

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 with another on the spot report from FESTAC.

TAPE: SIG. TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In today's programme we hear about a play from GABON called LE COMBAT DE MBOMBE but first let's take you to the National Stadium in Lagos. And Florence Akst watching a colourful display by dancers from Swaziland.

TAPE:

FLORENCE AKST: This is the Swaziland National Troupe and it's a dance of unmarried women who carry long knives and tiny miniature shields and you can hear the shells on their anklets rattling as they are stamping slowly and gracefully as they sing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Florence watched three dances by the Swazi group, the first by women and two others by the warriors and afterwards she asked His Royal Highness Prince Masitsela of Swaziland to explain the significance of the dances for Arts and Africa.

TAPE: Dance music. - girls dance.

TAPE: Prince Masitsela, talking to Florence Akst.

PRINCE MASITSELA:

The first dance by the women is something normally done by girls in Swaziland. We have a ceremony called the Reed Dance. This Reed Dance attracts a lot of young girls; when I talk of girls I mean unmarried people; unsexed girls. They are the people eligible to attend the Mhlanga ceremony and it attracts girls from all over the country but in Swaziland we don't have tribes, it is one Swazi Nation and everything is in common. Then they come together in thousands and dance as you saw them dance there. You might realise that behind them was a limited number of married people with different costumes, these only go there to accompany the girls and add to the beauty of the music, otherwise it was meant for the girls and only the girls.

FLORENCE AKST: Then after them, the warriors come on, but it didn't seem a very fierce dance.

PRINCE MASITSELA:

Before I come to the warriors' dance, in the girls that are dancing, there were girls in red feathers - those are the members of the royal family and what is unique in Swaziland is that anything done by the common people the royalty joins them and dance and play together with the people. You will realize that in the second dance, the man's dance we started with a hunting song - it was the first song sung there. Part of it was what you would normally see done by the warriors in their barracks. When they finished dancing after the exercises where you'd probably find that in Swaziland that His Majesty together with the warriors dance particularly during the Inwala. I'm sure you have heard of the Inwala ceremony where people come, the rain making ceremony or the fresh fruits ceremony.

FLORENCE AKST: The last dance was the most exciting and the audience loved it. It was very visual, splendid costumes, that marvellous stamping. That was quite frightening - was it supposed to be?

PRINCE MASITSELA:

Yes it excites us too each time they stand up to do it, it uses something new and to say nothing of the people who see it for the first time. It has definitely helped us project the image of the country because when Africa started to see this when we went to the All Africa Trade Fair in Kenya and it is then we took a small amount of the group but today we take a much bigger group. But at home we have a much bigger than that group and it is a sport normally done by men, healthy men. In the industries you find a lot of it and once a year His Majesty calls the different teams from all over the country and they converge in the northern district in one of the royal kraal called Entenjani and they compete against one another it is most wonderful and colourful and exciting sport and we already are planning that one day we should go and show the world. It is so much in demand that those who have seen it would like to see it again, and again and again.

FLORENCE AKST: Well I can quite agree with you when you say it can only be danced by healthy men because it was frantically energetic the stamping not only shook the stage but the whole stadium building. Can you describe that extra strong movement when the men lift up their knees and hurl their legs sideways before they stamp. That special loud one that's almost like a tree crashing.

PRINCE MASITELA:

Well this in fact is done to exhibit the strength - the harder you hit the ground the more it shows the strength of the man and the warrior - by nature all of us are warriors in Swaziland and the king himself is a warrior. This is why he will join the warriors. It is a sport that a man who does not participate in this, in fact, we don't regard him as a man, a strong man who can stand and be strong enough to face any difficulty - it is for that reason that in the second world war they proved to be the strongest of all the soldiers. What took other companies for instance a month, it took us Swazi groups a week or two weeks. Each time they go out to do their work it is accompanied by music. They like to work and dance and sing at the same time. So singing and dancing is a sport for every homestead at home and a sport for every community and a sport for the entire nation. It looks like all these children are artists, they are stage people. You take anybody in Swaziland, you put them on the stage he will do exactly the same thing a trained well-seasoned star will do.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

His Royal Highness Prince Masitela of Swaziland talking to Florence about the display of Swazi dancing at the National Stadium in Lagos.

