

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And for today's programme I've had the great pleasure of welcoming to "Arts and Africa" a friend and fellow-Ghanaian, at one time famous as an athlete. Not by themselves qualifications for appearing on "Arts and Africa" so I should add that he's the composer of this music.

MUSIC

Extract from "The Lost Fishermen"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

One of the songs from the Ghanaian folk-opera "The Lost Fishermen" by Saka Acquaye.

SAKA ACQUAYE

On Tuesdays at least, in the Accra area the fishermen never go fishing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

For what reason?

SAKA ACQUAYE

It is a holiday set aside for the Gods of the sea. We didn't exactly know the source of this festive tuition and doing a little research we discovered that at least in Ghana, you have two zero degrees meeting the Greenwich Line and the equator. So I used the opportunity to write around that meeting point, 0 point, so that when any fishermen gets there he gets mesmerised, he gets into a trance so to speak. One thing led to another and the fishermen got lost and blown off course onto an island. I was taking artistic liberty to tell the public what happened there. (laughter)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I assume that you wrote some music for the opera as well.

SAKA ACQUAYE

Yes, all of the music. Now you know that in any village or town in Africa, the children - girls in particular sing amorous songs before going to bed. When I was growing up some of those songs left an impression on me and these are some of the songs I tried to get into my opera.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you are a man of many parts, not only a writer but also a musician from what you have just said.

SAKA ACQUAYE

Well you have got to try to keep out of evil.
(laughter)

MUSIC

Extract from "The Lost Fishermen"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Saka Acquaye's "The Lost Fishermen" has just received its first London production, though he wrote it more than twenty years ago and in 1977 it was one of Ghana's entries in Festac '77, the Black African Arts Festival held in Lagos.

Those Accra fishermen ignore the tabu on Tuesday fishing and sail southwards into that double zero spot in the Atlantic where their fate is sealed.

ACTUALITY

Extract from "The Lost Fishermen"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The land to the surprise of the fishermen is an island inhabited by women, also from Accra who have not seen men for many years. The character who feels the wrath of the god most keenly is Ataa Masa, the head fisherman, played in this production by South African born Nathan Dambuza Myledle.

NATHAM DAMBUZA MYLEDLE

Well I had to interpret in the songs the feelings of Ataa Masa a strong man, a chief, broken down by the strains at sea, being lost for a period and also the equities brought to him by his son, who has brought about deaths that the father should pay for.

MUSIC

Extracts from "The Lost Fishermen"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

To make the folk-opera as international as possible Saka Acquaye has written the dialogue in English but his lyrics are in Ga. Luckily Saka's been here to coach the cast. When Florence Akst went to a rehearsal she wanted to know whether it wasn't difficult for Dambuza Myledle to play the role of a West African?

NATHAM DAMBUZA MYLEDLE

No, other than that these are sea men and in my country I wouldn't really relate to such a profession of having men who go out at sea to fish and get lost. But this happens in Ghana.

FLORENCE AKST

What about the Ghanaian language that you are singing in, you are learning it phonetically I suppose?

NATHAM DAMBUZA MYLEDLE

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

Is it a very difficult language to get the sounds right?

NATHAM DAMBUZA MYLEDLE

We have been able to get through. I also find it a very romantic language, it fits in so beautifully musically. One is entitled as a professional singer to twist a word to suit a mood.

FLORENCE AKST

And the music?

NATHAM DAMBUZA MYLEDLE

And the music.

FLORENCE AKST

When you were cast did you think that you were in for something really difficult as somebody from one end of the continent portraying someone from another end?

NATHAM DAMBUZA MYLEDLE

No, not at all. I have just come back from doing a film, the BBC film in Nairobi - The Blue Pastures.

FLORENCE AKST

So that was East Africa, now you are a character which is West African.

