

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 Zambia's leading actor.

MUSIC - CHANT

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Edwin Manda, who you heard there singing an old chant from Northern Zambia, is probably his country's foremost actor. Edwin studied in the United States and since his return to Zambia, he's worked as a civil servant concerned with cultural affairs, and as a performer in many plays and musicals throughout the country. Towards the end of 1978 Edwin Manda came to Britain on a British Council Scholarship to study theatre arts at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff. Edwin has just been cast in the title role in a new production of Shakespeare's 'Othello'. Welcome to Arts and Africa Edwin. Tell me how do you reconcile playing Shakespeare with your own cultural background in Zambia?

EDWIN MANDA

When I got interested in this I wasn't thinking in terms of Western culture or African culture I was merely thinking in terms of performing, and enjoying the act of performing. When I came to do my first Shakespeare play, because I've done Othello before, it was in the same vein and when I found that I was able to perform it, and those who knew the play quite well were able to accept my performance of it, well, I welcomed that. I myself do not believe that there is a basic difference in the theatre arts, I don't believe that. I do believe that there are cultural differences, I do believe that there are differences of language and differences of values, but art as an art it works under the same principles. This is why I can very easily participate in a traditional play, and participate in a Shakespearian play,

there's no problem with me. I don't have to adjust to anything. Of course I do have to learn the language, I have to learn the technique, the instruments that I have to deal with, the material that I have to deal with, I have to learn, but my attitude of mind is the same.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So how did you come to do this particular one?

EDWIN MANDA

Othello?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes.

EDWIN MANDA

Well I applied to come on a scholarship with the British Council to do post graduate studies in theatre arts, mainly because I wanted to have more experience on the technical side. You know like lighting design, set design, costume design and how these things worked, together with the rest. So I came to the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff and as our first project we did Marlow's Dr. Faustus and I played Mephistopheles in it, and it looks like I made a good impression in that one, and the idea came up that we should do Othello. That was last October or November, and then as this year 1979 came, the idea gathered momentum, and then we heard that there was a festival coming up in Oxford. In fact Oxford asked the Sherman Theatre if they could do an Othello, and this agreed with our thinking and it was decided that we would do Othello.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Who selected you as a leading character?

EDWIN MANDA

The Director of the play - Duncan Miller who discussed it with me. He told me that after Faustus he thought we should do Othello, and I thought it would be a good idea, and he checked with the Director of the theatre - Geoffrey Axworthy and our course tutor, John Linstrom and they agreed to do the play.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I was wondering if they selected you because they found some similarity between your voice and Paul Robson's, who as you know, is an outstanding Othello character?

EDWIN MANDA

Well, since then I've had a lot of references to that - yes!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You have, yes I thought that might have struck them to select you for the lead role.

EDWIN MANDA

Possibly, because comments were made.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Along these lines?

EDWIN MANDA

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you found any difference in the techniques of production between what obtains in Zambia and what obtains in the theatre here?

EDWIN MANDA

I've been very interested to note, or rather very fascinated to note, that for example in experimental theatre the use of improvisation. When Tikwiza Group came up and was formed, the first play done was based on an improvisation. It was a group play, people contributing ideas and even directing portions of it, and then eventually having a sort of Chairman put everything together. One of the projects we did at the Sherman Theatre in experimental theatre was exactly this, and the sorts of problems we encountered while working on that play with the Tikwiza Theatre were exactly the same as we found working on this one, so there it was similar. The traditional way, the various roles of the Director, that I have noticed here, I have noticed in Zambia as well. Because I think we shouldn't forget that although they are in Zambia thousands of miles away there's a lot of influence as far as theatre arts are concerned. Drama - we have taken it from the English theatre tradition, this is talking about contemporary theatre. Of course we do have traditional theatre arts and of course we do have new effort where we are beginning to use more and more of these in our own productions, but the main incentive or rather main force has been this Western thing. So there's no real basic difference, as far as approach to directing, we do tend to follow the same trends.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, are you looking forward to doing this before going on in the part of Othello, it's quite a daunting task I should think?

EDWIN MANDA

Yes, I am looking forward to it very much. I first did the part in 1966 in a college production.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, that was on a very, very amateurish basis, so you could be forgiven for not probably putting everything into the performance?

EDWIN MANDA

Then I did it again in Zambia, but now being in Britain I am very much interested to see what sort of reaction one gets here. Because I think this is where the people know all about Shakespeare - I suppose, and are the most critical. So I am looking forward to seeing what sort of reaction one gets here.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, since not all of us will be fortunate enough to hear you perform Othello, perhaps for our sakes and for the sakes of our listeners you could give us a line or two from Othello - how you propose to perform?

EDWIN MANDA

I think I will do the opening of Act 5 Scene I, when Othello has decided that he is going to kill Desdemona not out of malice but out of honour, as a form of sacrifice, a ritual sacrifice, and he walks in and she's lying on her bed and he addresses himself to what he's about to perform.

EXTRACT FROM PLAY

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Edwin Manda, Zambia's leading actor who's playing the title role in a new production of Shakespeare's 'Othello' here in Britain. 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