

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

KWESI KAY:

"Arts and Africa", and it's my pleasure to introduce news of drama with an African flavour and a new book that's labelled documentary.

SIGNATURE TUNE

Welcome to the programme. By-the-way, my name's Kwesi Kay and my personal interest is the theatre. That's where today's programme begins.

I've always been taught that the experience of drama transcends national boundaries - and language boundaries. Well, the idea is being put to the test in a theatre in Paris. An international group of actors is attempting to convey a situation that exists in Uganda in a way that audiences anywhere could understand.

This particular situation is one that exists for a small tribe in northern Uganda, called the Ik people. (In fact, the play's French title is "Les Iks"). What the Ik people face (and have been facing for a long time) is famine, and their only object in life has become the search for food. That's a common enough experience, and not only in Africa.

Robert Cushman, you are a London theatre critic, could you please explain how this has become the subject for a play?

ROBERT CUSHMAN:

It's become the subject for a play by way of a book called "The Mountain People" by an English anthropologist, Colin Turnbull, who spent two years in the late 1960s among the Ik people and saw the effects on them of famine and of drought - given the fact that they were originally a hunting people but had been officially forced into becoming farmers with no aptitude for it and completely the wrong kind of territory for it. And the result on their social life has been disastrous: breaking all kinds of family and religious bonds.

ACTUALITY - "LES IKS".

KAY:

My Ghanaian ears don't recognise that hubbub as an African sound but it's the noise the actors make to give an impression of the Ik. Robert, you've just seen a performance of the play, haven't you?

CUSHMAN:

Yes.

KAY:

Did it strike you as essentially African?

CUSHMAN: No, it didn't. It strikes me as essentially alien, in the sense that the actors who are presenting it are a mixed, international group ranging from England to Japan and quite a lot of places between. None of them are actually African and they don't make a realistic attempt at portraying Africans. This, despite the fact that the company, only a few years ago, actually went on a visit to Africa.

KAY: Yes, the founder of the company is the English theatre director, Peter Brook, and he's been explaining to us the effect of time spent in Africa on the production.

PETER BROOK:

We all returned with a tremendous amount of deep and often contradictory impressions which now have been digested, and everyone in the group had a very strong wish to speak about Africa to find a form that enabled them to express something of these strong images that they accumulated. And that is why, in this work, we are trying to present Africa and Africans, not naturalistically by people painting their faces black, but through direct acting - through an actor without changing his face, his clothes, appearance, at the same time expressing something that he has experienced.

KAY: Robert, does this work?

CUSHMAN: Theatrically, it works very well indeed - it is a magnificent production. But I think Peter Brook may be fooling himself if he believes that his trip to Africa contributed in any tangible way to the effect he produces. I daresay it gave him a few ideas, maybe even gave him the confidence to launch the play in the first place, but once he had launched it, I think it is very much a production of his and his actors' own imagination.

KAY: It doesn't seem to me that the people represented are typically African, are they?

CUSHMAN: No, they are not but to be fair, I don't think it's claimed that they are. I mean, I don't think many Africans and certainly no urban Africans would recognise the Ik as being typical of their situation. But I think the reason why Peter Brook has chosen to dramatise the Ik is that they represent people, any people, on the edge of human experience. They could be anybody, they could be the people watching the play, if drought and famine suddenly struck them.

KAY: So you would say, in fact, that it does really speak to a universal human experience?

CUSHMAN: Absolutely, this is its validity. And when you see a state of affairs in which the bonds between parents and children have been loosed, in which people attack each other for the sake of picking up a stray piece of orange peel, and in which everybody else's misfortunes become a subject for laughter and in which this is the only kind of sense of humour left - then you shudder because you realise the implications are universal and you realise that civilisation is really a very thin mask.

KAY: Yes, well, for this production to be acceptable to an African audience, I would have thought that if Peter Brook was going to produce anything on an international scale he should at least

try to be non-partisan. How does the production escape from the culture of the west?

CUSHMAN: I don't think it does, because Brook himself is a product of a culture of the west so the only comment he can make on African, or any other, experience is from a western standpoint. But I don't think it's in anyway patronising because of that. I think what he's done is to accept his own limitations - accept that it would create useless difficulties if he and his actors tried to create a realistic portrayal of the Africans. He has gone instead for a stylised view, something that doesn't attempt to be realistically convincing but does attempt to get at the underlying truth of the situation; the way in which the dreadful circumstances bring out the worst in absolutely anybody.

