

# Arts and Africa

ALS 4/5/5/2/36

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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ARTS AND AFRICA

FIRST BROADCAST 2.9.84

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to "Arts and Africa" from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And in today's programme we'll be considering the African drama contribution to this year's Edinburgh Festival. But first, a remarkable flowering of sculpture and graphic art in Tanzania. You may remember that just about a year ago we were looking forward to the opening of a brand new building in Dar-es-Salaam to house a co-operative of artists and craftsmen who'd been working together since about 1972. In Swahili the centre is known as "Nyumba ya Sanaa", translated that simply means 'House of Art', and, with the new building now open there are about a hundred people involved using a wide range of artistic technique and making their own high quality paper. The driving force behind the project is Sister Jean Pruitt. Sister Jean, as she's universally known in Tanzania, is a member of the American Maryknoll religious order, but she scarcely conforms to the conventional image of a nun. She's a ball of energy and clearly a great inspiration to the artists she works with.

Neville Harms managed to catch up with her on a recent visit to London and she told him how her enthusiasm had arisen.

## SISTER JEAN

Tanzania has many talented and gifted people in the area of sculpture, and this is the area that I am particularly interested in. I wanted to see this area grow and flourish; that's why I decided to work with Makonde artists who I thought would like to develop in the area of graphics.

## NEVILLE HARMS

The best known sculpture in Tanzania is the Makonde carving from Southern Tanzania, towards Mozambique, but do you at the centre also have artists from other parts of the country?

## SISTER JEAN

Yes we do. One young man who is really developing and progressing and with whom I've worked for the last six years, is a Haya from Bukoba, and another young man is a Yao also from the southern part of Tanzania, but not a Makonda and not a carver. Another is a young man of Zambian parents who was born in Tanzania.

## NEVILLE HARMS

To what extent does the artistic style of the young people coming from one area influence the work of people from another area?

SISTER JEAN

That's a difficult question for me to answer, but I think the answer is 'No more than you'd find in any art school in West Africa or in Europe'. Many people have said 'Oh, this comes from Nyumba ya Sanaa', and I have also begun to see that there is a relationship. - For instance, one of the young men working at Nyumba ya Sanaa started drawing animals, principally in ink, pencil, and charcoal. Now - because we have a young man who has come in and is working in water-colours - he has looked at the water-colours, and now I see that he has introduced just the subtlest bit of colour by using coloured pencils, and the subtlety and the colours are just marvellous.

NEVILLE HARMS

And at Nyumba ya Sanaa you are attempting to expose your artists to a wide range of materials and possibilities for artistic expression?

SISTER JEAN

Yes, we've taken natural materials such as goatskin. Goatskin is available in Tanzania and is a very nice material for painting on. We're using oil-based paints to do a colour-wash and then inks to do the drawing over. Various students have experimented with this using the Makonde "Shitani" style, some a representational style, and some very impressionistic.....

NEVILLE HARMS

Isn't there a danger that perhaps someone who is an extremely skilled carver, who, left to himself, might develop his skill and refine it - if he is suddenly presented with all sorts of alternative possibilities, isn't there the risk that he loses all his real talent and becomes just a dabbler?

SISTER JEAN

I think to the contrary, and I think this is the experience of most artists. In particular, I can state that one artist has really developed his carving and his sculpting by exploring other avenues .....

NEVILLE HARMS

Who is this?

SISTER JEAN

George Lilanga, who is a Makonde carver. Actually he had dropped out of carving and had started being just a simple night watchman. Just out of curiosity I asked him to do some drawings while he was sitting there at night. I have him some paper and pencils and he came up with the most beautiful and very exciting drawings which were extremely creative and very original. I was just so shocked at seeing these, that I thought they would do well in batik. So I asked him if he would like to try batik, and he loved doing the batik because he had never worked with colour before. He immediately went into the batik with tremendous gusto and did fabulous wall-hangings eight feet by six, and he has been well acclaimed for these batiks.

NEVILLE HARMS

Nyumba ya Sanaa has recently opened a new building in Dar-es-Salaam which is substantially decorated by George Lilanga?

SISTER JEAN

Yes that's right. His work has been incorporated in the gates which are done in sheet metal and he's also been able to do a frieze which surrounds the building. This was George's idea to protect us from all the evil and bad things from the outside, so that they don't get into our building. So we're well protected.

NEVILLE HARMS

And this has many of the kinds of figures that appear in conventional Makonde carving.....

SISTER JEAN

That's correct.

NEVILLE HARMS

..... the spirits, the rather grotesque figures with huge ears, funny shaped faces, limbs all awry. But in this case it's a frieze which is a sort of bas-relief.

SISTER JEAN

Yes it's relieved up to eight inches in some parts .....

NEVILLE HARMS

Made of what? Is this clay?

