



Script Service for Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 240

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of 'Arts and Africa'. Now I know that many of you write poetry and if you have ever tried to get it published you will know that there aren't many African magazines that have space for new verse by unknown writers. Well perhaps that situation will change soon. Robert Fraser has just been made Poetry Editor of West Africa magazine and he has a scheme to help budding writers. Michael Murray spoke to him and he began by asking Robert Fraser to explain this new post.

ROBERT FRASER

The interest really is to expand the scope of the magazine so as to include articles of literary interest as well. My particular interest, of course, is in poetry, and for this reason I am looking for poems from poets of West African origin who might like to submit their poetry for consideration.

MICHAEL MURRAY

This is a very broad scope that you are choosing - poetry in any particular style or from any particular country or period?

ROBERT FRASER

Since the magazine itself is an English magazine, we're concerned with poetry actually in the English language. The sort of poetry I'm particularly looking for is poetry with a popular appeal with a certain directness of appeal. Poetry which might interest the wider population rather than perhaps the literati or somebody whose got a particular critical interest in literature. In other words we are looking for poetry that is both popular and good, which is rather a difficult balance to keep. As poetry editor I'm by and large concerned with maintaining that balance in so far as possible.

MICHAEL MURRAY

Now have you read a great deal of Africa poetry or poetry from Africa rather, in English?

ROBERT FRASER

Well yes I've done quite a bit of editing before. I edited an anthology of African poetry which came out from a British publisher in 1975, and also since that time I've been editor of a magazine called "Poetry and Audience", which is based in Leeds where I'm teaching in the School of English.

MICHAEL MURRAY

So you're familiar with established African poets or West African poets - are you expecting poetry from them or from new people altogether are you looking for new talent?

ROBERT FRASER

Well I'm really looking for two different kinds of poetry really. I'd be very pleased, of course, if established poets felt able to submit poetry for consideration to the columns, but I also think there's a great hiatus at the moment, there are a lot of poets who are beginning to get off the ground, who are beginning to try to establish themselves as poets. Often I think these poets in the beginning stages of their career find it rather difficult to place their poems anywhere at all. One particular problem at the moment is that going back, say seven or eight years, there used to be quite a few cultural literary journals flourishing in West Africa Okyame and Black Orpheus and a number of magazines that have got off the ground in the late fifties and early sixties by and large due to the stringency of the present economic climate a number of these are either in great difficulty or they've actually folded. Now when you think of the poets who were actually established, as of now these poets got established in the first place by placing their poems in those journals. Now, since a number of those journals collapsed, the poets who are coming up now, the poets in their early and middle twenties find it very difficult to find a first rung on the ladder, as it were.

MICHAEL MURRAY

Apart from talking on this programme, how are you going about looking for your poets.

ROBERT FRASER

Well I've sent a circular letter round to the English departments of all the universities in English speaking Africa. This is a start because I think a number of established writers do start in fact getting interested, in writing poetry at university and I am hoping this will be one way into it. I am also sending a circular letter round to as many people as I know happen to be interested in the field and hope that they will spread the word, as it were.

MICHAEL MURRAY

But your poets could come, not just from universities, but from any walk of life or any particular place they happen to be? You did say all of Africa, is this open to poets living in other parts of Africa?

ROBERT FRASER

I think it is. We'd be interested in poetry from East Africa as well and South Africa, though primarily obviously, since the magazine itself is called West Africa and we are looking for poets from Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana and so on, but certainly we'd be very interested in seeing poems from Kenya and Uganda, Tanzania and the rest.

MICHAEL MURRAY

And the subject matter is unlimited, is it?

ROBERT FRASER

Unlimited yes, we would prefer poems that are not too obscure and which are not too effete. I think one of the problems one has noticed over the last few years is that the poems which appear in cultural and literary journals by and large address themselves to other poets or to critics or to people in universities, to people who are professionally interested in literature in some way. What we're interested in doing, I think, is expanding the base, the scope, and reaching the wider audience who may not really perhaps have read much poetry before, but might be introduced to the idea of reading and assessing poetry through reading poems in the columns of a weekly magazine rather than say a cultural journal which appears monthly or quarterly.

MICHAEL MURRAY

Right. So poets and potential poets where do they write to?

ROBERT FRASER

What they must do is address their poems to me, Robert Fraser, Poetry Editor, West Africa, c/o The School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, Yorkshire, England and if they could include an addressed envelope and also an international reply coupon that would be very helpful.

MICHAEL MURRAY

And will their manuscripts be returned?

