

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we hear an extract from a new Nigerian opera; we discuss a new play about the assassin of Dr. Verwoerd; and we talk to the man who has formed a new international ballet company with white South African money.

SIGNATURE TUNE

DR. VERWOERD:

A recorded extract from a speech made by Dr. Verwoerd, the former Prime Minister of South Africa, at a Club dinner.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

"Come inside and see the South African Prime Minister assassinated!" - that's how audiences are being lured into one of London's many fringe theatres at the moment to see "Tsafendas" - a new play by William Tanner about the man who stabbed Dr. Verwoerd to death in the South African House of Assembly in 1966. It was Dr. Verwoerd's voice you heard just now. Taking the bulk of his material from court records and from newspaper stories published at the time, Tanner tells the story of how Tsafendas, a coloured man of Greek-Mozambique origin, managed with astonishing ease to get a job as a temporary messenger in the all-white South African parliament where he was able to plan the murder of Verwoerd. Julian Marshall asked Tessa Marwick whether "Tsafendas" was different from any other assassin.

TESSA MARWICK:

I think the pattern goes very similarly. The thing that's important is that he was the one element that was never accounted for and he was not able to be placed in any category, a discontent.

JULIAN MARSHALL:

Do you think a typical product of a certain area of South African society?

MARWICK:

Yes, I think that he is a product of that indefinable racial category. He never was able to belong anywhere in South Africa or in any other country.

MARSHALL:

So you're basically just presenting a human problem?

MARWICK:

Yes, it is a human problem. It is the problem of the man who was rejected and was deported and was transferred, refused entry on a person to person basis as well as on a legal and political basis.

MARSHALL:

The play was very detailed. Where did you draw your material from?

MARWICK:

Most of the play comes from the official enquiry into the instances of the death and also from newspaper reports.

MARSHALL:

And what about domestic scenes?

MARWICK:

They too are built up. Everything is traceable to some written source and although obviously the scenes are created, they do come from actual statements that have been made by members of families, by people who had him as a tenant and so on.

MARSHALL:

Is there any particular reason why you have decided to stage the play at this time?

MARWICK:

It is a decade since the incident, it was written by Bill and I was asked to direct it.

MARSHALL:

Just as simple as that? You're not in any way trying to focus attention on Tsafendas's plight?

MARWICK:

I think the play draws his present plight and obviously is a thing of human concern, but for me it was to do the play.

MARSHALL:

It finishes with an assessment by a doctor that in fact the wounds that Dr. Verwoerd suffered were quite normal. That in fact they were no evidence that Tsafendas was in any way hired to do this. Do you believe that as well?

MARWICK:

I do believe that he wasn't hired. I think, as I said before, that it was totally a haphazard thing that happened. I don't think that it was plotted at all and I think that the important thing is that the wounds are said to be quite ordinary, the stabbings are said to be quite ordinary, and then one assesses quite ordinary in what kind of state, what kind of society allowed stabbings to be quite ordinary.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Tessa Marwick talking to Julian Marshall about "Tsafendas", a new play about the assassin of Dr. Verwoerd.

A considerable amount of controversy has been caused by the recent announcement of the formation of a new international ballet company with white South African connections. With the details here's George Somerwill.

GEORGE SOMERWILL:

The formation of a new international ballet company is enough to cause a bit of a stir at the best of times, but when a large part of the finance of the new company comes from white South African sources, in this case the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State, then the stir is even greater. In the last year, in response to world public opinion against apartheid, and because of the cultural boycott against South Africa, the South African authorities have attempted to reduce some of the more blatant examples of racial discrimination in the arts. But this is not so in the Orange Free State, politically the most conservative of South Africa's provinces which still refuses to open its whites only theatre to blacks. It only allows coloureds to attend occasional performances. So it's likely that when the new ballet company performs in South Africa every year, it'll be mainly for whites only, in direct contravention of the ban by the British Actor's Union, Equity, which discourages

artists from performing in South Africa to segregated audiences. The founder of Ballet International is Max Martin, who until eighteen months ago was administrator of the New London Ballet. I asked him what exactly the new ballet company's links were with the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State.

