

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

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

Film, painting and a major biography are our ingredients today. And we start in Harare where, as we reported a few weeks back, the second Zimbabwe International Book Fair was held. But together with the Book Fair there was a festival of African films, the first of its kind in that part of the continent; and, although most of the films have been around for quite a few years, the event was accompanied by a film workshop that brought people involved in the industry from many parts of Africa. Julie Frederikse reports from Harare.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

Open up the Harare newspaper to the entertainment page and there's hardly a clue that you're in Africa. About 30 films are showing around town - new movies, meaning those released in the United States 6 or 9 months ago, and a range of oldies from kung fu staples to vintage Clint Eastwood. There's not a single film on circuit that was produced in Africa by an African film maker, even though African films deal with far more relevant themes to the local population. The first Southern African film workshop in Harare aimed to change that very limited picture. Haile Gerima of Ethiopia, one of Africa's most experienced film makers now working in the United States, was outraged to learn that the screening of African films here in Zimbabwe has largely been restricted to cultural events usually sponsored by foreign embassies.

HAILE GERIMA

Very few of our people especially the bureaucrats and especially the politicians realise, though they give it verbal recognition, the war that is waged against our people through the mass media. Films especially have helped our people to be colonised; it has helped us to assume alien values, it has helped us to be enslaved. And to recognise that weapon and instigate a workshop to give that whole turmoil, that whole confused issue, a shape is one of the most progressive things that took place in Zimbabwe.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

Distribution is the main problem faced by African film makers. Either they themselves try to act as directors, producers and distributors, or the distribution

is left to a commercial concern, usually a British or American company which sees African films as not marketable enough to bother promoting. For Pedro Pimento a founder of Mozambique's Film Institute the workshop was most useful in its emphasis on regional co-operation.

PEDRO PIMENTO

We share borders, we share culture, we share the same people, we share languages, but until now we did not have the opportunity to share experiences on certain issues. I think that, now we know each other better, we know what each country or each organisation can contribute to the development of real progressive cinema which will be a kind of mirror of our peoples' values and our peoples' struggle.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

Pimento says that, since Mozambique nationalised its distribution system and established a film institute, the country's film industry has begun to generate income for the government. The Zimbabwe Government's Director of Arts, Steve Chifunyiza, would like to see his country and the rest of Southern Africa try and tackle the difficult issue of film distribution.

STEVE CHIFUNDYIZA

We have grappled with this issue and I'm satisfied that some of the points that we have raised and how we can solve this matter will be adhered to by the film makers themselves and will be listened to by our government.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

The film workshop concluded that there is a complete absence of coherent film policy for the region and established a working committee to try and encourage the creation of film libraries and archives for the preservation and exchange of information both nationally and regionally. Fans of African cinema revelled in the rare opportunity to actually see African films at the workshop's first African film festival in Harare. But to West African film maker Djibril Diop it was not enough to see his films shown to the urban elite; he took his film out to the black townships, spent an hour publicising the showing and drew hundreds of young blacks who had never before seen an African face on a screen. Diop comes from French speaking Senegal and spoke through an interpreter.

DJIBRIL DIOP

You have to understand the importance of what it means for all these young men from 10 to 15 years of age seeing for the first time on the screen a black man portrayed in a different way, portrayed like they are and not a black man who always says "yes boss, yes boss".

JULIE FREDERIKSE

The organisers of this first Southern African film workshop hope that, having built a base for future regional co-operation, they will begin to see the fruits of their work soon in the form of co-productions and joint training ventures.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Zambia is not a country I would normally associate with sculptors and painters of high quality. But a Zambian artist who lives in Britain is demonstrating that without any formal training he can make a living here as a professional painter.

His name is Charles Sambono, he comes originally from Southern Zambia, and he's recently had an exhibition at the Westbourne Gallery in London. When Florence Akst went to the exhibition she was confronted by voluptuous pictures of naked people, frequently locked in embraces. So, was Charles Sambono an erotic artist - or, not to cause any confusion, an artist of the erotic?

CHARLES SAMBONO

No I'm not an erotic artist. I should think that happens because the paintings you see here are based on a particular festival in Southern Zambia and really what you see is what people do after one week's exhaustion of dancing, singing, eating and being away from each other. So when they meet their wives there is always a sweet reunion.

FLORENCE AKST

So it is erotic, they are scenes of love-making?

CHARLES SAMBONO

Not particularly love-making no, but they are scenes of embrace, of reunion.

FLORENCE AKST

The figures aren't at all true to life. The curves of the body are exaggerated and there are many flat planes, but you do enjoy painting the human form don't you. I'd like to turn round and move over to this other picture which is a lot bigger than the others on show.

CHARLES SAMBONO

Yes, this is the main event. The closing of the ceremony, in other words the last day, and on the last day we have dances. Well I've got three dancers and three drummers there but normally you have about 40 or 50 dancers and a whole lot more drummers and musicians.

