

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we're going to meet a couple of young artists, one paints and the other writes plays, who left Africa when they were old enough to have absorbed a lot of their own culture but when they had still to complete their education. What is it like to be a creative artist when you've been nurtured on two cultures? Both our guests admit to a certain ambiguity of feeling. But, who knows, perhaps it's the sensation of being not entirely at home that stimulates the creative spirit.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC

KARIM ALRAWI

The feeling of going back into one's community is a bit like wrapping oneself in an old blanket which, although it may sometimes itch, is always a little comforting.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The voice of prize-winning Karim Alrawi from Egypt. We'll be meeting him again later in the programme. Sharing today's programme with him is a young painter from Ethiopia, Elizabeth Atnafu. When Elizabeth went to the United States to study she was looking forward to a career in journalism, but she tells me that she found she preferred talking to writing, and painting to talking, so she trained to be an artist instead. The London gallery where she's recently been showing her work had its walls covered with large and very decorative pictures of sinuous and rather glamorous women covered, almost smothered, in flowers. There was something insubstantial about these figures, apart that is, from their painted finger nails. There wasn't anything on show that reminded me of the more familiar, traditional Ethiopian pictures illustrating stories like the meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. When Elizabeth Atnafu came to the studio I had to admit I'd failed to see anything specifically Ethiopian in her work.

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

It's true it doesn't reflect... but I left Ethiopia when I was very young. I went to High School and University in America and started being a painter over there. So it doesn't tell, not only about my being an Ethiopian, but it doesn't even tell a lot of things people expect me to be.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So are you suggesting that because you are in America you've forgotten totally your Ethiopian origins?

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

No, not at all! They are all there, but might not be seen.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you give me some ideas?

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

O.k., some ideas: I live in New York and I have been living there and painting there, but the place is dark and you don't see any flowers. You don't see any kind of warmth or life. So I bring to it that background which I remember as a child, the sun, the flowers. That's what you see. I just make the combination of both. That's what it is about.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Perhaps I was also deceived by the sort of figures I saw - these slim women in flowered dress with long fingernails. I don't know if they are also traditional in a sense, I mean, you could easily have been one of them.

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

Of course, anything could be traditional. I mean you can see a slim, beautiful woman in Ethiopia, in America, everywhere. As a woman I like to paint the subjects I know best. Long nails, as part of the make-up... all this kind of thing..... Maybe they have something to do with what I want to do.... I don't know. It's hard to explain some of the work.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In other words, your figures are universal rather than belonging to one particular country.

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The biggest painting on show is entitled "Dance, Dance, Dance". I thought the figure looked very much like you, facially.

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

Maybe I'm doing my own self potrait, who knows?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

[Laughter] Now how come all of them.....

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

O.K. Another thing.... I would like to explain this. Since I left home when I was very young, I don't know how to create Ethiopian ways the way you want to see it. That's why whatever affects me - in the school or my friendships, or everywhere -it shows.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You have Ethiopian traditional dress for example. I mean the women in Ethiopia don't wear frocks like the type you paint in your pictures.

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

Yes, I am living in America for the time being, that's why I paint like that. If I lived in Ethiopia maybe I'd do that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, all right. Now I see that the main thing of the paintings is romance, love. I wanted to know if this reflects your personality more than anything else, if you are an intensely romantic person?

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

That I don't know for sure. Somebody has to tell me. My paintings are romantic.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It has also been suggested that people who are lonely tend to portray to the outside world how happy they are. And all your paintings reflect to me happiness, dance, music, all the way.

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

Yes, when you live in an advanced, civilized place like America there is always something missing. You are too busy making money, so busy going to this place and that, that these kind of things seem invisible. You'd like them to be seen so somebody has to show them what is missing. Maybe that's why I do what I do.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I noticed two types of paintings you have there: one which I regarded as intensely private to you - dreams, paintings of dreams, paintings of romance - and then on the other side the smaller drawings of people dancing on the pavements. When I last saw you, you told me that one was personal, that is, private to you. The other was a capturing by you of scenes of American life for the enjoyment of onlookers or people who had come to see your paintings. Do those two aspects, the practical real life and the private one, form part of your expression of life?