MAX MARTIN:

This Company already has certain contracts signed and settled, and it is in fact the money from those contracts which guarantees the Company's stability.

SOMERWILL:

Now, isn't this an attempt to undermine the cultural boycott of South Africa?

MARTIN:

Cultural boycott of South Africa... To the best of my knowledge if you went into virtually any hotel in South Africa that has a live group, nearly all of them have British musicians there. I don't think there is a cultural boycott in South Africa, personally.

SOMERWILL:

But for example, there are certain playwrights who refuse to have their works put on in South Africa.

MARTIN:

Oh, that's a personal boycott, it's not an overall boycott.

SOMERWILL:

And what about the attitude of Equity?

MARTIN:

They have been aware of the situation for a year now and obviously we wouldn't have got to the stage we are today unless the whole Equity side of it was settled.

SOMERWILL:

Don't you think this is a slightly risky time to be involved in a segregated venture in South Africa?

MARTIN:

I think you know that ballet and art are one thing, and politics and

all the rest of it is something else. Ballet is a non-political thing. We decided to go ahead with this project finally about six or seven months ago, and we're going to go ahead with it because in fact it's an art form. We're not involved with borders and people and colour, creed, race or nationality or religion or anything else as well. We've got a job to do which is to put a performance on stage.

GEORGE SOMERWILL:

Sir Max Martin is convinced that his new International Ballet Company, despite its controversial white South African connections, will be a great success, both financially and artistically. The only cloud on the horizon is that if the Company goes ahead with its plans to play to segregated audiences in the Orange Free State, then it'll have to overcome the pressure of not only British, but also World public opinion.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Thank you George.

The name Adam Fiberisima is a familiar one to lovers of serious music. He's one of Nigeria's most gifted contemporary composers. Born in Okrika in the River State, Adam Fiberisima is now Head of the Department of Music at the Voice of Nigeria. His latest work is a new three act opera called "Opu Jaja", set in the year 1800 and based on the exploits and supremacy of King Jaja of Opobo. Here's Anne Bolsover to tell you what the opera's about in more detail.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

King Jaja of Opobo is threatened by the British Consul about trade monopoly on the Island. He proves to the British Consul that it was wrong and refuses to comply to the various trade agreements signed earlier on. After threats of war between the islanders and Europeans in Opobo, King Jaja decides to send a delegation to see Queen Victoria. The delegation to London met with failure because there was nothing definite to ensure protection to the islanders. After a long stay, during which they got themselves acquainted with many English sports in the fields of Surrey, for example cricket, tennis, golf and billiards, they arrived home safely greeted by their countrymen in 1884. War ensued after their arrival because King Jaja made sure his son and the chiefs landed on Opobo soil before waging war against the British. A skirmish took place, but King Jaja was not satisfied with the attitude of the British Consul who pretended to be friendly. At last the British Consul tricked him to a private dinner on board the British Man of War and there held him captive. He was later sent on exile to the West Indies, to the Island of St. Vincent.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And now here's an extract from "Opu Jaja", performed here by the

London Symphonia with the Chorus of the English Chorale singing in Ijaw. The conductor is Martin Ford. And the part we're going to feature is when Queen Victoria is giving a banquet to the delegation King Jaja has sent to London.

MUSIC: "Opu Jaja" by Adam Fiberisima. An extract.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

An extract from Adam Fiberisima's new opera "Opu Jaja", played by the London Symphonia with the chorus of the English Chorale. The conductor was Martin Ford.

And that's all from "Arts and Africa" at the moment. Until next time this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying, with more music from "Opu Jaja", thanks for listening and goodbye.

MUSIC: "Opu Jaja" by Adam Fiberisima. An extract.

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