

BBC AFRICAN RADIOTAPE SERVICE

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"THE ARTS AND AFRICA"

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ELAINE: Hullo, this is Elaine Caulker - this week we'll be looking at drama from some different perspectives - that of historians, the playwrights, the audiences. But first let's hark back - sorry that didn't really intend to be a pun - to the sort of music which must have surrounded some earlier forms of drama in West Africa.

FONTOMFROM ORCHESTRA Band 1

ELAINE: You are listening to a Fontomfrom orchestra - that's an orchestra consisting of different kinds of Akan state and ritual drums. If they sound rather extra stately and ritualistic that's because they are playing the sort of music which accompanies more solemn occasions at the court of the Asantehene in the Ashanti area of what is now Ghana. Let's listen to something of their dramatic rhythms in the tones of the poet, John Okaii, as he reads the opening of one of his poems from a collection called "The Oath of the Fontomfrom".

JOHN OKAII DECLAINS

TALKING DRUMS Band 2

ELAINE: And those were the famous Ashanti talking drums, of course, And in the old days of wars with neighbours while the Ashanti kingdom was being expanded, people must often have heard themselves called to action by the sound of the drum.

In fact it's out of wars that much of the stuff of earlier drama is drawn - and that of more modern plays, too. But one wonders sometimes how good it is for African drama to make this return to the past in a world so acutely concerned with the future. Robert Fraser talked to Martin Owusu about his latest book of plays, which in fact includes on about the Ashanti War. But the first question was: is there in fact an authentic African drama?

MARTIN OWUSU:

Authentic African drama? Yes there is. It is when we come to authentic African theatre that the problem arises because drama as we know it, we have in plenty in Africa, you know all over the continent, but the theatre is an imported tradition. And so when we begin to write plays, we sort of make use of the imported forms, existent forms in Europe and so on, and basically making use of what we already have in Ghana and for that matter in Africa, so we cannot really say that there is an authentic African theatre - it's based on some Western form. So that the distinction between drama and theatre should be made.

ROBERT FRASER:

How far do you think it is possible for you to exploit indigenous dramatic forms in the plays that you write?

OWUSU: Oh yes, especially with the Anansi tale tradition. I am sort of very fascinated by them, by the form, the storyteller going and coming, and people coming to act various portions and so on, and these I have used in about three of the plays in this collection.

FRASER: To turn for the moment to 'The Mightier Sword' - of course, this is a free adaptation of actual historical material and it is a loose account of the first Ashanti Denkyira War which, of course, the Ashanti won and which to some extent established them as an empire. Now I think some people have criticised this play in performance because they believe it is not objective and that you tilted the play to some extent in favour of the Ashantis. Now do you think it is possible for a dramatist to be really objective when he is treating the history of his own country?

OWUSU: I think it is possible, although I must admit it is very difficult not to sympathise with one side or one party. After all it is a war. This is typical material material here. It is a war between two nations and the reason why people have criticised it is because they think I am an Ashanti - you know, a lot of people have been assuming that I am an Ashanti and I am not. So this is something that I have to make quite clear that I was writing this play having studied the historical material and selected what interested me.

FRASER: Of course the sad thing about much African drama is that it remains simply read and not performed. It seems to be a literary form. People don't seem to think of putting it on. What do you think can be done about this?

OWUSU: Well I think basically, a lot of writers are rather difficult to understand, I think that a person like Wole Soyinka - some of

his plays I must admit are extremely difficult 'A Dance of the Forest' for instance. I mean, to perform it needs some skill and know-how of the theatre. Soyinka says that when he is writing a play he doesn't think of them. In which case if you take the play as it exists in the text, you see that he has really not thought of his audience. But when he is producing, then he can adapt to suit the particular audience or place where he is.

FRASER: Do you normally write for a particular company or do you just...

OWUSU: Well, when I am writing I have particular people in mind. For instance, when I was writing 'The Story Ananse Told', I had all the characters envisaged before I wrote that play but it is not a company as such. So even though the play might not be performed as soon as it is finished writing (I have finished writing it) since I had the people in mind who are going to perform it, things worked out more closely.

