

# Arts and Africa

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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 in this programme we talk to a Nigerian actor about his new play and we hear about a different kind of exhibition now touring West Africa.

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

A travelling exhibition which has as its main aim a new approach to museums, has recently been touring three West African countries - Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Called Museums in Education the exhibition, consisting mainly of photographs and organised by the British Council, promotes the idea that museums are not just fossilised relics of the past but are vital centres of the community. Well while the exhibition was in Freetown, Joselyn Roland asked Dorothy Cummings, Curator of the Sierra Leone Museum, whether her museum has enough exhibits to play a bigger educational role in Sierra Leone.

DOROTHY CUMMINGS:

Yes, we have hundreds of objects in the Museum. We have so many that the Museum is now too small to cater for them all, with the result our offices have become storerooms. On top of it we change our exhibits every three months and we replace them by new exhibits and it is proved that we play an important role in education. About two thousand children come to the Museum every year on conducted tours, I'm not talking about the children who come in on their own. We arrange conducted tours for schools from a quarter to nine in the mornings until ten o' clock. That is before the general public is admitted, and we lecture to the children, we show them the objects, then time is given for them to study the objects on their own, time is given for them to make notes, to make drawings. In the schools the teachers follow up by oral lessons, by descriptions, writing of essays and so on.

JOSELYN ROLAND:

Mrs. Cummings, what was the general response to the exhibition by children, educationalists, teachers, principals?

CUMMINGS:

The people were very interested. About twelve thousand people visited the exhibition, visited the Museum during the exhibition. They came from all walks of life. They were teachers, professors, they were doctors of medicine, they were civil servants, they were ministers of religion and they were school children. They all passed very favourable comments.

ROLAND:

Would you say the exhibition fulfilled its role?

CUMMINGS:

Yes, I think the exhibition did fulfil its rôle. Even after the exhibition more teachers applied for conducted tours. The people have become extremely interested in the Museum and we now have more visitors than before. Originally we had between three hundred thousand and three hundred and fifty thousand visitors per annum, but I think this coming year we will get much more. We get letters from many schools booking conducted tours, so I think the exhibition is helping in education, in Sierra Leone museum education for that matter.

ROLAND:

What particular subjects do the objects at the Museum cover?

CUMMINGS:

The objects cover three fields. They cover pure history and we have objects, for example, the model of the Darata stone, the late Prime Minister Sir Milton Margai, an effigy of Rea Chief by Burai, the last Chief who challenged the British. We have uniforms, we have crowns, we have objects belonging to the colonial period, that is one field. These pieces were dug up. We have tools, neolithic tools belonging to the Stone Age, because they are highly polished. They were dug up in the Diamondiferous era. We have these stone figurines called Nomali (phonetically). They are made from steatite or soap stone. We have these big heads called Mayafi (phonetically), also made from steatite, and a host of other things like board stones and so on. And the last field is ethnography. These are the carvings or traditional art, in other words art made for the people to use the art. In Africa we do not carve carvings for the sake of beauty, art for the sake of art, but they are used and therefore it is called traditional art and these are the most numerous.

We have carvings, we have secret society objects, we have regalia belonging to Chiefs, we have farm implements, we have cooking utensils and we have costumes belonging to masquerading dancers, and many more.

ROLAND:

Thinking in terms of the general situation where the emphasis is now on general African history, do you have objects catering for this particular subject?

CUMMINGS:

No, we don't. The Museum is too small. We only cater for Sierra Leone pieces. We do have a few foreign pieces, but they were donated. We do not collect such pieces ourselves, we have no space for such pieces.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Dorothy Cummings, Curator of the Sierra Leone Museum talking to Joselyn Roland in Freetown.

A new play by the Nigerian actor and writer, Yemi Ajibade, has just opened at one of London's top theatres, the Royal Court. Entitled "Parcel Post", Yemi Ajibade's new play is about a Nigerian household in London where the family are nervously awaiting the arrival of a virgin bride.

Julian Marshall went along to ask Yemi Ajibade more about his new play.

YEMI AJIBADE:

Oh about a man, an African who has been living here and he sends for a girl from home as his wife and then when she comes over there are quite a few problems before she came over which are coming over and changing the house, and then when she comes she comes with some piece of trouble - two people who have never met each other and they have this problem to contend with. It is a very wide ranging story but I chose a particular section which I know and then through it tell the story, the dramatization of the story. It isn't written for a British audience, it's written particularly for a Nigerian audience, but it's said to have universal appeal.