KAY: Would you say that this method can be used widely by other theatre groups around the world?

CUSHMAN: Difficult to say. In many ways it is really rather a conventional play: Brook commissioned a couple of dramatists to write a play based on the book and he obviously must have used a lot of improvisation to bring the thing alive. This is certainly a method that can be used by actors in Africa or anywhere else.

KAY: Sounds very exciting. Yes, I'd like to see it some day. But thank you very much, Robert Cushman, for coming to talk to us.

CUSHMAN: Thank you.

KAY: It was in 1972 that "In the Ditch", the account of a young Nigerian woman's struggle to raise her family in an inhospitable London, was published. The book, a semi-autobiography, was by Buchi Emecheta and her latest book "Second Class Citizen" demonstrates how important the publication of the first book was to her.

TAIWO AJAI READING EXTRACT FROM "SECOND CLASS CITIZEN"

Adah is the heroine, of course, that Buchi Emecheta creates from her own experiences which even include the burning of her first manuscripts by her husband,

BUCHI EMECHETA:

At the end of the book, if you notice, Adah, the heroine of the book, has decided that she'll never, never have any more children and instead of having physical children, she will probably be able to start writing books. And "The Bride Price" was the first of her books and burning it, or destroying it, was like killing her baby - her next baby. It was so important to her.

INTERVIEWER: I think that anybody who reads "Second Class Citizen" can't escape the fact that there is mostly fact and not very much fiction in it. Why have you chosen a form that is not just straight autobiography? Why don't you say "I" and "my family" and "my husband" instead of giving the heroine another name?

EMECHETA: Because I want to add a bit of comical side into the whole thing. Because such a serious sort of episode ("In the Ditch", for instance if you notice, and "Second Class Citizen" both have the same heroine going through, which is Adah) if you make a serious topic too serious and make it personal, it comes out too dry. So putting it in the third person I can turn it round a bit, and make it funny in serious places if I want to. And that is the advantage of writing in the third person.

KAY: And here's an example from the opening pages. I'd better explain that although Adah is Lagos born and bred, her parents came from the town of Ibuza.

TAIJO AJAI READING EXTRACT FROM "SECOND CLASS CITIZEN".

We've already heard now Buchi's attempts to write were received by her husband, but her determination to write was established long before then.

EMECHETA: In fact, I had the idea of writing from the time that I was about 12, I think around that age. And the person who really inspired me was people like Wordsworth, the poet, I remember reading him at school, the Methodist Girls High School. And I told my teacher - we had English teachers in those days - and I said "When I grow up I want to be a poet" and she said "Oh, you must go back to the chapel and confess to God because you mustn't make such statements". And that put me off for a very, very long time and I never had the courage to tell anybody until I married and when my husband knew, the first manuscript was destroyed. But all along the line I have had it inside me: that one day I'm really going to write.

KAY: "Second Class Citizen" is more than a documentary account of a Nigerian girl following her husband to Britain and adjusting to an alien society. It's also a detailed account of the break-up of a marriage in these strange surroundings and Buchi agrees that it was a bitter book to write.

EMECHETA: Yes it was. It was a really bitter book and it had this effect on me because everytime, before I wrote it, when I saw the children I used to feel still bitter towards them, that but for them I would not have been tied in this sort of situation. But getting it out of my system sort of made me relax a bit. For instance when I finished it I waited until my daughter was old enough to be able to read and understand it, and asked her what she felt about it - whether she would like me to have it published, and she said "yes". And this had a tremendous effect on me because I feel relaxed in a way and feel that I should be able to communicate to other women, or whoever has been in a position like that.

Buchi Emecheta. And her book "Second Class Citizen" is published in London by Alison and Busby, and price is £2.50p.

STEVE RHODES VOICES

An Ibo song from Nigeria sung by Steve Rhodes and His Voices ends the programme. But I'm looking forward to seven days from now when I'll be back with more "Arts and Africa". So, till then, this is Kwesi Kay saying goodbye.

STEVE RHODES VOICES.

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