

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we talk to the author of a new play about President Amin.

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Recently Uganda's President Idi Amin has been portrayed in no less than three major feature films about last years Israeli raid on Entebbe. Now he's the main character in a new play which has just opened in London at The Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs. The play is called "For The West" and its author is Michael Hastings.

Michael's with me now.

Michael, could you give me an idea of what the play is about ?

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

Well, the story of the play is in two shapes. The play is two plays in one, in the form of two acts. The first act is a dream in Kampala which Idi has and it is this dream and he demonstrates for the first act, his very best personality, his laughing, joking, happy side. The wit and brevity. And what happens in the process of this first act is that he imagines he is being approached by members of an Asian compensation committee and by an Under Secretary from the Commonwealth Office in Kampala at the Command Post. And he gives everything away in the act. He gives all money to the Asians, he gives all money to the companies that have been nationalised, he's fair, happy and free. He wants the American diplomatic mission back. He says his contry is a very peaceful place, there are no bodyguards guarding him "And as you can see" he says, "there is no barbed wire on my windows".

At the end of the act, the Asian, a member of the delegation for compensation, kills President Amin. You don't hear gun fire, the curtain blacks down and that is Idi's dream. And it has some value

in so much as he has on at least four occasions in the last five years, told us that he does know who is going to kill him. And he does know what the time will be. But of course, he insists that this is a top level secret and the second act is virtually like a second play, because two of the people who form part of the delegation are just ordinary citizens who were picked up in the street and are brought in for interrogation. There is a third member from the first act who is a white major who is an all-purpose Sandhurst-trained white soul in East Africa, and who has no intention of leaving East Africa. And he is in the first act, and really in the second act, he is Amin's confidant. In the second you immediately notice as the curtain comes up, that these two men have been picked up at random because Amin is working entirely on his superstitions and he's working entirely on a rather strange malevolent dream world where indeed, his nightmares of himself being murdered, became a form of reality for himself. And he operates on the information received in this dream.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you, after what you said, sincerely believe that Amin's dreams are reality, do you believe in them ?

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

I entirely believe in his superstitions. I believe he does act upon his superstitions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now do you believe that the superstitions are true, in other words do they come true ?

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

There seems to be something fateful and awful about the man and his career and if you like, the dream-like world he lives in or this intense world of superstition that he lives in, it feels like a fast travelling express train from which he cannot get off. And there is an element, he's not a hero, but there's a strange element of tragedy in Amin and the way he is ruling his country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, in the play you show him as telling the Major, that he, the Major, appears in the dream, but he keeps assuring the major that he wasn't really one of the plotters but still we have a feeling that he was trying to hide his suspicion, his true suspicions and that's why I was asking this question. Because it is a major who, at the end, kills him.

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

Yes, in the second act of the play, as the Major, who is really not a very pleasant individual anyway. As this man, who is also a loner, notices the absurd situation the play casts the present state of Uganda in. As soon as he discovers the Asian picked up and the English veterinary surgeon picked up and taken in for interrogation, as soon as he realises that these men are indeed who they claim they are and that they are not spies and that they are not members of Asian compensation committees or Foreign Office officials, as soon as he realises that, Amos, the white Major, does definitely make up his mind to do the job himself. Because he is dealing with a mad man who tells the truth but is mad, and he seems to feel an extraordinary white despair and sense of honourable responsibility for this English army trained soldier who has let the side down. And that opens quite a different area which is the British responsibility in East Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you think that, since he considered Amin a mad man, he could justifiably tell him exactly why he was going to kill him? I mean a mad man wouldn't understand half what he was saying "this is for this and that person you killed"

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I mean, he wouldn't understand it would he?

