

University Report

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NARRATOR -
JOHN JONES:

To-day Ola Rotimi talks to University Report about his play "The Gods are not to Blame", a play that was well received at the 1968 Ife Festival of Arts on the Ife campus last December.

But first, the crisis at the London School of Economics which you must have read about in your newspapers or heard of over the radio. It just so happens that the front entrance of the L.S.E. is practically opposite my office window here at Bush House - so I have been able to see most of the goings and comings at the school. Well, what is this crisis all about? It is certainly not enough to dismiss it as yet another confrontation between students and university authorities. Here to fill in the details is the BBC's Educational Correspondent, David Smeeton.

DAVID SMEETON: Along with students in such places as the Sorbonne in Paris, Berkeley in California, and Japan and other countries where there has been unrest, the London School of Economics has a group of extreme left-wing students who feel very strongly that society needs to be changed, that the old establishment values are out of date, and that the only way for them to do anything is to attack what they feel is a paternalistic authority in the School.

Physically, the London School of Economics exists in a narrow canyon of a street in central London. The School is a conglomeration of tightly-built buildings that in many ways are too confined, and claustrophobic for modern college life - particularly for "aware" students in the social science fields. Equally, the organisation of the school, both academic and administrative, has been recognised as in need of up-dating. The authorities are keenly aware of this and the past three years has seen a continuous debate to try and resolve many of the student and staff frustrations.

Let us be clear also, the majority of students at the London School of Economics are not hard line militants, but many do have grievances about the relevance of what they are taught and how they are taught.

The history of aggressive protest at the L.S.E. goes back to 1967 with the appointment as Director of Dr Walter Adams, the former Vice-Chancellor of Salisbury University. Both liberal and left-wing students protested at his appointment because they felt he had compromised too much with the Smith regime in Rhodesia over the question of segregation and the autonomy of the university. They felt he should have taken a stand much earlier. His arrival at L.S.E. sparked off considerable demonstrations.

One of the chief problems at the L.S.E. is that only a minority of students attend the council meetings, which by and large are dominated by the more militant minded, and in some cases the really extreme left-wing students. Meetings taking a moderate line have been followed in quick succession by others that hardened student demands and sparked off demonstrations.

L.S.E. too was the setting last year for the founding of the Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation which now has branches in many universities, though its membership is very small. Within L.S.E. the number of really determined left-wing militants amounts to only some thirty or forty out of 3,000 students.

The latest round of protest, which led to the closing of the school, arose out of a decision - which the authorities claim the students initially accepted - for gates to be erected inside the buildings to make them more secure against theft. The students maintained they were put up to control their protest activities.

For many months now there have been continuing attempts to get agreement from the Student Council for a "new deal" for students: representation of high level committees in the school, new disciplinary procedures, a code of conduct for staff and students. The aim is to provide a framework wherein the School could operate as an academic institution allowing members to air their feelings, but at the same time one that disowned violence and protest that would destroy the whole point of academic life. But the Student Council repeatedly found itself in a position of being unable to fully ratify the agreements, due in no small measure to the attitudes of the hard line militants.

It was they who called a second meeting of council after it had already agreed to act moderately in discussing the issue of the gates with the director. This second meeting within twenty-four hours, which the students claim was entirely constitutional, voted to have the gates removed. And they were. The authorities called the police in, arrests were made, and the school was closed. Court cases are now pending, and thirteen staff and students have been served with injunctions to stop them interfering with the school.

JOHN JONES: Our Educational Correspondent, David Smeeton, talking about the crisis at the London School of Economics. Anyway, from action in the world theatre to theatre onstage at the University of Ife. Last December, the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife held a nine-day Festival of the Arts on its home campus. The festival was the first of its kind to take place in Nigeria and it is hoped that it will become an annual event which will eventually present the works of leading artists from all over Africa. One of the major events of the Ife Festival was the production of a new play, "The Gods are not to Blame" by Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi, a research fellow at Ife's Institute of African Studies. The play is a transposition into the Yoruba cultural context of the famous Greek tragedy "Oedipus Rex" - the story of the King of Thebes who was told by an oracle that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother.

At Ife, Ola Rotimi talks about his play "The Gods are not to Blame" to Akin Euba. First, he explains what influenced his choice of theme.

