

# Arts and Africa



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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## TIM JUDAH

Hello, this is Tim Judah welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa. In this programme we talk to the Zimbabwean writer Charles Mungoshi, but we start in Burkina Faso with a troupe of thirty actors whose ensemble is called Atelier Theatre Bourkinabe. They are all amateurs and they travel, mostly on weekends, to villages throughout the country to put on their productions. The themes of the plays vary - anything from sex education to vaccinations programs to the eternal battle of the sexes - but all their plays have one thing in common - they're controversial and doctors and specialists are often brought in to reinforce their educational messages. Atelier Theatre say they're trying to revive drama in African villages; since there have always been orators, actors and musicians who've kept it alive - until that is Kung Fu films and television began to erode all this. In the following extract taken from the play 'Cette Fille Indirigeable' or 'That Unmanageable Girl', a husband asks his wife what sex their newborn baby is - he's distraught when he learns that it's a girl - and his seventh one at that : he loses his temper and says he'll burn the birth certificate that he's supposed to sign. He won't go to the maternity clinic. Everyone in the village is laughing at him - who will carry on his name ?

EXTRACT FROM PLAY 'CETTE FILLE INDIRIGEABLE'

## TIM JUDAH

The director of Atelier Theatre is Prosper Kompaore; he's Professor of Literature at the University of Ouagadougou and Director of Performing Arts at the Ministry of Culture. Joan Baxter asked him what the reaction of people was to plays like this - do they get angry ?

## PROSPER KOMPAORE

Er, angry maybe, but more often they want to say something. They don't agree with what our bad man says. So they want to give a reply and that is the first thing. But we say that it is not enough to stand in your place and speak, because speaking will never change the world - you must act! So if somebody wants to say something, we tell him, "Get up, come here and play and we shall see". And they come, they go onto the stage and start playing, but when playing, the actor who was very good during the first time is now converted into a very bad man! So the man who's come to change very magically the situation is confronted with a very hard situation and he must develop more arguments in order to find the true and the good solution to the problem.

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And if the solution is magical, nobody will agree with him - the solution must be realistic, it must take into account reality. And if it is a good solution, everybody applauds and we stop there and we carry on with the play.

JOAN BAXTER

You're normally playing to very rural audiences and often illiterate audiences - people who don't have access to television or to cinemas. How do they interpret what's going on on the stage ?

KOMPAORE

Yes, your question is very sound. You know, for us it is not always easy to realise what people are thinking. What we know is that what we play for them is something like a message coming from the government. (laughs) Even though we are not sent by the government, they take it as something very serious and we have a lot of importance for them. But there is a problem linked to that because generally if they think we are in fact from the government, they don't speak very sincerely. But when they understand that it is in fact an occasion to tell us what they really think and to express their own thoughts, then they speak very seriously, and sincerely. And theatre is more efficient for us than cinema for instance, because we have an immediate feedback. We immediately know if people agree with us or not, if they understand or not; if there is a misunderstanding somewhere we can correct it immediately. People can tell us their own experiences and it is very, very interesting for us because we as well, we learn a lot of things that way. And from my viewpoint I think that our action is very important, and more people, more authorities now understand that. If people see us playing they understand that art in general and drama in particular can be a very strong support to a policy of "sensibilisation" of people.

BAXTER

So you go to a nice quiet village, some three or four hundred kilometres from Ouagadougou. You put on one of your controversial peices (laughs) and you leave the village in chaos, with men and women arguing!

KOMPAORE

Yes, it's something like agitprop but in fact we always have correspondents in the village and after our departure, they must go on discussing until they find solutions or answers to some questions.

TIM JUDAH

Prosper Kompaore, Director of Burkina Faso's 'Atelier Theatre Bourkinabe'. We move now to Zimbabwe where a play called 'Workshop Negative' has recently been causing a bit of a stir. It was written by the Bulawayo-based playwright Cont Mhlanga. The play's about a former freedom fighter who is now a member of the ruling party's Politburo, but he's depicted as a corrupt, drug-dealing capitalist masquerading as a socialist. Well, not surprisingly some people in Zimbabwe haven't liked this and indeed the Minister of Youth, Sport and Culture criticised the work, calling it "a false reflection of the current trend of issues and development of the country". The play was then prevented from touring abroad in Zambia. Well this was one of the subjects that Fiona Lloyd discussed with Zimbabwean writer Charles Mungoshi, famous for pre-independence works such as 'Waiting for the Rains'. She began by suggesting to him that established Zimbabwean writers such as himself were far less prolific nowadays than they were before independence.

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CHARLES MUNGOSHI

To be aware of who we are now, I suppose is the question.

FIONA LLOYD

Do you think people are afraid in a way of exploring that area for any reason ?

MUNGOSHI

I shouldn't like to think so, It could be political, but so far nothing has happened except for a play 'Workshop Negative', but then the Writers Union stood very much against the idea that the Minister of Youth, Sport and Culture was trying to put across - that the play was in fact negative and talking about problems that Zimbabwe hasn't faced and so on and so on. I mean, the newspapers are always telling us that so and so from a high position has been thrown into jail or they are investigating a case. See, things like that, I don't know whether the country, maybe the government wants them revealed artistically, or they just want to, you know ... Whenever it is said a politician has gone wrong, even if there is not that problem, there is a likelihood of that problem occurring. And if people do read, they will say, "That's myself," and they will stop immediately. I mean, it's like my sister, this is a very weird coincidence, she was putting on shoes, they were broken and the radio was on - this was out in Chivu, our communal area. This was in the kitchen, and she was putting on a broken shoe. The radio went suddenly, (speaks in Shona), which means "why do you put on worn out shoes ?" (laughs) You know that was an immediate message ... I don't know why it came in that moment that she was tying up the laces of this broken shoe and then the radio goes on like that. So things like that, I suppose they are warnings to politicians. I don't think they do much reading themselves. They get reports done by other people and they don't experience the things they should be talking about. We don't want corruption. Well, the writer says, here's someone who's corrupt, here's a play, come and watch it. Why should it be censored or banned ?

LLOYD

Do you think the problem of form is facing Zimbabwean writers at the moment ?

MUNGOSHI

How to say what you should be saying, yes. How to hide the little things that will stay for a long period. I suppose in my case ... I was talking to Dambudzo Marechera ... my writing's very reporterial, realistic, you might say. I'm trying to write exactly, not really in a creative way you know, saying a statement through another story like ...

LLOYD

Like Dambudzo, who's very experimental.

MUNGOSHI

Yes, so someone asked, "how is Dambudzo Marechera, how are Dambudzo and Mungoshi?" They were asking Dambudzo in my presence, we were talking across the table. He picked up two bottles and he said, "Charles and I are like soda water and whisky you know, and they know who's flat, but when you mix us, we go down very well. (laughs)

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LLOYD

So pointing in fact to the need for variety amongst writers ?

MUNGOSHI

Exactly, and he has been one for, well he says he's an anarchist but he has been one for ... well, we're complimentary, we are saying the same thing in different ways. In fact, lack of imagination I suppose would kill Zimbabwean literature, or whatever we do, I think so. We can't even put ourselves into different situations, and write from a writer's point of view. I mean if you ask a child to write about "I am a bottle", children are much more creative than we are. We have lost I suppose the old storytellers' touch.

TIM JUDAH

Charles Mungoshi ending this week's Arts and Africa. This is Tim Judah in London saying goodbye and leaving you with some Zimbabwean music. It's the Real Sounds with their newest release 'Wende Zako'.

MUSIC - The Real Sounds - 'Wende Zako'