

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: Song from Xiluva

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's a song from a stage show that's been running with great success in Maputo the capital of Mozambique. It was put on by a company composed mainly of amateurs, who call themselves Tchova Xita Duma, which roughly translated, means 'push to start'. Their play, 'Xiluva', is the first stage production in Mozambique with a totally Mozambican content. In the past plays performed in Mozambique have been imports from Portugal or elsewhere. Xiluva is the name of a child who's born in the last of nine episodes or sketches which all deal with the life of women in Mozambique. There's the girl in the village for instance refusing to accept the system of lobola or brideprice; there's a woman in a factory struggling to get a place for her child in the factory's nursery; there's a market scene where hoarding and black-marketeering are rampant; there are prostitutes and housewives and victims of bureaucracy.

Jose Pinto de Sa is a writer who's been with the theatre group since it was started two years ago, but as he explained to Lois Browne in Maputo, the making of Xiluva was very much a group activity.

JOSE PINTO DE SA

We divided the group into nine working teams that went out to observe women working in different jobs. We went to factories, schools, nightclubs; we went out into the country to talk to peasant women; and these nine groups then came back to the theatre with the work they had collected. With everybody together we put on a little improvisation representing what we'd seen - how we'd seen these women working, and their everyday life; and then we added suggestions and contributions from all the other groups.

LOIS BROWNE

How closely did the scenes you eventually wrote follow what it was you actually viewed in these various places?

JOSE PINTO DE SA

Sometimes we took the liberty of departing from what we'd seen a little bit, because of the limitations of stage adaptation etc. But basically we stayed very, very faithful to the interviews we made and to the decisions we took collectively when we designed the play.

ACTUALITY FROM XILUVA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you don't need to understand the Portuguese dialogue in that scene in the factory to realise that the audience was enjoying Xiluva enormously. But Xiluva wasn't without its problems with the Mozambique authorities. After the first night's performance Jose Pinto de Sa and the Directors of the play were invited to the office of the Secretary of Culture.

JOSE PINTO DE SA

He told us that he disagreed with certain specific points in the play - not the work itself for which he actually congratulated us - but he criticised certain points in the play; particularly one point where he thought the view we gave of the party member in a meeting concerning black marketeering wasn't a positive view, and at that particular moment, considering the serious situation Mozambique is facing, he thought it shouldn't be shown as such. We argued that our intention was far from being negative and, in fact, was a criticism of the negative side of society; and we asked him to transmit his criticism and his objections to the entire group and not just to the Directors of the group. And so we had a rather large meeting with the Secretary where very different opinions were expressed. Nevertheless we still thought that we should take account of what the Secretary was telling us, so we decided to stop the play for a week and to rethink it. Through necessity we changed what we had been instructed to change - having no other way out - and we introduced some other small and minor changes. Nevertheless, I must say that the play the audience sees is basically and ninety percent what it was designed to be.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An amicable outcome then, and in fact plans are now in hand to present Xiluva on television. The government's department of culture is also supporting the group financially and practically and there is great interest from people who want to join - people Lois Browne discovered, of all kinds.

JOSE PINTO DE SA

We had two girls, who came to see us, wanting to do theatre. They had never worked in theatre before, but they were very lively, very extrovert, and we felt sure they could do very good work. Up till then these girls used to hang around in bars and not do much - perhaps living on the edge of prostitution or on part-time prostitution, if I can use the words - and these girls came into the play and made a very important contribution to the writing of the story of the prostitute in the nightclub. When Xiluva was finished and we started showing it to an audience, the girls came to see us and they said 'We now have a different vision of ourselves and this has, in a way, changed our lives', and this was very touching.

LOIS BROWNE

I think that some people might suggest that theatre can be a rather frivolous activity for a country like Mozambique. What do you see as the role of your particular theatre group in Mozambique?

JOSE PINTO DE SA

Well due to drastic import restrictions Mozambican audiences have a very small number of films available in the cinemas, and most of them are very cheap imports. Also our national television only broadcasts for the moment at the weekends. So we believe that theatre - being something that doesn't have to depend on imports but can be self-sufficient - could represent, and could become, a mass show in Mozambique. And we would like to get out of the theatre and go on the back of a truck and stop in market places, railway stations, and put on smaller shows; working in factories, schools and all that - and try and create a form of expression that would apply directly to the Mozambican audience.

