

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa' from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today we'll be hearing from the leader of a Nigerian recording group, from the author of a newly published play called "The Old Masters", and about one way of introducing school children to the pleasures of literature.

MUSIC: - Late Nite Husband.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A new disc from Sonny Oti and his group. And Sonny Oti is also the author of the new play that I mentioned: a man of many parts you might say. Well, Sonny Oti is acting head of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Jos in Nigeria - in fact he set up the Department - and so he adds education to his many interests. For someone immersed in all aspects of theatre it's surprising to learn that when he was a student (it was the University of Ibadan) he began by reading History because public opinion didn't consider acting a respectable profession. It was only after his talents were spotted in a student production that he was enticed into the English Department to study drama. And now at the University of Jos, he has the opportunity to put his own ideas into action, so when Sonny Oti came to the 'Arts and Africa' studio recently to talk to Florence Akst about his work. She wanted to know how his personal interests are reflected in the work of the Department of Theatre Arts.

SONNY OTI

As we have it now it does include dramatic literature, broadcasting, by which I mean television; in fact we have included lessons in movies because we've got some experts on that field; mass communication by which I mean, journalism, advertising etc., and technical theatre by which I mean things like designing, choreography etc. It's all on a small scale yet, it's our ambition to spread out. It's difficult even at this stage to set up a professional school of acting. They would rather not hear that the students are going to do acting when they've finished - as theatre, yes, as mass communication, design, that they would accept for now. But we are getting round to stimulating interest. I had time trying to select people from the many applications I had, this was not the case before.

AKST:

Well, of course actors have always had the reputation of being vagabonds and rogues, and people in the "media" as we call it, are the ones who are supposed to earn a steady living. Let's move away from that to looking at what your Department contributes to the outside world - because you've been giving a paper on The Use of Drama in Education. That no doubt was about the theory of it. What about the practice? Do you contribute in Jos, at the University?

SONNY OTI

Yes, take schools. The text for School Certificate might be Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' or 'Julius Caesar' or 'Macbeth' as it was in 1976. I produced with a colleague of mine, Dr. Alan Cook an American, we produced 'Macbeth' and 'The Merchant of Venice'. We adapted them to suit local situation. I wrote pidgin for 'Shylock' and wrote a synopsis in songs about Shylock about being a hard man, about money and that sort of thing. It was very well received. Schools turned round and invited us again, and said "Come back, it did the job we had been trying to do for the whole year."

AKST

You were able to show the children that the plays had been originally written for entertainment not for passing exams?

SONNY OTI

And you see the text was usually a very hard thing to translate. They were scared - it was Shakespeare - they saw it on stage and knew that the man wanted to entertain them and, of course, the text all came to life - became simple.

AKST

Have you been able to provide any original work for children, because Shakespeare is a foreign writer?

SONNY OTI

Yes I have started something in that direction. I am publishing a set of six one-act plays - mainly comedies with Nigerian situations in mind.

AKST

And this is aimed at schools?

SONNY OTI

Yes.

AKST

Now I have here a copy of a play which I haven't seen before, of yours, "The Old Masters". Is this new - it's new to me - what is the theme?

SONNY OTI

I thought it was time we left the old quarrel about "western cultural shock" and blaming it on colonialism always, so I thought it was time we looked at our own domestic problems and this story basically deals with the conflict between slaves and free citizens. My home is called Arochukwu in the eastern part of Nigeria, and my people were slave traders. They dealt very much in slavery and, of course, I grew up to find that there was a problem between the descendants of slaves and the free citizens. It was this problem I was looking at. The white man actually was in the background only.

AKST

Roughly what time?

SONNY OTI

Around 1925. The church was also involved in the background.

AKST

Now it has this sort of historic background but has it a contemporary message?

SONNY OTI

Yes. The conflict within our society can always be resolved by ourselves without a middleman or what I refer to as an 'intruder'. If we can settle our home in order by first identifying our own problems then half of our path towards a stable government is assured of being around the corner.

AKST

Now, I think probably listeners will get a shock when they hear another side of your performing ability.

MUSIC - LATE NITE HUSBAND

AKST

Well, perhaps you'd like to tell us what we've been listening too.

SONNY OTI

The title is "Late Nite Husband", and by the way, it's causing a lot of sensation at home because the husbands are protesting very vehemently and saying why don't I write another version, "The Nagging Housewife". I conceived the idea to write this song "Late Nite Husband" when I tried some kind of research, into what I have called 'the immortal tunes of yesteryears' and among those are my own heroes, is a minstrel called Israel Nwoba. He was a leader of a group known in the fifties as the "Three Night Wizards". He died under some tragic situation, he was killed, and of course the Court went into it and hanged some members of his group

AKST

He was murdered by his group?

SONNY OTI

He was murdered by his own group.

AKST

When was this?

SONNY OTI

This was about 1956 or thereabouts. But he was a man who only played the guitar, not the electric guitar, and he made music that was very good to listen to and there was this particular number in which he was making a joke. You see, his music is very much like mine, because he was always having some satirical comments on the society: - What is wrong; how do I correct it, how do I reform it? For instance in this number he said: "If you want to make a lover, never you make an Ibo woman. If you make an Ibo woman, tomorrow money, money, money!" and it was the tune of that particular number that I took and wrote a brand new lyric to it. And because of the association of the words which the listeners regard as revolutionary and revolting and the recollection - there are many sounds of the tune, the great tune of this man - this is why the record seems to be making a good start. It's just been released late March.

AKST

But this is not your first record by any means. Now how come that an academic, a university man, also produces popular discs? I gather you don't think of yourself as a fashion-monger by the way.

SONNY OTI

No I don't. When I went to the University of Ibadan to study I was lucky to be appointed the director of the Student's Union revels and at the end of the year or at the welcome for freshmen I would conduct it, and I would always write a song. So I wrote this first song which I called "Installation Calypso" and "Installation Calypso" gave the history in the lyric of the founding of the University of Ibadan from the time when it was a University College to the time when it became the University of Ibadan. And the University felt it was the kind of thing that should be kept and they encouraged me to do a recording of it, and the World University Service in Geneva heard the song and selected it amongst the best six of students compositions, and when I got the feed-back I got encouraged to write more songs. So during the war years, the civil war years in Nigeria, I wrote quite a number of songs to entertain the soldiers at the war front and at the end of the war all these songs were brought out into one collection of an album, the first album. And incidentally, one track was played by BBC Morning Show when I was in Leeds in 1972, and that one was about South Africa and the Sharpville shooting.

AKST

Well, obviously there's a lot of amusement here in "Late Nite Husband", I can see that from the picture on the front of the sleeve. But nevertheless, from everything you've said about your writing as well as about your music, you do seem to have a strong social purpose behind it all.

SONNY OTI

Yes. It is perhaps one of the reasons why, sometimes my music has not been fashionable. The messages seldom match with the expectations of our people. I talk about money grabbing, greed, corruption, and people don't quite want to hear about it, and the robbery, cheating, official "go-slow", by which I mean you come into offices and nothing is happening very fast! Everybody is delaying you from the porter to the chief executive. You never find anything moves according to schedule, even if you had an appointment earlier on. So these are things some people wish to listen to and others wish to dismiss, but this is the kind of thing my music carries.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Sonny Oti has been talking to Florence Akst. And if we've been hearing more about Sonny's lyrics than the music, we'll remedy that in just a moment. But for now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until next week's 'Arts and Africa'. Goodbye.

MUSIC: LATE NITE HUSBAND.