

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

256P

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you once again to another edition of 'Arts and Africa'. I recently went to the opening of an exhibition at London's Africa Centre where I met Adesose Wallace. Adesose Wallace is the Nigerian artist who works in coloured thread beads and shells that I spoke to earlier this year. Exhibiting with Ade was a close friend and colleague Fakeba Minteh who comes from Nume in The Gambia. Fakeba now works with Adesose in Nigeria. Fakeba produces tie-dye cloths and I asked him how he came to work in this medium.

## FAKEBA MINTEH

My mother used to do tie and dye, but she doesn't take it to be a profession. The way she used to do her tie and dye is not the same as I am now doing. She used to do the real local tie and dye, go and cut trees, and then the leaves and then boil it and then bring her own dye out of that and then make her own tie and dye. In Dacca, I studied carving with the Chinese people in the bowl industry, so I was working with them until I was qualified in carving. From there I decided to leave to become a seaman. In 1975 I came back to see my parents. In 1975 I left for Liberia. All this time I was not doing tie and dye, I didn't take it to be my profession, but by the time I reached Liberia, I was paying people to dye for me and then I myself would go and sell it. In Nigeria in 1977 I met Ade Wallace. And Ade Wallace really pushed me to continue with the dye-ing. I started doing this tie and dye.

## TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what is the difference between your method and the traditional method practised by your mother?

## MINTEH

Our methods right now it brings lots of designs that our parents weren't doing. We are bringing our own designs from our own head.

TETTEH-LARTEY

But is it the same sort of method of using seeds to tie the ends of the cloth?

MINTEH

No, it is not the same method. The way we used to tie and the way we use to bend our cloths to bring our own designs out they are quite different. But these dyes too, are becoming proof of it in Nigeria because there are a lot of Gombians together, over forty. We used to sit together and tie and from there you learn more designs.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you deal with cloth the cloth as far as I am concerned is something to be worn. So when you are doing your tying and dyeing do you think in terms of artistic work or do you just produce the thing to be worn by people, or do you combine both ideas?

MINTEH

Right now you know I take it to be an artistic work. From the beginning it was to me an artistic work. At the time I met Ade it becomes to me an artistic work. So even this exhibition that's why Ade told me to do the tie and dye so that it could be considered as an artistic work.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Fokeba Minteh talking about his tie-dye work recently on exhibition in London. And now to an unusual publishing company operating from South Africa. The name Hans Zell is well known to African publishing and authors as a man who edits the African Book Publishing Record. In fact, Hans Zell has done more than most to encourage indigenous African publishing. His latest enterprise is to act as overseas representative for the Raven Press. The Raven Press is a Johannesburg based publishing company which, despite the worst efforts of the South African authorities to interfere with its operations, continues to produce books by and for black people about their situation in that unhappy country. David Sweetman spoke to Hans Zell and began by asking him how the Raven Press had begun.

HANS ZELL

Raven Press was founded in 1974 having had its origins in the study project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society, or SPROCAS as it is also called. This body was sponsored by the South African Council of Churches and the now banned Christian Institute of Southern Africa under Dr. Beyers Naude. The organisation was set up to analyse the South African political order, and to propose radical alternatives pointing a direction of a just, free and non-discriminatory society. Subsequently the scope of Raven's list has widened considerably and has taken in not only socio-political works but also literature by particularly new Black South African writers. The Company's aim is to produce socially committed literature which is not always easy when you publish in a repressive society like South Africa is. So inevitably a number of titles have fallen foul of the South African censors, and Raven's editorial director, Peter Randal, who was the partner of Dr. Beyers Naude was, in fact, one of the individuals affected by

OLU JACOBS  
SWEETMAN

ZELL I went to RADA, The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, to do voice and I went to another school called The Actors Forum where the banning orders, the mass banning orders by the South African Government following the events at Soweto.

DAVID SWEETMAN Could I just leap in there and say that although they are politically committed in their writing, one should make it clear, perhaps, that they are not writing the sort of very heavy and jargon ridden polemical writing that one sometimes gets from committed publishers.

ZELL No, not at all. The emphasis in fact is/has now more recently been in the creative talent that is coming out of South Africa, particularly from the townships, where a whole mushrooming of new talent is being discovered and that is one of the main aims. Ravan feels one of their main responsibilities as publishers is to respond to this upsurge of creative activity in the townships.

SWEETMAN Would you say that there was any difference between the sort of things that Ravan are publishing as a local publishing house looking at creative talent and the sort of things that a large outside expatriate publishing company, all be it committed to African writing, would select to publish?

ZELL Yes, well, they haven't sort of had the plums of literary publishing but increasingly because of their commitment to young aspiring authors and black authors, increasingly some of the distinguished names of the South African literary scene are publishing with Ravan, and indeed have already published. Nadine Gordimer has published a book with Ravan sometime ago, Yvonne Burgess is coming out with a new book and not least, significantly there is a new novel coming out sometime early in the New Year by Ezekiel Mphahlele entitled "Shorendu".

