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## UNIVERSITY REPORT

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NARRATOR -  
JOHN BANKOLE  
JONES:

This week Peggy Harper of the Institute of African Studies at Ife University on the Nigerian dance form, and creative writing at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

A few weeks ago in University Report from London, Frank Speed talked about the use he makes of cinematography for the recording and study of African culture. To-day we return to the Institute to hear about another aspect of their work in the performing arts - the recording of Nigerian dance form. Peggy Harper is a senior research fellow at the Institute and her particular interest is the recording of Nigerian dance forms with special emphasis on methods of classifying, describing and comparing different styles. At Ife, Peggy Harper first talked to our man there, Akin Euba, about another aspect of her work as a producer of dance dramas, and Akin asked her how she set about creating these.

PEGGY HARPER: Well, what I most like to do is to get together with a group of talented young people and say to them "Well, we would like to dramatise a story in terms of movement or mime and dance." and talk to them about the sort of story that makes a good dance drama. It's usually a mythological story or a legendary story and invariably I find that one of the group comes up with a very good idea. Then I always like to discuss, if possible, every stage of the production with the group that I'm working with so that they can make as much of a contribution as possible. We discuss how many scenes we should have, what the scenes should consist of, how they should relate to each other, what sort of music we should have. And then we start playing around with the movement and finding out who would fit in best with each character and what kind

of movement they have to contribute. And my job is really to be a catalyst and to relate the movements of various people - if you like to do the overall design and encourage individuals to produce or create their own movement for their own particular roles.

AKIN EUBA: Peggy, the Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Bertie Opoku, once said that African dance is really dance drama. Do you agree with this notion?

PEGGY HARPER: Yes. I think so, because African dance is always performed for some specific purpose or function. It always has a meaning over and above being simply entertainment and dance for its own sake.

AKIN EUBA: In these terms then your own dance dramas are just pieces in which you heighten the already present dramatic element of the dance?

PEGGY HARPER: Well, I think in all traditional dances in homogenous societies that every dance performs a function. So therefore working with people who have come from this background even if they are now young urban boys and girls who are somewhat cut off from their traditional backgrounds, I think that it makes more sense to create something which has a dramatic purpose even in theatrical terms.

AKIN EUBA: Peggy, what kind of research have you been doing in Nigeria?

PEGGY HARPER: Well, as an expatriate, I think I felt that it was my first job to get around the whole of Nigeria - which I know is an ambitious thing to say - and to record as much material in various parts of Nigeria as I possibly could because I think it is up to Nigerian research workers to go at depth into their own particular culture. So, as I say, I started off by doing research to discover what the various movements in Nigeria were - dance movements - in order to use them in the theatre. And then having worked for four years in the theatre, I became more and more fascinated by the research for its own sake because I realised

that it is enormously important for the traditional dances to be recorded because the societies are changing so fast that the dances as an expression of a way of life are changing rapidly as well. Many of the great dances of Nigeria are disappearing and I think that within the next decade, within the next five years they will be lost completely. Quite a lot of the material is already lost.

AKIN EUBA: How do you set about recording dance?

PEGGY HARPER: Well, I think the best way to record dance in Africa is on synchronised sound film because very often one is in a situation where a dance is being done on one particular occasion and is not to be repeated for some time, and this is particularly true of ritual occasions - the particular dance will be performed with full ceremony and full regalia, full costume, only once in seven years. So that you must have means of recording which is in the terms of the dance so that you can record both the movement, the music, the costume and the full details of the dance as it is performed. In Europe, films of dance notation are used. These are forms of graphic transcription. I'm sure that these are extremely useful for theatrical dance which has been planned in a situation in which the dance can be repeated whenever it is asked for. But in Africa I'm rather dubious about using these European techniques because European dance is essentially different in certain ways from African dance. The emphasis in European dance is on the design of movement in space - the dancers are particularly preoccupied with moving from one position in space to another whereas the emphasis in African dance is very much on the rhythmic movement of the dancer, and the dynamic quality with which the dance is performed or the movement is performed gives it its meaning. This doesn't mean to say that the dance is not formal because most of the dances of Nigeria - the traditional dances - have a definite form to them, but the dancers often move through positions in space rather than to positions in space. I would say that the dancers have volume rather than a linear definition.

AKIN EUBA: What are some of your immediate plans for the University of Ife?

PEGGY HARPER: Well, first, as I say, I think it is important to record the dances of Nigeria and if possible to write up this research, analyse it, and possibly in a couple of years' time to make comparative studies of the various dance styles. But I see the development of contemporary dance theatre as a continuation of the traditional life of people in Nigeria, and it's here that I think the University of Ife may make an important contribution to the world of art in Nigeria because the research fellows at the Institute are not only looking into traditional and neo-traditional forms but experimenting in the creation of new forms so that their research work has immediate meaning in new terms and the work that they are creating in these contemporary terms can be continually fed by their research work, so that there is a flow from the one to the other.