NATHAM DAMBUZA MYLEDLE

This is it, it is quite a challenge.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The show has been put on in London by the Black Theatre Workshop and has been directed by one of the Workshop's founder members, Louis Mahoney, who's known not least for his appearances in the BBC's African Theatre seasons. Louis told Florence how pan-African the cast was.

LOUIS MAHONEY

I thought it was a good idea to have South Africans, West Africans, Sierra Leoneans, Ghanaians, it is a nice mix for a Nigerian too. So it shows a very nice West African flavour with a touch of South Africa and it's working beautifully.

FLORENCE AKST

And you yourself are from The Gambia.

LOUIS MAHONEY

I am from The Gambia and I direct this particular piece. It is a simple folk story devoid of politics, devoid of racial conflict - a nice African folk-song drama and dance.

FLORENCE AKST

So you think it has a strong element of pure entertainment in it?

LOUIS MAHONEY

Oh yes, and also it does tell a lot of, what I call the host community in Britain, what certain cultural values are in Africa particularly in this case the Ga people of Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's interesting that Louis Mahoney should make that comment because when I was talking to Saka Acquaye about his whole range of folk-operas (and he's composed nine or ten others) he agreed that he was fascinated by traditional themes.

SAKA ACQUAYE

It seems to me that we are taken wrongly by outside values, you see, if we could more or less up-date some of our traditional values we would be able to retain them for the young ones coming, but we should be able to keep our sanity. When you give the traditional values wrongly people frown so you cut them with sugar on the stage and they swallow without knowing. (laughter)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, when I listed Saka Acquaye's talents at the beginning of the programme I omitted the one for which he's undoubtedly best known - he's a sculptor of repute.

SAKA ACQUAYE

Yes, sculpting is my means of livelihood but with plays and music there are certain emotions you want to share with others and that is where music and plays do come in, but sculpting is very personal. So whenever I have an idea that I want to share with the public or influence the public one way or another I go into the theatre. It's just a float you don't know when it comes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You still sculpt I suppose?

SAKA ACQUAYE

Oh yes, I sculpt every day.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I am rather surprised that some of these other sculptors from West Africa are often on the scene, but you seem to have disappeared all together for one reason or another.

SAKA ACQUAYE

Oh no.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it because we don't hear about you here?

SAKA ACQUAYE

Actually the reason primarily is that I don't sell whenever I exhibit - I don't sell at all. So people think I am very odd but I am establishing a collection for the future so I live on commissions. No, I am not lost at all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of sculpture do you produce? Is it on a massive scale or is it in miniature form?

SAKA ACQUAYE

Some are large, 12, 15, 20feet and others maybe 4, 5, 6feet depending on who wants them. When companies are interested they want them large for their foyer. There are various themes - sometimes a huge African mask, which I borrow from any part of the continent; sometimes realistic, maybe a farm activity or festive activity.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You also do sculptures of personalities, I remember seeing a huge one of Yaa Asomtewa.

SAKA ACQUAYE

Yes I do. Infact presently I am doing a sporting trophy, any sportsman who wins an award will be given it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You are showing her face?

SAKA ACQUAYE

Yes there is an old picture but I am trying to get it back into her youth because whether you are old or not the bone structure remains, it is the bone structure that gives you the ressemblence. If I could up-date the age to be younger by looking at the bone structure then I have succeeded and this is what I am working on back home now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yaa Asomtewa was of course the Shanti woman who fought against the British rather in the tradition of Joan of Arc. Well are you still interested in sport, you were also in your youth, a leading sportsman - hurdling champion of West Africa.

SAKA ACQUAYE

I love watching boxing but that is all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That is all, you have put aside all your ...

SAKA ACQUAYE

No time for that, the only thing that I enjoy as I said is, looking at people beating themselves up on the televison. (laughter)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that confession was from the Ghanaian sculptor, playwright and composer, Saka Acquaye.

"Arts and Africa" will be here at the same time next week. So shall I. Until next week it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.

MUSIC

Extract from "The Lost Fishermen".