

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hello from Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and welcome to our weekly review of "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

This week we return to a subject which I am sure is becoming pretty familiar to you - South African poetry.

"SOUTH AFRICAN MAN" BY HAMILTON BOHANNON

But really the subject is so large and the scope so extended that we are certainly not likely to exhaust it in a couple of programmes. You have already heard the names of people like Wally Serote, Sidney Sampala, Oswald Mtshali, and Dennis Brutus, and a tantalising taste of their work. Now we turn to four others, two men and two women, whose work is very different in style and tone. Let's start with Stephen Grey, now in his early thirties, a journalist, university lecturer, editor of the review, "Izwe", critic and a sharp satirist. Here he is describing one of the poems in a series called "The Beasts History". I wonder who the beast is?

STEPHEN GREY:

This poem, called "Fatter Than They Knew", derives its title as a jest against a book called "Better Than They Knew" which outlined the British contribution to current South Africa. It has a little imaginary folk song at the top "Oh to be in Britain, if it is still there".

READS "FATTER THAN THEY KNEW"

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Even when he talks of love - Stephen Grey still retains his sharp, critical bone. This is a poem which gives its title to his first book of poems, "It's About Time".

GREY: READS "IT'S ABOUT TIME"

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Stephen Grey.

MUSIC BY HAMILTON BOHANNON

TETTEH-LARTEY: South African writing is by no means a male preserve. if one thi of Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, Daph Rooke, novel writing at least seems to be in danger of being dominated by women. And there are a number of women poets, among whom is Phyllis Haring, now working as a swimming instructress - can't be many swimming teachers who write poetry! For thirty years she has been travelling around the world and writing verse which gets better all the time. Here is one of her latest poems, "Figure in Stone" - spoken by fellow South African, Christonie Hardwick.

CHRISTONIE HARDWICK:

READS "FIGURE IN STONE" BY PHYLLIS HARING.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Phyllis Haring's "Figure in Stone". And now to Jennifer Davids, one of the younger generation of women poets. Her first book has only recently been published that enterprising Cape Town publisher, David Philip. But Jennifer can tell us about that herself, for she's in the studio with me now.

It's nice to see you Jennifer. Now, tell us about yourself. Where were you born?

JENNIFER DAVIDS:

I was born in the centre of Cape Town, in a very built-up part of Cape Town. Went to school there and lived in that area - a very poor part too by the way - until I was about 16 when the whole family moved out to a more suburban and a more affluent part of the city. I taught in Cape Town for two years before coming over to England, which had always been a kind of dream of mine ever since I was a kid. Came to England, taught here for three years, went back to South Africa two years ago and have recently come back to England and I am teaching here now.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Do you intend to stay here or to go back to South Africa?

DAVIDS: I'd like to stay for a while, but got back eventually, I think. I get very homesick, I think I need the actual physical presence of the country: the mountains, the sea, the good parts of it.

TETTEH-LARTEY: But tell us Jennifer, how did you come to write poetry?

DAVIDS: I started writing when I was about 14. Wrote quite a lot, six poems a week - always unedited and, you know, kept in thick manuscript books. I think it was necessary at the time for me to write: I didn't have much outside my home to interest me and it came as a shock at school and I wanted to write myself.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Did you make enough money out of it to live on?

DAVIDS: Never. I don't think I will ever.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Now, obviously the subject of your poetry would be South Africa. Have you got any special one out of your repertoire that you would like to read to us?

DAVIDS: Yes. I'll read a couple of poems. The first one tries to describe the locations where the blacks live outside Cape Town. I wrote this when I was about 18, so it's very distant to me now. It is from my book, "Searching For Words".

READS "LOCATION FIRES".

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Jennifer, does the writing of poetry come naturally to you, or do you have to work at it?

DAVIDS: I have to work at it all the time. I feel that if I left it it would vanish, somehow get tangled up and vanish. Really I can't manage every day at the moment but it does need a certain amount of work, regular work.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Well, that poem you read certainly had a lot of feeling in it. Have you got any other you would like to quote us from your book?

DAVIDS: Yes, one of my favourites called "This Wilderness" - a more recent one than the first one I read.

READS "THIS WILDERNESS"

TETTEH-LARTEY: Thank you very much indeed Jennifer Davids.

Our next poet lives in the same city as Jennifer, and has also just had his first book published by the same publisher, David Philip. He is Mark Swift, who now works as a journalist in the Western Cape. He was brought up in a small town in the Eastern Cape, which he revisited just before the poem was written.

MARK SWIFT:

READS "HOME TOWN".

TETTEH-LARTEY: That was "Home Town". And here is Mark Swift watching his little daughter at play.

SWIFT: READS "TODAY HAS THE MAKINGS OF AGONY"

TETTEH-LARTEY: Mark Swift, and we hope the Gods will be better to the little girl than he suspects they will.

MUSIC BY HAMILTON BOHANNON

And there we end this week's "Arts and Africa" in which we've had a glimpse of four more South African poets - Stephen Grey, Phyllis Haring, Jennifer Davids and Mark Swift. And now to the rhythm of Hamilton Bohannon and "South African Man", this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC BY HAMILTON BOHANNON.

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