

# Arts and Africa

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY :

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. An African film that has set the cinema critics talking, and the Dance Troupe of Senegal both in today's "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Regular listeners to the programme will recognise our opening music as the sound of the many-stringed kora with its home in Senegal and neighbouring countries. So, naturally, it's an instrument that the Dance Troupe of Senegal take on tour with them.

MUSIC: SENEGALESE TROUPE. Band 3

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And one of the members of this celebrated company is going to be talking to me about the Troupe and their music later in the programme.

But I want to begin with the film that was such a success at the Cannes Film Festival in France earlier this year. In fact, one critic, writing in the magazine "Jeune Afrique" called it "an event of prime importance for world cinema". Well, even allowing for the French love of superlatives, it makes me regret that I've not had the chance to see the film - so I've been talking to someone who has, Michel Ciment, who teaches Cinema at the University of Paris and who's an editor of the French cinema magazine "Positif". The film's been made by a young Ethiopian, Haile Gerima and its setting is in Ethiopia. Gerima has given it the title "Harvest": "three thousand years" - a strange title to my ears, and I asked Michel Ciment to explain what it meant.

MICHEL CIMENT:

Well, "Harvest": "three thousand years" in fact gives the meaning really of the film, the tone of the film. It mixes a kind of lyricism and irony at the same time. 3000 years because Ethiopia is considered the oldest kingdom in the history of mankind and in fact the film, ironically, was made a few months before the downfall of Haile Selassie and it refers to this long kingdom. In fact it suggests that in 3000 years there has been no harvest really that went to the people that did the work on the land. The people who worked on the land, the peasants, had been deprived of the product of their work, so it gives, if you want, a kind of symbolic meaning.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, I see. Now can you tell us briefly what the subject matter is ?

MICHEL CIMENT:

Yes, on the one hand there is a relationship between a landlord and a mad-man, a kind of prophet, you know, the kind of person you find in villages, and the prophet, the so-called mad-man, tells the truth about the real social and political situation of which the farmers are not really completely conscious. So, in his madness, he understands the real meaning of the situation and the landlord is constantly fighting and talking with him. This is shot in a very stylised and theatrical way. On the other hand, there is a kind of semi-documentary film which has been done with the peasants of this little village and which is a kind of documentary about the life in the fields and the life in the village. So the film shows a juxtaposition between these two styles. The landlord is in fact, played by a professional actor and the mad-man is played by the former teacher of the director, when he was studying in Ethiopia, while all the peasants are, of course, people of the place. It's a very political movie, in fact it was made by Haile Gerima, who shot it in three weeks, after two months of preparation, in the summer of 1974. Three weeks is a very short time and the film is a long one, it's 2½ hours. Then he went back to California where he profited by taking advantage of the studio in the UCLA, where he was doing his MA, his thesis, and while doing his thesis, he edited his film for 1½ years. So I think he took advantage of all the facilities offered him by the American university system, in order to make a film which is extremely powerful and extremely critical of the political situation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

How was this received by the people at the Festival ?

MICHEL CIMENT:

Well, it was received with great interest. I think in Cannes there were so many films that a lot of them are unnoticed, not this one really. The film is not without weakness. It's a first film, it was done with very little money. It was done for 20,000 dollars. It has flaws, is sometimes awkward and over-long but on the whole I think it manages to create a really African style in cinematography, because a lot of films are

really copying European films, whereas this film is, I think, a very good example of a new African film-making style. I think it is a genuine enterprise.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Michel Ciment talking about the film "Harvest: three thousand years".

The other day I had the pleasure of enjoying a splendid presentation of African dancing here in London at one of the major theatres. The Dance Troupe of Senegal has been paying Britain a visit and while the audience was settling down the dancers and musicians behind the backdrop, painted to represent a Senegalese village, were getting ready for the first number in the show.

ACTUALITY: Drums and talk

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, a few moments later the stage lights came on and the show began.