ROBERT FRASER

They'll be returned if they include the stamped addressed envelope and the international reply coupon, otherwise I'm afraid I can't guarantee to do that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Michael Murray talking to Robert Fraser about a new chance for poets all over Africa. And if you didn't get the address don't worry, if you want to get a pencil now I will give it to you at the end of the programme, but now from poetry to drama, and with me is Adel Darwish who is one of the organisers of the theatre of Contemporary Arab Drama who are staging the London premiere of the play "The New Arrival" by North African playwright Michael Roman. I thought this would be a good opportunity to talk to Adele Darwish about the state of theatre in the Arab speaking north of the continent. Well Adel Darwish, how did you come to be involved with this company?

ADEL DARWISH

In 1975 I founded the theatre of Arabic Contemporary Drama in order to present the audiences in Great Britain with drama from the arab world and because of their preconceived ideas the audience in Great Britain had about the arabs.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Like what?

ADEL DARWISH

Well like that the press and mass media were taking delight in making fun of the arabs with their traditional head dress. Being from Egypt myself, it was very important to start with Egypt and with other countries from North Africa. The plays we are doing now at the Africa Centre, we have just finished the "Wheat Well" which deals with problems like the famine in North Africa. "The New Arrival" is another look at a very important period in the history of Egypt, the Forties and the Sixties. The Sixties, where the Egyptian administration tried to be revolutionary and was raising slogans of socialism while the society itself were contradicting the slogans of that administration. Also the play looks back upon the important historic events that took place in 1946, because the main protagonist of the play is one who took part in 1946 where the students were demonstrating outside Cairo University and a bridge on the Nile was open to the students above it and the British troops fired from the West Bank and the Egyptian police from the East bank. So the play recalls these events and this protagonist is putting a question forward to this administration - we vote for independence now where is our independence? All these things you are trying, socialism and all aspect of "isms" are just crushing the individual and making people lose their humanity.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Therefore, from what you just said, I don't think a play would go down very well with the establishment back home?

ADEL DAWLISH

Well, this play actually, in fact, is banned in Egypt, and it's probably coincidence, but all the nine plays we did are banned in the Arab world.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why? I don't see why they should be banned.

ADEL DAWLISH

Well again, when you are doing drama in Africa, in African countries, it becomes inevitable that you are going to tread on political and social ground, you just can't close your eyes, you can't bury your head in the sand, I mean an artist doesn't live in isolation, an artist is a witness of his age, a contemporary witness of the age he lives in and the society he lives in, and for reasons well, God knows why, they always say there are security measures and State Security and all this business, they ban the plays.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's interesting that you mentioned that because you must have heard of Ngugi Wa Thiongo and what is being done to him by the Kenyan Government, I thought it was perhaps only in the English speaking world that you had this sort of thing. Well it appears that in the arab world as well you have persecution of artists and playwrights and things of that nature.

ADEL DAWLISH

Yes it is unfortunately and its not only in English language speaking countries. Language is just as aspect of it and this particular play is fighting against an invading culture, its fighting against a society where everything is done according to computers and buttons. We are just people lost to humanity, they communicate with each other by pressing buttons and each one can't even be provided with his daily bread without feeding a special data into a computer to issue the food for him, so its about language, one aspect of it it because a playwright is banned and goes to prison because he tried to perform in his own language and also a play is banned because the playwright is fighting against invading cultures that don't suit the people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, how about the actual production of these plays.

ADEL DAWLISH

Well, we have just finished stage 1 of our project and we are now beginning stage 2, so within three months we shall be able to produce plays with all arab actors and also an African actor is joining us from Ghana, so we'll be having a company of ten people, five arab actors besides me and one African and one Asian in it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I also noticed that at the end of your plays, that is a few minutes to the end, you pause in the middle and then you throw a question to the audience. Now do you just wish them to partake in what is happening or do you want to find out whether they've been following the action?

ADEL DAWLISH

Well its both. Its a big problem here, the Americans are coming and the wheat is going to be destroyed and burnt, what shall we do, what do you think, shall we make a deal with them or shall we share the wheat or what, and its just deomocratic basis we actually take both and the majority wins and you improvise what you like, and the play actually also is designed to provoke a discussion afterwards.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What has the reception been like so far?

ADEL DAWLISH

Its been very good, I can't say that all the British audiences have chanced their pre-conceived ideas about us, North African Arabs, but at least those who came to see our plays, from the line the discussion took, began to re-think.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much Adel Dawlish. And just back to poetry for a moment with the address I promised you. Those who wish to submit poetry for publication should write to: Robert Fraser, Poetry Editor, West Africa, Care of The School of English, The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, Yorkshire, England. And thats it from 'Arts and Africa' for this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey goodbye.

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