

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of Arts and Africa. If you heard the programme two weeks ago, you may recall our guest Zakes Mafekeng, a radical actor and playwright from South Africa who was strongly opposed to multi-racial co-operation in the arts. He also put forward a strong argument in favour of the cultural boycott of South Africa. Well in today's programme we hear a very different view from an equally controversial South African, the playwright Athol Fugard whose collaboration with the black South African actors, John Kani and Winston Nstihona indicates a contrary stand.

Fugard whose work includes "Blood Knot", "Sizwe Banzi is Dead", "Boesman and Lena", "Lesson from Aloes" and many other plays, has long enjoyed international acclaim. He's even been described as one of the greatest living playwrights working in the English language. His most recent play, "Master Harold and the Boys" - which we discussed in the programme late last year - has now won a major drama award here in Britain. By his own admission, the play is the most autobiographical he has written. It's the harrowing story of how a young white boy called Harold comes to spit in the fact of his closest friend, Sam, a black servant who works for the family. Although it's an unsparing look at the psychological roots of apartheid, its message of forgiveness has incited considerable controversy. Paul Alan spoke to Fugard about his awkward predicament as a white South African liberal and about the continued opposition to his work.

## ATHOL FUGARD

The content of the plays, the sort of attitude, the emotional instrument that is revealed is unquestionably one which today a lot of militant black people, and not just in South Africa, take exception to. I mean Master Harold, for example, has come in for a lot of criticism both in America and to a lesser extent but even in South Africa as well where, to put it quite bluntly and to in fact quote the statement made by black politicians in America, 'the play does not serve the cause' because instead of Sam retaliating to that insult from the white boy and grabbing hold of him and beating the

ATHOL FUGARD

daylights out of him as an example to that audience out there every night that you can not get away with this any more, Sam, in fact, turns into a man capable of an incredible act of forgiveness. Well what I can say in my defence - well I don't feel I have even got to say anything in my defence - is I'm sorry chaps but there was a man called Sam and he did forgive and I'm sorry I can't introduce him to you any more because he happens to be dead, but it did happen.

PAUL ALAN

In your play, "Statements After An Arrest Under the Immorality Act", there's almost a documentary feel somehow about the form of it. You've got two people of different colours who have been sleeping together and it's only really as they make their statements to the police that they realise how fragile their own relationship really is. That seemed to me a plot that could only take place in South Africa but a story, a situation between two people which is much more universal. I wondered if that was based on two people, on actual events that you'd encountered yourself?

ATHOL FUGARD

"Statements" was a terrible...is based on a very ugly prosecution in terms of our immorality act which makes it a criminal offence for a man and a woman of different skin colours to have sex together in South Africa. A very, very ugly case in a small town in the hinterland of South Africa where the police caught a woman who was the little town's librarian and a black guy, in the actual case he was an African priest, in the act of making love. That was based on newspaper cuttings which I had of the court proceedings. The plays have come to me from very different, sometimes in the case of "Aloes" - people I've actually know, in the case of "Statements" - newspaper cuttings, in the case of Boesman and Lena" - just two figures that you could find on a street in any town in South Africa, two derelict coloured people, a man and a woman with all the earthly possessions on their backs trekking from one temporary little home on their way to another because the first one had been bulldozed by the white man.

EXTRACT

"BOESMAN AND LENA"

PAUL ALAN

Yvonne Bryceland won a radio acting award for that performance of Lena, Boesman of course - you played yourself. Your very first play was "The Blood Knot" which was written in 1962 and later televised in this country and I think that's what cost you your passport for a time. The basis for it is that two brothers are classified as being of different colour which would mean they can and indeed must lead quite different and separate lives. They manage to live together at least for a while and beat the law and I wonder with this one if the story appealed to you because it looked like a neat intellectual symbol for South Africa or whether it sprung from direct people that you'd met.

ATHOL FUGARD

No, it came directly from characters. I don't think any of my plays have been preceded by an intellectual exercise. In the case of "The Blood Knot", in trying to deal at one level I think the play operates at many levels. But in trying to deal at one level with the startling existential dilemma of my existence and another existence, South Africa just afforded me the most marvellous metaphor for that reality in the shape of a reasonably common South African experience in terms of the coloured community, the community of mixed blood, mixed descent which is that a family could have two children unquestionably brothers or sisters as has been the case as well, but who have radically different skin colours.

