

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa" from Alex Tetteh-Lartey, And to-day there's music from Malawi. I also want to introduce an unofficial Ambassador from Africa. Now I hope nobody thinks they're tuned to the wrong programme when I mention this year's Commonwealth Games to be held in Canada in July. Travelling with all the athletes from Africa to Edmonton, Alberta, is a sculptor, Berlings Lengani Kaunda, who will be coming from Zambia. Whilst others are competing in the 100 metres or the marathon, Berlings Kaunda will be taking part in the Commonwealth Sculpture Symposium which is being held in the same city at the same time. He's been telling Ceciwa Khonje how fhe feels about being invited to take part.

BERLINGS KAUNDA

As it happens that I'll be the only one from Africa, I feel that it will not be so much representing myself as an individual. People would like to see how an African artist works when he's actually there. So my hope is to try and create a kind of presentation which will be typically African because this work will be executed somewhere where I'll be exposed to the public, all the people who will be coming to the Commonwealth Games and coming to see the artist at work. They should see how I use my tools, my kind of tools, how I sharpen them, the entire involvement, how some art object emerges from the chunk of wood right from the start to the finished product.

CECIWA KHONJE

But, apart from implements or instruments that you are going to take, how are you going to create this African atmosphere in Canada ?

KAUNDA

Nothing much apart from just trying to present myself in the attire that is typical, African - the traditional African artist way out in the village. Luckily enough, it will

KAUNDA

be at the time of year when the weather will permit me to be in that kind of outfit.

TETTEH-LARTEY

The Sculpture Symposium is part of a larger Commonwealth Cultural Festival that was planned to compliment the sporting events. An international competition held last year selected eleven Commonwealth Sculptors to take part in the Symposium. Berlings Kaunda and the other ten non-Africans will be living and working together and each of them will be creating a single piece of sculpture to leave behind in the city as a permanent memorial for the games. Well, apart from taking some warm clothing just in case, what preparations can an artist make to meet such a challenge?

KAUNDA

My preparation is certain things that they may not have available for me, certain tools that I can't really part with. Like the traditional African axe which I use in chipping wood. Also when it comes to giving the piece some finishing touches, I use polished stones and paint and beads and final decoration and patination of the work.

TETTEH-LARTEY

To be one out of only 11 sculptures from the entire Commonwealth is quite an achievement, so we asked Ceciwa Khonje to tell us a little about Berlings background.

KHONJE

Berlings Kaunda received his first professional training at Makerere University in Uganda and in 1972 obtained his Masters degree in fine arts at Southern Illinois University in the United States of America. His experience as an artist has been wide, including exhibitions which he has held in Africa, Europe and North America, public lectures and a director and curatorship of the Museum of Malawi. Perhaps the most outstanding piece of sculpture executed by him is one standing 14 feet high at the Bunda Agricultural College in Malawi. Berlings, can you describe this piece - especially how you made this giant 14 feet high is not a joke!

KAUNDA

Yeah, I was actually dwarfed by it after finishing the work. This was executed in concrete. I used reinforcement bars and had to dig up the foundation to make it stand firm on the ground. The theme was something relevant to a college of agriculture. Here you see the giant of the woman emerging from an open book, symbolising knowledge, carrying a basket of produce from the soil. It's not just the knowledge but the application of such knowledge.

KHONJE

Berlings, I've been told that inspiration is an important factor to an artist in the execution of a piece of art, be it sculpture, painting or whatever. What part does inspiration play in your creations?

KAUNDA

If you're not inspired with something, then you're not really involved. You're not really possessed, as it were, by those forces within you, the desire to create. Such desire comes, you know, after that inspiration has taken place. You say, oh, I'm inspired, I'm possessed! You can almost visualise, you know, on the piece of wood, or whatever medium of expression you are using, you can almost visualise the object.

KHONJE

For instance, we have these two figures right in front of us in wood - actually a mixture of paints, wood, and beads. Could you pick any one of them and just explain what it is that you see? what made you make that figure for example on the right.

