

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 135

(BR 53 S135 G)

## ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and this week we look at a new version of one of Shakespeare's plays and we talk to the director in charge of African art at Christie's, one of London's leading art dealers.

## SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, recently a major collection of African art was auctioned at Christies, here in London. In the African collection was the famous Udo bronze head which originates from the Benin area of Bendel State in Nigeria. It's thought that the head almost certainly must have arrived in Britain via the port of Liverpool where huge cargoes of Nigerian palm oil were imported early this century. An analysis of the casting core dates the Udo bronze head to around the second half of the sixteenth century. Helen Mayer went to Christie's to discuss the Udo bronze head with the firm's director in charge of African art, Hermione Waterhouse.

HELEN MAYER: What would you say were the special features of it?

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

It is in fact, quite a subtle variant of the head made the same time at neighbouring Benin which lies about 14 miles away and one would have to examine both types of heads, which were made for the ancestors altars to be able to tell which were the Udo group. I doubt if many people outside Bilfag could tell immediately, although in fact this corpse of heads are all identical in that they are made from wax so that they can never be totally identical. But they all appear to have been made for a particular thing and comewithin the same artistic group and therefore within each other can be instantly recognisable. They also all have this square hole at the back of the head which the Benin pieces don't have.

HELEN MAYER:

This was a place about 15 miles out of Benin. It was something of a rival. They wanted a kind of UDI from Benin. It has a

sort of look of self reliance and defiance about it hasn't it

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

It's a memorial head for the kings later. The Udo of the time would have made them for his father and would have cast anything from half a dozen to perhaps 2 dozen for the altar of his father. The thing about Udo was that at Benin there was a decree by the Udo or the King that the brass castings or bronze heads as they are now called, were made solely for the altars and his ancestors. This must have been perhaps one of his own family who had set up at Udo and felt strong enough at that time that he could cast bronze heads for his father's altar without incurring the wrath or if he did incur the wrath he must have felt strong enough to resist the military force of Benin - that might have punished him. It could, I suppose conceivably have been a dispensation to do this series.

HELEN MAYER:

So this is perhaps also what gives it its strength, this sort of ancestor veneration.

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

Oh, they were very serious pieces of bronze and the caster made them with very serious intent.

HELEN MAYER:

You have, in fact, sold this piece. Who did you sell it to and for how much?

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

It was brought by an anonymous buyer for £20,000.

HELEN MAYER:

And what do you think he might be doing with it? Why would he value it so greatly?

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

He, presumably, would be a collector of bronzes. Whether he's a collector of all bronzes whether he's a collector of African art or whether he's a collector specifically of Benin material we don't know of course.

HELEN MAYER:

At this sale, you also had some other Nigerian art from another town which is also near Benin and also that period of 16th century.

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

Well, the Udo art is not much more difficult to establish the dates of. It again was a major town and in fact seemed to be on the crossroads between Eife and Benin. Eife being the spiritual capital and Benin being secular capital of Viehey

being rules by the Yorubas and they had these marvellous ivory carvings. They also do bronze work but they seem to have had this tradition of ivory carving but it is difficult to date, but we do know the earliest piece was brought back before 1840, in fact they could have been made much prior to this and the cup and cover that we sold in the same sale could have been 17th or 18th century or early 19th century pre 1800 because of the old pattern, the wear on the cup, for instance, the snakes tail was missing and the wear around it was considerable and probably would have been worn in Africa rather than when it had come back to this country.

HELEN MAYER:

And has that got an equally interesting history ?

HERMIONE WATERHOUSE:

That was brought back and collected by a Lord Shirley who lived in Oxfordshire who was interested in all art and history which shows the appreciation that people had at such an early date for these things.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The story of Nigeria's famous Udo bronze head which was recently auctioned at Christie's in London for £20,000.

A new African variation on the theme of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" called "Caliban Lives" has recently opened in London. It's a study of relationships between blacks and whites from the time of slavery to the present day. As you know Caliban lived on an island which he owned until Prospero came on to the island and enslaved him. This is a classic variation on an imperialist theme and the Temba Theatre Company, directed by Alton Kumalo has adapted Shakespeare using the music of the Afro Rock Group Jabula to show parallels with the situation in South Africa today. George Somerwill went to see "Caliban Lives" for "Arts and Africa" and here's his report.

GEORGE SOMERWILL:

"Caliban Lives" written by Richard Drain and played by Alton Kumalo's Temba Theatre Company has been playing to full houses in London and the provinces. The play is basically an indictment of both English colonial history and also current English hypocrisy in the field of race relations, but perhaps most importantly, it tries to set the record straight about colonial history. Director Alton Kumalo explains what he's trying to do.

