

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa. In today's programme we talk to a painter from Egypt and a poet from Ghana. But we begin with an unaccompanied song.

SONG

"Why Do You Stand So?" - Adzo Zagbede-Thomas.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The voice of Adzo Zagbede-Thomas with her song "Nuka Nutsie Miele Tsitre do". And for those of you who don't speak the Ghanaian language Ewe, it means "Why Do You Stand So?". It's essentially a plea to the people of Ghana to unite and help rebuild their country. Apart from being a composer of songs, Adzo is also a poet, and as with her songs her subject matter ranges from the plight of contemporary Ghana to the wonders of an African childhood. Among her most recent poems is one entitled "What Happened To Those Days?"

POEM - WHAT HAPPENED TO THOSE DAYS

What happened to those days?
We burnt sugar
To brown-hue our teas
When milk flowed forward
Criss-crossed, side-stepped, mouth-trapped,
Loaf-soaked, handcuffed and back to forward again
Dreamy like the Mono.
The breadboys of Lome/Aflao
Perched on rickety bikes,
Chimed rusty bells and winked
Their pose as struttish as
Love-laced petty rogues of 'Paradise'
Their tease hoisted and tender
Like bending branches in the breeze.
The brass-plated bells of Lucky Numbers
Called us to the prizes of corned beef
And tinapa on revolving trays,
And Keta-made bread sat
Broadbased, crusty and golden-brown
Inviting like honeved pop-corn.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Adzo welcome to "Arts and Africa".

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I must say I felt a wave of nostalgia as I heard that poem by you. Now how do you get your subject matter? What are your sources?

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

Well it depends on where I am at the time. Sometimes it will be triggered by some small thing, some unimportant thing. Sometimes it's about something serious. That poem I have just read was while I was waiting to collect some food from a depot when I waited for so long and out of the blue I was wondering why should we be sitting here at a time when Ghana is supposed to be so rich and all that and I started thinking about the past. And out of that I wrote "What Happened To Those Days?"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now when you have the feeling, the subject matter comes to you, how do you set about writing about it?

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

Well I normally put whatever comes to the inspiration, down on paper to start with. Then I steadily work it. Sometimes I get a regular beat and if I don't get it, I don't try to force myself because what I realise is that since the English language is not what I was brought up in from childhood, it's sometimes difficult to express yourself properly. But I don't try to write like the way Milton did or Keats did, no. I put my thoughts down and if I can get the beat fairly even - good. Other times I try to rhyme some parts but if it doesn't work like that, it doesn't worry me. Sometimes I finish the poem and it will not have a rhyme scheme or whatever but it will have a fairly regular beat and I have the feel that it's a good poem. Sometimes when you write a good poem you yourself know even without normal poetic qualities, you know it's a good thing. And if I feel it's very good, well then, that's good.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When you talk about a beat, are you talking about the rhythm of the human language or are you talking about the traditional poetry beat?

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

Oh, in this sense I'm talking about the traditional English poetry...you know they normally have regular beats in so many lines for a particular type of poetry, that's what I'm thinking of. I have never really done my poetry according to the Ewe musical rhythm. The only thing I tried to do was to write a few songs in Ewe but if I'm writing and the Ewe beat can be transferred into the

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

English language fairly competently, I do employ it. Otherwise, as I said, I just go on and hammer out something good.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well let's now turn briefly to your songs. We've already heard "Why Do You Stand So?". This second one has a very different feel, it's more like a church hymn.

SONG

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well first of all, what is the subject matter of that song?

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

Well I was looking at Ghana and I was thinking Ghanaians are terrible people. They don't seem to have any respect for their own country. Everybody seems to be jumping on it, kicking it about. I thought if you have a tiny bowl of akpleh, it's one of the main things we eat, if you have a small one and you are proud of it, then you call it a mound of akpleh and then other people will start respecting it. But if you think it's nothing you have on your plate, then nobody will give respect to it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So it's a mixture of sadness and patriotism, shall we put it that way?

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now why do you tend to sing it, I'd always regarded you as a poet first and foremost in everything?

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

Well I've always liked singing, only people keep telling me my voice is terrible (Laughs) I've always loved singing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

(Laughs) Yes, I know, I know you've always accompanied your poems with song but I didn't know you wrote songs by themselves.

