

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 we take a look at the darker side of the arts from one part of the continent.

AZANIA SINGERS.

'How Long, Oh Lord, How Long?' The Azania Singers from South Africa asking a question that leads us straight into yet another repercussion of an event that took place on the twelfth of September last year. That was the date of the death of Steve Biko, the South African Black Consciousness leader, who, while he was in police custody died what has been described as a 'miserable and lonely death'. And that phrase - 'A Miserable and Lonely Death' - has been taken for the title of a series of special theatre performances here in London.

Julian Marshall of the 'Focus on Africa' programme was at one of the performances and so we've invited him to come along and tell us how the Royal Shakespeare Company attempted to deal with this terrible and real event.

Now Julian I suppose Steve was the main character of this performance. How was he portrayed?

JULIAN MARSHALL

Well he was certainly the main character as far as he provided the main subject matter for the performance, but there was no one actor portraying the part of Steve Biko. In fact he didn't even appear as a character in the course of the performance, because what it consisted of was a reading by actors of the actual transcript of the inquest into the death of Steve Biko. So although the audience gained a very strong impression of the way in which Steve Biko died his last and lonely hours in the police cells you never actually saw a character portraying the part of Steve Biko.

ALEX Were there any black actors among these?

JULIAN

No, as so far as it was an inquest into his death the major parts were those of the Coroner, the Magistrate, the lawyer defending or rather the lawyer representing Steve Biko's family, a representative from the police force and then, of course, the policemen themselves, the people who were responsible for interrogating Steve Biko and the pathologists, the doctors who treated him and these were all Europeans in real-life and were portrayed by Europeans in the play.

ALEX I assume then that there were no other aspects of Biko's life portrayed except the inquest.

JULIAN

No. It was literally dealing with, I suppose, the last ten days of his life - those days that he spent in police custody in Port Elizabeth, his journey from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria, and finally his death again in police custody in Pretoria.

ALEX These are things we've read a lot about and we've even seen on television here. What was then the point of doing the same thing all over again?

JULIAN

It can't be denied that it was a very political gesture, I think, on the part of the actors taking part in this performance. For instance, the proceeds from the performances were going to an organisation which collects money for the defence of political prisoners in South Africa. But I think also that it did convey in a very stark manner the way in which Steve Biko spend his last days on earth and in a way that gave a continuity to the sequence of events that was not contained within the newspapers. After all, you pick up a newspaper you read an account of the inquest day by day, but this enabled you to get an idea of the sequence of events and in many ways this very stark presentation by merely reading the transcript of the inquest. I think was perhaps extremely appropriate for the nature of Steve Biko's death.

ALEX Do you think this thing should be shown in Africa?

JULIAN

I certainly feel that it would be a very useful exercise for black actors in Africa to put on a similar performance like this, and not necessarily dealing with the death of Steve Biko, but perhaps with someone in their own country who had suffered a similar experience.

ALEX So you think it would give the opportunity to an African playwright - a budding playwright - to use the theme for a play?

JULIAN

I think certainly what one saw in this performance was the bare bones of a potential drama. It is the stuff of which a drama is made and that you can then proceed from there and perhaps elaborate on this basic material and create a full length drama on the life and death of somebody like Steve Biko or in fact any other character who happens to have caught the public eye."

ALEX Thank you very much Julian Marshall, for telling us about the production.

MUSIC

That recording of the Azania Singers was made during a show the group gave recently here in London. The audience - it was fairly evenly balanced between South African blacks and local people - the audience was given a sample of a wide variety of material. Steve Khala, one of the Azania Singers is here with me in the studio and Steve, first, welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. You seem to perform traditional music, modern music, drama etc - how would you describe your show ?

STEVE KHALA

Well I would describe it as multi-talented.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what do you intend to show to the audience the culture of South Africa ? In other words, do you want to teach them about your history and your coming into contact with the Europeans or do you intend the show to entertain them - say like any other modern entertainment around ?

STEVE

Yes, the whole thing is to try and show a show that is relevant, but again entertain. We want to put the entertaining element into the whole thing because otherwise the show won't survive - it is our livelihood.

ALEX In other words the entertainment is a means of getting people to learn about your country ?

STEVE Yes, learn about our country in a relaxed manner.

ALEX How did you come to form your group ?

STEVE We decided to form our group - it was immediately after we broke away from "Ipi-Tombi" - we came together and thought that it's high time we produce a show that is relevant to our situation in South Africa but still entertaining.

ALEX Do you mean to say that "Ipi-Tombi" wasn't doing that kind of thing?

STEVE

Not much. You can remember as soon as the kids were moved down out there "Ipi-Tombi" was continuing with the tack that 'happiness is a show called "Ipi-Tombi"! and yet people were mourning.

ALEX

So you thought they were doing something quite contrary to the real situation in South Africa ?

STEVE

Yes. Well it was just a money-spinning venture.

ALEX

Does your group represent all the various groups in South Africa or does it represent any particular tribe - in other words the music you play ?

STEVE

It represents most of the tribes of South Africa all woven into a form of - like a dance - it's all woven into a form of choreography.

ALEX

How about the actual players themselves ?

STEVE

We mostly have Sothos and Zulus.

MUSIC

ALEX

Now how would you describe that song?

STEVE

It's a song that's being sung by a Zulu girl singing about her boy friend who is going out with another girl.

ALEX

Is that traditional ?

STEVE

Yes, it is traditional - Zulu traditional.

ALEX

And what's the name of it ?

STEVE

The title means - even if you do things you must watch out, for somebody is watching you - your boy friend.

ALEX

Now you were telling me earlier on that you broke away from "Ipi-Tombi" because you felt that you had to form a group of your own to reflect the sad conditions pertaining in South Africa at the moment - do I then take it to mean that you intend your show to be sad ?

STEVE

No, not the sad condition - the relevant condition - the way it is.

ALEX

And yet it happens to be sad ?

STEVE

Yes, it can be sad but not always.

MUSIC

ALEX

Now what sort of dance was that - was that meant to be happy ?

STEVE

Yes, well it's a gumboot dance. It's a dance that was created by the tribe called the Bhaca. The Bhaca's tribe most of them who are mine workers - dance this when they

STEVE hold their competitions every Sunday in the mines.

ALEX Now I happen to associate the gumboot with labourer's work.

STEVE You could say that but the dance itself is something that is art in its own self.

ALEX How do they produce these sounds from the boots ?

STEVE Well they are beating, stamping and clapping. It's all timed.

ALEX Clapping - don't they slap the boots ?

STEVE They slap the boots and they stomp the floor - to create this rhythm -

MUSIC

ALEX Now Steve what about the future of the group - what do you intend to do - stay in this country and perform or go to Africa ?

STEVE Well, at the moment we can stay in this country we've been issued with work permits and can do anything, but we have plans. There's something that we are preparing at the moment - somebody who just came in a few days ago who came to organise a few concerts in American universities.

ALEX Well Steve Khala thank you for talking to us and our best wishes for the Azania Singers.

MUSIC

And already we're at the end of today's programme. Hope to meet you next week for more 'Arts and Africa'. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lortey saying goodbye.