

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello in today's Arts and Africa we look at two new films both by women directors. From South Africa 'Tsiamelo' by Ellen Kuzweyo and Betty Wolpert. And, from the West Indian island of Martinique - an unusual choice for this programme - 'Rue Cases Negres' or 'Black Shack Alley', the first feature film by the West Indian director Euzhan Palcy. I'm Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome once again to the programme. Just over half a century ago a draconian piece of legislation was passed by the newly formed Union of South Africa. It was the Native Land Act of 1913 which began a long process of dispossessing blacks of their rights and their land - a process which has proceeded relentlessly until this day. This is the subject of 'Tsiamelo', a film which charts the experiences through four generations of the family of Ellen Kuzweyo, a 70 year old community leader from Soweto and her 84 year old Aunt Blanche. Both these women were robbed of their family farms by government legislation and the film tells the story of their resistance and the endeavours of the African activist Sol T Plaatje who led a delegation to London in 1914 seeking British intervention in defence of their lost land rights. Nick Barker spoke with Ellen Kuzweyo about the making of the film and began by asking her about the title of the film 'Tsiamelo'.

ELLEN KUZWEYO

It means exactly what it says, 'Tsiamelo' - the place of goodness.

NICK BARKER

And why did you chose this title?

ELLEN KUZWEYO

It is because the film as a whole is related to the dispossession of that farm which was our heritage from our ancestors over a very long period.

NICK BARKER

Now this farm is your own family farm?

ELLEN KUZWEYO

It was our own family farm which we inherited from our grandparents, from our parents and right down to us.

2.

NICK BARKER

Now have you always wanted to make a film about this very personal family story or was it something else that prompted you to make it?

EBBEN KUZWEYO

The film really came first and foremost out of the book that I'm writing, particularly because it was also linked very much with my family. I was getting a lot of material from a maternal aunt of mine and who seemed to suddenly become a legend to some of my friends who couldn't believe she's now 84.

NICK BARKER

And her name is Aunt Blanche.

ELLEN KUZWEYO

And her name is Aunt Blanche. Naturally some people became curious to see her and when Betty Wolpert saw Aunt Blanche, she suddenly said to me, Ellen, this is really walking history. She said it is a pity she is so old, we are going to lose all that she can tell us and that is how this film came about. But, more than that, when we were doing this film we unearthed so much about my own grandfather via Sol T Plaatje.

NICK BARKER

Now can you tell us a little bit about Sol T Plaatje because he is clearly a very important early African activist yet most people have never heard of this man.

ELLEN KUZWEYO

That's very interesting because he was a regular visitor to Great Britain and I remember very well as a little girl that I did not associate him with his political activities but I always associated him with his translations of Shakespeare's works, particularly two of Shakespeare's works – A Comedy of Errors which he named 'Diphoshophosho' and Julius Caesar which he named 'Dinchonchon'. I was very much impressed about this, maybe it's because I was a little child. I was due to go to school and we had heard so much about Shakespeare and his works and I was very much impressed. But, I got to know now when I was doing this film, suddenly so much about Sol T Plaatje who at a certain time in my life was a household name in my area. He was a Morolong who came from the district of Kimberley and he became very very attached, or concerned about the plight of the black people at the turn of the century after the legislation of the Native Land Act in 1913.

NICK BARKER

The film is clearly a very personal portrait of you and your family, did you have any reservations about letting film cameras film you and your grandmother and your relatives in a very intimate way? Did that worry you at all?

3.

ELLEN KUZWEYO

Maybe it could have done that, she is my aunt, the one who appears with me and Blanche is in the film. For me personally it didn't bother me. Maybe in the course of the situation in which I was, I kept on wondering to what extent this would be seen as a record of what really happened, something that is historic, something that is not distorted, something that is talking about the pain of many other black people in South Africa. So, to that extent, because I felt it was going to keep a very important record the films, all the equipment that was used on me maybe bothered me as it would have bothered me in any other situation but I would definitely say that it bothered my aunt a great deal.

NICK BARKER

How did she respond, presumably she'd never seen a television camera before?

ELLEN KUZWEYO

I would say she had seen just ordinary photographers coming over and she would go to the local photographers studio but she hadn't anticipated this and when it came at the beginning she was taken aback but as time went on she adjusted very well to what was happening.

NICK BARKER

Ellen, this is now your second film, you're clearly building up a considerable track record as a film maker, do you have any plans to make any further films?

