice and in truth and the politician's sly way of hiding between truth and betrayal. Somewhere along the line the politician hides behind rhetoric and statistics and gives figures of how many buildings he has built.

NURUDDIN FARAH

But always tends to forget how many souls he has broken, how many brains he has humiliated, how many vile-based thoughts he has created in the heads of people and how many corruptions he is responsible for.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The idea that politics and literature are in some way incompatible is a difficult thesis for anyone from South Africa to swallow. Some of the finest and most inspired writing coming from South Africa is infused with political protest. South African poet Ingoapele Madingoane was clear in his mind about the role of literature as an agent of change.

INGOAPELE MADINGOANE

Not only politicians can participate in the liberation and cultural policy of the people within the country that is in conferences of this nature, but also the artists themselves. I was oppressed long before I became a writer. It is just that my conscience demanded that I should record some of the things that were happening and are happening at home. I am a person committed to the total liberation of the country whether it is through the spilling of ink onto paper or the spilling of blood: I feel there will be a time where the writer will have to stop writing in ink and start writing in blood.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Prophetic words there from Ingoapele Madingoane. But the writers workshop wasn't just a talking shop for an intellectual elite - the theme of the workshop was after all Literature and Communication, as Malawian poet Jack Mapanje explained.

JACK MAPANJE

It ranges from academic as well as personal issues and what is interesting about this conference is that it's not just African writers who are involved in the discussions, it's the rest of the community here. Anybody who comes in can hear his views.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

While most of the casual observers were from Zimbabwe, the writers participating in the workshop really did represent the whole of the continent, not least West Africa.

JACK MAPANJE

A lot of West African writers, most of them anyway, have not been to Zimbabwe. I've got a writer who I admire, not only from French speaking country but also English speaking, West Africa, Professor Gabriel Okara who is here and has become a very good friend because I admire his poetry. He was saying that this is the first time that he has been to this part of the world. So one thing that this conference has done is to bring people from West Africa to come to Central Africa. There is this sort of unity which is very interesting about it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Gabriel Okara is not only a writer but also a bookbinder: His practical attitude to books has led him to take a particular interest in the whole question of how to get people to read in the first place. In other words, literature for children. It was a topic discussed in a paper delivered by Ghanaian children's writer and artist Meshak Asare. And in this instance participants in the workshops were united, as Gabriel Okara explained.

GABRIEL OKARA

We passed a resolution calling on the various governments in the continent to make a priority in the provision of such material for the children and also to make use of the writers giving them some sort of inducement and also some sort of inducement to publishers to publish this material for our young ones. As a matter of fact I come from the River State in Nigeria and the government of the River State is doing exactly the same thing as was passed in the resolution. So I think the other governments will follow suit.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But meanwhile the grown ups at the fair have come up with one important concrete achievement, the resolution to establish a Pan African Writers Union. Jack Mapanje looks on it with cautious enthusiasm.

JACK MAPANJE

There is a feeling that this might be an opportunity to have an organisation, you know African writers and critics and so on, everyone involved in creativity of one sort or another should come together and form a union. And this might be an opportunity to do it. But the problem is, as we are always doing, some of us are very sceptical about this sort of thing. It's been tried before and we are still sceptical. I mean we can try it out but we think why did the rest of the stuff fail and why are we going to succeed now? That's essentially the issue, but Zimbabwe Publishing House have done an interesting thing. I think their idea is if we agree that this might be a good proposition, then perhaps they might offer a building or something that we might call the secretariat and that's a thing that I think people are now tossing around to find its feasibility.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But the political role of literature is never far from peoples minds. The runner-up this year to the annual Pan African award for writing, the Noma Award, was Zimbabwean writer and editor Chenjerai Howe and he sees the African Writers Union as having a specific duty to speak out as a unified body against political oppression, as he explained to Julie Frederikse.

CHENJERAI HOWE

We have never been able to speak, as it were, with one voice. We've only been able to speak with one voice during meetings like this one. But when we leave sometimes some of us get thrown into prisons here and there and we get into trouble. Our fellow writers pretend we are not there. So if we were one voice we would be able to pressurise the governments, pressurise organisations to put more pressure on governments.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

So the role of an African writers union would be also to defend the writer so he can say what he wants to say?

CHENJERAI HOWE

Yes. A pressure group and also trying to emphasise two governments the role of a writer in society. Because governments tend to think that writers are rebels or misfits or mischief makers. We want to talk to governments, we want the governments to realise that we are a generally concerned people about the aspirations of our people, that's all. Maybe politicians might have their own different aspirations from us but our aspirations, as writers, are aspirations of the people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well the Zimbabwe Book Fair by all accounts was a great success. But at the end of the day, however enthusiastic the writers, however keen to read the public is - both adults and children - the onus for getting books from the writer to the reader lies with the publisher. Let David Martin, Chairman of the Zimbabwe Publishing House and one of the organisers of the fair, have the last word.

DAVID MARTIN

African authors must stop going first of all to European and North American publishers. They must support their African publishing industry. They must bring books to them. Now a particular African publishing house may not be very good about export, he may not have sufficient world contacts to export well. But it can then make a sub-lease arrangement with a publishing house in Europe or North America or wherever it is and let them do the world distribution. But when you make that sub-lease agreement, it means that you're bringing foreign currency back to that given African country. Africa shouldn't continue for ever to be a dumping ground for books from Europe and North America. It could become a book exporter, it could become a foreign currency factor.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

David Martin from the Zimbabwe Publishing House taking a practical look at how African literature can be supported to the benefit of writers and readers alike. And that brings us to the end of this week's programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

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* CLOSING SIG. - "Limpopo"