SWEETMAN I am probably most fascinated by the Ravan play scripts. They are much more interesting than the usual printed play, because they have photographs of the actual productions, could you tell me how these came about?

ZELL Yes, it is largely experimental theatre and it originated largely from the Black townships of South Africa. It aims to bring new South African drama of which there's an enormous amount coming out now, to bring this to the attention of a wider circle of readers and above all, of course, an international audience. We'll probably find it a bit difficult to market these, because traditionally book-sellers are a bit reluctant to stock experimental drama of this sort, however, apparently they are doing very well in South Africa itself, there's five titles out so far, of which you have the first three - four of them are in fact by Black South African playwrights.

SWEETMAN

Ravan also produce a literary magazine called "Staff Rider", could I begin by asking what does "Staff Rider" mean ?

ZELL

Yes, well that puzzled me too initially, but what it apparently means is it takes its name from the young people who ride "Staff" as they call it on the commuter trains from Soweto and that is on the roof near the doors, with some considerable daring and much to the alarm of their fellow passengers. The magazine had been launched by Raven Press in an attempt to respond, as publishers, to the great surge of the creative talent that is now coming out of Africa. Again it is mainly intended as an outlet for writers groups, again mainly black township based, but it also publishes individual writing by black and white South African authors, it features short stories, it has extracts from novels, extracts from drama in progress, and there is a series of interviews. Mostly, by as yet, unknown black South African writers and dramatists, but also by one or two well established names. An interesting thing about "Staff Rider" is the way it is marketed in South Africa itself. The Writers, or the contributors to the magazines, do in fact distribute the magazine themselves, in the townships, and apparently with very encouraging results.

SWEETMAN

And do you see it having an interest outside of South Africa ?

ZELL

I think so, very much so. If we take it on, which we haven't decided yet, we do promote it but we are not, as yet, officially distributing it, we obviously have to give it something of a sub-title. I think any library, world-wide, which has an interest in the new literary output that nowadays comes from South Africa can just not afford to be without it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was David Sweetman talking to Hans Zell about the Raven Press. And from books to plays. The current hit on London's West End stage is "Night and Day" the latest play by English writer Tom Stoppard which is set in an imaginary African country. This African connection in the play, fascinating though it is, is really more about matters of concern to a European than to an African audience. However, one of the principle actors in the piece is Nigerian Olu Jacobs. It's still somewhat unusual for an African to have a successful career on the West End stage so we asked Simi Thomas to find out just how this came about. She spoke to Olu Jacobs backstage at the Phoenix Theatre and asked where he had got his training as an actor.

OLU JACOBS

I went to RADA, The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, to do voice and movement, I went to another school called The Actors Forum where I did projects, now these projects are to help drama students with their end of term projects, you help direct them, act in them, and all this I was doing, to help them and to help myself, and from then on the

JACOBS

struggle started. I remember having to go on tour to Leicester and having to subsidise myself.

SIMI THOMAS

Did you find that there weren't many parts for African actors in England?

JACOBS

Oh, very few parts for Black, even fewer for Africans. Its getting much better now, because of the new generation of African and Black actors seem to be more united.

SIMI THOMAS

Have you been in a play by a Black dramatist ?

JACOBS

Oh yes. I've been in a few plays but the one that actually sticks out in my mind is Ola Rotimi's play, "The Gods Are Not To Blame", which he came over here to direct himself earlier this year. It's the Oedipus Rex play set in Nigeria in the 18th Century and it was perhaps the most satisfying job I've done for a very long time - it was very exciting indeed. The theatre in Africa is comparatively young, I mean in some areas non-existent, so we have untapped avenues for entertainment that prob bly the Europeans haven't got anymore. I mean things that we can still write plays about, - I mean its still live and it will still be very valid even in Britain.

THOMAS

So you think that drama will really develop now in Africa ?

JACOBS

Oh, without a doubt, without a doubt. And the more settled politically we are the better things will get, because we will be able to pursue the cultural aspect of life, which we've neglected for years. Just look at a very small area, music, if there's any kind of festival of music anywhere in Africa you find musicians from all over the world going there with their little tapes to go and record music. They want to bring it back, they want to learn, they are very eager to learn there, because they've got to a kind of saturation point. I mean the excitement is in Africa now, and I think it is in our hands.

THOMAS

And will you yourself go back to Africa ?

JACOBS

Well I think, myself, it is my duty to do that, if I've gained anything at all I think I should be able to impart some of that.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Olu Jacobs, African actor talking to Simi Thomas about his career, and that's it from 'Arts and Africa' for this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

BBC COPYRIGHT