ADZO ZAGBEDE-THOMAS

Oh I've been doing that but not on a big scale, it's only last year that I wrote lots of songs, I must have got about ten songs in the year which I was very pleased with.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Adzo thank you very much indeed. Over the years Arts and Africa has looked at the work of many African painters, but rarely I think have we met an artist from Egypt. Well currently on show at London's Africa Centre is an exhibition of the work of Salem Sallah. Salem first trained in Cairo and then at two of London's most famous art schools.

Nick Barker visited the exhibition - his first one-man show in this country, and spoke to him about his work.

NICK BARKER

Salem as we enter the Africa Centre the first pictures that we see are a series involving still-lives and female nudes and you've used a variety of different techniques. You've used etching, you've used pastel and charcoal but what struck me about these five pictures was the fact that you've chosen as your subject matter the staple of Western art.

SALEM SALLAH

Yes, you're right. When you are in art school you have to really pass in different degrees of technique and knowledge of painting and learn to use different kinds of materials. Because this knowledge can't be achieved in one day, it takes you a long time.

NICK BARKER

Now you've studied at a number of art schools in London. When you first came over as a young Egyptian student, did you have problems working here? Was there a clash of cultures for you as an Egyptian artist working within the Western fine art tradition?

SALEM SALLAH

The way English people see the colour is different to what I see sometimes. If they are seeing the colour more grey and more cold a colour and light green mixed with white, it's just because nature has given them this kind of atmosphere. But I see the colour with the sun, with more strong colours: Red and orange and blue - warm blue. You know blue is not warm but I see it as warm because of what I came from. But that doesn't mean I didn't develop my own way but I tried to open my heart and mind to my tutor. To select is a good thing to do and develop.

NICK BARKER

What you say about colour is very interesting because the next series of pictures that you come to in the exhibition are three canvases of an Egyptian city. Now they are semi abstract and we can work out through the geometrical shapes, the outline of Arab buildings and palm trees but the palette that you use, your colours are really quite sombre, they're rather cold, it's like the cold light of an English day.

SALEM SALLAH

Yes. Sometimes a composition lets you decide which colour and atmosphere you have to use. I was interested in the Cubist movement...

NICK BARKER

...which of course was founded at the beginning of this century by the famous artists, Braque and Picasso.

SALEM SALLAH

Yes I feel always the geometric object is more there in Egypt; the mosque and the space and everything has been geometric in many ways, colour is strong in many ways.

NICK BARKER

In these pictures the colour is dull isn't it?

SALEM SALLAH

It doesn't mean to be strong, it has to be colourful. It means strong in the way the colour is handled.

NICK BARKER

Now the rest of the exhibition consists of paintings where your interest in landscape is revealed again. But your attitude towards the landscape and colour seems to be very different. We look at these pictures and we see that you've used large flat planes of primary colour and you've isolated the basic elements of the Egyptian landscape and reduced them to very simple symbols, haven't you? For instance there's one picture which consists of some pyramids by the Nile. The pyramids are depicted as just very simple orange triangles, the Nile is just a flat wash of blue and there's a little yellow shape that depicts a sailing boat. What were you trying to do in these pictures?

SALEM SALLAH

Well I believe Egyptian art in the history has not just been putting ancient art in a simple way, I believe there is a lot of idea and thought behind this kind of ancient work. I also see the movement of young people in London as well. For them colour is more important than anything else - just as a subject or object or anything, colour itself. You see the young peoples work, you see the ancient work and you see the twentieth century movement, you find everything has been built in a very simple way. Ancient work gives me this kind of simplicity of line, colour and symbolic mean of the object.

NICK BARKER

Is it important for you as an Egyptian that your pictures should be seen and appreciated by your own people in Egypt or are you more interested in a sort of international audience?

SALEM SALLAH

Well I am really more interested in letting my own people understand what I do because I'm Egyptian. I've got the knowledge from Europe, I've got the basic training and I'm trying to develop my own spirit. There is a large number of Egyptian people who have visited the exhibition and I think they like it very much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Salem Sallah discussing his work with Nick Barker, and bringing to an end this edition of Arts and Africa. So to the strains of Mohamed Abdel Whab, one of Egypt's most popular musicians, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

GRAMS

Mohamed Abdel Whab.