

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and today, I talk with the author of a play on Soweto.

SIG MUSIC.

There can be no-one on the continent of Africa to whom the word "Soweto" means nothing. Steve Wilmer is an American whose play "Scenes From Soweto" was recently produced at the Roundhouse Theatre in London, and after seeing the play I talked to him about it.

STEVE WILMER

Well the play is based on Wellington Tshazibane who was an Oxford graduate who died in detention in South Africa in 1976. Wellington was a friend of mine at Oxford while I was studying there and the play is based loosely round his life. The character in the play is actually called Nelson, just so that I could have a little bit of flexibility in writing about him. Now Wellington grew up in Soweto, he went to Fort Hare and he went abroad to Oxford and then Salford University. He then returned to South Africa in 1974 and worked for the Anglo-American Corporation and a subsidiary, De Beers Mining Corporation, and then as I say, he died in detention after being arrested the same day on December 10th 1976.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you say that he was not interested in politics, I mean in the play, that is, and you go into great detail about what happened to him in South Africa. How did you get all this information?

STEVE WILMER

Well, I got a lot of the information from friends of his. After he died, we had a memorial service in London and in Oxford for him. And I tried to piece together from what other friends knew about him a kind of story and for those parts that I couldn't find anything out I tried to speculate about what might have happened.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now could one say that you were politically motivated in writing this play and therefore probably biased in your opinion about what actually happened?

STEVE WILMER

Yes, I was perhaps more emotionally motivated than politically motivated. I was very upset by the fact that a friend of mine had died in detention. I think that when this happens, one thinks to oneself what can one do and one feels quite impotent. Because in the normal course of things, if a friend of yours has done something wrong, he might be arrested or be brought to trial, but you don't expect him to be detained and die the same day in prison.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, you have chosen a theme which is rather contemporary. We've heard a lot about what's happening in South Africa. What you say is more or less what we read about in the papers from day to day. Do you say anything new?

STEVE WILMER

Well, what's new I suppose is the actual personal portrayal of this man. I think that it's always informative to people, who may know something in general about the subject, to have information about a particular person. I think people tend to identify with individuals more than they do with facts or events.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How do you make a play out of this? It seemed to me that it was more or less a documentary. We saw photographs of the riots in Soweto, of deaths, and that kind of thing. That would hardly make a play, would it?

STEVE WILMER

No, it's more than a documentary. It has as its core the documentary events of Soweto and also the events in the life of Wellington Mshazibane. But, in addition to that, it shows the psychology of the man, the difficult position that anyone in Soweto would be in, if they, for example, didn't want to get involved in politics. His position, as I see it, was that he returned from Oxford, having been very well trained and educated and he wanted to get on in South Africa, he wanted to support his family. Then gradually he found it more and more difficult living in the society that we divided, black versus white. He was in a sense living on the white side during the daytime, working for Anglo-American Corporation, and the black side at night, in Soweto.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sorts of emotions do you want to engender in the audience? I was completely disgusted by the end of the play with the physical violence and the pig-headedness of the South African policeman.

STEVE WILMER

Yes, well, the emotions that I want to get across are that one should be disgusted with what is going on in South Africa. One should want a change in the present regime in South Africa. The last scene, as you point out, is a heavy scene. It shows the torture of the main character, Nelson Malabani, and the reason that scene is there is not there to disgust the audience. It's to make the audience aware of what probably happened to him as well as other people like Mohapi, Steve Biko and other people who have died in detention in South Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now this play, "Scenes From Soweto", forms the third part of a trilogy. What is the connection between the three plays altogether?

STEVE WILMER

There is one fundamental dramatic connection, which is that it's three plays acted by a black man and a white man. There's a thematic connection, which is that the plays all deal with Southern Africa. Both of those plays, as well as this play, I think, deal with the conflict within the black man's mind of on the one hand having traditional values, and on the other hand having to cope with western values, which are forced on him.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The two actors in the play join us in the Studio. West Indian Rufus Colin, Artistic Director of the Keskidee Centre, who played Nelson, and Nigel Gregory, the English actor and producer, who played a series of parts, including Colin, a student at Oxford, the South Africa Special Branch Officer, and Jim Franklin, Nelson's American colleague at work. Here's an excerpt from when Nelson returns to South Africa, and at the airport is interviewed by a Special Branch Officer.

