

# 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 novelist and playwright; we discuss Shakespeare in West Africa and we hear about a new play with an original subject: Mercenaries in Angola.

## SIGNATURE TUNE

### TETTEH-LARTEY:

This has been quite a month for Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian novelist and playwright. Her new play "A Kind of Marriage" has just been shown in BBC Television's season of plays by Commonwealth writers, and her new novel "The Bride Price" has just been published.

Buchi, both the titles of your new play and your new novel seem to be about marriage. Why is that?

### BUCHI EMECHETA:

Because I feel that at the moment for African women and for Nigerian women in particular, marriage can be almost a gentle trap, the way it's being conducted at the moment. So I highlight them in the type of African marriages we have, in my plays and in books, so that people can see what actually goes on. It's not that it's terribly wrong, but I feel that it can sort of trap a woman for ever.

### TETTEH-LARTEY:

Can you tell me briefly what the plot of your new play "A Kind of Marriage" is?

### EMECHETA:

The play starts from here in London, two students who met each other,

they got married and she had to wait to get married until she was nearly in her thirties, fairly old, according to Nigerian standards, so by the time she got home she was only able to have a son. And the husband is I think two years younger than the wife and is director of his own family. Of course, by Nigerian standards, one son is not enough, so he would like another son. But he was too frightened to let the wife know, so he was bulldozed by his own family to have a separate woman somewhere, and so when they went home to their home town they brought this little boy and told her, "Look, your husband has got another son, four years old", and of course she had no choice but to accept, otherwise her son will lose his place in the family. So it's a kind of marriage where they compromise between the old and the new. The other work is "The Bride Price".

TETTEH-LARTEY:

That's the novel?

EMECHETA:

That's the novel "the Bride Price". The plot is again about being trapped into a kind of Ibo marriage. This is not very common among Ibos, but among this particular group I write about, it's the people from Ibuzor, a girl can be forced into marrying a man as long as the man has got his own lock of hair. And this was what happened to the girl. She found herself being forced to marry somebody she didn't care for. Of course she had to run away with another man she loved and the man she loved happened to come from slave ancestors and amongst our people, daughters of very clean families they don't go into such families, even though they are now by modern standards doctors and lawyers, and she eloped with this boy but eventually she had to die. I had to kill her at the end because she went against our tradition. So to me, deep down inside, I'm still a traditionalist, but still it's better to let people see it and read about it.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I know you being a woman who naturally, and I sympathize with the lot of a woman, but don't you think a marriage can be a trap for a man as well?

EMECHETA:

No, because men are free to do what they like. If for instance a woman has no children the man is free to get another wife. And in our place there is no complete divorce as such, all you have to do is just to put the woman away. She's still your wife, she still retains the Mrs. if she likes, and then you get as many women as you like. In the Western culture, yes it can be a trap, but not the way we have it in Nigeria.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now your play's going to be shown on BBC television here, do you think there's any chance of it being shown in Nigeria?

EMECHETA:

Oh yes, because it has a large Nigerian cast. I have Jumoke Debayo as the leading lady and one of my children and I have I think two or three others - Olu Jacobs, well-known Nigerian actors who took part in the play so I think it should have appeal to a Nigerian audience and the background music is Ibo music, and the village setting, everything with the goats and the hens, they're all Nigerian!

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now how about your book? It's been published here, is it going to be published in Nigeria as well?

EMECHETA:

Oh yes, Fontana has bought the rights for Nigeria, so that is coming out in Nigeria and the same thing with my other books so with these new ones they have the paperbacks and that should be within the reach of almost everybody.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Buchi, thank you very much, and I wish you well.

EMECHETA:

Thank you.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Since the MPLA'S military victory, Angola has rapidly become what is known in journalistic terms as "Yesterday's News". And that in fact is the title of a new play in London which is about the recruitment of British mercenaries to fight for the FNLA in Angola. The action centres around one of the mercenaries, a raw recruit called Keith Jones. But most of the mercenaries are made up of tough, rough, veteran soldiers. Julian Marshall spoke to two of the cast, Paul Kember and David Rintoul, who play experienced soldiers. He spoke first to Paul Kember, the actor playing the part of an ex-paratrooper.

JULIAN MARSHALL:

Can I just ask you both first to what extent you actually researched

the parts that you were involved in?

PAUL KEMBER:

We actually met a lot of people and most of the stuff in the show is taken from tape recordings, actual words the people have spoken to us.

MARSHALL:

What do you think was going through the mind of the character you were playing?

KEMBER:

When he was talking to us?

DAVID RINTOUL:

I think they were both rather uneasy about coming to talk to us and they also had just come back, I think about three weeks previously, from Angola. They'd obviously been through a lot out there and were quite suspicious about us. I mean they relaxed and they've been to see the show since, and we've got to know them reasonably well, but certainly on first meeting they were very suspicious indeed.

MARSHALL:

And how did they react to the show when they came along?

KEMBER:

I think they enjoyed it because I think they were interested, as a lot of the people we've spoken to are, in actually trying to get some sort of truth over. Because they feel that so many mistruths have been quoted in the newspapers and in the media generally, that they welcome the opportunity to actually set the record straight. I think they feel that the show is their representation of what they were trying to convey about the realities of the situation out there.