FLORENCE AKST

Now over on the right the picture looks unfinished. Is that really unfinished or did you mean to leave it like that?

CHARLES SAMBONO

No it's not unfinished, that is finished.

FLORENCE AKST

It's quite different and blurry.

CHARLES SAMBONO

Yes, it is. That is a spirit according to the story of this picture. A spirit is not supposed to be human that is why it is blurred. But that signifies the year ahead, because if the spirit doesn't appear then they know that there's going to be drought or they're not going to have good crops, so it's very important for the people. Now when they see the spirit or when the spirit appears everybody is overjoyed.

FLORENCE AKST

Now the two pictures below the one we've been looking at are each of one female figure, one covering her eyes with her hand and another one holding her breast. To me they look like pictures of sculpture, because the bodies are all brown and not really skin tones so much as perhaps wood tones. How do you achieve this effect?

CHARLES SAMBONO

I use oil but I rub it down with my hand.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes, it isn't at all glossy.

CHARLES SAMBONO

No it's not. I rub it down with my hand or a piece of cloth to get this effect, and I use a very thin brush with indian ink to achieve the lines, the outside lines.

FLORENCE AKST

You've had exhibitions before this one. Where have you exhibited?

CHARLES SAMBONO

Well I've exhibited a lot in Africa - Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia of course, and Zimbabwe last year.

FLORENCE AKST

And yet you weren't trained as an artist - no formal training at all?

CHARLES SAMBONO

No, nothing. I just started it as a hobby and I pursued it from 1969 and I'm now a professional artist.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Charles Sambono from Zambia.

The African National Congress of South Africa has many famous names associated with it - Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, to mention only the most prominent. But in the pantheon of heroes in the struggle for human rights in South Africa the name of Sol Plaatje is bound to have an honoured place. Plaatje, who was born in 1876, was one of the founders of the South African Native National Congress which eventually became the ANC, and throughout his life he worked tirelessly for the attainment of political rights for blacks in South Africa. But he did much more besides; he was the first black South African to write a novel in English, he was the first African to translate Shakespeare into an African language, and he kept a fascinating diary of events at the famous Siege of Mafeking in the Boer War. Well all this is to be found in the major biography of Plaatje that has been published after years of detailed research by Brian Whillan. Neville Harms asked Brian Whillan what it was that attracted his attention to Sol Plaatje.

BRIAN WHILLAN

I got interested in Sol Plaatje really as a result of the publication of Plaatje's Boer War diary which was discovered by an English anthropologist called

John Comaroff who'd been doing some anthropological field work in the Mafeking district in South Africa. It was published I think in 1973 and that was really a revelation. Previously Plaatje was just a name to me; I knew him I suppose as a political figure who'd been involved in the African National Congress and he was the sort of person to whom there'd be the occasional index reference in a number of different books on South African history and one or two on literature as well. But there was very little to connect all these different references up, and when this diary came out I was fascinated. That's what really led me into it.

NEVILLE HARMS

But was he really an important writer - I mean would he be remembered today as a writer if he hadn't been a political figure as well?

BRIAN WHILLAN

I think he would certainly have been remembered for the novel 'Mhudi' that he'd written, and which was published in 1930, but I think we're now in a much better position to see 'Mhudi' as just one book that this man wrote. He wrote a number of other books many of which very sadly were lost - the manuscripts just disappeared and particularly the numerous translations of Shakespeare into Setswana which was his native tongue. I think, had all those works survived, he would have been much better known.

NEVILLE HARMS

Now we've referred to his diary and he was also a journalist. Was he really much more than a perceptive observer of events, or do you think he was really a man of the imagination?

BRIAN WHILLAN

I think he was certainly a very perceptive observer of the events that he witnessed during his lifetime. He was after all a professional journalist in the sense that he earned his living as a journalist really from a very young age, and I think what's fascinating about 'Mhudi' is the way that Plaatje explores and makes use of a variety of different traditions, the oral traditions of the Tswana people and the Barolong especially. But it's also moulding them, it's not just a re-writing or a recording of oral traditions, it's bringing together the strength and the fascination Plaatje had with these oral traditions with his abilities as a novelist much more in the Western tradition. I think what you get is a very interesting mixture of characterisation and tradition.

NEVILLE HARMS

Well now he's clearly a many-faceted figure. You spent several years doing your research into Sol Plaatje. Did you find yourself emotionally getting really very close to Plaatje?

BRIAN WHILLAN

I think, having written a book of this kind, that it's actually necessary up to a point to really feel that degree of identification with your subject. Now obviously there are dangers in that and you have to guard against them, but my feeling is that one's first priority in writing a biography is to write in terms of how the man saw his own life. Only after that do you locate it within the wider context, which obviously you have to do to make sense of his life in wider terms.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Brian Whillan. And his biography of Sol Plaatje is published by Heinemann.

And with that we come to the end of today's programme. Join me again at the same time next week for more of the Arts of Africa. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.