

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 73

(5R 50 S073P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to more news and views on the "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

Just for a change I thought we'd start on a sour note today. We won't be neglecting the brighter side of the state of drama to be found at present in Kenya but the truth is that if you decide to spend the evening at the theatre in Nairobi the chances are you'll find yourself watching white actors (and they are all too often imported) in a play set in London, Paris or New York.

Now one critic of this state of dramatic affairs is Janet Young. Janet Young isn't Kenyan, her roots are in the Gambia and Sierra Leone, but as an actress and television director she has strong feelings on the subject. Paul Toulmin-Rothe, a fellow Nairobi resident asked her why it was that drama in Kenya seems less developed than in Uganda or West Africa.

JANET YOUNG

Well, I don't blame the Kenyans for not participating much in theatre here, for what I have seen here in the past 5 years are these comedies - sitting-room comedies which the English are very fond of doing. Although I was trained in England, I still don't think they have a place here - nowadays anyway. The theatre has been kept very much to very small white groups and they seem to feel that they have a sort of monopoly of a theatre here in Kenya. The Blacks are not given any part in the theatre of their country and I think it is wrong to say that the Kenyans do not have a tradition of going to the theatre; they don't have a tradition of going to the theatre as such, the proscenium arch theatre is completely wrong for Africa, we would do much better in out-of-doors and Kenya has this beautiful climate and what more could you ask? But now with Kenyan

YOUNG plays and Kenyan actors and there are quite a few of them coming up now, I think they are going to have a wonderful future in theatre.

PAUL TOULMIN ROTHE

Of course if you have Kenyan plays, you've got to have Kenyan playwrights. We know about Kenneth Watene who wrote "Didan Kimathi". But do you think there are other playwrights here in Kenya who can produce the material for the actors to use?

YOUNG Yes, well, they are trying. I mean we have a Francis Mbukwa, I don't know whether you have heard of him - he does some television work; there's James Ngugi he's changed his name and I can't remember what he calls himself now.

TOULMIN-ROTHE

Mrs. Young, you've pointed out that there is a big difference between the western theatre and African theatre and you are saying - if I understand you, that what is needed here is more devotion to a true African theatre. But, there are certain things, aren't there which are common to all theatres, don't you think?

YOUNG Yes, that's quite true, and I sometimes have no objection really to a group of people or any group doing very English plays provided the theme is a universal one. For instance, I feel that some of Chekov's pastoral things would well suit Kenya, but I think there are some plays that are just not on for us - and then we should just avoid these and get our own. Or sometimes we might give our own interpretations; I don't see why some of Shakespeare's things could not be given our own interpretation of it. After all, everybody is doing whatever they like to Shakespeare these days, so why not we?

TETTEH-LARTEY

Why not indeed. Now, at one time, Janet Young was drama advisor to the Ministry of Education and this has led to her being the adjudicator at the finals of the Kenya students National Drama Festival. This kind of event is obviously the place where the drama of the future is being hatched so I'm glad to report that Janet was encouraged by the high standard of their productions.

YOUNG I thought they were a very high standard and also I thought we were getting towards what is really required in Kenya - and that is towards finding what one can truly call Kenyan theatre, which is not in existence at the moment. The plays that the colleges presented were written by Africans, African content and the presentation was African and I thought that was very exciting.

TOULMIN-ROTHE

Can you say something about the winning entry and why you liked it so much?

YOUNG

Well, it was part comedy really - I would probably say it is a straight play. It was called "Mwembe", that was the name of the hero of the play. It was about a chief who very much wanted a boy, a son - you know this is very African; if they don't have sons they think it is the end of the world - forgetting it's Women's Year 1975! Anyway, he calls his witch-doctors and asked them that whatever happened they should predict that he would have a son. Well, they were very unsure, which was the comic part. You should have seen those witch-doctors, they really brought the house down. Their facial expression was just terrific. Then an old woman came and said that all this was rubbish. I will plant a seed - a mango seed, and this seed will grow into a tree and how well it grows will affect the life of the child - and this was so. A son was born and they called the son Mwembe and he got married. Then eventually the tree fell down and died, just crashed suddenly and the fellow committed suicide. But, one thing that struck me was they had a great deal of stage sense; you could see this in the movements and they had a bit of dance in it as well. And the way the dialogue went and the way they involved the audience which was terrific; the audience were a part of this and this is very essential this involvement in theatre which I think Africa needs. We really need to be involved with whatever action is happening on the stage.

TOULMIN-ROTHE

What did you think of the level of the technique of the acting of the young people in "Mwembe"?

YOUNG

They did very well, in fact, they had a superb set which they did themselves. There was a little hut by the side of it, but not just a tree or something; in fact, the mango tree looked so real - it stood right in the centre of the stage, but they overcame this by the movements around it - it was really well done. So that was no problem at all. The characters came out brilliantly.

