

BBC AFRICAN RADIOTAPE SERVICE

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 9

(4R 53 S009G)

SIGNATURE TUNE

ELAINE: Hello from Elaine Caulker. I wonder how often do you get to see a film? Is there a cinema near, what kind of films does it show?

MUSIC "SHAFT IN AFRICA"

ELAINE: Yes, 'Shaft in Africa'. A film that's drawing big audiences all over the continent. But is it the kind of film we should be seeing? That's one of the questions we'll be asking film actors and film makers later in the programme.

But first let's begin with news of a competition. It's a poetry competition - and anyone with a book of poems that has just been published should listen very carefully. And if you think that can only apply to a dozen or so people in the whole of Africa, that thought had struck us too. Anyway, I know lots of people who like expressing themselves by writing a poem or two every so often. And to encourage them getting into print the Commonwealth Institute in London offers a poetry prize of two hundred and fifty pounds every year.

POETRY
Pray protect this patrimony to which
you must return when the song
is finished and the dancers disperse;
remember also your children
for they in their time will want
a place for their feet when
they come of age and the dance
of the future is born
for them.

ELAINE: A few lines from the title poem of Chinua Achebe's "Beware, Soul Brother" the book that one him the joint poetry prize in 1972. Who will it be in 1974? Well, we'll just have to wait till June for that, but Bob Okonedo has been finding out from the Institute's Librarian Michael Foster what sort of poetry the judges will be looking for.

MICHAEL FOSTER:

They look for well-written poetry; they look for something which expresses the emotions of the writer and something which means something to them as they read it. It is often a matter of personal preference I think.

BOB OKONEDO:

Well, the 1974 Poetry Prize will be the third in the series. Now how many entries have you had in the past?

FOSTER: Well, last year we had forty-six entries which were eligible for the prize. We got a lot of others which were not eligible because they weren't printed or they were either in typescript or manuscript (which we cannot accept for this prize), or else they weren't the first book which the person had published, or else they weren't in English. Therefore there are a number of hurdles to overcome for this prize: they must be published in English; they must be a printed book rather than a typescript or a manuscript; and they must be the first book of poetry that any one has ever published.

OKONEDO: Before we go on to look at the rigid conditions you set on this, how many entries have you had in the past from Africa and how many will you be expecting this year?

FOSTER: I had quite a few from Nigeria and one or two from Ghana and I think there were some from East Africa as well but we would welcome as many as possible - the more we have to choose from the better.

OKONEDO: You have just laid down the rigid conditions for the entries that you expect for this poetry prize. Don't you think that when you do this you are just pandering only to the established writers and excluding a whole area, an army, of aspiring writers?

FOSTER: No, I don't think so. I think normally the way to get into circulation as a poet is to get your first book printed and if we didn't have a stipulation of this kind we would be absolutely flooded with manuscripts from every part of the world I am afraid. This is a simple kind of screening, you know, that once someone has got into print then at least they are on the road to becoming a writer.

ELAINE: And if anyone listening has a book of poems hot off the press you can get full competition details from the Librarian, Commonwealth Institute, Kensington High Street, London W8 6WQ. Now tell me, how African do you find this?

MUSIC "SHAFT IN AFRICA"

ELAINE: Well that's more from "Shaft in Africa", of course, and I'm hoping it's enough to get the three people sitting at the microphone with me talking about the films they'd like to see shown in local cinema. Yemi Ajibade's just come back from Hong Kong where he's been taking part in an international thriller. Leopold M'balla from Cameroun and Oliver Chimenya from Rhodesia are student directors at the London Film School. Yemi, tell us what were you doing in Hong Kong of all places?

YEMI AJIBADE:

Well, this particular film was shot in collaboration with Shaw, Runrun Shaw the expert of Kung Fu - the Chinese art of karate etc. Around there, there are locations which look exactly like Africa as if Africa was just removed to that place and the place is sub-tropical, a monsoon type of place. So it is just a question of convenience.

ELAINE: But you see the problem for me is the people who have the money are always going to be the people in the West, so how does this affect Africa film-making?

OLIVER CHIMENYA:

Now you come to the real point. There hasn't been much African film-making. What has been there has been a few people from the West and they have sort of dictated what they want the African audiences to see. What we have been seeing for the past twenty years or so are westerns or James Bond type of films which have no resemblance whatsoever with the African audiences. I don't know what you would feel about that, Leopold?

LEOPOLD M'BALLA:

I would like documentary films to be shown in Africa, I mean, really showing problems of Africans. I take this from my own experience, for it wasn't until I was in Europe that I really found out about what was really going on in Africa. The Africans themselves don't know what is going on two hundred miles away from them. The whole problem is that with our film-makers they have been educated in Europe.

