

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 161

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we present a special on the spot report from FESTAC.

SIGNATURE TUNE:

FANFARE TO FESTAC:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Fanfare to FESTAC. Festac, which as you know is now in full swing in Lagos and Kaduna. All kinds of cultural events are taking place - music, drama, poetry, art - most of them with a political favour and many having humourous overtones. Nigeria, the host country, has gone to a tremendous amount of trouble and expense to ensure Festac is a success. Millions of nira have been spent on the construction of the new National Theatre in Lagos and a special Festac village has been built to house all the participants. Florence Akst is covering Festac for Arts and Africa and when she visited the village this is what she heard.

MUSIC: Ethiopian peasant music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Ethiopian peasant music being played at the Festac village. Well we've got Florence on the line from Lagos now, Florence is Festac a success ?

FLORENCE AKST:

Well I really think it is going extremely well. It started with quite a lot of problems still waiting to be ironed out but in spite of them, the Festival spirit that really got going on the opening parade has got things swinging along and now with an enormous number of participants having arrived, so many of the events have already taken place. I think the only word for Festac is a success.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What things have you seen yourself ?

FLORENCE AKST:

What I have seen has ranged from the serious discussion in the colloquium, which is a gathering of academics to a pretty jazzy afternoon with the Afro '77 band from Tanzania, the cinema is going every afternoon and evening with films from all over. I've been to see the Camerounian film "Pousse-Pousse" which I think was in the Arts and Africa programme recently and that went down very well here at the Festival, so did the Nigerian film "Sheikh Umar", which is about Northern Nigeria. It is the first full-length Hausa feature film and the Nigerian audience loved that. There are films from every part of the continent and many contingents from Cuba, USA and from Gt. Britain too.

ALEXTETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, obviously a lot of activities have taken place. But which for you, have been the highlights of them all ?

FLORENCE AKST:

Only the other evening, there was a big spectacular performance by the National Troupe of Nigeria which put on a dance drama which was tremendous in the dancing and very amusing in the story. It was about a paradise in Africa, there are only beautiful girls and all of them dance marvellously and it is interrupted by the coming of two white men and these were black actors dressed up in rather grotesque and very amusing outfits. They come bringing the unwanted things like guns, and their trade and the commercial aspect of colonialisation. This sounds very serious, very political which it is, but in fact it was done with great goodwill and was marvellously funny and I never realised it was so easy to make fun of European characteristics. Another play which I enjoyed enormously was from Cameroun - again a political play but again a comedy. Although my French is limited I really was laughing almost as loudly as the crowds of Francophone Africans in the auditorium as it is a wonderful show.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Obviously these political plays have been treated in rather a humorous manner. Do people still take them seriously or not ?

FLORENCE AKST:

Well I think that the message comes across quite well in a subtle way. There is a lot of politics here and some of the performances have been quite serious in their political intent - particularly a play put on by Somalia about the freedom fighters. There wasn't too much humour there. It was a straight political view put over by speeches and by miming and there was also an excellent production of a straight political play, again in mime, without speech by Ethiopia. But this was quite serious and there was not much humour in either of them. In fact the politics come into poetry too.

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Later/the Zambian troupe is putting on a dramatic reading of poetry to do with the students of Soweto. There was an extremely dramatic and quite overwhelming recitation by a black-american

contributor, Jane Cortez who performed, so to speak vocally, her long poem on the African drum which was so exciting that it had people on their feet afterwards cheering but generally there has been a more sober reception for poetry and short stories which are read both in French and in English. The quality varies enormously but it does give poets, particularly new poets, a platform for people to hear their work.

ALEXTETTEH-LARTEY:

Finally, what does it feel being there at the moment ?

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, I can't believe that there is anything else happening in the world at the moment. I'm so entirely surrounded by Festac people. I spend a lot of my time here at the National Theatre complex which is entirely Festac, so I'm at the moment, living, eating, drinking, sleeping Festac, meeting a lot of old friends of the "Arts and Africa" programme who are here and making a lot of new friends and I hope I'll be able to give you much more information in the succeeding weeks.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Florence, thank you very much. Now Ethiopia is the star nation of the Festival. This may seem suprising as Nigeria is the host country. But star nation simple means that Ethiopia will be the next country to stage Festac. The main event that Ethiopia's presenting at the Festival is a play at the National Theatre called "Our Struggle" or "Ethiopia Rises". The play depicts the overthrow of the feudal lords by the peasantry and the restoration of freedom in the land. Members of the audience from Southern African countries in particular, engaged in liberation struggles, find this a sympathetic theme. Florence asked Hailmonot Alemu, the director, if the play could be properly described as a drama/ballet.

