

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 241

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of 'Arts and Africa'. You may remember that I recently interviewed Eddie Ugbomah about the state of the Nigerian cinema and Eddie Ugbomah had some strong words to say about the lack of help from the Nigerian authorities.

This week I have Ivan Annan from Ghana with me, he runs Ivan Enterprises which is concerned with musical, variety, and motion picture industry productions. He worked on "Soul to Soul", was an actor in the Canadian Film Board film - "Journey from Dtsa", and he directed the Ghanaian version of "Music Around the World". So, I am wondering if he won't have something equally strong to say about the Ghanaian film industry. Ivan Annan, welcome to 'Arts and Africa'.

What is "Soul to Soul" about?

IVAN ANNAN

"Soul to Soul" was a musical of a group of black artists being moved from the American soul system back to the African soul system, with a backdrop of the Black Star Square, and this featured the voices of East Harlem, Santana, Roberta Flack, Wilson Pickett as the main artist Tina and Ike Turner, - on the whole a host of other artists, including the Staple singers, plus a variety of Ghanaian artists, mostly from the northern part of Ghana.

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What was reaction like about this?

IVAN ANNAN

Fantastic. Fantastic. Both the films came out very well. There were lots of queues in Accra to see "Soul to Soul". Now, on production day, we had a crowd from the main Black Star Square right onto the main street. Now, arranging the chairs in front of the stage, 5000 chairs was just like a drop in the ocean, and you can see the size of Black Star Square. Then, I realized that Black Star Square is far bigger than even the Red Square in Moscow, and it was filled to capacity. It was filled - we worked from

eight o'clock in the morning, and it was quite a production.

ALEX "Soul to Soul" was a recent picture wasn't it?

IVAN Yes.

ALEX You must have been - you were with the film industry before then?

IVAN Well, I was fortunate to - they asked me to produce for the fifteenth Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations.

ALEX What year was this?

IVAN 1963. I had a whole African section, which I produced as 'The African Scene' with the assistance of my friend and relation, Wolfe Tagel. We did quite a good performance, and I should say, because we had Madame Moraz from Brazil, Louis Jourdan from Paris, the famous actor, who read the preamble. We had the Kabuki's from Japan, and the Bloshoi theatre. It was an international performance. Another little section was the last - which had a standing ovation. I think probably because we were a bit of colour!

ALEX And did you find possibilities for African themes, African films in this?

IVAN Of course. Vast areas where Americans are interested and especially in Africa, and Ghana being in the lead for many years, both in the political scene, and cultural scene there was quite a wide open gap, which had to be filled, that there were limited people or facilities that could be utilized to fill in this. The number of times you have obstruction from government officials, diplomats who misuse their offices by, for instance, once I had the opportunity to produce an ancestral dialogue, sound and light, plus images, with the assistance of a Phelps Stokes Foundation. But this was sabotaged by officials of the Ghana embassy, simply because I had done this production at the United Nations without their consent. I don't know why I should consult them. I was offered an opportunity 'Would you like to produce this?', so, I took the opportunity and I did it, but after the reception they thought they should have been informed - what for, I don't know - probably might use that for some of their political propaganda - I wasn't interested in politics. So, later on when I had the opportunity to do this they deliberately sabotaged it at the last moment. I wouldn't mention names, but, they are very much aware of it. This brought bad feeling among some of the black Americans who were anxious to be associated with Africa and the Arts, and especially from Ghana.

ALEX Now there has been a rejuvenation of interest in the film industry in West Africa, Nigeria, Cameroun, to set only two examples, but generally also in Francophone Africa. I haven't heard much from Ghana by way of films.

IVAN

Well, Ghana unfortunately hadn't made enough progress. They have all the equipment you can think of - they have a first-class studio, compared to other studios that I have seen outside West Africa, or outside Africa - Black Africa - that unfortunately they are then run like a government information service, and not like an industry. Instead of buying and marketing (they haven't got the facilities to buy and market) they have produced a few - couple of - films that I don't classify worth distributing outside. Unfortunately, that's the way I see it. Contact was made with an Italian co-producer, but the substance was out-of-date, and distribution was nil. Bad distribution in Ghana because on film ran in one theatre for about a month. Normally when you have people looking at one product for a couple of days naturally they get fed up, and that had to go somewhere so that a new audience can also have a look at it. But this system of distribution had been the regular pattern of information media and they are still doing the same thing - so, money-wise they don't make the money invested by the government. This naturally wouldn't give the government the opportunity to think of them as an industry - as a money-making thing. But, it is quite a big thing. If they will open up the channels and let the government understand that this can make them more money than probably even the cacao, because we have all the facilities we need. We have 360 days sunshine, locations, equipment, people, what more do you want?