PAUL ALAN

The Blood Knot was first produced almost furtively really wasn't it in the rehearsal room of a drama school in Johannesburg which in turn was a converted factory anyway? But back in Port Elizabeth you'd started with a theatre company in almost as makeshift a way. The Serpent Players who performed in the Snakepit and that started your very close and productive involvement with African actors of all colours. They were all amateurs weren't they?

ATHOL FUGARD

Well, not even amateurs I mean people who had never acted before in their lives.

PAUL ALAN

But blacks as well?

ATHOL FUGARD

Blacks who had never acted before in their lives who realised there was something called theatre. The first intimations of its existence had reached the black ghettos, the black townships and who realised that it afforded them an opportunity to do one thing which by and large that society made impossible which was to speak up, to speak out. It gave them a chance to having a voice that would be heard, directed both at their own people and also at white South Africa which is very much the way we exploited our theatre work and used our theatre work in certain plays in Port Elizabeth

PAUL ALAN

It paid off very handsomely later on with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, you actually took them into the writing fold and they collaborated with you on a couple of plays, "Sizwe Banzi is Dead" and "The Island". How did that come about that you gave up, if you like, some of your own personal domination of the product?

ATHOL FUGARD

A combination of two things. The collaboration with John and Winston, they'd been in my life a long time before that but the collaboration which led to "Sizwe Banzi" and "The Island" came after "Boesman and Lena" round about '71. It is a result of two things.



ATHOL FUGARD

Firstly after "Boesman and Lena" I found myself squarely up against a writer's block. Then I was very fortunate. It also happened to be the very moment when John and Winston having already been in Port Elizabeth as amateurs holding jobs during the day and rehearsing at night, decided that their lifestyles didn't allow them to just treat theatre as a hobby, that they wanted to commit themselves to it full time. I just threw up my hands in despair. I said "Don't be stupid, it's impossible. There's not a professional black actor in this country. Where are the plays? What plays are you going to do? Where are the audiences? You're out of your minds!" But they were very persistent. John said to me: "Well, have you got an idea?", when we realised that we would have to make something for these two lunatics who wanted to be professional actors. (Laughs) Yes, I had an idea. My idea was quite simply something that I'd seen many years before and which had absolutely ravished me. I just wanted to do something about it. It was a photograph in the window of a little street photographer in Port Elizabeth. It was a photograph of a black man in obviously a suit he had just bought brand new and he's smiling radiantly at the camera. He had a cigarette in one hand and a pipe in the other. I don't know it was like a flower as far as I was concerned. That was as far as my thinking had gone. Then I said 'come on, there must be a play' and John said quite simply: "The only time a black man really smiles is when he's won a round in terms of his battle with the passbook. That man is smiling because something has gone right for him in terms of his reference book". And there it was. There is no question about it that the most hated symbol of the oppression that the black people are under in South Africa is that reference book.

PAUL ALAN

Let me change the subject completely and ask what you feel now about the continued isolation of South Africa by writers and actors. At one time you were in support of the writer's ban on South Africa, the position of English language writers who said "My plans can't be performed in South Africa so long as apartheid lasts". Subsequently you argued against it. What are your feelings now?

ATHOL FUGARD

I feel even more strongly now that boycotting South Africa is a mistake. It's regrettable. Firstly no theatre in South Africa now operates on a segregated basis. That doesn't mean to say that the society has changed. I'm just as adamant in saying that that is part of the government's attempt at windowdressing, to try and convince the outside world that some move is being made towards liberalising and freeing the situation internally. That is not the case. I think that society remains as entrenched in all its viciousness as was the case at any point in the past. But theatre certainly has benefitted from this attempted cosmetic job. So there are no segregated theatres either in terms of the auditorium or the stage. I still believe that theatre is an inordinately civilising factor in any society. It does provoke people to think and feel, sometimes about things they don't want to think and feel. One of my most passionate convictions is that if the majority of white South Africans got around to doing that, then we would stand some real chance of things happening inside that country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Paul Alan in conversation with Athol Fugard. And there I'm afraid we must end the programme. Till the same time next week, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAPE

Closing sig. - "Limpopo".