JULIAN MARSHALL:

But you don't think that you'll have any problems conveying your message to a British audience?

AJIBADE:

No, there is no problem because it's chosen by the British as

you know, the Royal Court Theatre, one of the top class theatres in the English-speaking theatre and you know they have a band of experts who read the plays, and they are all British. Unfortunately they ought to have some blacks among them. They are all British so you can see that these are the people who decide what plays go on, even written by the English themselves. So it is from this angle so there is no problem at all.

MARSHALL:

Do you regard it as a mark of distinction that you've been able to stage this play at the Royal Court, which as you say is a very prestigious theatre?

AJIBADE:

In a way I'm very glad because one is in the business and one is ambitious and this is responsible for my staying on and on and on in this country, to see that one gathers experience where competition is very, very high, rife. Therefore I'm very, very glad that the play is going on here in the best place. As an artist looking at it now, it goes on here in the best place. As an artist looking at it now, it goes on here, it goes on anywhere. You see what I mean, one wants one's work to be seen, and to be seen, in the best light, in the best place. You mention the Royal Court Theatre in the same breath as the Royal Shakespeare Company, and then you come down to commercial theatre and fringe etc.

MARSHALL:

In "Parcel Post" you play a dual role, both as actor and also as author of the play. Does this mark a turning point in your career, will you be writing more plays from now on?

AJIBADE:

Well I'll be writing more plays. In fact I have plays which I've written after "Parcel Post", through the help of the award I got from the Arts Council for which I was able to buy time but writing and playing wasn't my intention. I've already established myself here as an actor in the theatre, and after that as a director. Then I began to write plays. Now I was sort of, not forced, but convinced, to act in this, because I wanted to back out of it or play a very, very small part, you know the way it is. So I can help them and see how the thing is going. But I was, for several reasons, I feel flattered when I was told that I'm one of the very few actors who can bring this particular role alive so that's how come it could be a pattern that I'll be acting in every play I write, but it's the pattern that I'll be writing more and more plays for the blacks.

MARSHALL:

Do you think that it's been a struggle as a Nigerian working in Britain?

AJIBADE:

Oh, I would say it's been a war. It's been a war! Because you leave very established studies to come to the theatre, and then with big hopes that you're going to be this, you'll see your name in lights and things which are there now in some very ironic way. And all of a sudden, people praise you at school, at grammar school and say you're brilliant, you're talented, You work very hard, then you leave, your white friends are working. Some of them you think they are mediocre, some are good, some are better, but they work and you don't work, and they begin to get small parts, and you reject humiliating parts, you don't want to play silly parts that doesn't mean anything to you, and then so it's been a war, fighting through this, through the years, and this is one of the reasons probably I had to discover that I could direct plays, so that I would not let frustration take most of my time. And when I found that that wasn't enough I still say that that there is still time for frustration in between directing plays and acting. Therefore writing is one of those where frustration is of a different kind, you know where your work is not accepted, but that you can't work when it's not there. You have your pen and your paper, you can work, if you want to work or you have the time to work.

MARSHALL:

How have you spent the last few years? I believe that you also had quite a few parts in films? Have you been type-cast do you feel in these films?

AJIBADE:

Well, I have not been type-cast at all, but in the last few years, six, eight years, I've been given roles of leadership, of course that's not strange. When I was even younger I was playing juvenile leads, black leads, revolutionary, staging coup d'etat, my first soldier part I staged a coup d'etat. When there was no coup d'etat in Africa. But a few weeks later there was a coup d'etat in Dahomey, now Benin, this coincidence happened and it became affirmed. And after that I played Premier Mali, I played Emperor Theodore of Abyssinia with Peggy Ashcroft, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, and then I played Nelson Mandela, the South African guy in prison and revolutionary, then I played Moise Tshombe of Katanga as President, and so on and I began to have these Heads of States and then last, and then I played General Asamingoya in a film, "Ashatar" as a Head of State of some fictitious African country, and so all roles these roles, big, big, head of something, started rolling in, but in between I played a professor and things.

MARSHALL:

So to become a playwright and eventually a director is in fact a logical conclusion for this sort of role that you've been

playing as an actor?

AJIBADE:

Well I have never connected. You see one just works and hopes for the best and keeps working and hopes that one is doing ones best and hopes for the success.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Nigerian actor and playwright Yemi Ajibade, talking to Julian Marshall about his new play "Parcel Post".

And that's all from "Arts and Africa" for the moment. Until the same time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: "Limpopo" by Jeremy Taylor.

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