

Arts and Africa



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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of 'Arts and Africa'. We have plenty of variety for you this week and we begin with theatre.

The South African born actress Yvonne Bryceland is currently enjoying considerable success in London with a one-woman show called Miss South Africa Six, which used the theme of a beauty queen contest to demonstrate the underlying tensions - notably those arising from guilt - that exist in South Africa today. The play has been chosen as part of the British National theatre's current policy of mounting "platform" performances - short plays and readings which take place in the main auditorium of the theatre in the early evening prior to the major plays being staged later. Yvonne Bryceland talked to Mike Sanderson about the play and its rather strange title: why Miss South Africa Six?

YVONNE BRYCELAND

Well, its called Miss South Africa Six, because she came sixth in that contest, she actually wound up as Miss North-Eastern Transvaal and then in the final round-up only came sixth so she didn't make the Miss South Africa thing, so she didn't get to London. I knew this man Barney Simon, a Johannesburg writer, that I know very well and I said I know that he's got a book out of short stories and monologues called "Jo'burg Sis" and its an absolutely marvellous reflection on all aspects of South African society, and there's this one particular thing, in Miss South Africa Six, and I said, well you know, that was one that I'd love to do, so they went quite "bananas" about this, they thought it was marvellous and its the first time Simon's work has been done outside South Africa because he's essentially a director and he's a marvellous writer.

MIKE SANDERSON

What does the play actually achieve? What does it do?

YVONNE BRYCELAND

Well it's on quite a few levels. First of all his writing is very similar to Athol Fugard's writing, which makes me hone in on it straight away because its the sort of South African society that I know something about.

MIKE SANDERSON

And indeed you were involved with Fugard for some years yourself?

YVONNE BRYCELAND

And I've been involved with Fugard for so many years. Well its about a beauty queen, and I think its got a lot to say about beauty queens anyway. Its about how they are exploited and how they exploit and in the final analysis lose out, because, well they do, because, I mean, its only a really transitory thing that they have, their beauty, and once that's through then they've kind of lost out and its actually based on a true case in South Africa where a girl did have a really serious breakdown because she couldn't cope. You see it acts on another level. You know, White South African society has a terrible guilt complex and so this poor girl is riddled with it, she knows nothing about politics and then when one is faced with having to answer questions about the political aspect of South African society, knows nothing, but whose subconscious knows, she goes "bananas" on that. And its also about her, you see there's a very strong calvanistic streak in South Africa and the extraordinary thing is, I mean for such calvanistic people its a dreadful paradox, because they're mad about beauty contests and its always those girls who come from a very Calvinistic background like this lady that I'm playing, who gets launched into these beauty parades and things. They can't cope because they're pulled between their very strict up-bringing and then this other thing of showing off, showing themselves, and, you know, the strange sort of erosion that comes with that.

MIKE SANDERSON

Ideally, how would you like an audience to feel as they leave the performance?

YVONNE BRYCELAND

I think that, hopefully I think it would be nice if they laughed initially and then realised that it isn't actually funny to laugh at another human being's particular plight and dilemma.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mike Sanderson talking to Yvonne Bryceland about her one woman show Miss South Africa Six. And now to a new book about African wildlife that has just been published by Alan Hutchinson. It's called How the Zebra Got Its Stripes and its a collection of myths and tales about wildlife collected by Kenyan school children who are members of the wildlife club of Kenya. The stories have been written down by the children and others have illustrated them. Anne Belsover talked to Sandy Price who was responsible for co-ordinating the idea and she told her how the book had been put together.

SANDY PRICE

Well, we thought that before folk tales disappeared from Africa, which they are doing very rapidly, we would ask students from all over Kenya to collect stories and literally sent a letter saying: "during your school holiday ask your grandmother to re-tell some of the stories that perhaps she told you when you were very young". So with this kind of encouragement, they collected hundreds of stories and we sifted those down to about 25.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What kind of stories were you looking for? Were you really looking for stories that had been handed down from generation to generation, or ones that the kids had invented as well?

SANDY PRICE

No, we were looking for authentic stories and we got enough repeats on the stories to be able to know which ones were authentic or not. And then we ran a competition to get paintings as illustrations for the stories.

ANNE BOLSOVER

And what kind of stories did you get, you say you had hundreds?

SANDY PRICE

Yes. And of course, we wanted each story to be about a particular animal, wildlife, lions, zebras, giraffes, rinos. Most of the stories are the kind of fables which originated with Aesop's Fables, which I believe came from Aesop originally in Africa, so most of them have a moral and some of them can be a little bit brutal actually, but they do get the point across.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What are some of your favourite stories?

SANDY PRICE

My favourite story is about a guinea fowl, which is a beautifully speckled bird, I suppose it would be familiar to most people here, which saved a cow and its calf from being killed by a lion, which came into their corral and as a reward to the guinea fowl, which was a very plain and lack-lustre bird, the cow dipped its tail in milk and splattered the guinea fowl with beautiful spots for ever more. And many of the stories do deal with how animals came to look the way they do, how they got long necks, or long tongues, or why they make a certain sound, why the lion roars, for instance, how the zebra got its stripes.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Why does the lion roar?