SPECIAL BRANCH OFFICER:

We've been expecting you. The Bantu designer from Oxford University. And Salford University. Red brick eh? Run by Communists?

NELSON: No sir.

SPECIAL BRANCH OFFICER:

This document in front of me tells me you attended the Oxford University African Society. Is that not political?

NELSON: Eh, no, it's a social club.

SPECIAL BRANCH OFFICER

A social club ?

NELSON: Well, some people were political, but mainly it was a way to get together and have fun.

SPECIAL BRANCH OFFICER:

Is that why it organised the Zimbabwe Action Day on the 11th November, 1975? Is that why it invited Bishop Muzorewa to speak?

NELSON: Well, as I said, some people were political, but I was mainly interested in meeting friends, other Africans.

SPECIAL BRANCH OFFICER: Why ?

NELSON: Sorry ?

SPECIAL BRANCH OFFICER:

What would you want to meet other Africans for ?

NELSON: Well, we had something in common.

SPECIAL BRANCH OFFICER: Politics ?

NELSON: No, I said it was a social club. We organised evenings of music and dance. I was mainly interested in dancing and drinking. I am not interested in politics. I am a mathematician and politics bores me.

SPECIAL BRANCH OFFICER: Now, look you cheeky kaffer, just stop playing silly buggers with me. "Not interested in politics?" What were you doing last November 25th ?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nelson works at the Anglo-American Corporation as an engineer, and the American, Jim Franklin, is one of his colleagues. Jim describes what seems to him a farcical situation the different distinctions between white and black and the fact that the South African Government, as he puts it, "measures" you.

JIM FRANKLIN:

If you're half European and half-Bantu, they call you 'coloured'. If you're three-quarters European and one quarter Bantu why then that's more difficult. They have to stick a pencil in your hair to see if it will fall out and examine your skin for Mongolian blue spots, whatever they are. Now, with Nelson, there's no problem. You can see from a mile away that he's Bantu. But I went to visit his family the other day yeh, imagine having to get a special permit just to see a friend - Anyway, next door there's this family and they've been forced to split-up because the Government decided they didn't belong to the same race. Two of the children just happen to have such light skin that they were forced to move to a coloured neighbourhood. Then, you know, foreigners too are examined.

JIM FRANKLIN:

Japanese are 'white', Chinese are 'coloured'. I think there's something political in that. Cambodians are 'coloured', people from Thailand are 'white', or is it 'coloured'? I can't remember! Diplomats and distinguished visitors are, of course, "honorary whites". But, if you're thinking of visiting here and you happen to have brown hair and brown eyes, well let me warn you, don't go and get too much of a suntan or you might find yourself riding third class.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In this final episode Nelson realises that he can no longer stand on the side lines, observing the pain and suffering of his people.

NELSON: Do you know what really hurts? Seeing your people trampled and crushed day after day, with you powerless to help, knowing that if you take action you will suffer as well. But there comes a point when your own security and well-being no longer seem to matter. For me that point came on October 24th 1976, United Nations Day. It was also the day of Jacob Mashibane's funeral. Jacob Mashibane a student who died in detention. There were over a thousand mourners in the cemetery, and just as the hymn singing began, suddenly and somehow predictably, the South African Police arrived in force. I never understood exactly what happened. I just stood there, stunned, unable to move as the police opened fire. There were people screaming and running in all directions, scaling the fences and being cut down by rifle-fire. Suddenly, a Policeman came up to me and forced me at gunpoint to pick up the wounded and load them into police vans. He spat at me and kicked me and told me "you'd better hurry up or you'll be loaded into the van instead". I picked up a boy of about fifteen. He was badly wounded. I asked him his name, and his address, so that I could inform his parents, and all he said was he was "thirsty". He said he was thirsty, and that's all he said, and then he died. As I lifted him into the van and walked back, a sinking depression took hold of me and somehow I could not lift the next one. And slowly became by a compulsion to SCREAM! The police laughed, thought I was mad or had seen a ghost, but I felt quite relieved. That moment I had made up my mind. I knew that no matter what the risk, I had to act.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And so we come to the end of this week's programme. Steve, Rufus and Nigel, thank you.

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye, join us again next week for another "Arts and Africa".