CHIMENYA: Although an African, now I can never go back and say that I am the original one. I have been uprooted and I have almost....

AJIBADE: To where?

ELAINE: Yemi, what do you feel about this? Because you are an actor and you need to make money?

AJIBADE: Yes. You see, the problem of movie-making in Africa is quite simple and I think the boys have started now - we have Sembene from Senegal and quite a few others. The Nigerians had an effort, half-effort we should say - the director was Ossie Davies, an American, a black, which makes it a bit nearer home!

CHIMENYA: Just by colour I suppose!

AJIBADE: But because of this distance it was what it was, but it was an effort. O.K., a movie is not like a stage: the four of us could get together now and have a play here, it doesn't cost us anything, but to make a movie of ten minutes it costs so much money whereby the government of the country would have to be interested and makes things free of politics - not anarchistic.

CHIMENYA: Films at the moment should be very political so that the people would realise what they have been through. For instance, the slave trade and the taking away of all the riches from Africa and now the imposition of puppet governments in Africa...

AJIBADE: I'd like to interrupt you, Oliver. You see, I don't think it is as simple as that. You have a government in Africa that is a puppet. Well, this is the government that you have got now.

If you want to make a film, you need money to make a film. It is all right if you are writing poetry you can write that your government is silly, and is this and that, you can even write books which get published, but if you want to make a movie you are going to end up only making the one movie....having a \$1 million backing from the government and people go and see it, in any case, it is going to be boring because political films are very boring.

ELAINE: I feel that a lot of the political films that are made completely lack humour. They are really sort of heavy and it is always going over the same old political thing over and over and over again. What I would like to see is a balance between the commercial thing on the one hand and the political film on the other hand.

M'BALLEA: Well a political film could be very, very entertaining. Take for example "Shaft in Africa". The whole film is not fiction it comes from an event in life. Probably you know that what happened in "Shaft in Africa" is about slavery and that is still going on.

AJIBADE: I saw the film and I think that it is a very mediocre film, in many respects but I think in Shaft an image is born. Ironically, it is the only one that has touched a problem, a real problem which exists.

M'BALLA: Which was lightly treated!

AJIBADE: Whether lightly or heavily it has touched it, you see, it has touched it. The motive might be to make money, to exploit a situation but in doing so albeit, unintentionally, it exposes this problem to the world..

ELAINE: What about the film "Zulu"? Have any of you seen that one?

CHIMENYA: I did but it was, you know, Africa as the white man sees it and you couldn't really say that it really represented Africa as we know it ourselves.

AJIBADE: I saw it and I was moved. I saw it twice. I have been in the movie business for quite a few years and I have acted in quite a few movies so I know what this thing means to have given this little, just this little respect to this Zulu general, I have never seen it before in my life. I see people jumping and sometimes you see a white man take out a gun and shoot "Boom" only once and you see about six Africans falling over with only one bullet!

CHIMENYA: Now that is white man's propoganda.

AJIBADE: But in "Zulu" for the first time I saw this Zulu general on top of the hill, the mountain, and he was waving his spear and the boys go, and he does this, and they come back, and he gives this little regiment of English soldiers a tough hell. The first time I have ever seen a Zulu man fight and fight really well.

ELAINE: Well, we've been talking a lot and criticising a lot of films and I would just like to know before we end: have any of you seen a film made about Africa that you think has really been worthwhile and has done justice to the place?

CHIMENYA: Well, I have seen a number of Ousmane Sembène films - the film about the African girl "Black Girl" which was made in Senegal about the sort of slavery which is still going on now in West Africa.

ELAINE: And what about you Leopold?

M'BALLA: I think Sembène is one director, one African director, that really goes deep into the problems. All his films like "Mandabi", "Emitai", "Black Girl" as he says are all very well done.

CHIMENYA: They really represent what the situation is.

ELAINE: Yemi, what do you feel?

AJIBADE: I think "Things of Value" is a good compromise. I have never really only seen one and said: "I think that that is the one. But overall I think that "Things of Value" made eight or nine years ago started to portray, to treat a problem. And even though the makers were outsiders I could see and learn a lot about Kenya.

ELAINE: So in fact there are a few films that are worthwhile to see and I hope that there will be a lot more in the future. Well thank you Yemi Ajibade, Leopold M'balla and Oliver Chimenya for taking part in that discussion.

MUSIC "DINGAKA"

ELAINE: "Chseni Cheeni" from a film I don't think we mentioned, the film "Dingaka" and that brings our programme to a close for today. However, I'll be back this time next week with more about the "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC "DINGAKA"

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