TETTEH-LARTSEY

The individual characterization that Janet Young has been admiring in the youthful actors brings to mind the stress Robert Serumaga placed on the reverse - the ensemble playing. In a recent programme he told us that members of the Abafumi Company of Uganda were a troupe and so the element of competition was superfluous. In fact, he was asked whether there wasn't a certain strain in acting - and living - as a family.

ROBERT SERMAGA

Knowing the theatrical world here, and in the United States, I think what causes that is the actor's anxiety to get ahead of everybody else; to be singled out as the one who will make it; the one most likely to succeed - and all that kind of thing.

Now, our theatre does not work on a star system. Even on the billing all the names are just put there and nobody is called a star in the play. Although if you look at it you can notice star quality in some people. And in fact I was very curious when I read one of the critics in England. He said, as a complaint, that our actors lacked individuality, but he failed to realise that it is the ensemble form that often necessitates, does not require, individuality. When you are singing in a chorus you don't want to stick your voice out - you sing as a chorus.

ACTUALITY OF ABAFUMI COMPANY

TETTEH-LARTEY

A reminder of that disciplined sound in the Abafumi production of 'Renga Moi'.

But now a quite different sound is produced by the Chikwakwa Theatre of Zambia. Inevitably so, because their intentions are very different to those of the experienced and sophisticated Abafumi players.

Fay Chung who teaches at the University of Zambia has been telling Stephen Chifunyise about the project.

FAY CHUNG "Chikwakwa" is a Chinyanga word which refers to the grass roots. It was chosen to refer to the kind of theatre where the masses participate, in other words a people's theatre.

STEPHEN CHIFUNYISE

What was the main aim of establishing that type of theatre?

CHUNG One of the aims is to bring the university - the academic community closer to the people in the rural areas and in the townships. Secondly, we wanted to have an exchange programme by which the University's drama can be performed in remote rural areas, whilst at the same time people from the university could do research into traditional dance, music, ritual and other forms of traditional drama.

CHIFUNYISE

Talking about Chikwaka theatre at the university, how many plays do you have at the theatre each year?

CHUNG We roughly have about 12 productions a year. Some of these are plays by recognised authors; others are plays written by students and others are improvised sketches.

TETTEH-LARTEY

The ideological aims of the University's Chikwakwa Theatre set it apart from the other drama developments we've been hearing about; reminiscent in a way of the Egyptian River Theatre that floats down the Nile to entertain and instruct villagers along its banks.

The Zambian audiences certainly join in when the theatre pays their village a visit.

ACTUALITY OF CHIKWAKWA THEATRE

That example was recorded at a chief's court when the Travelling Theatre of Southern Zambia put on a performance of 'The Rainmaker', a play based on a popular myth.

By-the-way, the project isn't entirely run by the staff of the university. Phaskani Japhet Msimuko, for instance, is a fourth year student of Political Science who acts in the productions and helps to organise the tours, and he gets great encouragement from the reception given the travelling players.

PHASKANI JAPHET MSIMUKO

The reaction has been very very enthusiastic, in fact, I must say that in the four or so travelling theatres that I have participated in for the last four years, we have had very very strong calls that we go back to them, perform to them and also see what they can offer us in terms of their own forms of theatre, drumming and traditional dances and so on.

CHIFUNYISE

And do the people in the rural areas who come to your shows take part in the performances?

MSIMUKO Well, at one time we involved the people that were in Eastern Province, in Chapata when we went there in 1971. However, in the other provinces we have been thinking of including the people into the performances by either organising local shows utilising local people; on the other hand when we are going to travel we have used them more to help us in disseminating the ideas we have in the play and extemporize.

CHIFUNYISE

What are the themes that you usually deal with in these plays, when you go to the rural areas.

MSIMUKO: We have dealt with a lot of different things. We have dealt with the way people live in town, the way people live in the rural areas and the clash of ideas in culture about urbanisation and rural life in Africa and we have also dealt with more involving philosophical themes, like what life should be like among the people, and so on.

CHIFUNYISE

What are the languages you use in these performances?

MSIMUKO: We have mainly used English and whatever local language we have felt the local people could understand, in the area where we are performing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

A round-up of some promising developments in African drama. All too brief, I know, but I can promise you plenty more on the arts in next week's programme. Till then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

DRUMMING BY ABAFUMI COMPANY

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BROADCASTING RIGHTS: FREE FOR USE BY ANY BROADCASTING ORGANISATION OUTSIDE BRITAIN IN ENGLISH OR IN TRANSLATION | PUBLICATION RIGHTS: NOT FREE FOR USE IN PUBLISHING OUTSIDE BRITAIN IN ENGLISH OR IN TRANSLATION |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|