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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we talk to Sophie Lokko, from Ghana, who's just been appointed to the Executive Committee of the International Federation for Theatre Research and to the man who wrote this:

MUKHTARR MUSTAPHA: Reads an extract from his poem "Dalabani" set to music.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Mukhtarr Mustapha, the man you've just heard reading one of his poems set to music, is one of Sierra Leone's leading writers. Now in his early 30's, he's poet-in-residence at the University of Michigan in the United States. While he was in London recently, Neville Harms talked to Mukhtarr for "Arts and Africa".

MUKHTARR MUSTAPHA: Reads an extract from his poem "Dalabani" set to music.

HARMS:

Mukhtarr, that sounds to me a fascinating combination of words and music, how exactly did you make it? How did you put that together?

MUSTAPHA:

Well I started writing this particular poem titled "Dalabani", which means "the dance of the ancestors", in 1968 and finally I got to New York and connected myself with some fantastic musicians who saw the poem had other kinds of capacities, it had dimensions, and that we could be able to do something together with it.

HARMS:

Now when you did it with this group of jazz musicians, actually

how did you go about doing it, putting it on tape, making this recording?

MUSTAPHA:

I spoke to a friend, a musician, a powerful musician, Stanley Cowell, who looked at the poem and said "Well, give me a month to study it", and I gave him a month to study it and one morning he called me and said I ought to come over to his apartment and that he has worked something out, and I walked into his apartment and there were all these giants sitting there, musicians, very heavy musicians. They started playing a couple of notes and I started feeling it. And he said: "Could you speak a line?" and I spoke a line. That was the first rehearsal. And then we had a few rehearsals, then we decided to get into the studios and spent fifteen hours at the studios with various musicians coming in at different times and putting things on tape, reading the poems and getting down into playing certain instruments and seeing what the music actually was within the fabric of the poem. The poem was the smaller motor that generated the larger motor of the music.

HARMS:

How many instruments are there there?

MUSTAPHA:

Oh, at least about sixteen instruments - Western instruments as well as African instruments. I had the mbira from East Africa and I had the pondi from Sierra Leone, and the balaphone from Senegal and then we had the ghaita from Morocco, and we had the sekere from Nigeria and the bells came from Upper Volta.

HARMS:

And who was playing these instruments?

MUSTAPHA:

Two Africans - Salem Toureh from Senegal and myself and the rest of them were Americans, were black Americans.

HARMS:

What is it about this poem "Dalabani"?

MUSTAPHA:

"Dalabani" is a source which is obeying the commands of the ancestral stream, that is, I am from Africa but I see the the universality of my own being and at the same time this particular kind of dance is a dance which extends to the whole human experience.

HARMS:

And "Dalabani" is the name of the dance"?

MUSTAPHA:

"Dalabani" is the name of the dance, the name of the drama, the name of the theatre. It's the totality of it all.

HARMS:

And this is a Sierra Leonian word?

MUSTHAPA:

Funnily enough this word comes from Odagadougou. It is a dance which is celebrating the dance of the ancestors, the dance of blood, the dance of the masks, the dance of the circle, 'Circulo de Oration' if you want to call it that, the circle of the Oration you know, the tabernacle, the dance which clothes one with a feeling of continuum, a belief, the will to do, the will to be. This is "Dalabami".

HARMS:

One element in this poem which I recognise very strongly is the element of violence that you've already mentioned. I wonder if we can just hear that section of the poem, one section of the poem which does seem to me extremely violent.

MUSTAPHA: Reads an extract from "Dalabami" set to music.

HARMS:

You seem there to be regelling in violence. Are you yourself a violent man?

MUSTAPIA:

Well, I think when you're idgalang in this kind of medium you don't rule yourself beyond the violence which you see, which you experience, which you feel, which you know about and to conceal it would not be doing justice to one's own credentials, or to one's own presence as a man, as a man of action, as an artist and I will have to reflect on it, truly reflect on it and solidly deal with it because this violence is also a continuum. The violence is also part of the joy, violence is what we experience, our day to day relationships.

HARMS:

You see violence around you every day do you?

MUSTAPHA:

Every day, every day I see it. I see it in New York, I see it in Africa, I see it in Europe and I want to find a way, maybe, of transcending my self beyond that kind of violence and making people, feeling people, understand what it is all about. This is the message.

HARMS:

But surely people know only too well what violence is all about and don't need it glorified in this sense.

MUSTAPHA:

Well it's very strange Neville because sometimes people see things in front of them but they don't want to deal with it, they don't want to answer it and so in order that they would be made to feel responsible to themselves first of all I make it very clear that these things exist, that they are alive, and we've got to talk about them, we've got to discuss them, and this is why I do what I do.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Mukhtarr Mustapha, from Sierra Leone, who's now poet-in-residence at Michigan University in the United States talking to Neville Harms.

The International Federation for Theatre Research has recently held an important conference in the beautiful Italian city of Venice at which the well-known Ghanaian Sophie Lokko of the University of Legon who's with me now was elected to the Federation's Executive Committee. First of all Sophie, congratulations.

SOPHIE LOKKO:

Thank you very much,

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now tell me briefly the aim of this Federation.

LOKKO:

Well the sole aim is to help universities with chairs of Drama, promote their research into drama and of course also to help them with visual aids; all the necessary help that they will require for the promotion of their work. I happen to have met two professors from France who are very interested in the role drama plays in the education of the child and even the adult and this happened to be my special area in my teaching assignment in Ghana. We more or less compared notes and one of them, Professor Clansy, had been on tour in so many places in Britain he said, and I wrote a paper some time ago and luckily I had the paper with me. He read it and he said "Well do send me a copy when you go over because I want to if possible get the

International Federation for Theatre Research to give you all the help necessary. And why I wrote that particular paper, and why I have that particular interest is the observations that I have made between the average Ghanaian child and the average European child. You see the average Ghanaian child in the classroom will, before any seat of authority, will shy away. He will coil into a nutshell and will never never say a word, even if you coax him. But the average European child, or English child in the classroom is full of beans. Mind you the average English child never talks to strangers when he's in the open fields, but the Ghanaian child talks to strangers. If we can bring this into the classroom it will be a very great asset and you know of course we are full of beans, the Africans, and we have no inhibitions. But why should we shy away when we come before any seat of authority? I believe drama can help a lot in this.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you think other countries are likely to join the Federation when the idea has taken root?

LOKKO:

Having been elected on the Executive I happen to be the Correspondent Secretary and I have been asked to contact other African countries, maybe the francophone countries. They of course centre their drama work mainly on the literature side, not on the acting and on the theatre side. But nevertheless I will still contact them anyway. If they are interested they can join.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

What exactly do you do at Legon?

LOKKO:

I am in the Drama section of the Institute of African Studies in the University of Ghana. I teach drama or lecture in drama and I happen to be the head of the Drama Department.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

That's very good.

LOKKO:

As a teacher of drama I don't think it's really helpful not to be involved in the acting side of the drama work so I always take part in plays, available plays, with the students. I'm even in a television series, right away before coming, in fact, the series isn't over. We've done six episodes now and a funny thing happened at the airport when I was leaving. There were three children and some adults and they asked whether I was going away. I said "Oh, yes, I'm going to Venice for a Conference".

And then one of them said "Oh, but you can't go. You are appearing on television tonight and we won't see you". And everybody laughed and said "Oh, it's been recorded".

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I must congratulate you on your efforts and I hope you have much success in the future. Thank you very much Sophie.

LOKKO:

Thank you very much, grazie, ciao.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that's all from this edition of "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye for now - and hoping you'll be listening again next week for more "Arts and Africa".

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