ELIZABETH ATNAFU

Of course! One part is the reality the other part is a fantasy or a dream. I think as I have to face my reality in this part of my life, I have to paint it. And my fantasy, which is my dream, I have to paint that too. Together they make me go on.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was talking to Elizabeth Atnafu.

Karim Alrawi also left his native land when he was still in his teens - fourteen to be exact. He came to Britain with his parents and continued his education here. He trained to be an engineer, but writing plays has taken precedence over that and with six plays performed, one of them, it's called "Migrations", has won the John Whiting prize. This important drama prize is presented annually by the Arts Council of Great Britain to an up and coming playwright. It's awarded for, and these are the words of the citation: "Exceptional writing quality and for being of particular social relevance to contemporary British society". The experiences of immigrants who come to Britain and start a new life in very foreign surroundings, is a particular interest and concern of Karim Alrawi's. He's seen it at first hand in the part of London where he's been living. Producer Florence Akst talked to him about his play "Migrations" and whether there was an Egyptian ingredient of any sort in his writings.

KARIM ALRAWI

Often the themes I choose to write about grow out of my concerns as an Egyptian living in contemporary Britain. But also, as has been pointed out by actors, the language I adopt is what they term 'slightly biblical'. By that of course they mean that it has a linguistic dimension that is from the Middle East or from North Africa, as in the Bible for example which was originally in a Middle Eastern language and translated.

FLORENCE AKST

You've been educated largely in Britain I believe, and have lived here for a lot of your life. Which is your first language, which is the language you think in and which is the language you are writing these plays in originally?

KARIM ALRAWI

That's a very difficult question to answer because in fact I lived in Egypt until I was fourteen and I went to an Arabic language school, therefore on an every-day level I'm not aware of myself thinking in one language or the other. When it comes to writing the plays, because the plays are being written in English, inevitably I find myself thinking in that language while I'm in the process of producing those plays: as I think of intonations, as I think of dialogue.....

FLORENCE AKST

Now it would seem to me that you have a definite advantage over other people, perhaps other playwrights who were being considered for the Award, because you are able to bring to your writing two cultures. That must be something very much in your favour?

KARIM ALRAWI

Well it could also be to my disadvantage. The fact is that one is addressing oneself to an audience that is only schooled in one culture. There is the added problem of making accessible to them the concerns and ideas that you bring with you, coming from another society, another culture. Even though one has lived a long time in this country there is still a certain degree of a "cross-over" problem. I think people who come as migrants have to leave some baggage behind and have to take on some new baggage, and that in itself

makes them neither of one place nor fully of the other. I go back to Egypt fairly regularly. My family now are settled back there, and the feeling of going back into one's community is a bit like wrapping oneself in an old blanket which, although it may sometimes itch, is always a little comforting.

FLORENCE AKST

What are the chief attributes in your plays, or perhaps, what is the chief attribute in your plays?

KARIM ALRAWI

One of the things I bring with me from a Third World society and a Third World country, is a sense, if you like, of the importance of the emotional dimension in theatre which I think has been somewhat discarded in the last wave of theatrical innovation in the West.

FLORENCE AKST

You'd like to see me go in to the theatre and weep and laugh.

KARIM ALRAWI

I would like you to go in and come out feeling shaken. I think it's very important that people be moved on an intellectual and an emotional level, and I think theatre now so often in the West engages people's intellect, if it's good theatre, but ignores their emotions. Alternatively you get soap operas which engage people's emotions but leave their intellects intact. I would like to be able to have a double effect and touch people, if you like, on the deepest levels of their emotions. Because the deepest levels are emotional levels and not intellectual levels.

FLORENCE AKST

What do you enjoy more? conveying a message or entertaining people?

KARIM ALRAWI

I hope that my plays are not 'messagey' plays, that what I do is present a character as truthfully and as forcefully as I can so that an audience would feel that these are real people and that even if they behave oddly, badly, or whatever, they have very real reasons for doing that. What I would like to do really, is to communicate to people the humanity of the characters on stage.

FLORENCE AKST

And may I congratulate you for winning the John Whiting Award.

KARIM ALRAWI

Thank you very much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Florence Akst talking to Karim Alrawi and let's turn for a while to the comfort, as he puts it, of his origins in Egypt.

EGYPTIAN MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I'll be here next week with more "Arts and Africa". Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.