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

Dance drama.

FLORENCE AKST:

is
A dance drama. And this a traditional way of putting forward ideas in Ethiopia, because we have the struggle of the peasants, the downfall of the monarchy and then the people uniting to look forward to the future of Ethiopia. Is this a traditional way of putting over ideas ?

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

No, I think this is a very new way of putting it across. It has never been done in Ethiopia. As a matter of fact, I've seen very little of its type in Africa. We've tried to experiment with this kind of thing for a specific purpose because we would like to get the message across to people who come to a festival like this and who speak different languages.

FLORENCE AKST:

There are no words spoken at all. If there is any voice, It's singing or just grunting of some sort to show effort or different emotions. This is specially with Festac in mind ?

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

Yes, partly with Festac in mind, partly with the whole of Africa in mind, because even in Ethiopia we have people that speak different languages and whenever you go to see a play, even at the Festival, they are usually in one language and only a certain group of people get to understand the play and the rest of the people don't. So we tried to find something that would get across to people of different nationalities, both in Ethiopia and in Africa, and all over the world. So we thought a universal language of dance and drama, music and singing and movement would probably get the message across to just about everybody who sees it - they would all get the message.

FLORENCE AKST:

You call yourself the choreographer and a lot of the dancers were very beautifully designed, that was your work. Is there any traditional element ?

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

Well, we tried to use some traditional movement in the dance but we have also tried to use some ballet - not very much, some Ethiopian and some African movements to get across and some which we took out of movements that people do when they are working in the fields, or in the factory. So it's sort of a mixture of a lot of different movements. Probably the Chinese are the ones that come closest to this kind of expression. We don't concentrate very much on the perfection as they do in Western ballet, we concentrate on getting the message across and if we make a floppy movement here and there I think the audience will forgive us as long as we get the message across.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, I didn't notice many floppy movements but I did wonder whether the Chinese modern opera had some affect. Have you seen Chinese dancing ?

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

Yes, the Chinese have been over to our country recently for various productions and I must say that as director I was very much impressed by the art work and I think I learnt a lot from them. The main lesson being, that concentrate on getting the message across and concentrate on the emotion of the dancer as opposed to the dancer concentrating on perfecting his movements.

MUSIC: Ethiopian peasant

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

As the play draws to its climax there's the exciting clash of sword and shield.....

MUSIC: Ethiopian music of sables and swords

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And after that, rejoicing by the victorious.

FLORENCE AKST:

When the production started I wondered whether it was going to be a very solemn and a very political occasion, but in fact it was entertaining and there was quite a lot of humour. The audience were loving it at some points, particularly when that sloppy soldier who didn't know how to hold his rifle was enlisted. Why do you bring humour in. I'm not too sure if that is usual in a political play ?

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

Well, I think that to start with, people laugh because we present the kind of people that they have noticed in their lives. So when they see a reflection of those kinds of people they tend to laugh. The other reason why we use the humour is, particularly in a political production, you have to use a lot of humour to get the message across otherwise it would be very, very, well one flat thing you know. Since this is a dance and a drama and there is a lot of humour which goes right along with sadness, the two are one in the same in drama. So I think that in order to portray life you have to portray both the happiness and the sadness together.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, the audience certainly loved it and they cheered when the rulers were overthrown, and the peasants were victorious. This is exactly what you were after ?

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

Yes, you see we are trying to get the message across, not only to oppressed people in Ethiopia, but to oppressed people in Africa and the whole world who are now very deeply engaged in the liberation struggle. So we thought that we would come up with a universal theme, something that everyone is involved in and this is why, in Festac, a lot of people who are engaged in arms struggle are here and we could touch a lot of different basis when we present this kind of thing.

FLORENCE AKST:

So a Festival of Arts and Culture doesn't preclude politics ?

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

Absolutely not, I don't think you can separate one from the other.

FLORENCE AKST:

Thank you very much.

HAILMONOT ALEMU:

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hailmonot Alemu, director of the play "Our Struggle" or "Ethiopia Rises". Another political drama called "The Drum" is being presented by Somalia. It's being performed with an English commentary to help people in the audience not familiar with the Somali language. Dance drama seems to be the order of the day at Festac and no doubt we'll be hearing more about it later in the Festival.

That brings us to the end of our first report from Festac. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying a FESTACOLOUR goodbye and leaving you with the sound of the official Festac anthem composed by the Nigerian composer, Akin Euba... with words by the black American writer, Margaret Walker.

MUSIC: Festac anthem recorded by courtesy of the Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria.

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