

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and this week the subject is fiction - and fact that is stranger than fiction.

MUSIC

The brash sounds of a big city - this one is the Nigerian capital, Lagos. And Lagos is the setting for a new film called "The Rise And Fall of Doctor Oyenusi".

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Anybody from Nigeria who hears the name Dr. Oyenusi gets frightened, like the first day it was published in the paper that I was going to make this film, the Commissioner of Police, everybody in the country was saying: "Oyenusi, not him again, not him again!" But later they find out in the local press that it was a film because the headline of the paper said: "Oyenusi Lives Again!" So you know, people ran down to the cemetery to make sure he's still there in the grave and then reading down a few lines saw that he's going to live in celluloid, in a film.

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That's the voice of Eddie Ugbomah, Co-Director with Kayode Dada of a film about the robber-bandit, Dr. Oyenusi who terrorized the suburbs of Lagos in the late sixties and early seventies. (By the way, Oyenusi was a fetish doctor, not the hospital sort). Eddie Ugbomah makes his living in the construction industry but he has studied directing and acting and very much wanted to film the story of Oyenusi who believed his fetish could save him from the bullets of the police, but nevertheless, ended up before a firing squad on the execution ground at Bar Beach. As Eddie Ugbomah explained to me, he knew of Oyenusi at first hand.

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Oh yes, I was unfortunate that in 1969 I went home with a group that was called "The Soul Messengers". I took them on tour of West Africa and after a big concert in Lagos - so I went back to my hotel and the hotel was crowded with friends so somebody asked me to come and spend the night in his flat. Well, on getting to the flat this gentleman Oyenusi burst down the front door and stuck me up. As I was lying down somebody else in the compound started screaming: "the robbers, the robbers", so that he shot them down, two brothers, and ran away. For a whole day I couldn't even talk because I was so frightened because he had a gun right to my skull. Shouting at me to lie-down, give him the money. - So I went fast to the ground but lucky for me somebody else took the bullet, and then he ran away.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There's also a story that an attempt was made to shoot him and he didn't die. Is that true?

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Well, that's a thick story, that might be true that might be lie, I wasn't there, but people believed that they couldn't kill him and they had to pour acid all over him, you know, but I know he was a terror.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now I think it's a very exciting story, but can I ask you if it's your personal reaction to the experience you had from him that made you decide to use this for your film?

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Yes, I can say yes. But actually it's been my dream to be a film producer. I've worked in Britain, I've produced and directed a lot of stage plays here, even I'm one of the BBC's African Theatre actors, before I left Britain. I've been looking for to produce my own film and I think this an opportunity to do it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The theme is authentic and its also relevant to modern day Nigeria, isn't it?

EDDIE UGBOMAH

What happened is everybody wants to get rich overnight. Nigeria's life is absolutely becoming American where you can't guarantee your life and you can't guarantee your property, and you can't go out after 10.00 o'clock. I think everybody says: "Oh, the Government must do this, the Government must do that". But who is the Government? The Government is you - myself. What have we done to help the Government? - This is what I have done to deter crime by frightening people, the teenagers, the younger ones and those others that, crime does not pay. It is all right to look glamorous but what is the end of the criminal? They end up in the gutter.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now to the actual production of the film. This is your first attempt - it must have been very difficult for you to do this.

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Well, I went through a lot of headaches - but I enjoyed it because I was starting another film at the end of November. But if I had to look back to the trouble and the inconveniences and financial trouble I went through this film I will not then make another film again in Nigeria. I think that the Government announced that they want to encourage film-making. This is an opportunity for them to help me. I didn't get any help. I have to pay for the equipment, I have to pay for the crews, even I have to get my own crew. Then I have to audition the actors, train them 3 - 5 months so they can actually be able to do their best in this film because, as I said, they are not professional actors. But the irony of it is that we've got about 4 to 5 Universities in Nigeria and they all have a Faculty of Drama and none of them can produce any actor. All they do is go through University get a degree or diploma and run straight into television and to the Ministry of Information, white collar jobs. Why do they study drama - why? This is a question I'm asking everybody. Why did they go to do drama? If the Government had established a film industry then these men and women would just come out and go straight into film business, but there are no film industries.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now this film was shot on location in Nigeria, did you use the very places where these crimes took place?

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Exactly, the spot where he killed people, where he looted. As I said in one of my interviews that Nigeria, if not Africa is the cheapest place to make a film because you don't pay for locations. All you have to do is talk to the people, and they are very happy to help you - I use the actual locations at Surulere, Yaba, Sogamu, Badagry Road, Ikeja on the whole, the exact place where the crime took place, that I used.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What is it in, is it in colour or black and white?

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Oh, it's in Eastman Color.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's terribly expensive!

