

Arts and Africa

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we'll be talking to a well-known Ghanaian writer about writing for television and hearing about a recent exhibition of art from Zaire in New York.

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well if you heard last week's programme, you may remember that one of the participants in our discussion on the Culture of Africa was the well-known Ghanaian writer - Cameron Duodu. Well Cameron who is one of Africa's leading novelists and newspapermen, is in London at the moment working on a television play for the BBC. I asked him what the play was called and what it was all about.

CAMERON DUODU:

It's a very difficult thing to say. The title is still being fought over, there's bound to be blood in it I'm afraid. Now the theme is very interesting because although it is only a 30 minute play, I've tried to get in a lot of ideas that have been worrying me: anachronistic customs in our society, the lasting effect of what we learn as children, when we grow up and become exposed to all sorts of advanced cultures. There is love in it, relationships between people of different races - just imagine and in only 30 minutes!

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well that's quite a lot on your plate I'm afraid. Have you written for other media - say the radio, the stage?

DUODU: I have written for the radio and of course I've written prose work and poetry, but this is the most challenging thing that I've ever done because when you're writing for television you are much more limited than in, say radio, especially because of budgetary difficulties. Now I was told immediately that you couldn't have more than four sets and there was to be no shooting of localities at all, everything had to be in the studio. Well, immediately this gives you a limitation which is very, very difficult to overcome, and that's what I've been battling against. I must say that I'm pleased what I've done so far appears to be within the limitations and yet not to have lost much of what I had in mind when I started. I would have loved to film on location but that's out, and I've got to get it all in the studio. But even the sets, you sit in London writing about a typical Ghanaian house in a village and you say - a Ghanaian courtyard in the evening, corrugated iron sheets, cemented floor, raised patio and so on. How are you going to get it right? And this is vision and there are Ghanaians who are going to watch this here and who will be immediately repelled if there is any falsehood in, or suggested in the sets - accents, how people speak, you worry about this, many of the actors here happen to come from the West Indies - are they going to get it right when they read my lines? All there are tremendous problems, but we hope to succeed.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well you obviously didn't anticipate them before you took up this project. Now that you are faced with these things assuming that you couldn't get the right things would you just take substitutes? Because it seems to me that is what is going to happen actually.

DUODU: Well I would of course, I'm dealing with people who are very broad minded and who understand the writer's point of view, and I'll certainly make my views very well known and make suggestions and hope that they are taken because I've put a lot of labour into this work and I want it to be as good as possible.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Why did you in the first place choose to write for television?

DUODU: Well I was commissioned to do it, but I welcomed the opportunity, I mean, it is a challenge in the medium. I've watched a lot of television, particularly colour television, and drama is really open to such possibilities of beauty, just representing beautiful things on the screen, and I love to create beautiful things, and also the idea of being able to show a wide audience in England what life is like in an ordinary Ghanaian day-to-day life, as it were, the conflicts that come up in his daily life which are universal, the love scene between the boy and the girl, I believe is one of the best things I've ever written, and I hope it will come across beautifully for people to know that we are just like them; and this is the way we do our own things.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Are any of these themes you are including in your play on racial lines?

DUODU: Oh well....

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Because you talk about cultures which we're exposed to when we're young, and I thought that perhaps you might have been thinking of Western Culture.

DUODU: Yes indeed. There is one scene where a young student is staying with his headmaster who is white, and the headmaster happens to be homosexual. Now as a result the boy feels that his colleagues suspect him of having a homosexual affair with this man, and yet he is not himself homosexual, and his sister is living with them and his sister knows the situation, so there is already a cloud in a three-cornered relationship. Then the sister's boyfriend visits her, and when he comes there is nobody in the house and they cuddle and they kiss, and then this chap comes in, and he's enraged because he is saying that it is too western, if these people are in love they should wait and go and do the proper customs like Africans and not go around, you know, the girl is in hot-pants and things and he thinks she is too much under the influence of American culture. And as a result there is quite a scene, and he is saying you are not behaving like true Africans, and they say - we are behaving like human beings and you are repressed and that's why this scene enrages you. Well I mean, just imagine what that would be like.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Is this play of yours going to be shown in Ghana, or are you only writing for television here?

DUODU: Well, I've been commissioned to do the work and the people who have commissioned it will get it. But what happens later is of course, I halt, a different matter. There are syndication rights available and anyone interested can get it.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

and are you thinking of writing anything for Ghanaian television?

DUODU: Well, they know I can write and they can ask me to write for them.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, well, I think that's quite a fair comment. Well anyway, I do hope they ask you to write, and that you produce something as good as what I hope this is going to be. When by the way is the play coming up?