MUSIC: SENEGALESE TROUPE - DRUMMING BAND 1

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Baboucar M'Bengie is the administrator of the company, and he's with me now to tell us about this well-established and much travelled group of dancers and musicians.

Baboucar, how old is this Troupe and to what places have you been so far ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

The National Company of Senegal was formed in 1960 - 17 years ago.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It was formed in 1960 ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes, when Senegal got its independence,

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's quite a long time.

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes, a long time. The Company has been all over the world, except to Japan.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Why not Japan ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

I don't know - we would like to go there next year.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

So you keep changing the personnel? I mean these were very young men and women.

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes, we have to change the Troupe after every tour. This Troupe have been away from Senegal 21 months and will be on tour for another eightmonths so many members get very tired. So each time we go back we have to change the personnel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

That's a long time to travel. Now, you had a certain amount of dances to show. Were these selected especially for Western audiences and for audiences in other parts of the world or are they the sort of dances anybody would see any day if they should go to Senegal

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes, the show, you see is what we do in Senegal too, because we don't have a special show for Africa, a special show for overseas. We do just one transposition from the village to the stage.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now the biggest part of the whole show was this story of Diankey Wali. First of all can you tell us what Diankey Wali means ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

It means a fisherman. Sometimes in Senegal a man, when he sees a young girl, he says "when she reached 18 or 20 years old, he will take her as his wife", the parents say "OK right". If, when the girl reaches 18 or 20 years old, the parents see another man who is richer than the fisherman, they say "this man has more wealth, so we will give our daughter to him, not to the fisherman! Then they do the celebration of the marriage, and then when they give the girl to the rich man, the fisherman is very angry about that. He goes to the sprie ...

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Spirit ....

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, the water sprite.

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

.... and then he explains his problem and he says "I have lost my girl-friend and need your help to", how do you say ? ....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I want you to make the man mad so I can get my girl back ....

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

..... exactly, he makes the rich man mad. Then the fisherman says he doesn't want the rich man to be mad forever, and then he goes to see another spirit and says "the rich man is mad now but I need you to bring him back to normal". We do that with an exorcism because in this story we try to show how we do exorcism in Africa.

MUSIC: SENEGALESE TROUPE.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now, what was this piece of music ? I know it was from the play.

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

When somebody does something great you praise him.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

So that is talking about the fisherman ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes, the fisherman.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Baboucar, I saw a lot of dancing by these young men and women, and there wasn't much variety in the dancing. There might have been variety in the music played, in the drums and things like that, but I didn't see much variety in the actual dancing. Have you got different types of dancing in Senegal, or have you got a common dance to the whole country ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes, in Senegal we have many different tribes and each tribe has his own dance, but we can't have the possibility to show all the different dances, but when we come back to London we will show another dance, because we have many many different dances,

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It is very difficult for me to see any difference, I must say. All the same I thought it was enjoyable. How can they keep this up night after night, sometimes doing 2 performances in one day ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Every day we have to perform except Sunday, but it's natural for my company, because for 17 years we have done the same, every day we dance and now, if you don't dance you get tired.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

So the dancing actually gives them more energy for more dancing ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

One could see that they were really enjoying what they were doing and I saw the show twice, the second time with my family and we thoroughly enjoyed it. Anyway, from here you are going elsewhere ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes, from here we have to go to France, Italy, Yugoslavia and then we come back to Holland and then we will go home in 6 or 7 months.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

You've talked about all these places and all of them are in Europe. Are you thinking of performing anywhere in Africa ?

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Yes, before we started this tour we did many performances in Mali, The Ivory Coast, Cameroun, Gabon, Kenya, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, I wish you all the best. I hope everyone will enjoy it as much as I did. Thank you very much Baboucar.

BABOUCAR M'BENGIE:

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And we've more music from the Dance Troupe of Senegal to complete the programme. Here's a song by a woman sending a message to her absent husband telling him she's waiting for him, while I leave the stage for today. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until next week's "Arts and Africa"

MUSIC: SENEGALESE TROUPE BAND 6.

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