SISTER JEAN

No. The original was done in wax. George originally melted wax, poured it into a mould and from that mould sculpted his figures, and then we poured concrete over that and made a negative, and from the negative we made a positive relief which now decorates our building. If you look at these figures you will see they're quite happy. They're very much satires of everyday life. The particular frieze that encompasses our building is a beer party, and George wanted to show what great happiness we have at having this new building and art centre, so it is a really very happy event.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The enthusiastic Sister Jean of the House of Art in Dar-es-Salaam.

MUSIC: "Wenzani"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's a song from one of the shows at this year's Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. Every year the Festival presents some of the world's most prestigious musical, operatic and drama companies, together with a host of small groups hoping to make an impression on the so-called Fringe. In recent years there's been substantial success on the Fringe for drama groups from Africa, so Chris Terrill went up to Edinburgh to find out what Africa had to offer this year. Chris, that song we heard was South African, wasn't it? It sounded very much so.

CHRIS TERRILL

Yes, it was South African. It was from an extraordinary show called "Wenzani" which, when translated means, 'What are you doing', and it's a play essentially about apartheid in South Africa represented on stage by two women; one black South African woman and one white South African. The black South African was Dorcas Faku and the white girl, Diana Taylor - both South Africans in exile in fact. They've put together a series of items: some are funny, some are sad, representing women in South Africa, the white woman and the black woman in all sorts of roles. So for instance, you've got one very funny item which is a dialogue between a black prostitute in Johannesburg and a white prostitute. On the other hand you've got another item about a white woman and her relationship with her maid. And you've got a white impresario and her relationship with a black performer. So it's really an exploration of female relationships within the context of apartheid. But having said all that of course, it's a very political play. So much so, that at the end they bring out a flag in the colours of the A.N.C. and they drape them over the stage, suddenly saying 'this is what we stand for'.

DIANA TAYLOR

It's a play about support. We're talking about trying to construct a society that's more equitable, more just, and so on. And it's been enormously encouraging for me to get up there and come out in support of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

DORCAS FAKU

When I started doing this show, I didn't say to myself 'you are involved with any kind of political organisation; but now I am, because I have experienced a lot of terrible things which have clearly made me feel bitter.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What was this experience that Dorcas was referring to?

CHRIS TERRILL

Well, when Dorcas was actually in London she received a letter from her mother still in Soweto telling her about what had just happened to her brother. Now her brother had been a cripple, and one night in Soweto he had been picked up off the street by the police and taken to the police station and badly beaten. And allegedly, his body was seen with blood on it from head to foot, bones actually sticking out of the skin. And a few days later he died. Now the family wanted to, naturally enough, institute legal proceedings, but they found it impossible to do that because the witnesses, the boys own friends who had seen what had happened or what didn't happen, apparently were intimidated. And indeed one, one of the key witnesses, mysteriously disappeared. Now this is evidently a terribly scarring event in Dorcas's life and her mother's life, and it came over very strongly on stage when it was done. Simply the actual letter was read, but not by Dorcas - that's the interesting thing - it was read by Diana, the white South African. And when the audience, and certainly when I eventually twigged that this was an actual experience that Dorcas had been through, it really was an incredibly moving experience.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It was a very sad, personal tragedy of course. But as we've said before, this is all very political. Is the stage the correct venue for expressing a political message?

CHRIS TERRILL

Well that's of course a very important question and one that I had to ask Dorcas herself.

DORCAS FAKU

People like to go to the theatres. They will never turn up for speeches and talking and all that. But when you say 'Yes, there's a good show from South Africa, a good show based in London about life in South Africa', then people will come and listen to it. So I think yes, the theatre's the right place to do this show.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What else from Africa was shown at the Festival?

CHRIS TERRILL

Well, one of the other things I enjoyed very much was "Master Harold and the Boys", Athol Fugard's play which was done this time by the Sundown Theatre from Zimbabwe. They're not professional actors, but it was a very professional and polished production; I enjoyed it tremendously. There was one that I particularly wanted to see. It was called "Nigerian Occupation". It's a musical in fact, but it wasn't on when I got there: it was going to come on in a few days time. That was part of the chaos of Edinburgh at the time. So that's something I still have to look forward to.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was in Edinburgh three years ago. It's such a big place and during the Festival all sorts of things happen.

CHRIS TERRILL

Yes. I think it's got too big, and it's so chaotic.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, of all the African plays you saw there, which one did you consider the best?

CHRIS TERRILL

Well I don't think there's much doubt about that. I went on the final day to see a play called "Black Dog". It's a play that's been written, in part anyway, by Barney Simon and performed by the Market Theatre from Johannesburg. Now this was - I can't think of any other word than stunning! But, talking about the chaos of Edinburgh, one thing they haven't got sorted out, for example, is air-conditioning, and as enthralled as I was, I went to sleep three times during that play because it was so hot. Very unfair to the players.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thanks very much Chris, and I understand that play's coming to London for a short season and perhaps we'll get a chance to look at it more fully, with some of the people involved, in a later edition of "Arts and Africa". But now we'll end with another song from "Wenzani". It's goodbye from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, until this time next week.