ALTON KUMALO:

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What it tries to do is/try and explore the fact that our kids today, when they go to school, all they see are comics with the devil looking black, hanging in a tree looking frightening, and they grow with all that and not knowing exactly how come

they were actually made to look that way and their culture is never explained - what happened before they were enslaved, what happened before the colonial days, what happened leading on to the situation in the world today, and it is a very clouded issue for our kids. Everybody starts in the middle or at the end and nobody tries to actually find some of the recording was deliberate. Trying to actually make a study that can explain to our kids, how come and who started all these labels.

GEORGE SOMERWILL:

What is the link between Caliban and the present day ?

ALTON KUMALO:

Caliban, in Shakespeare's play, is a man who I believe is black. In fact I do know he's black, who's actually living on an island, surviving on roots, natural minerals, hunting and everything but owns the island naturally. He then gets visited by Prospero who's a white man, who survives there, gets shown the way to survive and then using magic takes over and enslaves Caliban who is the natural owner of the island and in the end owns it. Now when you look at the situation in Rhodesia and South Africa with the people who belong to the country, who are called guerrillas now, they are in the jungle trying to to back to their country where the white man Prospero is now in charge and he's magic was what --- the gun.

EXTRACT: Two extracts from the play "CALIBAN LIVES"

GEORGE SOMERWILL:

Don't you feel in fact, that by putting this play on in London, in England, that you are preaching to people who are already converted.

ALTON KUMALO:

Converted to do what ? People in England, particularly white people, because they read about race because they are educated and they have read the history of slavery, they say they are converted. If you are converted you get into some action. If you are converted to do something about the injustices, you are part of something. You will know black people, you will be in a movement, you will do something. But if you are converted just because you are able to read and you have a degree, you are not converted as far as I am concerned.

GEORGE SOMERWILL:

One particular line in the play, where you say to the white man "You white liberal bastard" don't you think your audiences here are very likely to be just that kind of person - the white liberal bastard.

ALTON KUMALO:

Well, the trouble is, I'll tell you what it is. I've found England confusing in that they are great experts of hypocrisy. Now, if something works it doesn't need me or the play or my company or any other black person to point it out. If some-

thing works you will see it in theory and practice, it will be there. Now what tends to happen here is that a lot of the Liberals - you look at the papers - if a white person got up and said something terrible about the Asians or some kind of anti-black speech you'd read it in the papers tomorrow. Now instead of them going the following day and getting a black person to say something they can put in the papers, they don't. Then they turn around and say "We don't like what so and so said, but we'll print it". It's a lie - they like it. If you don't like something you don't print it - you stop it. They stop black people from saying anything angry. They print everything white people say and they look after black people as if they were kids playing in the next room. They speak for us. They always speak for us and Liberals are probably the most dangerous people because they don't mean what they say. If they care for black people here the black people would make speeches, they would graduate to being important people, they would be stars, they would be in the Liberal Party and in the Labour Party. They would be part of society, but the Liberals want to talk for them, they feel sorry for them. To apologise for them, to get angry for them. When they do it themselves, they don't want to know.

GEORGE SOMERWILL:

So director, Alton Kumalo says there is a relevance to the Southern African struggle. That may be the truth, but in the last act of the play, set in contemporary Brixton, a predominantly black area of London, the analogy between Caliban, the Shakespearean slave and black immigrants to Britain wears fairly thin. In this case an anonymous middle-class conservative Englishman is beaten up and eventually killed by black urban guerrillas. It seems as this point as if Alton Kumalo is treading on dangerous ground, since his only apparent answer to Caliban's problem in modern Brixton is violence. The irony here lies in the fact that his Temba Theatre Company gives many performances to raise funds for just those groups in Britain which are trying to promote a degree of racial harmony. The company is not particularly well known in London, though it's been around for some time. I asked Alton Kumalo how long it had been going.

ALTON KUMALO:

It's been going on for about 4 years but we don't usually play in London for the simple reason that we have a grant from the Arts Council which forces us to take "art" as they call it, to the regions and so we are better known outside London but occasionally we play in London and I hope we can play in London more often and in Africa. I mean, I hope that the governments can support us so that maybe with shows like that we can take them and show people how we feel and how we are doing it.

ALEX TEETEHLARTEY:

The Temba Theatre Company's new version of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" called "Caliban Lives". That's all from "Arts and Africa" for the moment. Join us again same time next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: Limpopo ~ Jeremy Taylor

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