

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No.164

(7R 50 S 164 P)

ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we bring you our 3rd on-the-spot report from FESTAC.

TAPE:

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In this programme we hear about a folk opera from Ghana, But first we talk to Henri Lopes, a former Prime Minister of the Congo Republic who recently published his first novel in French called "Le Nouvelle Romance". You may remember my colleague, Ian Piper, discussing this book on the programme some weeks ago.

Until 1975 Henri Lopes was an active politician; but he's also established a growing reputation as a writer and musician, and is in fact the composer of the present national anthem of the Republic. Well, he is in Lagos attending FESTAC and one of the events that Florence Akst covered recently for "Arts and Africa" was a performance of the Congolese play "NGANGA MAYALA" by Ferdinand Mouangassa. After the performance Florence Akst asked Mr. Henri Lopes to tell us what the play was about.

TAPE:

"NGANGA MAYALA" is the name of a king who has lived in the Congo near the sea in the region of Pointe Noire and his daughter the only queen in the history of the Congo. The play is located during the time "Nganga Mayala was king and just before he gave the kingdom to his daughter Losi. The author Ferdinand Mouangassa, died very early, died two or three years ago, and he has written only two plays -

TAPE: Cent'd and 'Nganga Moya' is the second one. So you have seen it is a play based on two problems. There is the problem of the wife and political power and also the problem of the king who wanted to represent truly his people and especially the peasants and the youth.

FLORENCE: Now would you like to explain why the son was executed which allowed the daughter to succeed her father?

HENRI LOPES: Yes, the son was executed because he murdered a citizen who was a chief of the army. This is the reason as far as logic is concerned, but in fact he was executed because the king wanted to show that he applied the law equally for his family and for the people. And secondly maybe he was executed also to achieve his aims to put a woman at the head of the kingdom.

FLORENCE: Now everything you have said reminds me of the fact that the production seemed very classic in style. It reminded me a bit of French classical drama. Static, people stand up and they make speeches. There's not a lot of rushing about. There's not a lot of ordinary speech. It was in the grand style.

HENRI LOPES: Yes I think you are right that this play is influenced by the French classics but also the problem is put I think in an African way because the situation created by the possibility of a woman to be at the head of the state is tackled taking into account the African custom, and also in the play itself there are the dances, and so on, and the way the actors perform which are truly African.

FLORENCE: Is this play a play that has been performed frequently at home in the Congo or is it something that has been produced specially for Festac?

HENRI LOPES: No it has not been produced for Festac but it has been played very recently now, I think one year ago, only.

FLORENCE: Would you say it is typical of drama in the Congo?

HENRI LOPES: No. I think there is another type of drama, there is the problem of choice and I think anyhow the theatre in the Congo is only beginning. It is very unhappy that Mouangassa died, because I think he would be able to produce many other plays, but there are others, for example we have another writer, but in another mood than Mouangassa - Silvan Benba for example and I think in the next festival we will produce other things.

FLORENCE: So there is a developing theatre in Congo.

HENRI LOPES: Yes. Because it is the way for the artist to go straight to the public, it is more easy by the theatres than for example writing novels or poems because we are in contact directly with the public.

FLORENCE: Well in that case I must ask you if you are going to write a play yourself.

HENRI LOPES: I think we cannot write what we want but what we feel deeply and the way to write is like the way you speak, you have your own tune and so far I am not attracted by theatre - maybe one day but not now.

ALEX: Henri Lopes who until 1975 was Prime Minister of the Congo Republic, talking to Florence in Lagos about a play from the Congo Republic.

TAPE: Music from "The Lost Fisherman". Band 2.

ALEX: That was an excerpt from the folk opera "The Lost Fisherman" put on by Ghana at FESTAC. It is sung by the Accra Damas Choir, accompanied by the performers of the Accra Arts Council. The play was written and directed by SAKA ACQUAYE, well-known also for his morality

play written about 15 years ago, OBIDZEN. Besides being a playwright, he is also a famous sculptor and a champion athlete. The opera was set to music by ISHMAEL DIMS, equally well-known as leader of the famous male voice Dims Choir which specialises in folk songs. In 1963, the two got together to pursue a joint venture which has culminated in this folk opera. Florence Akst spoke to the two men and asked ISHMAEL first, if the folk opera was a new idea to Ghana.