DUODU: I hope it will be in the early quarter of 1976. I've made it sound as if it is very serious and full of conflicts and things, it isn't at all. There is a scene in which palm wine drinkers are teasing one another, I think I will leave you with this thought that one of them was saying that - a newspaper man would come to the village to report on what was going on there, and one of the palm wine drinkers said:- In this village to see a newspaper man? That will only be when you have produced a baby which has the face of a baboon, the legs of a cow and the arms of a lizard, because you have cooked your sperm with so much application that when it gets into your wife this is all it can produce.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well Cameron, I am very pleased that you are exposing African culture to Western audiences. I suppose this is the first time this has happened, I hope there will be many more to follow, and I wish you all the very best.

DUOBU: Thank you very much, I hope so too.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Cameron DuoBu. Now the other day the world famous weekly magazine 'The New Yorker' ran an item headlined 'Art from Zaire' which interested us. It said "Herd on the heels of the Emperor of Japan, the King of Norway and the President of Uganda, there came to our resilient city last week practically everybody from Zaire except its President. The occasion for the presence of so many distinguished Zaireans was the unveiling at the African-American Institute, across First Avenue from the United Nations, of a remarkable exhibit of one hundred works of art from the Institute of the National Museums of Zaire." Well, it just so happened that apart from the Emperor of Japan, the King of Norway and the President of Uganda, one of my colleagues, Neville Harms was on holiday in New York at the time we read about the exhibition, so we sent him a telegram, and after taking his family around the UN building, he kindly agreed to review the exhibition for us. Well Neville's now back from holiday and he's with me now. Neville, sorry about interrupting your holiday to see the Zaire exhibition, but broadly what did you think of it?

HARMS: Well, it was a magnificent exhibition of, as you said, something like a hundred objects beautifully displayed, ranging both in historical and artistic sense very widely. There are archeological objects - a couple of pots for instance, and some bracelets which date right back to about the eighth century. So this is over a thousand years, right up to the present day, objects that were in use in villages until they were recently collected by the National Museums in Zaire. So these were objects which were in use in villages, and a great effort has been made to collect objects and there were many things in this exhibition which have never been displayed anywhere, not only outside Zaire, but inside Zaire, because Zaire doesn't yet have the building to house its national collection, so these objects were on display for the first time. As I've said, there were a very wide range of things ranging from the practical things like pots, stools, purely practical village objects but beautifully made, to objects like masks and staffs and various objects which were used in ritual practices in the villages over a very long span of years.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Was there any particular exhibit which you considered outstanding?

HARMS: Well, there were a lot of things which were absolutely magnificent, particularly the big scale masks, some superb ones which are done with cowry shells and beads, absolutely beautiful objects, but I think outstanding of all was a small statuette carved in a rather dark wood which comes from the Hemba region which is in the Shaba province in the South of the Country.

HARMS: This is a statuette with a beautifully rounded head with (cont) delicately arched eyebrows over the top of the eyes. This head is standing on a long exquisite neck with rings carved round, and the woman has very pendulous breasts, which is in fact holding a sort of fertility symbol so that it clearly has some fertility symbol in it, but purely as a work of art without any of those religious or mystical or ritual overtones, I would put this in the very highest class of art from any area, certainly as beautiful an object, I think, as you would find anywhere in Africa.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Your reaction is obviously very favourable. How well did the exhibition go down in the U.S.A.?

HARMS: The day that I was there was in fact designated as 'Black Solidarity Day' and there were demonstrations and meetings going on in New York and the black people that I was told had been thronging to the exhibition weren't in fact there. So when I was there, there were a few rather lost white American ladies going round saying: Now where do you say Zaire is exactly? But I think when they went round, it was an enormous revelation to them - the beauty and the magnificence of some of these objects.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I'm surprised that they asked that question because they are following hard on the Forman - Ali fight in Zaire, one would have thought that everybody in the U.S.A. would know about Zaire.

HARMS: Well, indeed one would have thought so, and I think there is, on the part of Zairean government, a great desire to express itself to the world and to promote Zaire, particularly in the United States, and I think you can see it alongside the Ali - Forman fight.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And do you expect further casual exchanges?

HARMS: I think this is probable - I think, as I said, that the Zaire government does want to promote things Zairean in the outside world and to establish itself as one of the most important countries in Africa from a wide range of points of view.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Neville Harms talking about an exhibition of art from Zaire which is at present on tour in the United States. And that's all for this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye for now and hoping that you'll be listening again next week for more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC

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