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Oh, we're talking about £2,000,000 to £500,000 for a 90 minute film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, you did say that Dr. Oyenusi was connected with some "big shots", in society. Presumably some of them are still around. - Would they be very happy to see this film shown ?

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Well, that's a very good question because I've been going through a lot of headaches. I've had my shop raided, had my house broken into, had my brand-new car damaged, and letters dropped to me saying "leave Oyenusi alone let it lie-low". And then this really gave me encouragement I said well, if these guys think they are going to frighten me then they are making a mistake. So I decided to make the film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So you wouldn't agree if people said this film was probably going to show to the youngsters around, the methods this man used, and they might try to emulate him ?

EDDIE UGBOMAH

Well this is the mistake most people have been making ever since I had said I would make this film. They've been telling me: "Why Oyenusi, do you want to glamourise him?" - I said no, you just wait this film is made to frighten people, to make people to sit down and think twice. Is it worth it, is it worth it? This is the big question - is it worth being an armed robber just to have three good years of living and being a terror, and then to be killed like a rat? Because in the film you can see, because I was lucky during my shooting to have been able to shoot a true execution (the last day of my shooting there were exactly five armed robbers and I filmed it), so these films are to frighten the teenagers, the adults, and everybody who might think I want to get rich quick or I want to be an armed robber or I want to be a thief - you end up in the gutter.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Eddie Ugbomah telling me about his film "The Rise And Fall Of Doctor Oyenusi". But how about a change in mood,

MUSIC

Reading from "The Man From Sagamu".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The opening paragraph of Adaora Lily Ulasi's latest novel. It's called "The Man From Sagamu", and tells how the disappearance of Mr. Agege created havoc in his home town. Now Adaora Lily Ulasi, welcome to "Arts and Africa". You've written several mystery stories before, all set in Nigeria, now what kind of reading can one expect from this book.

ADAORA LILY ULASI

It enlarges on the cultural traditions of the Western part of Nigeria, the Yoruba land. It takes in the Oshun, the yearly Oshun Festival which is the most famous festival held in that area.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why did you chose a theme of somebody disappearing. It's never been done before. I don't remember anybody writing about that literally happening.

ADAORA LILY ULASI

Well I had to have a plot, and I thought to have a man disappearing during the Oshun Festival, to weave it into the plot, would be a sort of a thriller.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is a very serious theme, the supernatural, at least as far as the people living in Sagamu are concerned - and yet you manage to get a lot of humour out of the situation - the reaction of people to the news that Agege has disappeared. For example the frustration everybody feels at not understanding how he could have done it and not finding him at the same time. The police, the local Magistrate, even the Resident Officer himself, Mr. Whitticar. You see, they are all in a jittery state and I find it rather funny. How did you arrive at this ?

ADAORA LILY ULASI

Agege, Mr. Olu Agege had always been regarded as an unusual figure, and then for him to disappear created such a stir even though at first they sighed with relief, and then they thought well, there was something mysterious about his birth. That was why they all went flat out looking for one man.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, I see. Now your story is rather uncomplicated. You tell a story about the disappearance, and then you build around it various people's reactions to this thing so it is simple in that sense and I also find your style most uncomplicated. Do you think this has anything to do with

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

the fact that you are a trained journalist, not only a trained journalist but you're one who has qualified, you've got a degree in it ?

ADAORA LILY ULASI

Yes, I believe it is. I first started with newspaper journalism and then progressed to being an editor of a women's magazine, women's journal, women's monthly. And you find that to be in such a responsible position when you get your material you have to cut out so much, you have to simplify it, and that has helped me a great deal in writing my books. So I borrow from my journalistic experience and then you know put it into whatever talent I have as an author, and then combine the two.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It was a refreshing thought that you say that journalism has helped you simplify your style - when perhaps to a lot of people journalists tend to be rather deliberately complicated and they think that by writing that sort of style they give an impression they know their stuff.

ADAORA LILY ULASI

Yes, well another thing that helped me was that when I was going for further studies abroad my parents decided to send me to America and you seem to detect in all my books there's always that flowing American style, to cut everything short. You know, you say what you want to say in a hundred words then, you cut it down to ten words.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And perhaps your training as a journalist has also taught you the less you say the greater the humour you bring out.

ADAORA LILY ULASI

Yes, and the greater the people pay attention to what you say. Because one can write pages and the readers find it boring whereas if it is just short and concise they enjoy it more.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Adaora, I must say I didn't find your book at all boring and I felt like going on right to the end.

ADAORA LILY ULASI

Thank you very much indeed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Adaora, thank you for joining us. Adaora Lily Ulasti's book is called "The Men From Sagamu", and it's published as a paperback by Fontana at seventy-five pence here in Britain.

MUSIC

A Yoruba song arranged by Steve Rhodes for the Steve Rhodes Voices, and with it we come to the end of today's programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until next week's "Arts and Africa". Goodbye.