TAPE: BRIDGE: FESTAC BOOM.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The girls dance from LE COMBAT DE MBOMBE, a play from Gabon put on at the National Theatre in Lagos. Florence went to a performance of "LE COMBAT DE MBOMBE" which was performed in French and afterwards she talked to FIDELE GOMES, a Gabonese drama student who's also the assistant director of Gabon Television's film on his country's contribution to FESTAC.

TAPE:

FLORENCE AKST: Now I want to know if this story which I have just seen is history or just a story. It is the arrival of a quite colonial French government and the struggle by local people against the colonisation. Is this something that actually happened?

FIDELE GOMES: Yes it really did happen and the main character Mbombe really existed. He was not really against colonialism. I don't say that he was for Colonialism but he was against different forms of colonialism. For example, but the French colonialists wanted to impose taxes on Africans you see. This was a difficult process for these people because they did not work. It was a means to bring these people to their natural way of living, to create money.

FLORENCE AKST:

They hadn't the actual cash to give; they would have to alter their life style, this is what the king was fighting for.

FIDELE GOMES: This is what he said at the end of the play. He said he was against your taxes just because they were asked in a way that they did not really like. We are warriors and we don't have to comply to any order given to us. We are proud people.

FLORENCE AKST: There were one or two production points I would like listeners to know about because I found them very interesting. The first one was early on when they decided to fight. I think it was a Fetish priest brought in a great big torch that was actually flaming on stage and clouds of smoke. He put it in the centre of the stage then he got sheaths of rushes or stems of plants that were dry, he held them in the fire till they caught light and ran around the stage whirling these so great cinders and sparks flew about, in fact I was wondering if there was a fire bucket nearby in case there was a fire, but it was splendid theatre. Is this a tradition for this part of your country?

FIDELE GOMES: Yes, it's a tradition, it's very frequent in this country to find these kind of dances, because in the play this was preparation of the war against the colonialists and fire has a great place in Gabonese tradition and generally in African tradition.

FLORENCE AKST: Now a scene in the play which really got the audience laughing enormously and yet was extremely clever and I think the actors must be very self-disciplined was when the leader of the warriors who also had supernatural powers didn't he, stopped his warriors when he knew that the French were advancing and got them to stand suddenly just as they were in different positions holding their spears and they became trees. The French soldiers come in, only see trees and start in in fact walking round these people leaning against them not knowing. That must be very demanding on the actors? "These actors have been working very hard to reach this level of quality.

: This is a company that works together all the time in Gabon?

FIDELE GOMES: This is a national theatre group we have in Gabon. We still have a lot to do but this is just a beginning. The group is not very old you see, most of them are very young, you have noticed that I guess.

FLORENCE AKST: Well I did notice that a lot of them have a marvellous sense of comic timing. Even in some of the serious scenes there were little details that were very amusing. Do you have famous comics amongst them? They way they walked, the way they did their little bits of stage business were very good.

FIDELE GOMES: Individually I don't think that we have great comics, only when they are working in teams and groups.

FLORENCE AKST: I wasn't meaning people who told jokes I was meaning people that by acting could make other people laugh.

FIDELE GOMES: Sure we have a lot of them. These people are not among the most popular, but making people laugh, this is the most common means of inspiration actors are using in Gabon because you can communicate more easily with people by making them laugh than making them look serious.

FLORENCE AKST: So even though this was really a tragedy and both the leaders of the group were dead in the end there was plenty of amusement.

FIDELE GOMES: Yes, because it was a real tragedy because Mbembe was his nephew. He went to see the colonialists and tried to betray him, and it's bad to be betrayed by your own nephew. In Africa your nephew is not your nephew your nephew is your son. It's the worst thing that could happen to a man to be betrayed by his own nephew.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Fidele Gomes talking about LE COMBAT DE MBOMBE, a play put on by Gabon at the National Theatre in Lagos. And that brings us to the end of another FESTAÆ special from Florence Akst in Lagos. 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".

TAPE: Limpopo by Jeremy Taylor.