

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 today we turn our spotlight on one of Africa's most gifted young creative artists.

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

You may remember this extract which we played on the programme a few weeks back.

MUSIC: Extracts from the Ghanaian folk opera "The Lost Fishermen"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes. It's the scene from "The Lost Fisherman" the play which was Ghana's contribution to Festac '77, held in Lagos earlier this year and which received rapturous acclaim. The creator of the play was Saka Acquaye, the extremely versatile, Ghanaian sculptor, painter, playwright, musician and champion athlete. Besides the Lost Fishermen, he has written several other musical plays, most notable among which is his morality play "Obadzen", Ghana's version of the medieval play "Everyman".

Now I've just returned from Ghana where I spoke to the artist and asked him when he first realised he had such remarkable talents.

SAKA ACQUAYE:

I think in my teens, because I remember very vividly after school, I'd go to the beach to dig clay, put it in my pocket and set home. That started me on this artistic line. Further on, I organised a music group, so that also brought me closer in line with what I have now landed myself in.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now what are you doing with yourself these days ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Well actually I'm sculpting mostly. I have an exhibition next month at the Arts Centre and hopefully this year I will send the exhibition abroad. So I'm very busy right now with these things.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I remember you attended Festac with the Ghana team and you produced this play "The Lost Fisherman".

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Yes, that was a very interesting area, "The Lost Fishermen" was originally written in vernacular, but then I was searching for a kind of language that would be accepted internationally, so I changed the dialogue into English. The Damas choir has been performing it for some time. So when we took it over there, the reviews were very very rewarding and I'm very happy that the thought I was pursuing, achieved its goal.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I remember you were doing mirror paintings some time ago.

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Yes

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Are you still painting ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

No, I do a lot of sketches for my sculpting, because you know, as you rightly pointed out, I seem to do so many things and sometimes I don't have time to do all. So you have to concentrate on a few, those things which you enjoy most.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now you do all these things as you say. Which of them do you find you are most at home with ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

I think sculpting, because, well I can't give you the reason but I get the most satisfaction out of it. And of course, I earn my living from it. But when it comes to drama and music, it seems to me that I have the satisfaction of sharing or identifying myself with my society. That is very engrossing. Sometimes when I begin talking about it, I feel so small really about it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What sort of music have you been writing ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Well actually, as you know, I work with two groups, I work with the Damas Choir which primarily produces folk operas. I write and produce the music and the play. So in that area, the subject matter has always been what I might call, traditional values. "The Lost Fishermen" for example, talks about why the Fishermen in Accra do not fish on Tuesday, because it is a holiday. So it is a tradition and a taboo which haunts the people. So I pick those ideas and transform them into a kind of play that one would want to enjoy. It's a way of perpetuating that kind of belief. Now when you come to the Wulomei, it is quite different.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Oh, that's the other group you work with ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Yes, that's the other group I work with. You see, they pick songs from around them, the beach, famine, and so forth and I also add a few songs, something about God, something about the fishermen, something about the farmers, about puberty rights and things of this sort. You see, these are some of the areas which are very necessary for us to be reminded about, because as we forge ahead trying to industrialise the country, some of these things would definitely be forgotten and so we want to transform them into the modern context so that they will remain with us as we go along.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Let's listen to a song by The Wulomei entitled Utufo - a puberty song.

MUSIC: "Utufo" by The Wulomei.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The song "Utufo", recorded by The Wulomei, arguably the most exciting music group to be unearthed in Ghana in the last four years.

Now what sort of people form The Wulomei group ? Are they educated people ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Well, some have been to school and some have not you see. And these are the type of people you do need. Some have only been to elementary school, some not at all. There is a qualified teacher among them. And there is a plumber, a couple of housewives. The leader himself has been with several groups of musicians, so he has some experience. There is a type of group that are very close to what we are doing, you know, they are in touch with the fishermen, in touch with the farmers, in touch with the ordinary man in the street, and the rural folk also. This is the source of inspiration you need very badly for this type of programme.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

They produce really tremendous music. Now let's come back to the sculpting which you really feel at home with. There are some lovely busts there. One I can see is this gaint of Dr. Danquah which is in your workshop, that is just behind there. Really beautiful thing which is about 20 feet high I should think. How did you come to make that one ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Well, this is commissioned by the Government.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Is it going to be publicly displayed ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

I should think so, eventually. As I said it's not public yet, you see, so I tend to be rather guarded.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

About what is going to happen to it eventually ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

That's right. We have reached a stage in our society where we are beginning to recognise the effort of our citizens and I believe this is one of the ways in which the Government will be thinking.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now you said earlier on that that you were hoping to open an exhibition at the Arts Centre in Accra ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What sort of things are you going to exhibit ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Well actually some carvings and some sketches and some sculptures. I am teaming up with a friend who is a painter, a veteran painter. So the two of us will be exhibiting there. I've written to the British Council to see if I can get an opening in Britain to exhibit there. I've also written to America.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Have you ever opened an exhibition outside this country ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Well, not since I came back. But as a student I had a few

exhibitions in America. Also, when I came back I did a head of a former director of Information, James Moxon. I'm told that it was the first head or piece that was accepted at The Royal Museum. I think it was in 1963. Since then I've been concentrating on commissions, so I don't have time to exhibit. But I exhibit here and there.

ALEX ETTEH-LARTEY:

Wouldn't it be a good idea if you expanded this little workshop you have now ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Actually, it seems as if you are reading my mind! I have a plot on McCarthy Hill, a few miles in the suburbs, and at the moment the building is being built. I'm building a studio there and hopefully I can allow in young chaps, carvers, painters who want to be attached and directed, or inspired. They will have room because the area is big.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Are there any avenues you would like to explore beyond what you are doing at the moment ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Well, you see, I believe the ultimate goal is some day for the nation to have what I normally term "The Hall of Fame". Now a few friends feel that this is an outdated title. But the idea to me seems to be developing in the minds of the present government. I think in a society you need to nurse appreciation for what other people do. Each and every one of us, if you are a lawyer, you try and perhaps push the legal system to help the people, if you are a mechanic, you try and do your work well so that your mammy trucks are safe. You see, in my area, the way I think, is that we should develop a sense of responsibility, a sense of appreciation, a sense of history, a sense of values for our children to come and also to build upon. So to me, this is my ultimate goal.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

So you have something in mind like Madame Tussauds Gallery ?

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Well, something like that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I think it's a very noble idea and I'm very sure you are going to achieve your goal.

SAKA ACQUAYE:

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Thank you very much indeed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Saka Acquaye, a renowned artist talking to me in Ghana.

MUSIC: "Play Play" by Wulomei.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

As The Wulomei have had so many imitators, so much stylistic influence on subsequent groups, it is only appropriate that we should ask them to play us out. Their song is called "Play Play". Until the same time next week, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

GRAM: "play play" by Wulomei.

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