

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 159

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme: South Africa's first film for blacks is banned - we hear about publishing in East Africa and the future of African theatre.

SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

"How Long", the first South African film made and financed entirely by blacks is banned. The film is based on a successful stage musical written and directed by Gibson Kente, a famous Soweto man of the theatre - Mike Popham asked Robert Greig, a writer who's been following the story, on the line to Johannesburg, why he thought "How Long" had been banned.

ROBERT GREIG:

The official reasons are that it was obscene and blasphemous, it caused harm to race relations and it prejudiced the safety of the state. The actual reasons, I think, are tied up with the protests in Soweto in June. The play itself deals with the plight of a young man who wants education and is frustrated at every turn. Frustrated by the white authorities and the educational authorities. Eventually he takes to stealing as a means of earning money to pay for his education, and I think in the context of South Africa at the moment, this is a volatile subject. I think that was the reason the production was banned. Again, it was the first film made by blacks for blacks. It's been a very popular play and it would have been spoken directly to the blacks and the government preferred to have a control on the material that reaches them from the stage or from the screen.

MIKE POPHAM:

Now what has happened to the author director, Gibson Kente ?

ROBERT GREIG:

Kente was detained in the last days of the filming which was in the Eastern Cape which is on the border of the newly "independent" Transkei. He was detained by South African security police more or less as the film was ending. They arrived on the second last day, allowed him to complete a take, they went off for lunch, Kente and two others in the crew. Kente decided to go back to the car to collect something and in 10 minutes he was picked up by the security police and taken away. Now he's detained, I think under the Terrorism Act - it isn't particularly clear what charge he's been detained under or for what reason. But I imagine that it has to do with his ability for reaching the masses of the people, the fact that he was involved in a film whose subject was volatile at the time.

MIKE POPHAM:

So how do you see the future of the film now? It's just languishing on the shelves, will it ever be shown do you think?

ROBERT GREIG:

Under the legislation which came out at the end of 1975, if a film is banned, the makers can appeal. Now this is a long and very expensive procedure and I think the company which is making the film "Hamba Films" haven't got the money and I think its unity has been rather shattered by the detention of Kente. So, at the moment they seem to be disorganised. What could happen, if they could organise themselves, if they could get the money, they could appeal, but there is no guarantee that the appeal would go through. So what is likely is that the film will sit on the shelf until there is a change of heart.

MUSIC: Drumming music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Publishing in Africa, like publishing anywhere is a risky business nowadays. In the last few years printing costs have risen alarmingly and finding new distribution outlets for books is always a problem. African publishers also have to fight off strong competition from publishing houses based in Europe and America who've been having strong ties with the continent since colonial days. So just how are national and local publishers in East Africa competing. I asked Salim Sulaiman from East Africa to tell me first who the publishers were in East Africa.

SALIM SULIAMAN:

Well, there are three main ones: the East African Literature Bureau, East African Publishing House and Tanzania Publishing House. These are the main three publishers in East Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now what problems face these publishers?

SALIM SULIAMAN:

Well, first of all it is the problem of readership because as you can imagine, in East Africa the level of literacy is not as high as it is in the Western countries. So whatever books are published, in English or Kiswahili, which is the language of East Africa, the distribution of books would be minimum because not everybody can read.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What kind of books do you publish? Are they fiction or are they text books?

SALIM SULIAMAN:

They are text books as well as fiction. For example, East African Literature Bureau would publish books in English and Kiswahili. A lot of their books are published in Kiswahili, mainly the classical works. East Africa Publishing House also publishes in English and Kiswahili. But at the moment it is much more concerned with modern Kiswahili writers, for example a writer like Kazilahabi, who is a novelist and one of the leading Kiswahili writers now in Tanzania. Also Abdilatif Abdullah, he's from Kenya, from Mombasa, he writes poems and you have Ibrahim Hussein who's a playwright, a Kiswahili playwright. Also you have in English novels, Ngugi wa Thiongo, he's also published by East Africa Publishing House. Then you have political works, for example, the speeches of Nyerere and so on and one major work that was published by East Africa Publishing House, was a conference that had taken place in Kenya on cancer in Africa, and this is a hefty work, with of course, very limited readership. Also they publish text books in so far as schools are concerned. These are the main buyers of books, by the way, in East Africa, the schools rather than the ordinary readers in the street.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Are you saying that they will accept works written by East African writers whether they are politically sensitive or not?

SALIM SULIAMAN:

Well, that we can divide into two aspects. For example, Tanzania Publishing House has published by a book by Issa Shiviji which is "Class Struggles in Tanzania". This is a controversial book. It attacks the system in a very intellectual way. There is no restrictions on that. Another book is called "Workers in Management" which looks very critically at the Mwongozo which is a guideline for workers in Tanzania. That is published also by Tanzania Publishing in Tanzania, and East African Publishing House does not publish such controversial works.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Why?