SANDY PRICE

He was always a very truculent animal, pushing he weight around and some other animals got together and tricked him into eating a whole pot of honey, afterwards he took a nap underneath the tree where the honey was stored, the bees came back, found their honey all gone, and stung him so much that he made the loudest noise possible, and so he roars.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Where do you think these stories originally come from?

SANDY PRICE

They have been around for decades and decades, maybe even centuries, so probably grandmothers or elders in a village did make them up long ago to entertain children and definately to get a lesson across.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Now how did you do the illustrations for the stories, you say you ran a competition?

SANDY PRICE

Having taken the best 25 stories or so, we then condensed them and sent 25 condensations to all thousand secondary schools in Kenya so that students could pick the stories that they liked best, or interested them most, and make an illustration for it. We do run a yearly art competition and this one was the most successful ever and exhibited by UNESCO in Nairobi and we had lots of good pictures to choose from then, and 18 of these are now in the book accompanying the stories.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What were you looking for when you were actually choosing those illustrations?

SANDY PRICE

We were looking for paintings that had great charm, and perhaps interesting colour, an interesting concept of how an animal looked, or what it was doing in the story.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Do you think there's a likelihood of a book like this taking myths from all over Africa?

SANDY PRICE

Yes, I think that would be a very good possibility, try it in other countries, perhaps the other side of the continent and it would be interesting to see how many of the same morals turned up, because I am sure it would be very similiar.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Shalapo Nomba Naya by Alick Nkhata, the Zambian singer who died recently. Alick Nkhata was, for a long time, Director of the Zambian Broadcasting Corporation. Now one of Nkhata's colleagues was Peter Fraenkel, who is now with the BBC and is here with me in the studio. Peter, what was, to being with, the meaning of that song?

PETER FRAENKEL

Well, it was one of those very sad songs that Nkhata seemed to specialise in. It was the story of a man whose lived in town, picked up a girl in town, has established a long term relationship, but not a proper tribal marriage with her, and after a few years decides that he has to break, the call of the village is too great, his relations with the woman aren't right, and he tells her that he's breaking off and he's got to go back home and would she look after their children, he'll help her to support them but he can't carry on this type of life.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Who was Alick Nkhata?

PETER FRAENKEL

Who was he? Difficult to say. A man of genius certainly. You know, he one day walked into, what was then the Central African Broadcasting Service, they used to have 'open door' in my days and even before. Every Wednesday anybody who thought he could play or sing, could come and be rehearsed and recorded, we had an enormous library of such recordings and one day Alick Nkhata turned up. And Michael Kittermaster, who was then in charge of the Station, realised that he had a man of extraordinary talents on his hands. From that he drifted into broadcasting and in the end, rose to be Director General of Zambian Broadcasting.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Was he from the city?

PETER FRAENKEL

No, I think he was born, or certainly brought up at Lugwe Mission. I think his ancestors, his parents, came from Malawi, hence the name Nkhata from Nkhata Bay. I think the family history is very similar to the Kaunda's. Both their parents were missionaries attached to the Mission, were brought up there in Bemba speaking country and considered themselves Zambians.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, he became Director of Zambian Broadcasting Corporation, which was quite a high office, how did he come to be appointed to this post?

PETER FRAENKEL

Well he was a very prominent person, he was known as an artist. I always think, especially looking back at his career now, that if he'd stuck to his artistry he would be remembered even longer than he will be remembered now, because he was a great artist but he spread his talents too far instead of concentrating what he did superbly well and that is express the problems and the longings of people coming into the towns having to cope with a new type of life and he had this extraordinary good ear for tribal music. He picked these melodies, you heard for example, a tribal melody that he picked up and adapted.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Peter was it just a case of one man and his guitar, in other words was he just a solo performer?

PETER FRAENKEL

No, in the end we at the Lusaka Broadcasting Station arranged a band around him, which accompanied him. They appeared every Saturday night, if I remember correctly, in a live, or sometimes pre-recorded Saturday night show that we did and the demand for new songs then became tremendous and he would work through our library and take songs from any area of the country, any tribal tradition that appealed to his ear and adapt them for these songs. I think I'd like to play you one of those, it was originally a song recorded by bare breasted women in the Eastern province of Zambia, either Tambuka or Ensenga, sang it while pounding their maize, with a heavy pounding rhythm and it appealed to the Chief Kalindawe to do to do something about the drift of young men to the towns, who were all going to the line of rail, there was only one railway line in Zambia, and all seemed to feel that they had to see that line of rail before they died. They appealed to the Chief, saying, you are a good Chief, but so something to bring back these people. The title of the song, if I remember correctly, was Kalindawe Ni Mfumu.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Well thank you very much Peter Fraenkel. And that's it from 'Arts and Africa' for this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

MUSIC