LOIS BROWNE

What have the artists of Mozambique, the writers, the theatre people of Mozambique, been doing for the past ten years that you have not been able to work up a stock of Mozambican material?

JOSE PINTO DE SA

There has been practically no theatre written since independence except for a few radio plays. We think this has happened because a lot of Mozambican intellectuals had developed, through the years of colonial oppression, a literature struggling against the colonial power; and when suddenly with independence they were called to play a very different role, they found it very difficult to partake in building something. I think this is one of the reasons why a lot of very important Mozambican authors have practically stopped writing, and only a new generation born or appearing after independence will come and be sensitive to these problems.

LOIS BROWNE

Is that new generation emerging that you can see?

JOSE PINTO DE SA

Yes, I think so. There is now a new group of people in their early twenties who are starting to do very interesting things, because now they do know that there are groups - theatre troupes - that are ready to put those plays on stage.

MUSIC: Song from Xiluva

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, from the sound of Xiluva there's a bright future for Mozambique's new young playwrights. I wonder that our other guest on "Arts and Africa" would make of all that? He's a long-established, almost a veteran, playwright from Ghana. His name is Bill Marshall who has written many, many scripts for the stage, for radio, television and for the cinema, and his writing career spans all the changes of political regime that have taken place in Ghana since independence in 1957. How does he see his role in the revolutionary Ghana of Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings? That was the subject Davina Dougan discussed with Bill Marshall when she met him recently in Accra. But first she asked him where he drew his subject matter and inspiration from?

BILL MARSHALL

As a Ghanaian the basic platform from which I work is the African way of life, and I pitch this where necessary against other ideas or cultures which I think would interest my readers or my viewers.

DAVINA DOUGAN

I gather your plays poke fun a little bit. Would you call them satires?

BILL MARSHALL

Well the whole way of life of human beings makes room for satirical treatment and I exploit this aspect of human life, not as an inborn sadism but as a vehicle to reflect what goes on in society; but I always remind myself that I am essentially an African and I try to portray as far as possible why we do the things that we do as Africans and why we live as we do.

DAVINA DOUGAN

Now, you've been writing under a number of military regimes in Ghana. What's the reaction to your work?

BILL MARSHALL

Well, I think we have been very fortunate in Ghana. We - that is people in the creative field in Ghana, especially creative writers, - have been very fortunate in that we have not had any harassment from any government, be it civilian or military. I suppose this is because the authorities concerned are aware of the tremendous benefits we can give to society by way of reflecting what is going on, because on many occasions ordinary people look at things that go on around them but don't see them, and it's through writing that we bring this to the surface.

DAVINA DOUGAN

Do you draw a lot of your themes from the politics going on in the country?

BILL MARSHALL

Not from the politics per se, but from the social point of view. I suppose the two are related somehow, but even where politics is concerned you want to look at what that politics does to the individual as a member of the society.

DAVINA DOUGAN

Would you think that you've been writing different things in this present revolutionary atmosphere to things you may have written in the Acheampong regime?

BILL MARSHALL

Well, I think it's so funny that things which I wrote, years ago, even before this Revolution, when they are picked for exhibition now, people tend to think they were written for, or in consequence of, the Revolution; but these were written even before the Revolution had come into being. And this familiarity is because they were based on the social environment, and the social environment is always constant.

DAVINA DOUGAN

You very much observe people. Have you seen new things, new facets perhaps of the Ghanaian personality that have surfaced since this present revolutionary government?

BILL MARSHALL

Yes, I think people are beginning to look at themselves more objectively. If you

are doing something, you want to find out not only if it's good for you but if it's good also for the man next door. There was a time when you'd open your radiogram on Sunday mornings at full blast because you wanted to enjoy your music, but now people want to look at it in terms of its nuisance to the next door neighbour. I think that's a healthy state of affairs to have in a society. You want to think about somebody else and not yourself all the time.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's an interesting comment. Bill Marshall talking there to Davina Dougan.

And that's all in today's "Arts and Africa". Join me Alex Tetteh-Lartey again next week and let me leave you with more of that Mozambican music from Xiluva. Goodbye.