

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 today we talk to one of Zambia's leading men of the theatre.

MUSIC - "Perefere"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Masautso Phiri is a journalist and one of Zambia's foremost men of the theatre. He is one of the founders of the Tikwiza Theatre based in the Zambian capital Lusaka. Since its formation in December 1975 the Tikwiza Theatre has performed many plays for audiences throughout Zambia and elsewhere, the most well known being "Soweto - Flowers will Grow", a play about South Africa, and more recently the intriguingly titled "Christ Unlimited", an original musical which Masautso wrote and directed.

Well welcome to 'Arts and Africa' Masautso. What have you done for the Arts so far in Zambia?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Well I've been involved in theatre since 1963, but more seriously from about 1970 - 1971, when I was involved in a theatre group. That theatre group was a travelling theatre, we took some plays to the provinces. In 1975 we formed a different theatre group called the Tikwiza Theatre for which I've written and performed in some of the productions with other people directing. But I've also directed some of the other productions myself. I've tended to look at it from the committed side and the plays I've been doing have followed the line.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When you say we've formed a new theatre - what do you mean by "we"?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Well there are several of us workers and a few students. But mostly workers from various Government Departments and so on. We came together in December, 1975 and decided that we were going to indulge in theatre, partly to project political ideas as a "Theatre of social consciousness".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

From what you have said I guess that, not only you are a part-time actor, but also the rest of the Tikwiza Theatre players are also part-timers?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Yes, all of them are part-timers. In fact most of our rehearsals take place in the evening. The Government has been kind enough to give us a room in one of their multi-story buildings, where we have our meetings and rehearsals. Sometimes daily sometimes three times a week.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you only concerned with presenting plays inside Zambia, or do you go outside the country?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

We are not only concerned with Zambia. Our view is that there is very little travelling between the various African countries, so last year we decided that we would begin visiting other African countries, that was also partly a response to a directive from our President. That was the time of the play "Soweto". Since then we have been visiting African countries, and I suppose that we shall be visiting more this year.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, if the actors are part-timers, how are they able to travel outside the country, especially if they are employed by private individuals?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

We are a one party state, and apart from that, any employee is entitled to leave. We ask our actors not to take any holiday and we also use the help of party officials to obtain leave for our actors from their employers. But in most cases we don't have any problem.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are they paid when they are away and are not working?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

By their Companies at home? Yes, they are paid. They don't have to pay for anything. The theatre pays their fares, their hotels, etc., wherever they go.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is this on a voluntary basis, or is pressure brought to bear by the Government?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

It is all voluntary. In fact, the club is an independent group. Our club constitution emphasis its independence, though we also look at ourselves as being an activist kind of theatre. We are supposed to be conscious of what's going on, so if the Party says can you do a production, we do it for them. But how we interpret that production is our idea of what theatre is.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And who sponsors your trips outside the country?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

At times, we raise the money ourselves, but the trip to Botswana was sponsored by the Kenneth Kaunda Foundation, which is a publishing house that also distributes educational material to schools.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Does the Government give you any financial help at all?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Yes and no. Yes in that they have committed themselves to give us money. Last year they reimbursed us for part of our expenses, but we also try to be independent, in that we try to raise money on our own.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And when the Government gives you financial assistance, does it also influence your activities in any way, say in the type of play you act?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

No. Basically what influences our production is our own constitution which says we must portray both Zambian and African theatre to any project that is acceptable to us as being good theatre.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I understand that you were once commissioned by the Government to write a play for the Party. Is that correct?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Well, yes and no. Yes, in that the Club was asked by the Party to put on a production for the meeting of the National Council which is attended by Party officials from various parts of the country and also Cabinet Ministers etc, and we did the production. It was a short documentary with music. It portrayed the history of Zambia, from independence to the present day. That was on the

5th June last year which was the performance date. Obviously with this type of production you get various reactions. Some members of the audience, which in this case was the party hierarchy, were offended. Some of them tried to have the play stopped, others went out, but we continued performing the play. At the end of it the President talked about how we, as actors, had come back home to project what is going on in our society. That might seem peculiar, us being asked by the Party to do a production and then we being supported by the President himself. I think here, what you have to look at, is that our society itself is peculiar, it is nothing like you see in the West where there are several parties. We believe that the Party itself, must be able to be critical of itself, and those who are critical must be the people within the Party.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, on a very sensitive issue like this, I wonder if you think the President was trying to bring to the notice of the officials certain things, which he thought might have been going wrong without the officials being aware of them?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Well, that's an assumption that normally officials are not aware of what is going on. Anyway I think that politicians normally know what is going wrong, but the usual question is what do they think of it themselves and how do they respond to it, vis a vis their own positions. So, the answer to that question is, I think, that everyone is aware of what is going on.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you were saying that yours is a peculiar society unlike countries in the West, but I would even point out here that you are unlike some countries in Africa itself, for example, artists are often falling foul of Government officialdom in a place like Kenya and Uganda.