ELAINE: Martin Owusu talking about history and drama. By the way, his latest collection of plays is called 'The Sudden Return and Other Plays' and is published by Heinemann. And his final mention of those for whom plays are ultimately made, audiences, bring us to a discussion we had in the studio recently between two people of the stage, a Ghanaian actress Sophie Lokko, she also teaches drama, and a Zulu playwright Welcome Msomi. On hearing that Sophie Lokko produced a production of the French play "Tartuffe" by Moliere, I wanted to know is an adaptation on a play from outside Africa of real value:

SOPHIE LOKKO:

It is and it is not. It is not because we have people of other lands and we have to know what they are, what they like, what they do, how they move and all that. But if you say it's danger, then you mean we want to be one-sided and not do any other thing. Well, that is a question of adaptation. If you are thinking about that, I think even Moliere - we have the quack priests - and it goes down very well. In fact, I feel that the Ghanaian audiences, (I haven't been to other African countries) but I feel that the Ghanaian audiences like comedy more than tragedy because usually when there is something serious, when they should more or less sit quiet and look at it, they laugh. Why is that? Well, when we go to our funerals, you see people dancing and laughing, others with tears streaming down their cheeks. Well, it is a sort of releasing tension or, more or less, laughing and crying with the dead.

ELAINE: Mr. Msomi. Now you are an African playwright as well, so you have problems with adaptation.

WELCOME MSOMI:

Yes. With adaptations now, here, I'd be happy if you could just

explain to me if you took these western classics as they are or if you changed them into a vernacular language.

LOKKO: This is something one of my co-workers said: It would be a good idea; you know the theme is all right and everybody understands it but it would have been a better idea if you had used the vernacular. And I am also thinking about, after this adaptation into English, to change it into one of the various vernaculars.

MSOMI: And I'll tell you why I am asking that. It is because I have worked the Western classics as they are, brought them to Africa, but I found that I couldn't get out more from my actors so I decided to do them in the vernacular language and I found that I got something that is terrific, something that they know of, and I think the using of the vernacular language works out very well.

ELAINE: Can I just say something that interests me very much here is you have both talked about African emotions, laughing and crying at different times, completely different from what some one in the West would do. Now this interests me very much. What exactly is it? What is the difference?

MSOMI: I think here, if you look at African audiences, the ones I have performed for, I have found that they became more involved with the performance. When it came to laughing they'd laughed, they really laughed, and when they cried, they cried and if it happens that you start with a comedy line, let's say with the first half being comedy, and you try to bring in some seriousness in the second half, then you will be in trouble. Because they will laugh. They'll expect to laugh. See, if you start with a comedy line definitely, and they release their tension in that way again in the second half. So now when looking at these audiences and comparing them with Western audiences, I think Western audiences tend to be too sophisticated because - you've seen them - when they sneeze you know what happens, they must put up their hands or take out their handkerchief and put it to their noses, and then, well, that is how they act. Well, you watch an African: they let it go. They're free, they can do whatever they like.

ELAINE: And you have found the same thing with your students?

LOKKO: Yes, the same thing. It is the same, but I would add one other thing. With the serious plays where they are supposed not to laugh, they know that it is a make-believe and they believe in the make-believe life so, you tell them that this person is supposed to die, or is dead, 'Oh! I don't believe it,'

MSOMI: And it's true. In some places we have had people dying on stage and they had to be dragged out dead. They know that this person must be dead, but somehow seeing a person being dragged off the stage somehow makes them laugh, (laughter).

ELAINE: Joining me in that discussion was Sophie Lokko and Welcome Msoni and now with the help of Mustapha Tettey Addy and his drums.....

MUSTAPHA TETTEY ADDY "Ewe Atsimivu"

ELAINE: I will say goodbye as we have come to the end of The Arts and Africa for this week.

MUSTAPHA TETTEY ADDY "Ewe Atsimivu".

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