ELLEN KUZWEYO

Perhaps this is my third if I may share with you as far back as the close of the 1940's, the beginning of the 1950's I was involved in South Africa in taking part in Cry the Beloved Country which was produced by Zoltan Korda from some part in Europe.

NICK BARKER

That's the famous Alan Paton novel?

ELLEN KUZWEYO

That's the famous Alan Paton book and so I cannot say, I'm not very young whether I will have the chance to make another statement. I'm not sure but I feel I have had some fulfilment in talking about some of the things which have meant so much to me as a black social worker, as a black woman and as a black person in South Africa.

4.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ellen Kuzweyo, the community leader from Soweto talking to Nick Barker about her new film 'Tsiamelo'.

We now move a long way from South Africa to the West Indian island of Martinique and the film 'Black Shack Alley'.

MUSIC - Taken from Black Shack Alley

Black Shack Alley is a remarkable first feature film by Euzhan Palcy. It is based on an autobiographical novel by Joseph Zobel, a fellow native of Martinique. The film is set in a tiny shanty village during French colonial rule in the thirties, and portrays the immense hardships endured by the freed slaves working in the sugar cane fields. The film's hero is the brilliant wide-eyed Jose, an eleven year old orphan destined to defeat the misery around him. With the help of three remarkable people, his grandmother Ma Tine, the local schoolmaster and his spiritual father the ancient cane cutter Mr Medouze, young Jose gets the education he so desperately craves, winning a scholarship to a secondary school in the capital town Fort de France. Well, watching the film with me was the Nigerian film producer Sadiq Balewa who's joined me in the studio. Welcome Sadiq.

SADIQ BALEWA

It's a pleasure to be here.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I thought the film was very remarkable for a first feature film, did you?

SADIQ BALEWA

I think the most remarkable part of the film was the attempt, at least by the film-maker, in skillfully crafting the characters, the characterisations. I think it's one of the few films I have seen where you find that the characters are neither exclusively bad or good. I think she has done something wonderful in trying to portray characters as being victims of situations within the context of colonial Martinique.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I also thought that there was a strong African presence throughout the whole film.

SADIQ BALEWA

I think you are right. Certainly there is a strong African presence. I think that even the fact that a communal society is depicted within that particular context has a lot of African reference points. You find that the community there is very tightly knit. The children there they play amongst themselves. I think in a certain way it is very African where you think about the polygamous families where so many children come together, in that sense I think, because of the communal nature, that it's an African environment.

5.

But apart from that, you mention the character Medouze, the boy's spiritual father Medouze. I think certainly Medouze has a certain link between the past, the African past with their present. His spiritualness, the way he relates to the boy and tells him stories of Africa and even of the days of slavery and looking up to the present, I think is another significant contribution of the film-maker, how she manages to build that character to effectively bring out some of those qualities. Also if you consider the various festivities when the workers have been paid their wages you find they celebrate. Now a lot of things about those celebrations are very African. I mean the kind of musical instruments they were using, the type of dancing they were doing, in that sense again you can say it's a bit African but even more than that, when the old man Medouze dies, we find that instead of showing grief we find there's an element of celebration. Now that in itself is very common to a number of African societies.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I thought the standard of acting was excellent. I mean this film won two awards at the Venice Film Festival for best actors and best film. What do you think about the grandmother character?

SADIQ BALEWA

I have never seen a character or an actress who has actually moved me as much as that woman. She is a wonderful actress. But the character itself is a really remarkable character because there are so many things. The self-sacrifice of a woman is something which people admire. She's very humble, she has a very strong self-will, she sacrifices so much so that the boy can have some way out of the destiny of the sugar cane plantations.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

She's not just a tyrant. She beats him up when he deserves it and you probably think that she's a very strong disciplinarian, she's not very fond of this boy, but she does it all for the good.

SADIQ BALEWA

To me one remarkable moment is when they have gone to the school and they go to see the director of the college and he informs her that the one quarter scholarship is really nothing at all. When she comes out you see a sudden upsurge in her will and she declares to the world that she is not beaten. They don't know her she's not unsure any more.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Truly remarkable. Sadiq Balewa thank you very much indeed. And that brings us to the end of Arts and Africa. Let me leave you with some more of that music from Black Shack Alley. From me Alex Tetteh-Lartey goodbye.

MUSIC - Black Shack Alley