

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 242

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, it's Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of "Arts and Africa". I don't expect you though the programme would begin with that music. Did you recognise it? Yes, "Ol Man River", made famous by the unmistakable voice of Paul Robeson. And now the controversy surrounding Robeson's life is alive again in Britain and America. It's been caused by a new one-man show about Robeson's life written by Phillip Hayes Dean. The man who plays Robeson and has been a life long admirer is black American actor James Earl Jones, who has been in many important plays about the struggles of black people, as Anne Bolsover discovered when she talked to him.

JONES: Some of the most important plays I've done in America have been about the South African scene, plays by Athol Fugard, his Busman and Lena, and his 'Blook Knof'. I did one play that was not by an African, it was by an Afro-American, Lorraine Hansberry who wrote 'Raisin in the Sun' and many other important plays, for Broadway, a play called 'Les Blancs' which was her answer to (Les Negres) which is our Jean Genet play about the blacks, she had an unusual reaction said about writing a play called the Whites which was really her study of the emergence of revolutionary thinking and action by the African leaders by the African people and it was an imaginary play set in the land of Albert Schweitzer but dealt with a young man who came back from England and decided to change his country.

ANNE: So most of the roles you were playing must have been figures of protest against something. Is that why you chose the role of Paul Robeson as well?

JONES: Figures of protest, no figures in conflict with their time, figures of protest suggests that they're out looking for a fight, no, black people that I study they're not looking for a fight they're just dealing with what's there, with the oppression, the lack of total personhood that is imposed on them and they decide to step forward and be total people, it's more to do with conflict with one's time, threatening change, I think that defines Paul's life and certainly his battles, best of all he was a man who threatened change.

Here in London when he was here in the 20's he met men like Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah. London did not have quite as large a coloured population as it does now, so Paul as a great singer and actor did not threaten change, and he was embraced by the British quite fully, but he did threaten change in his own country because we had a very difficult racial problem there especially in our USA south South of the Mason Dixon line where I was born. Paul confronted these problems and that led to a lot of the censorship against him because he threatened not because he was wrong because he threatened change, rightful change, righteous change, that society was not ready for.

ANNE: He called himself a scientific socialist, what did he mean by that?

JONES: He was always being accused of being a Communist and in those days it meant something quite different, I mean you can say yes I'm a Communist today and it doesn't mean anything but in those days during the cold war with the Iron Curtain and the 'Better dead than Red' slogans in America, it was a very crucial thing, he denied being a Communist, I am convinced he was not a card carrying Communist, though very strongly aligned with the Soviet ideas of course, and later Chinese ideas and he saw the cold war as a folly, a very dangerous folly and fought against it, he fought for peace.

ANNE: What were his feelings about Africa?

JONES: His feelings about Africa began to be formed here in London really when he met Kenyatta and Nkruma. He began to realise that Africa would never be understood, looked at through Western eyes alone and he discovered through his study of culture, language and music, that there was a greater kinship between the African peoples and the Asian peoples, much more than there was between Asia and the Orient or Africa and the Orient.

ANNE: What did you think about his films, the way he portrayed the black man in his films?

JONES: With great dignity always, even roles that he later came to detest. He did a film called 'Saunders of the River' in which he was the hero, but after he did his filming, he took a trip to Russia and that made the producers here very uneasy, they said to themselves, now can we present this man as a hero with his association with Russia and they decided to re-edit the film and made Saunders the hero and Paul was just another pro-colonialist black person.

ANNE: Yes, it's the kind of archetypal colonial film really. He plays the good black man.

JONES: That was the film he shot but it was the film that was changed once the British became a little concerned about his association with Russia.

ANNE: Did he speak out against this?

JONES: Yes he protested along with a lot of African students, he protested against the film.

ANNE: What about his other films?

JONES: Other films he did, he did the early version of the 'King Solomon's Mines' that was the only time he was on the Continent of Africa, that was filmed in Cairo, in building the play at one point we got so concerned about making it clear what his stand about Africa was, we were even assuming he was there, but he had planned a trip to Africa, a whole tour, and again he was called to Russia and his wife Islanda and Paul Junior took a trip from Capetwon to Cairo instead, and Paul never took that trip but his mind and his spirit was always there, he learned many African languages, spoke in them fluently, and sang in them, he found a great kinship between a lot of the Negro spirituals that he's been taught by his father, his father's church, he found a great kinship with some of the African songs and the Asian songs as well.

ANNE: What aspects of his life do you bring out in your show?