ISHMAEL: Well actually, I would say folk opera is nothing new in Ghana because in any village since there is no form of entertainment in the evening story-telling is the main thing and there is always miming, singing and dancing so we took it from this source and expanded it on to the stage. Of course when you get to the stage you have got to adhere to certain principles on the stage which change it a bit from what you see in the village.

FLORENCE: Nevertheless it has roots in the past although its a new development. Mr. Adams I'm interested to know the reversion of work between you because it was so integrated its difficult for me to separate the drama from the music.

ISHMAEL: Well Mr. Saka Acquaye who has worked so well has always thought of the idea musically, and he has woven the music round the opera, and had to be speaking Ga. and since my acquired tongue is better for people of the Ga speaking tribe we found that we could get together and we have added our ideas in a sort of unity between us.

FLORENCE: But who has the ideas first? Do you think of the music and try and find dramatic ideas to go with it or is it

the other way round?

I.A. Well I think it is the other way round. Yes the story comes first, and then each area suggests the type of music to incorporate where, where he comes in with this rich musical background, particularly when I write something which needs some deeper musical flair, he will say 'No I think this way' I will say 'No I don't think you're right', and by this no and yes and give and take we will be able to keep ourselves together.

F.A. I think this remarkable siamese twin attitude to the music drama really comes off because the audience loved it, I don't think I have been amongst a more enthusiastic audience here at Festac. They have got the real melodrama the three murders all in one play, a love story, and lots and lots of comedy. Is the comedy something which you write in or is it something that very easily expands during rehearsal, and during the performances?

I.A. It expands, you know you have got to have that at the back of your mind. The plot itself is quite heavy as you saw and I think you want to relieve the audience slightly, and then rush forward with the heavy dose.

F.A. I don't think the audience were treated lightly, I think a lot of people would be having painful sides because they laughed so much. People were rearing with laughter around me. Isn't it difficult though to move from a really funny situation, in fact almost farce sometimes for instance when the two men were fighting over the one girl or the women were pretending that they did not care that the men had arrived, when in fact they were desperate. How do you then go into music, because the music mood can change can't it?

- I.A Well it does, within the background of the whole story itself and then also the luck on our side, getting the right people to take the right parts.
- F.A Yes, tell me about the people, because they sing and they act but they're not professionals, I gather.
- I.A They're not professionals at all. The Choir is made up of people of all walks of life, and we have housewives and workmen, tailors, craftsmen, we have some technical men too. They all come together and it's fantastic how they move together.
- F.A They have been together as a group for a long time now?
- I.A For quite a long time. The choir itself was formed 30 years ago and I still have a few of them as original members.
- F.A The music and the story are they based in tradition? Is the music basically traditional although it's been arranged?
- I.A It's basically traditional.
- F.A Is this Gb tradition?
- I.A Yes, which we have arranged to suite, borrowed more or less.
- F.A What about the story line? It's set amongst fishermen and Gb people live along the coast of Ghana so does that mean there's an element of traditional story here?
- I.A Yes there's a religious background to it, that is to say every Tuesday there is no fishing, it is taken as a holiday, which the fishermen mend their nets and also give praise to their deity and this has been so fascinating and some of us do not know the origin, but we know the chief priest is called

I.A. Now we were told that when our people, our forebears were coming, they came through up the Nile Valley, through Nigeria to where we are now, and when they came they saw the sea and thought it was the Nile. Their spiritual leader we gave him the name the leader and the custodian of this deity. Naaye. That's why we call him

Naaye Wulomo.

So it's fascinating. We took more or less an artistic liberty to formulate this opera around it.

F.A. I was very impressed with the opening on the stage that was the fishermen in their boat with the back projection on screen of the water moving and clouds scudding across so that you really felt that the boat was moving, although of course it was firmly on the stage.

F.A. Who devises this?

I.A. Well we have a lighting technician from the Arts Centre Arts Council who responsibility it is to give us all these effects, and if you want to know more about that I will tell you it's a professional secret.

ALEX Florence Akst talking to ISMAEL DMS and SAKA LOQUYE co-directors of the folk opera from Ghana "The Lost Fishermen". And that brings us to the end of our programme for today. Join us again next week for more "ARTS AND AFRICA". Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lortey saying goodbye.

TAPE: PLAYOUT MUSIC.