JOHN BANKOLE JONES: Peggy Harper of the Institute of African Studies at Ife University talking to Akin Euba, on the campus, about her research work into Nigerian Dance form.

And now let's go south to the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Learning by doing is the "in" thing these days. When I was at school the little chemistry that I ever learnt was as a spectator never as a participant. Nowadays, of course, students can romp around the science laboratory doing their own tests and making their own discoveries. Well, this principle is now being taken over into the Arts as well. In the English Department at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland the subject of Creative Writing is a typical example of the learning by doing process. For this course, students write their own stories, poems and so on as part of their degree work. Before leaving Lesotho at the end of his tour there, Michael Pickstock discussed the idea for the course in Creative Writing with Mr Roy Holland who conceived it. Michael Pickstock asked Mr Holland why he felt that creative writing should be part of a course in English.

ROY HOLLAND: Well, I think the first reason is that it's always seemed anomalous to me that anyone studying English shouldn't produce it - you know if you're studying Art or Music you produce the thing that you're actually studying. Now to study a piece of writing purely from the critical or commentative angle and not be able to use the language yourself has always seemed to be a failing of many of the conventional courses in English. I think that in learning to use English in this way, battling with problems of structure and form in stories and so forth the students get an insight into the way literature works much more surely and with much more of a sensitive assessment of what's involved than from any amount of critical study or critical reading, and I think that the third thing is that well everybody, I believe, basically is a creator of some sort or another. I make the assumption that every student is a writer - everybody likes to make things - and part of the *raison d'etre* for this sort of thing is that the students themselves get a tremendous amount of enjoyment out of it - pleasure in the sheer making of the thing - and this play element in study seems to me an important element in motivation of study.

MICHAEL  
PICKSTOCK: Now you took twelve students and over a period of just over three years here at Roma you developed them from people who'd never written anything seriously before to the stage when a selection of their written material has been accepted for publication by a well-known publishing company. What are the steps between?

ROY HOLLAND: Well, first of all, you must give the students confidence in themselves. They believe, of course, when they begin, that they can't write anything. The thought of writing a short story frightens them. So the first part of the course has to be spent on thinking of ways and means to get them writing on all sorts of topics which they've experienced themselves - their own personal experience, things that they see around them, things that they hear around them, things that they think, which is the raw material of writing.

So the first part of the course is really, for me, the difficulty of thinking how to get the ink flowing through their veins, you might say. The second part is to then go on to ways and means of using this raw material, shaping the material for stories, and I give them a series of exercises which gets them thinking about characters and characterisation, settings in novels and stories, themes, and so forth, and they work through this. All their writing is published or printed, shall we say, in the course of the whole thing, and each has a folder which we discuss in class regularly - each piece is anonymous so that they can discuss this quite freely and the criticism and the creation, as it were, goes together as far as possible. This goes on through the first two parts of the course. The third part is where they then graduate to the point where they're writing their own stories and this means that I have to see each of them individually in tutorials, talk about their ideas, their themes, their suggestions for stories and suggest how to shape the material, suggest how they first of all write notes on the characters and get to know them and so on. And at the end of the process out comes their story.

MICHAEL  
PICKSTOCK:

Now your instruction was in English, all their work was in English, their final project was in English, but these people came from six different countries, from very different countries and backgrounds and, of course, speaking different languages. How much value do you think this sort of a course will be to them if they attempt the same sort of thing - creative writing - in their own native language?

ROY HOLLAND:

Well here I'm guessing. It's a tough question. But my guess is that they will have experienced what it's like to go through the process of writing a story or a poem or a play or whatever it is. They will know how they shape their material, how they gather their material, they will have come up against certain technical problems presenting the material and this experience - well, it's a learning situation. They've learned to handle something which when they come to do

it again will be easier. I think all writers teach themselves in this sense. And so, if they're writing in another language other than English the experience of having done it in English, I think, is almost certain to help them in their own language - in the structural way, the basic problems of approach and handling. Where I don't think it will give them any help at all is in the shaping of the sentences, as it were, in their own tongue. This is something which can be done only by people who have a feeling for the handling of that particular language and this is a lifetime's job.

NARRATOR -  
JOHN BANKOLE  
JONES:

Michael Pickstock was talking to Roy Holland about his course in Creative Writing at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. It's hoped that the work of some of these students will be published by the Pergamon Press.

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