

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No.243

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello again, Alex Tetteh-Lartey with this week's edition of "Arts and Africa", and if those sounds you've just heard meant nothing to you I'll try to help. Imagine a theatre with the walls of a green forest, actors in long black cloaks with hooded faces, all of them making animal noises, and you have the opening of "Couvade", a play by Michael Gilkes which is being presented at the Kesckidee Arts Centre in London. Anne Bolsover saw the play and afterwards spoke to Rufus Collins, its director.

RUFUS COLLINS

This play deals with the problem of "Couvade," which is based on a birth ritual, which is between a woman and a man. In some tribes in Africa for instance a "Couvade" is performed where a man is tied to a stake in the middle of an oncoming tide and they have figured out that his wife should give birth in so many hours and if she doesn't give birth in so many hours then he drowns to death. There's another ritual where the man is scourged all during the birth of the child, they're saying that if the child is not born and she doesn't push and deliver the child in the right amount of time he is murdered by the scourging. The play is about the modern Couvade painter, whose wife is pregnant and is possessed by archetypal images in his dreams of Ashanti Priests and a Shaman South American witch doctor, these images haunt him because he is, in fact, haunted by the problem of identification, he comes from mixed parentage, his wife comes from mixed parentage, he's preparing painting, and therefore develops this kind of Couvade problem with painting and has a nervous breakdown and has to be taken to hospital, just before his wife gives birth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why did he choose to set the play in Guyana rather than Africa, when it's an ancient African myth.

RUFUS COLLINS

Because I think it is, the play talks about how people who came from Africa are beginning to live with the Indians and, therefore, have developed a whole new race of people, there's mixed blood of Indians and Africans, and therefore, the rights which were particularly African, were being translating into an American kind of mythology

ANNE BOLSOVER

What main aspects of Africa are being brought out in the play ?

COLLINS

At one point when the idol rises up and says you're black why don't you take off your shades and realise it. Unless you realise that you are black and that you come to terms with Africa and because when you go to a white country the first thing they will say to you is "nigger go home", they don't mean back to the Carribean they mean back to Africa. As you begin to realise that within yourself then you might be a whole man.

BOLSOVER

What happens to him during the course of the play ?

COLLINS

During the course of the play the painter goes through a series of emotional breakdowns. One about his painting, one about his racial identity and also about the on-coming of his child, and I think it all sort of capsulises in the particular sickness where he breaks down and goes off to the hospital.

BOLSOVER

At the end is there any hope at all, or is it totally negative ?

COLLINS

There is a hope that a new child is coming into the world, and one hopes that the child that comes into the world out of parentage which have faced this kind of particular problem, will have the wisdom of facing that particular problem.

BOLSOVER

Why do you think he chose an artist as the central character of an art form itself ?

COLLINS

Because it does allow him then to deal with the dreams on real terms. One is particularly moved into relating the interior monologue of oneself into a real-life kind of painting in front of you, you become quite aware of what his interior images are, and therefore, when you take a paint, then the painter paints on the canvas those images which you begin to talk about the play, that is of the Ashanti Priest, of a robe, of African images of American Indian images.

BOLSOVER

How did you approach directing it. I mean what problems did you have ?

COLLINS

I found the play to be enormously hard to do on a budget of some six - eight hundred pounds. We had a designer who painted an entire sort of Guyanese forest scene, the whole play is built with screens which go back and forth, because the play evolves itself and there are many, many scenes happening at various times both in reality and in non-reality. I think the very physicality of trying to do a play of that type and stretching the actors is the largest scope of a dramatic play that we have attempted at the Keskidee at present.

MUSIC ACTUALITY.

TETTEH-LARTEY

The dream figure of the Ashanti Priest, a very important part of the painter's consciousness. Millie Kiarie from Kenya, plays the painter's pregnant wife, Pat.

BOLSOVER

How did you see the meaning of the play having acted in it for so long, having gone into it so deeply. How did you see the two dream figures and what happened to your husband ?

KIARIE

You see the character I'm playing, I wouldn't say she's ignorant she's a bit kept away from her husband, from the artistic values and things she's not interested in.

BOLSOVER

But you yourself seeing the meaning of the play, what did you personally think it meant.

KIARIE

To me, its a kind of ritual, where if, like my husband, I mean like Lionel, he believes in it, he believes in the things he's seeing and the things he's saying and to me its a kind of very important play I've done in my life and to me its a very important experience that I'm going through.

BOLSOVER

Did you see any strong links between the African roots and the Guyanese roots, going through the play ?

KIARIE

There's the African element - that part of it was brought in by the Ashanti Priest who was representing the African part of Lionel and the Shaman who was representing the Guyanese part of the dream and the African part of it came as much as the other part it came out and as he says in his paints, he doesn't only believe in one element of the whole thing, he sees all sides of the cultures and he believes in them, the big part between the three characters

Lionel, Arthur and Eddie talking about roots. One's talking about believing in being a Guyanese, he has to accept and the other one wants to go back to Africa, and the other one doesn't know, he doesn't care whether he's there or not there, so it has the present kind of argument that still goes on.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Imruh Caesar plays the painter, Lionel, and he explained to Anne Bolsover how he had approached such a complex role.