JONES: We try to introduce his life not as biography but as a simple introduction from the age of 19 to the age of 75 covering all the highlights that happened to him, we can't cover everything, it would take a television series to cover Paul Robeson's life, it would also take a great singer which I am not, it would take a great deal more research that we are allowed in terms of the time we had and the access we had. We bring out the things that, and this is the most important thing for me, the things that show Paul as evolving to his stand developing, not learning from anybody except his own experience. He evolved because he began to see a connection between racism as he experienced it in America, and Colonialism as he experienced it being abroad, and fascism as he directly experienced it in Germany in 1934. So those were all connected with the same kind of drive the Western world was on ever since the Renaissance, he saw the Renaissance not as a glorious period but a Pandora's box out of which came all the horrors that we know of, the kind of aggression, the drive for power that leads to exploitation of labour that leads to enslavement of people, dark people in particular, because it was easier, he saw that as a birth of racism as we know it, there was no point in racism before that, except to divide man and say that's sub-human and this is better and began to treat a hierarchy among men which he saw as totally ridiculous. His whole drive since he was so endowed, he could have sat on a mountain top and enjoyed those endowments for the rest of his life, been wealthy whatever, but he saw so many of his own people and other common people not being able even to develop their own endowments. He saw all men as being fully endowed if they were just allowed to develop those endowments and share them with fellow men, and that defined his fight I think better than anything political.

ANNE: To turn to the criticism that the play has aroused in a lot of black people in America and here too, what do you think caused them to say that you've trivialised the character of Paul Robeson - made him into a kind of chocolate John Wayne?

JONES: The people who came to see the play left the theatre without thinking that. Paul Robeson Junior does not want anything done about his father at all. He says he will do something some day when he's good and ready, but I don't trust that frankly. Paul Robeson belongs to the world and as an artist, I feel that I have a right to address myself to his life as an artist, and that's what this play represents. I would love to have had a better play too, but this is the best we could do given the access to material and given the time we had, it is presented as a monodrama partly because it is simpler to do it that way not easier but simpler.

... the play ... broken into two

I go onto the stage representing Paul, and I speak to imaginary characters that I cannot conjure or imagine on the spot, the play is two hours long, broken into two acts. I don't sing. Bert plays music to help establish the mood, plays it on the piano, and I will sing a snatch or two when it's relevant to the statement that I'm trying to make or relevant to the feeling that Paul is involved with.

ANNE: To turn to your next role which is something different again. You're going to be playing Alex Haley in 'Roots 2' aren't you?

JONES: Yes.

ANNE: Now what do you think about the original Roots did it start something completely new for black people?

JONES: Not new, no, black consciousness has always been aware of what slavery represented but this is the first time that so many white Americans could share. Because after all you see, since the early sixties white people were saying, well what's wrong with the black people, what do they want, what are they complaining about and they were saying these things without the context of slavery over our roots really, our roots go to slavery. I think Alex Haley's thing is a one man story. I could never trace my roots I could more easily trace my roots to Ireland than I could to Africa. But that is a very important journey that Alex Haley took and it is a journey that reveals a lot about all of us, white and black, slave owner and slave really, and that's what Roots meant to the American people. It is a very important event.

ANNE: What is Roots 2 going to be about?

JONES: The continuation of that story dealing with the seeds of slaves and slave holders the emancipated people, the Haley family as it grew into prominence. Alex was sort of the black sheep of the family, his father who was a great scholar and teacher said "you is black children, I want you all to be college professors at least", and well Alex's brothers went on, one brother is a Senator the other brother I think is a scholar, professor, but Alex never quite found it until he found his search for roots and that's the part of the Roots 2 that I will be involved in, playing Alex from the time he leaves the Coastguard and becomes a professional writer and gets very involved, not with the black cause so much but with his own curiosity about the black ethnic and tracing it back to Africa.

ANNE: How are you going to approach the role, does it fascinate you?

JONES: Yes it does I will approach it very much like I've approached the role of Paul Robeson, with great curiosity. I've known Alex for a number of years, I got in touch with Alex when he first did the autobiography of Malcolm X because I wanted to do that then about ten years ago when I met Alex and we've talked about it many many times since, that's never materialised by the way, but my association with Alex has been very fruitful. I feel a great kinship with him.

James Earl Jones talking about his part as Paul Robeson and his future role as Alex Haley in "Roots 2". And that's it from 'Arts and Africa' for this week. It's goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey and I'm leaving you with some more of Paul Robeson - "The Canoe Song."