SALIM SULIAMAN:

Well I think probably that they think that they have no market for them, or rather that they would leave it to Tanzania Publishing House. Tanzania is more political. If, for example, we take the book recently published by Mahmood Mamdani "Politics and Class Formation in Uganda" the paperback version of that book is published by Heinemann of Britain.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

So the overall effect is to push the writers whose works are not acceptable, into the hands of Western competitors?

SALIM SULIAMAN:

I wouldn't stress so much that political works are not allowed they are. For example, coming back to the Kiswahili writers that I've mentioned, Kizilahi in particular writes novels in Kiswahili but in these novels he is very very critical about the society in Tanzania, the bureaucrats and so on. His book called "Kichwamaji" is an analysis of how corrupt the bureaucracy could be or is in Tanzania. So it is a political work. Also Abdilatif Abdullah's poems, they are highly political, historical political. Abraham Hussein in his plays, is examining the society in Tanzania and in East Africa as a whole.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

So all in all you see a rosy future for publishing in Africa, East Africa ?

SALIM SULIAMAN:

Oh yes, indeed and I'm quite sure there will be a lot of competition of course with the foreign companies, but the Tanzanian publishers are faced with this big problem, the costs, the printing side of example, the costs have risen so much. Also paper, as most of these books are published in paperback.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Salim Sulaiman talking about publishing in East Africa.

EXTRACT: From the play from African Theatre "Secretary please take note".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Take it easy there listeners, that's not the news/a new coup, you're listening to, it's only me acting in one of the African Theatre plays !

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Now African Theatre, the BBC African Service drama series which I've taken part in as an actor for some years now, is to have a new organiser, Robin White. Robin, who most of you will know already as Editor of the weekday current affairs programme "Focus on Africa" is himself an actor and playwright and in fact has had one of his plays performed in African theatre. Robin, what plans do you have for the next season of African theatre ?

ROBIN WHITE:

There are going to be six plays this year and they are going to go out once a month in the second half of the year starting in June.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What type of material are you looking for ?

ROBIN WHITE:

Well, looking for good plays. Don't ask me what good plays are, I don't know what good plays are. But you get a feeling about plays when you read them, somehow they hit you off the page, they look exciting and there seems to be something happening and you feel, this is a good play. But it is very difficult to define. It can be anything, it can be comedy, tragedy. It could be anything. It could be a monologue for half an hour and that could be exciting. I don't want safe plays, I like plays that aren't safe. I like plays that offend people, that shock people, I like plays that are close to the knuckle and hurt people to listen to them. I don't think theatre ought to be an easy entertaining safe thing at all. I really do think that a really good play should shock people and start people arguing about whether the play is true whether this is a real reflection of what is going on. It should really hurt.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Wouldn't you be inviting trouble, because people might suddenly think to themselves, ah, here's a chance for me to attack this and that politician and that could be very dangerous ?

ROBIN WHITE:

Why not, why not attack politicians ? You can't specifically attack them because then you are open to charge of libel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Quite, quite.

ROBIN WHITE:

So you don't mention the name, but I really don't see why. Why shouldn't people, why shouldn't plays attack government, why shouldn't they get really get, what, after all is obsessing everyone in Africa ? That's what the play should be all about, what obsesses people. What I'm asking for is that the plays should be about Africa, as long as they are about Africa and have something to say about Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now do you find that most plays in the past have come from one particular area in Africa ?

ROBIN WHITE:

Well, in the recent past an awful lot have been coming from Nigeria. I mean it's nice to get lots of plays from Nigeria and some of them have been very good plays but I can't believe

that there aren't people elsewhere in Africa who have written plays.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, in the past we've had prizes given for plays in a competition, do you intend to revive this ?

ROBIN WHITE:

I hadn't thought of it as yet, but it could be a good idea if we don't get enough plays sent, then it could be a good idea to have a competition. But I would like to stress that anybody who sends a play in and it is accepted, they earn a total of £170. It's not a lot of money, but it's not too bad. So I'm really asking and appealing to people in Africa who've got plays or who are budding writers to sit down and write a play and then send it in. Either they will be done, in that case they will get a lot of money, or otherwise I'll write back and say why they haven't been accepted and so on. What's required is about 25 pages of typed foolscap and that is about ½ hour.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Robin White talking to me about the new series of African theatre which you'll be able to listen to later in the year. And for those of you budding playwrights who would like to send in plays have now a new challenge! Don't hesitate to write freely: whatever you write, as Robin has said, will be considered on its merits. Send your entries to Robin White, African Theatre, BBC, London.

MUSIC: Limpopo by Jeremy Taylor.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that brings us to the end of the programme this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and hoping you'll join me again at the same time next week for more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: Limpopo by Jeremy Taylor.

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