KAUNDA

Looking at that piece, for example, at any of my sculptures, you could almost reconstruct how the tree trunk looked. You could almost reconstruct it. You could almost tell that it had undergone some subtraction, revealing what lies underneath that tree, what you actually visualised beyond the surface of that trunk. More or less like the unveiling of something that has been wrapped up by nature.

KHONJE

What do you consider is the greatest challenge that you have to face in your participation of the Commonwealth Sculpture Symposium?

KAUNDA

The greatest challenge really as I look at it, is really for me to become complacent because I don't really have that feeling. I've never had it, the feeling of total satisfaction. It's a continuous search. You want to understand myself. Generally my theme is humanity.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Ceciwa Khonje talking to Berlings Lengani Kaunda and our best wishes go with him to Edmonton.

MUSIC "KUMELEULE"

TETTEH-LARTEY

"Kumeleule", one of the first recordings by the Kamwendo Brothers. They are just one amongst many groups of youngsters who provide much of the popular entertainment in Malawi. Joe Mosiwa knows the Kamwendo Brothers well, and, as he's been telling Florence Akst, they've become popular at a remarkably early age.

JOE MOSIWA

This Kamwendo Brothers, they're a group of boys between the ages of nine and sixteen.

FLORENCE AKST

Are they brothers ? - They are all from the same family?

MOSIWA

Yes. Two of them are brothers, I think - two or three. But then the rest must be boys in the neighbourhood where they live. They have one or two girls who sing along when they can. The girls are too young to go and sing all night if they are booked to play in a hall or something.

AKST

You said in fact the youngest was about nine years old so they really are youngsters - their voices haven't broken.

MOSIWA

No they haven't. Probably they will break in a couple of years time but their voices haven't broken and it's interesting to see young people like this turning out music that has a national audience.

AKST

I wonder what they were singing in the song we heard first of all?

MOSIWA

That's "Kumeleule". Actually Kumeleule is a place. It's the name of an area that's between 12 and 15 miles outside Blantyre going up north. It's one of the places that's along the railroad from Blantyre to the interior of the country. Kumeleule is the name of the place and the boys come from there. They must have been travelling probably from the main town on the train home and they're singing of the place, they're singing of the people around there. It's just a couple of words repeated. They got popular not because the song said anything meaningful. Everybody will probably say a couple of sentences about going home when he's travelling. But it was the rhythm, the kind of beat the kids used and the voices, the clarity and simplicity and the kind of innocence about them. The beat itself happened to have corresponded with traditional dancing

MOSIWA

of that area - especially some of the dances - wedding dances in the southern region.

AKST

And have you met them yourself or do you just know them through their broadcasts ?

MOSIWA

Oh, I've met them. I've talked to them. They're just young. You try to look into the band itself, their dreams... all you see is just young people who are having a good time. Probably in a couple of years time they will chuck in these activities and finish their school and take employment somewhere.

AKST

Do they have somebody like an agent looking after them ?

MOSIWA

You see, it's not a band that will have any official recognition like something that is professional. It's just a couple of countryside boys having a good time. Probably in the mornings they go to school. When they finish they meet. Probably on weekends mostly, Saturdays when they are not in school, they'll collect their equipment and sit under a tree somewhere and then play their songs or maybe play at a wedding if they are invited.

AKST

What sort of things would they play at weddings ?

MOSIWA

Ah, the same type of song, the same type of beat. Probably improvisation is more likely to happen. A lot of improvised music takes place at countryside celebrations. You look at the situation, you take in what you are seeing, you sing about it. I think that's the secret of it because then it gets everybody involved. But then I can imagine these boys after their success with "Kumeleule" - a song which probably gets people reacting happily because of the beat, the relevance of the rhythm - they will go on. And they did and the song they came up with next after "Kumeleule" was "Ukwait Woyera" which also became a household song. As I said they've got young voices, their voices are light and the title itself is rather attractive. "Ukwait Woyera" means White Wedding.

MUSIC "Ukwait Woyera".

TETTEH-LARTEY

Joe Mosiwa talking to Florence Akst. And now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until next week as the voices of the Kamwendo Brothers sing us to the end of the programme. Goodbye.