

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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SIG. TUNE

AL EX Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we talk with a South African poet - about his new book of poetry - and about the role of poetry in South Africa today.

SIG. TUNE

POETRY READING "Soweto" by S.S.

ALEX Part of a poem called "Soweto", from a collection of poems recently published in London, called "The Soweto I Love". They were written during and after the riots in Soweto in June 1976 by Sipho Sepamla, the well-known poet and editor of South Africa's black review "New Classic", - who has lived all his life in Johannesburg. Stephen Gray talked to him for 'Arts and Africa', and asked him about his book.

SIPHO SEPAMLA

It's a book in dedication to the struggle in South Africa. It's dedicated to the people who lost their lives in last year's demonstrations.

STEPHEN GRAY

As a poet, how did you respond to the riots?

S.S.

I think I should say that being part of the South African scene, being part of the South African black experience, I reacted almost impulsively to what was happening. But I had to give myself a little time so that I don't cry over the page, so that I don't bleed over the page. For that reason I waited until about three months after the last group of people who were detained last year, was released from prison.

- S.G. You're writing a very immediate kind of poetry. Do you see your poetry as having an element of journalism in it?
- S.S. I don't know what journalism means in this case, but I think it is corrent to say that my poetry is largely topical. I think it's obvious from the fact that one has been inspired by this present big event that one has to be topical. I have always thought that a writer in South Africa, even whether he likes it or not, finds that he is involved in what is happening. Therefore, he has a duty to be a witness, for those that will be coming later on, to record what transpired whilst he was around. This is the reason I have felt so strongly about writing this particular book and why I have got it produced.
- S.G. Your previous volumes called "Hurry up to it" and "The Blues is you and me" are much more contemplative books.
- S.S. I think that one must accept that, if you write as soon as I have done after the events that have just taken place, one is less concerned with things of the mind. I think it is more of the feelings that one was after here and I tried to capture the feeling not only of myself byt of those that were involved also, you know, in the riots.
- S.G. Do you feel that over the years you have acquired the role of being a spokesman. In other workds, what is poetry doing at present in black South Africa?
- S.S. I don't think I am a spokesman. I don't wish to be a spokesman. I think I am one of those that are trying to articulate what is happening in South Africa. I think it is true that at the moment there is a lot of writing, particularly from young people, which is very encouraging. I do, of course, feel a little distant from the young ones because I think their pace, or perhaps their impatience, is so hard that some of us are not able to cope with them. But at the same time I admire what is happening because, for a long time now, there has been a lull in our writing activities, and last year's events particularly seem to have provided a kind of stimulant, which I think is good for the future of the country.
- S.G. Do you feel very cut off from the previous generation of black writers in South Africa, who are not available here?
- S.S. Yes certainly. I feel there's a distance from those people. I think it's unfortunate we are compelled not to have continued where they left off. We are compelled to sort of begin as it were from the beginning. This means the groping that is taking place is harder and perhaps more painful.
- S.G. As an editor of a magazine, "New Classic", which you have recently revived from the previous "Classic" magazine, do you find that new talent is really that groping?
- S.S. Most certainly. A lot of material that I have received through the post I think is not ready to be published, and I have had discussions with some of the fellows who have come to see me about new work and always I have had to say to them -"please

don't give up, please continue writing, and only in time will you be able to see the fruits of your labour. But at the moment, my sincere view is that it would be damaging to publish your work as it stands now." I have had to say this quite often to people and I think it is largely because a lot of people that write are inexperienced and a lot of people that write lack contact with other people, lack an exchange of ideas, lack technical know-how. It is because they are operating from a vacuum virtually. This is why they are still, you know, without direction. In some instance, you find the work is without depth. These are things that worry me and these are things that one comes across.

- S.G. Siphon, you have played a significant part in what has become a poetry phenomenon in South Africa in the last five, six, seven, eight years. Can you explain why poetry has become the fascination and the mouthpiece, when in the fifties and sixties black writing was almost exclusively a matter of fiction - short stories and novels.
- S.S. I think we have to go back a couple of years when there were guys like Oswald Mtshali and Wally Serote who wrote around the country. Those fellows, I think, were a great inspiration and I think that the writing that is happening today is an extension of what those guys started around here. I think the other reason, maybe, is that poetry is immediate. Poetry, being a form that can take two lines, four lines, six lines, ten or twenty lines, allows you to get into it, whereas a short story would want a lot of time and we don't have the time, we don't have the facilities.
- S.G. Is it not also true that the market for fiction writers in South Africa have shrunk considerably? The generation of the fifties had "Drum" magazine. Today there is no popular medium for spreading the word through print.
- S.S. Well, I think you have a point there. Today what is it that is available? We have largely newspapers and well, today, maybe we have "New Classic". I think a lot of people identify "Classic" with poetry because I am myself involved in poetry, whereas you see they could in fact be writing short stories and have their short stories published in "New Classic". I am hoping that it will change, of course, as time goes on.
- S.G. There's a theory doing the rounds that poetry is less vulnerable than something that's very explicit, like a short story. Do you think that poetry can say things that cannot be said in a short story, published very much in the open in a magazine?
- S.S. Today, I don't think this is true, you know, that poetry is less vulnerable than prose. If you were to take the stuff that is written today by young black writers you find that they say it like it is, as they say in America. Because of this very way of saying things, I think poetry has become as vulnerable as any other form of writing.
- S.G. Now, your first two books have been published here in Johannesburg and the third one, "The Soweto I Love" in London. One of the dilemmas I think you might be in is constantly dealing with white editors?

S.S. It seems I am in a position which I cannot change at the moment, of having to deal with the whites as my critics. I think that the fact that there are no experienced writers in this country, black ones that is, leaves me with very little choice but to work with white critics, white editors. I have come to believe from experience that this is the case. That there is a difference between a black editor and a white editor. Our experiences are different. I think most white writers, critics, editors, don't have the sort of feelings that oppress me as I sit in a township-room writing, fearing this or that might happen. But then on another level one has to accept that there is a lot that we can learn from one another.

S.G. Sipho, you have made three applications for a passport as a South African citizen to leave the country and travel abroad. These three applications have been refused. Would you like to comment on that?

S.S. It's hard to understand the thinking behind those refusals. I think for some reason, some person out there thinks I am so strong a guy that if I go out I am going to tumble the edifice that is South Africa. I don't know whether it is because I write poetry and I write the kind of poetry I write, I don't know whether it is because I edit the New Classic, which is a symbol of a spirit which refuses to die. There's been no reason advanced by authority to say exactly why I am being refused a passport and this is why it becomes so maddening, as a black man, I have no choice, as a black man I am to think, I am to do what the white authorities want me to think and do, and it is therefore consistent of them to refuse me a passport and not tell me why.

ALEX Sipho certainly has cause for bitterness and anger. But the last poem in the book is entitled "A Wish" and reflects Sipho's generous wish for mankind despite the tragic events of last summer.

POETRY READING: "A WISH" by Sipho Sepamla

ALEX And our warm thanks to Sipho Sepamla. Next week we will have time for more of this poems.

SIG TUNE

ALEX And so we come to the end of this week's programme. Join us again at the same time next week for another "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying good-bye.

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