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Yes, I do agree with that. I think partly, its the personality of our President, if you were to imagine that President Kaunda had been present on the day we performed it would have been a different story, maybe our small theatre group would have been ostracised, but the President believes in the arts, he supports the arts and, I think we are very lucky because of that. If we are commissioned again to do another play on Zambia, we would try to look at it from the point of view of the various things that have happened since the last time we have performed the documentary.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, about the Tikwiza Theatre Company, have you got any plans for the future? I know that you performed at FESTAC for Zambia.

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Yes, that was a long time ago, since then we have been to Botswana, and last year we were in Cuba for about two and a half weeks. This year we are thinking of visiting Kenya. We are taking two productions there, one is on South Africa, "Soweto Flowers Will Grow", the other one is the musical "Christ Unlimited" which I wrote and directed. In the other play "Soweto - Flowers Will Grow", I acted with other people directing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why did you choose Cuba in particular?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Well, in Cuba there was a festival, which was attended by many countries. We met quite a number of actors from Ghana and Nigeria and all these other countries. Why not Cuba?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I only asked that question because Zambia is supposed to be run on democratic lines and Cuba isn't, well, associated with left-wing movements and things of that nature and I was rather fascinated by this.

MASAUTSO PHIRI

Well, I think that is a myth that has been created by the West about Cuba being a left, communist country, and anyway, Zambia is its own master, we try to be democratic in our own way, its not perfect yet, but we hope it will be perfect. We choose our friends. I can come and act in Britain, for instance, or, like right now I am talking to you here. That is why I think Cuba was right at that particular time, just as an experience of a former British colony.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now this play "Christ Unlimited" that's a fascinating title. Is it a religious play?

MASAUTSO PHIRI

It is a religious play in that its based on the Acts of the Apostles from Chapter 1 to nine, Pentecost to the Conversion of Saul. It is sort of a free dramatization, in fact the idea of "Christ Unlimited" is that its limitless. Later on you have these Christians succeeding. But at another level it is also political and the establishment, that's the Romans and also the Jewish hierarchy at the time, you know, are confronted with this new small group rising up, and it all deals with ideology, that religion is an ideology in this case, and in most cases an ideology of fear. People were frightened of this, or frightened of what is going to happen tomorrow, will they exist within the kinds of freedoms they think of.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And does that bear any relationship to contemporary affairs in Africa, or in the world?

M.S. UTSO PHIRI

Anywhere in the world. I think the theatre doesn't look at itself as just an African theatre group, we hope, in terms of how we interpret theatre we can be valid in any situation, in any society, except that our plays are committed, they will be social, they will be political, social-economic or whatever you might want to call it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And are you going to be represented in the festival in Germany?

M.S. UTSO PHIRI

We hope so. In fact just before I left there were arrangements made to find out which group is going to go to represent the country. But we think, that whether we are chosen or not, we have a message which we want to take there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, its interesting to hear that there is so much going on in Zambia as far as the arts are concerned, and yet we have had very little contribution from Zambia to the African Theatre programme, even to Arts and Africa. I mean we have got contributions from Mwesa Mwanza in the music field, he is quite a friend of the programme. Why is that there is so little in other spheres of activity from Zambia.

M.S. UTSO PHIRI

I don't know. Maybe we don't have the contacts, or maybe we are shy of the former citadel of colonialism in Africa, but I think that will be corrected from now on!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, we very much look forward to hearing from you now that we have had this interview, Masautso and I hope that it won't be too long before we get contributions from your end.

M.S. UTSO PHIRI

Thanks a lot.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that's all from 'Arts and Africa' for this week. Don't forget to join us again at the same time next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lortey saying goodbye.

MUSIC

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