

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA *all*

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we feature a new play about the late Steve Biko.

MUSIC: PEREFERE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

As you know, Stephen Biko who died on September 12th 1977 was one of more than fifty political detainees who have died since 1963 whilst in the custody of the South African Security Police. Prior to his death he had suffered banning, restriction, and silencing. However, his was the only individual death to have international repercussions, since he was widely known as a founder and leader of South Africa's Black Consciousness movement. Biko was famous for his brilliant intellect and his warm humorous personality. And his enemies both respected and feared him.

A new play about his life called "Mister Biko" has just opened in London put on by the Temba Theatre Company. "Mister Biko" has been written by Andrew Carr, Alton Kumalo and Peter Rodda. Well with me in the studio is Alton Kumalo a South African actor who also plays the title role of Biko. Well Alton the Biko story has been shown on television, reported and discussed in the press and presented on the stage. Now you have come up with this new play, what is new about your play?

ALTON KUMALO

What is new about this particular play, I think is the fact that Biko speaks for himself. I have seen on television a thing called "A lonely and miserable death", it was an inquest basically into Steve's death and then there was a thing by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which was a reading of the inquest. Now I thought all those things were very honourable and respectable things, but to have white people present a story about this black man who basically died because he was black is very unfair, and also not once in all these things that I have seen done on the stage, not once, did Mr. Biko speak for himself. And I have found this a great insult to Steve Biko's thinking. Now in this play we endeavour to let Biko speak for himself, that is, his philosophies, his beliefs, his passions, his pains, his frustrations, his politics.

Obviously not everything that is said by a politician makes drama or theatre. We have edited here and there, and I also feel that there was a great injustice. I mean I personally never knew Steve Biko, I think that the Western World did him a great injustice, they made a fuss of his death, not of his life. There is something wrong in that. I believe very strongly that if the people in America who say "I knew Steve Biko he was a man of great respect and passion", if they said that when they knew he was arrested, in the press, we could have saved Biko.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you have just said that you didn't know him personally. Did you feel a sense of affinity with him so that you could identify with him as a person, although you've never met him?

ALTON KUMALO

Yes I could I mean in the way, of fortunately or unfortunately, coming from South Africa myself I knew the rules, the conditions, the frustrations that Biko was writing and living under. It was a very demanding role of all the things that one has done. I mean when you do a thing like Biko and you know that a man died, and his family exists, and his products are left behind. It is a very touchy thing you must be careful, you must stay with the truth more than personality or passion or just dramatic technique as such. Yes I feel very close to him because I identify with what he actually said, and I don't think he just spoke like a South African. I think most of the things that he said applied to this country, to America, or wherever you find blacks, or people of colour - let me put it that way. Also there is a man in England who was Steve Biko's lieutenant. His name is Barney Pityana, Barney arrived and we couldn't get enough information except for Donald Woods's book, then Barney was in town and I spoke to Barney and he gave me three interviews which were very moving interviews. In this he discussed what the South African government thought of the Black Consciousness movement himself, and he was in prison for about a year and a half in Pretoria, and he told me of the interrogations there. That was very moving stuff So I was able to put that into the play with confidence.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I think the combination works very well indeed. I also think that to you as a black person could probably not give a true picture of what the white person in South Africa thinks of the black man, so that getting a white person to write his viewpoint, combined with your viewpoint from the black man's stand, works a very wonderful combination, I think we can see this in the scene between the immigrants and the servant.

EXTRACT FROM "MR. BIKO".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well next we are going to hear an extract from the scene where Steve Biko, after his ban, appears as a defence witness at a black consciousness trial. Can you tell us something about that?

ALTON KUMALO

Yes, that is a very interesting scene, because actually that is the scene that brought Steve's attention to the police and to the South African regime as such strongly. The nine people who were arrested, were members of the Black Consciousness Movement started by Steve Biko, and Biko was banned, and when these other guys were arrested the Lawyer asked Biko if he could come and be a witness, and Biko said "Fine if you work it out, and I can be free to come to court", he was then in King Williamstown, "if I can come to Pretoria I will do that", and he came. And when he came, he came actually to display the philosophy of the Black Consciousness Movement, he also came out to air out his frustration of being banned. This was the only opportunity to do it. And when he came there he said incredible things, we had to edit things, but he didn't say things like he said to the judge one time, he said. "You make me carry a passbook because you say you want to stop other black people from other countries coming into South Africa", he said, "but Judge, do you like South Africa?" The Judge said, "yes". And he said, "Why don't you carry a passbook so that we can stop Italians and French people coming in?" He said "I don't mind a passbook as long as all South Africans black and white, carry it". And there was an incredible freedom within Biko. I think he knew the end was coming, he knew the guys who were arrested were going to go to Robben Island. After that he was really marked by Kruger and a lot of other people, everybody knew that Steve was not a safe man to have around. If anybody else started thinking like Steve, if there were two Steve's in South Africa there would be a hell of a lot of trouble. And in the play there is a situation when they pick him up they say "Oh yes, well I remember him in that trial, and he came as a witness and as far as I am concerned he was the biggest troublemaker". And in fact he proved that he was a leader. I think from that point on Steve was finished, after that SASO trial he was finished.

EXTRACT FROM "MR. BIKO"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Alton Kumalo thank you very much indeed. I enjoyed seeing the play.

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ALTON KUMALO

My pleasure.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well the actors you heard in the extracts from the play "Mr. Biko" were Alton Kumalo, Adrian Stokes, Paul Humpoletz, Bob Phillips and Vass Anderson. 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-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC - LIMPOPO

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