OLA ROTIMI: The choice of theme really was motivated by one major factor, namely the desire to let the Nigerian audience experience this tragic essence which only a play like "Oedipus Rex" can bring out, and the tragic essence really takes several forms - one, the idea of puericide: the killing of a child soon after birth, two the idea of patricide: the killing of the father by the son for that matter, and done in ignorance, and three, the idea of incest, you see, these tragic evidences which I thought the Nigerian audience should have a feeling of and also their parallels between Nigerian cultural indices and what we find in the great cultural set-up that brought about this Oedipus Rex story. For instance, the idea of soothsaying, prophecy - I think this is very significant in our culture - and I thought again the Nigerian audience might be able - particularly the Yoruba audience - might be able to identify this aspect of the Greek culture which runs parallel to the grain of the Nigerian equivalent.

AKIN EUBA: There's such a lot happening in new forms of dramatic expression to-day in Africa, and of course, Ola, you're aware that quite a lot of playwrights choose their themes directly from traditional sources - and sometimes one wonders whether a playwright who decides to go outside the cultural context of Nigeria is not, in fact, wasting his energies in a certain manner. How do you feel about this?

OLA ROTIMI: Well, I thought a playwright should, by all means, react to the prevailing social, political conditions in the setting in which he exists, and, as far as I know, the Nigerian setting is such as one would describe as far from being relaxing - what with the civil war now at our doorstep and so on - and I thought something must be done outside of just writing a play - something must be done to express one's own feelings about these happenings around the writer. That was why I chose

Oedipus Rex as an idiom for conveying my emotions, my feelings, my ideas about existing conditions in Nigeria. Now you might ask what are these ideas that are conveyed. Well, the title itself bears this out - "The Gods are not to Blame". Brought down to mundane terms, the gods simply mean world powers. What I am saying here is that these powers cannot be held responsible for our own downfall, the downfall of underdeveloped nations, the downfall of Nigeria, for instance, if we, by our own errors allow them to exploit our flaws to our own disadvantage. And what are these flaws? The flaw of tribalism is a foregone conclusion as the bane of modern Africa and as the hero in this play "The Gods are not to Blame" says at the end of the play "The gods are not to blame, Do not blame the gods. The gods would have failed if I did not let them use me. They know my weakness", he says, "the weakness of one easily moved to the defence of his tribe against another."

AKIN EUBA: Ola, what problems did you have in converting "Oedipus Rex" into a Nigerian cultural play?

OLA ROTIMI: Well, the problems really boil down to two:(1)the cultural problem, and (2) the structural problem. The cultural problem is evidenced by the difference in attitude between the Nigerian and the Yoruba and the Greek. Now in the Oedipus story, Oedipus kills his father over a dispute on the right of way. This, I don't think would carry within the Nigerian frame of thought, you see. A man has no right to strike an elder dead because the elder upbraids or reprimands him so I thought well, why what then could I use so that the Nigerian audience could sympathise with this one man. Well, the right of possession of land was one the Nigerian would feel somebody had the right to defend. And if this young man in his attempt to eject this old man whom he considers an intruder on his property were dramatised - then the Nigerian would feel "Yes, this man had a right to kill." And so I had to alter that aspect, you see.

On the structural level, I did away with such Greek dramatic or dramaturgic formats as the formal use of the

chorus. I felt that the chorus might not work effectively in a play that aims at a modern dramatic expression, so I did away with that. And also, of course, I introduced a new form - the use of flashback - in two instances of the play, and I think these were the deviations from the Greek original.

AKIN EUBA: Many members of the audience reacted to your play as if it were a comedy. I wondered whether you were using comedy to heighten the drama or to relieve the tragedy because it seems to me that you could do either.

OLA ROTIMI: Well, I must concede that there were a couple of laughs too many. But then people said "Oh, this was good, It was a laugh of embarrassment on the part of the audience. It was an emotional release on the part of the audience." Well, whatever it was, my main reason for introducing subliminal humour to it stems from the fact that the average Nigerian doesn't know this play at all. And the whole traumatic impact of this tragedy comes at the end of the play when the audience realises that this man, after all, is the murderer of his father whom everybody has been looking for, and also he is the husband of his mother - I mean this whole unbelievable tragic experience comes as a bang to the audience. Now I asked myself how could I make this so effective, to have the audience appreciate the full meaning of it. So I said if I delude the audience, you know, isn't as serious as it really is - by getting them to believe that it is a tragedy all right but maybe not as tragic as the prologue seems to suggest - so I wrote this play introducing comic instances into it until, towards the end of the play, the tragic revelation begins to come and then people might wonder why they have laughed at all and whether this whole laugh was the wrong emphasis, but whether I succeeded in this I don't know but the fact that most people at the end of the play were emotionally stricken seemed to, in a sense, vindicate my use of this technique.

JOHN JONES: Ola Rotimi was talking to Akin Euba about his play "The Gods are not to Blame" and let's hope that one day it will have found its way on to the London stage.

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