ALEX

What film were you referring to earlier on?

IVAN

I was referring to "Contact". Lately they had done another one with George Williams, which had had quite a good reception because it's all local artists and local producers, directors - the reception was far ? than the previous one which was an international production "Contact".

ALEX

You were talking about the opportunities in marketing not being made use of, but what else is hindering the production of films in Ghana? Is it for lack of script writers?

IVAN

No. We have a lot of stories around which ought to be put into screen-plays, and then produced, but they are running all the industry itself makes it impossible for other people to come in, for instance, we have few writers employed in the government establishments. Now, the referee is my opponent? I send in the script and it is retained because he's also writing what he thinks he could use. Furthermore, we have quite a number of competitors on the Board of Directors. Some are competitive artists in the artistic world in Ghana, others have some proteges in the background. So, they put what they think is necessary. It's wrong. We must have a new neutral administration which buys properties, it doesn't matter who it comes from. Those that have already been exposed on the shelves, on the stage, like "My Fair Lady", these have been in production

long before they were taken into films. We have "Dode Akaibi" - "I speak of freedom", which I intend to do on Nkrumah's involvement in the independence trouble in Ghana, and then in Africa. There are a lot of materials but they have not got a department for buying and selling and so those that have been produced are there and nobody is doing anything about it. There is a big demand for childrens' films - this is why I am here - to see what type of films they want. I know, for instance, in America they want to have Annansi stories, because Annansi stories come from the West Indies into the public schools, but over here in Europe I don't know what they want, but I am sure they want something from Africa.

ALEX You just talked about wanting to produce a film of Nkrumah's anti-colonial struggle. Do you think in the present political atmosphere of Ghana such a controversial film would be welcome?

IVAN Of course, even in 1965 I wrote a television script "Nkrumah's Ghana And World View" - which one of the American television stations were willing to produce if I could get permission from the government. This went through the embassy in Washington and it ended up with doubt about it - I am not going to write about his political ideology I want only to write about how the man came into the midst of the political arena in Ghana, because earlier on we had a number of elites - Nanka, Bryce, my father, your father, and other people who were influential in politics, but they didn't do anything until Nkrumah came out of nowhere and with people like Sergeant Adjetey - the ex-servicemen's organisation, and right up to the period of independence - this is where I want to limit my scope, you know, so, I don't see anything wrong with that.

ALEX And do you think there is any possibility of a conflict developing between television which is now picking up in Ghana, and Africa as a whole, and the film industry.

IVAN No. Well the people in television in Ghana are sleeping at the moment, and until they wake up I don't think there is any competition with film in Ghana. Furthermore, films in Ghana at the moment are being exploited by too many aliens who have created a foreign exchange media by importing films through the Bank of Ghana, and then re-issuing those films outside the country - not accounting for money accrued from those films back to Ghana. Now, if the film industry corporation is really in the commercial system it should know that this must be stopped with immediate effect. I have written a number of letters in connection with this, but nothing has been done about it. And this must be stopped immediately so that any film produced in Ghana, or imported into Ghana, amount of money realised from that film - part of it should be utilized to promote other film producers in Ghana, or in other parts of West Africa with the co-operation of the Ghana film industry.

ALEX Well Ivan, you have said a lot of interesting things. Now, what are your plans for the future?

IVAN Well, I hope to produce in association with outsiders for distribution reasons, historical films like Samore Touré, that's Sekou Touré's late grandfather who fought the French for 18 solid years, and is known as the 'Black Strategist'.

ALEX Well Ivan, all the very best wishes to you, I am sure you will come up with something worthwhile.

IVAN Thank you very much. Nice talking to you, and I hope to come back again with some more information.

ALEX You are welcome. And that's it from "Arts and Africa" for this week, and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's 'Goodbye'.