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

No, but we just took it on one level to begin with. At the end of the first act, which is Idi's dream, the Asian does the dirty on him, recites him a list of names, all of whom are dead, or who have been found missing in the last 6 years. As soon as the Major, in the second act, starts the very first sentence of that original speech that was in the dream, he fires the gun. It's, if you like, an element of theatrical device that he continues reading out the list of people who have been killed in Uganda, the Chief Justice of Uganda, The President of the Bank of Uganda etc, etc and ending up with the Archbishop. But essentially, if it does happen and Amin has had a dream of his assassination and can recognise his assassin, as he comes in the door, the assassin will have to move very very quickly indeed. 'Cos the odds will be stacked against him!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now do you think that the Major was justified in shooting Amin because he was a mad man. After all, some of the things he said were very true. For example, he chastises the ambivalence of the British towards him, the British papers after the overthrow of Obote. "Oh well, here's a man we can talk to, we can negotiate with". Now they are saying to the same person, you

are a tyrant, you are this and that. Amin also quotes the example of Nagasaki when the Americans dropped the bomb in the last war. Now what right have the Americans to turn round and say "ah, here's a black tyrant". Now these are justified remarks aren't they? I mean, they could hardly come from a mad man.

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

It does bring us the central problem of what is Amin and I'm stating in the play that he is the result of an English military education in Uganda and I think he has a white man's soul inside him. He has a strong achilles heel, the giant is bleeding somewhere and it's difficult to know where the laughing giant is bleeding. Something is pouring out of him which is a measure of truth. I mean, black children do listen to what he says. He is indeed one of the most famous leaders in Africa at the present time. But the problem is as much a British problem as it is an African problem and I only wish we'd take more notice of this.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, I had a feeling that you had a soft spot for him. He actually comes out better than the other characters from the way you treat him. You keep a very balanced view of him. You don't treat him as a caricature which one is very likely to do with a man like Amin. I felt you didn't do that at all. You seem to have represented both sides of his nature very very well.

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

I think that is the only way you can try to get to grips with a folk image which seems so much larger than life and in fact, he has said things no playwright can think of. I mean he's quite a good step in front of most of us with his extraordinary remarks! God only knows where he gets them from and how he gets his information and he seems to operate with such confidence on French, German and British and American media; He seems to know exactly where to put the knife in and where to put the compliment in!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Can I ask you if you've ever been to Uganda or ever lived there?

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

No, I know Khartoum and I've been to Dar. but I've never been inside Uganda.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now how much of the information that you got for the play is based on actual research there?

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

Well, it's based really on an enormous amount of general research and I certainly have got over a dozen friends who've lived in Uganda and have come away and visited it again. I think it is just sheer hard graft that has put all that information together. I also feel that you cannot write a play about Uganda and the British involvement in Uganda, economically and emotionally without laying down as many of the facts as a theatre audience can take.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, this is one of the risks an author writing a play about an existing person or an existing situation has to face. It's very difficult for the audience to exercise a willing suspension of disbelief. In other words, the audience expects what they see in the play to be the reality of the situation. Now do you think you are justified in using the assassination theme? I know from time to time the President has said that he knows the exact time and nature of his death. He's such a volatile man, don't you think he could turn round and say "at the moment, I've got a British advisor and in the play I'm assassinated by a British advisor, therefore this British advisor I have at the moment is likely to be the one to do such a thing to me, therefore off with his head"?

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

Well, everybody was very worried at the theatre because the actor Basil Henson plays the white Major, Major Amos, in the play, was very shocked to read the newspapers and to discover that President Amin has in fact, sacked his white advisor, an ex-RAF officer, Bob Astles, and the actor did turn round to tell us during a word rehearsal and he said "I fear I've lost my job" and I did notice in another paper recently that he has indeed almost started to quote line for line one of the speeches from the play about Britain. About Britain using Amin as a camouflage in its media to hide the true facts about Northern Ireland. Well, it's an extraordinary situation. There's a strange element where fact and fiction do merge.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes I know, but this man is still existing. You see, that is the point I'm making, he's still existing and as you say, somebody has already fallen victim as a result. Do you feel therefore

MICHAEL HASTINGS:

I agree, there's an area of risk in that sense. But quite honestly, if a playwright is a playwright and can get his play on the stage, he must speak and I'm really only interested in theatre that has some kind of contact directly to the audience about our present life.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Michael Hastings talking about his new play "For the West" about President Amin.

MUSIC: Limpopo by Jeremy Taylor

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that's all for this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and hoping you'll join me again next week for more "Arts and Africa".

LIMPOPO by Jeremy Taylor.

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