

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 142

(6R 52 S 142 G)

ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey: and today, a Pan-African musical tour and poetry as a window on events in South Africa.

SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And I'm going to begin by posing a puzzle: what have these three places in common - the island of Goree (that lies off the coast of Senegal), Yaounde, capital of Cameroon and N'djamena, capital of Chad. And to give you time to work that one out here's some music.

MUSIC: HOT KOKI by Tala Andre Marie.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

That's part of the instrumental from a big 'meal' of a disc called 'Hot Koki'. Now for people who don't live in Cameroon I'd better explain that koki is one of the most famous national dishes of that country and you're supposed to eat it really hot. And Tala Andre Marie has, so to speak, set the menu to music.

MUSIC: HOT KOKI by Tala Andre Marie.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

'Hot Koki' with Tala Andre Marie. He's from Cameroon, as you'd expect, but records in Paris. His songs combine ingredients from Europe and from Africa, but in varying proportions. Here's one sung in Mbamileke and called 'Mwouop'.

MUSIC: MWOUOP by Tala Andre Marie

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And before I forget, the answer to the puzzle is that Yaounde, Goree and N'djamena are all places that Tala Andre Marie has celebrated in his songs. 'N'djamena' sounds to my ears as though the French ingredients have got the upper hand. By the way, Tala has never been to Chad, but this is now he dreams of that country's capital city.

MUSIC: 'N'djamena' by Tala Andre Marie.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The island of Goree gets quite different treatment. Perhaps that's because, unlike N'djamena, Tala has been there himself, and although he's blind, the place gave him a strong impression.

MUSIC: Goree by Tala Andre Marie.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Tala visited this little island when he attended a festival in Senegal last year. Many years ago Goree was notorious as a slave market but that's in the past. This is how Tala Andre Marie found it, a lovely island with a charming little town

MUSIC: Goree by Tala Andre Marie

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Tala Andre Marie singing about the island of Goree. And how strange that a slave station with a terrible reputation in the past can now evoke such lyrical feelings! Time has literally transformed the place.

Now for anyone interested in a particular sequence of events the passage of time is not creative, quite the opposite. It easily blurs the picture. Not so if the events are today's events. And this is what led a French university teacher and translator to study contemporary poetry from South Africa. Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre has been with us on 'Arts and Africa' before but this time, while he was talking to Mike Popham, he explained his own involvement. During the Second World War, Jacques experienced the German invasion and occupation of his country and he became deeply interested in the way the French poets recorded their experience of oppression. Then he met Dennis Brutus who introduced him to the poetry of South Africa and he realised that he could study committed poetry while it was actually being created.

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

I wasn't interested in the poetry that could be written under any skies by a poet in love with nature but only with nature. In Dennis Brutus I found nature and the country and freedom at the same time. Of course the lucky thing was that the black consciousness movement,

the new black poets and the new white poets came into prominence soon afterwards and it became quite an interesting study..

MIKE POPHAM:

Is there a danger in this type of literature that there could be too much polemic in a sense

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

.... oh yes.

MIKE POPHAM:

... I mean, the poetry might suffer from a literary point of view ?

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

Oh yes, absolutely. The border line is very idfficult to establish but today, I mean now after th first few ones like Mtshali, Serota and Sepamla, I think that the new poets are beginning to be too political to remain poets and the last few poems I've seen are rather crusty things.

MIKE POPHAM:

There is also the danger in political poetry of exile isn't there, of exile withering your political and literary gifts. Do you think that a lot of poets who have gone overseas have lost their themes and have become rather estranged from the struggle.

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

No, not really. Well, of course Dennis Brutus is constantly reverting to th- South African themes so did Nortji and you find it in a different way with Cosmo Peterson, the politically committed poet and activist, political activist that he is, has never left South Africa. I mean his heart is still there and he's still writing. Of course, they are disconnected with present events.

MIKE POPHAM:

Do you think literature and poetry in particular has developed along segregationalist lines in South Africa or is it possible to link white poets and writers with black poets and writers ?

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

Yes, there are a few poets who's complete works, complete production is devoted to the problem of conflict in South African society and I could name two of the most prominent ones and that is Peter Horn and Wopka Jensma.

MIKE POPHAM:

.... who are the new poets ?

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

Yes, who are the new white poets and I am particularly interested in both of them. Jensma is a fantastic poet, he's able to speak at the same time for the victim and the accused, the murderer and the murdered man and he has a fantastic way of symbolically describing from the insight the South African mind.

MIKE POPHAM:

Could you read us an extract ?

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

Yes, I'm thinking of a little poem which goes like this:

I'm a dirty little room,
With spiders in the corner of my skull
My mouth a dark pit
Into which human droppings disappear
The speck of rust in my heart worries me
Many people breath in and out of me
I'm at ease with the world
Only the speck of rust worries me

Now this poem is extremely interesting and what's interesting in the new poetry, whether it be written by black or white poets, is the understatement, which are constantly there, the illusions the innuendos and so on and it's easy to find in this little picture this little poem a symbol of South Africa today. Now another type of procedure which he uses is the little sermons like this one which shows the impossibility, the near impossibility of changing something now. This is what he says:

I plant my corn on the rocks
It doesn't grow.
I plant my corn on fertile and
it does not grow.
Next time I plant I'll start beyond
I'll start beyond the bread.

Now this is nearly religious and I think that Jensma and all the other poets are extremely influenced by the bible, by the Christian upbringing which is common to South Africans.

MIKE POPHAM:

Are the poets and writers in South Africa prophets without honour in their country or are they important in terms of social and political change in South Africa today?

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

Now that is the problem and at times I am extremely pessimistic. The public, the audience in South Africa is extremely limited: a. because of the little interest in literature, and b. because the doors of education are closed to so many people, particularly the black people, and the poet reaches to very few people and at times I think he is even accepted as a kind of token liberalism

but his voice reaches very few people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre talking to Mike Popham.

Somehow I don't feel we ought to end on too cheerful a note today. Here's some music from South Africa, music that asks questions.

Mongezi Feza plays 'flute music' with Duda Pukwana and 'Spear'. For now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye - join me this time next week for more 'Arts and Africa'.

MUSIC: 'Flute Music' by Mongezi Feza.

BROADCASTING RIGHTS: FREE FOR USE
IN BROADCASTING OUTSIDE BRITAIN IN
ENGLISH OR TRANSLATION

PUBLICATION RIGHTS: NOT FREE
FOR USE IN PUBLISHING OUTSIDE
BRITAIN IN ENGLISH OR TRANSLATION.