IMRUH CAESAR

From the character really. Knowing the character Lionel as a middle class person in the Caribbean, with a romantic vision of life and I took it from that, it was a fantasy situation which you know, is life, you know three quarters of his life and fantasy.

BOLSOVER

How did you see the two dream figures ? How did you feel the differences between them ?

CAESAR

In the play the differences are that the artist in his head the artist in his head - trying to resolve that conflict which is an African past which he can't deny and that neutral American-Indian, which he would like to aspire to, you know and that is the conflict which is represented in the play. Again its part of the fantasy, you know, its part of the artists fantasy.

BOLSOVER

And what about the ending of the play when they seem to be talking about the hope in the future child and blessing the child in a way. Will that child be the symbol of the future ?

CAESAR

It is meant to be in the play.

BOLSOVER

And a fusion of what, the African and the American-Indian ?

CAESAR

Well, more than that. American Indian and Indian, because the artist's wife, Pat, is a mixture of an Indian and African and the artist himself claims to be a mixture of African and American Indian, so its a fusion of all those influences.

BOLSOVER

How did you get the play to have a kind of coherent whole because its got so many different ideas in it, and so many themes in quite short scenes ?

CAESAR

Well it is a problem for the audience to really understand the levels on which the play operates. But I think once you understand the dream play, and a lot of it is what is happening in the artists head, then you can begin to relate the scenes and get the rhythms that the play represents.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And talking of rhythms, here are some from the play - drumming and dancing.

MUSIC - ACTUALITY

And now to turn to another kind of drama. I was very pleased the other day to find in the 'Arts and Africa' mail a letter from Nii Obli Armah of Accra, Ghana. Mr. Armah asks if we would like to have reports on the arts from his neighbourhood and has sent us a sample - an account of some recent theatrical activities. Well, we are indeed very pleased to have the report and very good it is and without more delay here it is:-

AMOBI MODU (READS LETTER)

One of the disturbing problems to lovers of the arts in Ghana is the grim situation of drama. Drama has been and is still in it's infancy. The reasons are not far to find. The many drama groups in Ghana are all run on an amateur basis and those that run them know how they have to scramble for money before they come out with a production. Even if they come out with any production at all, they die a natural death after a while because the artists suffer so much by having to pay much of their money for transport during rehearsals and performances. If this assumption is true, what is the state doing to bring about the much talked of National Theatre ? Here in Ghana, drama seems to have no value and it seems that no meaningful effort is being made to develop the theatre. During the late sixties, the School of Drama in the University of Ghana, Legon, now known as the School of Performing Arts did make some impact. There was always a series of productions during the summer by the drama students; but with the exit of the then head of the School, Professor Joe de Graft, lovers of the Arts started starving. Around this same time there was George Wilson at the Arts Council of Ghana, who from time to time tried to whet our appetite with productions. For some

four years now he has been a farmer. To him "if you are not recognised in the arts at least the soil will recognise you". In fact, it looked as if we were going to be starved forever, at least that was how some of us saw it. But Professor Joe de Graft and George Wilson, have taken up the task again and have treated us to two productions of a few weeks ago. After so many years in the country, Prof. Joe de Graft is back with a bang to his post as the head of the School of the Performing Arts at the University of Ghana. His production - "Mambo" which he also wrote was performed by the students of the School. It took the theme from Shakespeare's Macbeth. In fact he says it is an adaptation of Macbeth. The story relates to the present day situation in the country. Mambo's world, like the world of all megalomaniacs, is essentially a world of fantasy in which psychological forces in violent turmoil dominate everything. In his own words, the writer of Mambo says: "Solving the problems involved in realizing this central fact dramatically has been my greatest challenge". George Wilson feels he still has drama in his marrow and can't get rid of it entirely, no matter what the prevailing environment. His production of Henrik Ibsen's famous play "A Public Enemy", with the Ghana Playhouse at the British Council has been acclaimed as one of the best of his numerous productions. "A Public Enemy", otherwise known as "The Enemy Of The People" is a commentary on the intrigues by people in responsible positions who aim at discrediting the man who is tirelessly working for the public good. Both the "Public Enemy" and "Mambo" had messages for Ghanaian society. It was, therefore, not coincidental that both plays ran side by side at a time when we most needed certain problems to be brought out for the silent majority. If drama can contribute so much to nation building, it should be tackled with all its seriousness by the powers that be here in Ghana.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Nii Obli Armah's up-to-the-minutes report on drama in Ghana, and I hope he'll send us more accounts about arts events in his part of the world. In fact I'd be more than happy to hear from other parts of Africa, so if you fancy yourself as a reporter and there's something interesting going on in the world of music, dance, painting, sculpting, writing or any other of the arts then put pen to paper and let us know. Our address is 'Arts and Africa', BBC, PO Box 76, Bush House, Strand, London WC2, England.

So that's it for 'Arts and Africa', for this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, its goodbye.