MARSHALL:

And do you feel that having come into contact with these former mercenaries, you played the parts yourselves, that you have any greater understanding of what happened in Angola?

RINTOUL:

I think so, yes, as far as reconstruction of detail goes, but there

is still a lot of mystery there because a lot of the people we talked to had different experiences out there, were in different units in different areas of the war, and so the first thing we tried to do in mounting the production, after we'd decided that it was going to be about Angola, was to try and reconstruct the sequence of events from newspaper cuttings and so on. And then the show changed from a kind of straight narrative documentary kind of thing about Angola, to being about the lives of seven quite particular people. And so, yes, we have in passing picked up a lot of information about what went on out there, but that hasn't been our kind of guiding light. Rather we've tried to understand the people who are involved and get to know their attitudes.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Julian Marshall on "Yesterday's News".

Suzan Farmer is a well-known British actress who with her fellow actor John Fraser has just spent two months touring Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Nigeria on behalf of the British Council, playing specially adapted versions of Shakespeare to more than sixty thousand West African school children.

Suzan, you are supposed to have played to school children doing their 'O' levels, but from all the accounts given in the papers here it looks as if you played to villagers rather than school children. Was this deliberate?

SUZAN FARMER:

No, they were school children. We would play sometimes not really in a village, but in the nearest town which had the biggest school building to which something like fifteen schools would come from maybe a hundred miles away, but they were all school children studying to take WASC, which over here would be 'O' levels and over there is the same thing.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Even those who are said to have peeped at you from tree tops?

FARMER:

Ah, they were the little ones that weren't allowed in! Because it was specially for the children who were studying for this exam, and for this exam they were studying "Macbeth" and "The Merchant of Venice" and they were going to be asked questions and they'd have to pass the exam in English. And all the other children, because they'd never seen acting, we did go to places where they'd never seen live acting at all, just wanted to see what was going on, so they'd sort of fill in all the windows and watch!

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And what sort of response did you have from them, apart from their enthusiasm?

FARMER:

Rapture! I mean their enjoyment is quite astounding. If one did the same thing in England you would never ever get that reaction. I think English school children would just be bored. I certainly would have been as a child. Where to them, "Macbeth" especially, they absolutely adore it, it's like I think if they saw a Western on television they'd react in the same way. They'd love seeing acting to be done. They can't believe that you're not actually the people that you're portraying. They believed I was Lady Macbeth, they believed John Fraser was Macbeth, and then we did "The Merchant of Venice" and of course they loved John Fraser playing Shylock and then Portia winning at the trial as he doesn't get his "pound of flesh". They understood every word and identified with it. Shakespeare, anyway for them is considered wonderful, they love him, he's not heavy like he is to us as children. I mean to us he's really quite tough, but they study him so much, there's always Shakespeare in their WASC exam, they always have to study one or two Shakespeare plays.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you think if they hadn't had the background to Shakespeare studies, they would have appreciated the plays in the same way as they did?

FARMER:

Well, the only example I can give as an answer to that really is that occasionally we would play to children who had only studied "Macbeth" and because we had a programme which we devised of doing "Macbeth" and "The Merchant of Venice" it seemed such a shame not to show them "The Merchant of Venice" as well, because they always seemed to enjoy it. And most times they would enjoy "The Merchant" more than "Macbeth", and that's extraordinary, because they hadn't studied it, didn't know the story. We would tell the story as we went along linking up scenes, but they actually enjoyed that I think more than "Macbeth".

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Was that for the melodrama involved? In fact there is melodrama in both actually, but...?

FARMER:

I think it's the love and romance in "The Merchant of Venice". I

mean they love the casket scene, they love the ring scene at the end with Portia and Bassanio, and they love Portia winning at the trial and they don't think Shylock is a wicked, evil man, they sort of even understand that, they understand why he's bitter because he's been so persecuted and humiliated, but of course the moment in the trial when Portia says, "Wait a minute", you know there is just, there's this point, they love it, because the woman wins and Shylock is destroyed, and yet they have sympathy for Shylock.

TETTEH-LARTHEY:

Do you think it's really fundamentally worthwhile doing a Western play like Shakespeare to African audiences, children studying for their 'O' levels or do you think, personally, it would have been much more worthwhile for the students and the children to have seen plays with their own backgrounds?

FARMER:

I think they should have both, without doubt, but Shakespeare I do think is universal. There is so much to be got out of him. I mean there really is, there's so much one can learn, there's so much about human beings, human nature and emotions, and it was so relevant, especially in Nigeria, when the attempted coup happened, because on the headline of a paper was "Dimka, a man of vaulting ambition". So you can imagine when we did "Macbeth" that afternoon, there's Johnny actually saying the line as Macbeth "vaulting ambition". No, I think it's very valuable, but I also think it's valuable for their own art, and their own drama. I don't think there's enough of that, which is a pity.

TETTEH-LARTHEY:

Thank you very much Suzan Farmer.

And that's all we have time for in this week's "Arts and Africa". Join me again next week at the same time - until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: "Limpopo" by Jeremy Taylor.

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