

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 discuss the work of Robert Serumaga.

ROBERT SERUMAGA

We are trying to create a theatre which is a language itself and does not have to rely on other spoken languages. When we use sentences we use them as examples primarily and then carriers of meaning next so we can speak to everybody in the world. And its a great satisfaction to us to make people understand when we speak in a language they've never heard of.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The voice of Robert Serumaga one of Uganda's leading playwrights, actors and novelists who has just been released from arrest in Kenya. Its believed he may have been arrested in connection with dissident activities against the Government of President Amin in Uganda.

Born in Uganda in 1939, Robert Serumaga was educated in the Republic of Ireland and at Trinity College Dublin where in his spare time he also worked as a night club comedian. Later he joined the BBC African Service as a freelance broadcaster. Returning to Uganda Serumaga went into business working with the Uganda company as head of its motor vehicles' sales department. With his earnings from this job Serumage launched a private theatre company in Uganda called 'Theatre Limited' and later the 'Abafumi Theatre'. In 1975, the Abafumi Theatre Company made a world tour with Serumaga's play "Renga Moi", an experimental theatrical parable using traditional music and dance. While the Abafumi Theatre Company was performing in London, Robert Serumaga talked about his concept of theatre.

ROBERT SERUMAGA

We live on the stage through all the emotions truly and genuinely - we create these emotions afresh every time we act and we live through them and we think this is the best way to impart our feelings to the audience rather than to pretend as many actors in the world do - act to be sad, act to be happy. We feel that human beings can transmit a feeling without giving words or sound, or anything if that feeling is genuinely felt by him, he can communicate independently of any other means.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Robert Serumaga there talking about his play "Renga Moi". Well, with me in the studio to discuss Robert Serumaga's work is Andrew Horn.

ANDREW HORN

He's an extraordinary figure in East African life. Prominent not only as a man of commerce, but extraordinary as an actor, writer, director and a producer - an entrepreneur who has managed to get his own private theatre company on the road himself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of person is he?

ANDREW HORN

Very outgoing. Extremely articulate. Very theatrical in many ways. But his sense of humour you can find everywhere. And in fact in all of his writing there's a comic element even in the most bizarre of events. He's written several plays in the course of the last ten years or so. The first was a thing called "A Play". That's a play on words because its people playing around with ideas and with emotions. This was, I believe, the first piece he wrote, and certainly the first to be produced. and he starred in it in 1968 and one might add has starred in every one of the plays. He writes his plays for himself to act in. "A Play" is a domestic problem play. He later moved on to write a thing called "The Elephants" which examines life in an academic community and how people are destroyed by their own inner doubts.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When you say he takes part in his plays, he acts parts, does he take the leading role or does he take any part which suits him?

ANDREW HORN

He always plays the leading role and the leading character of the play is somehow identifiable as a Serumaga figure. In fact in everything he's written the main character is always the same man.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And what sort of theme does he deal with?

ANDREW HORN

He's very much concerned with the problem of the artist in society. And in his play "Majangwa" which is about an artist, a drummer of the Royal Court who through hard times has been reduced to making his living by collecting ten cent pieces in a public sex show with his wife, the complete decline of the artist. Serumaga sees this as society raping the artist who has given everything of himself. I think it would be good to listen to a piece from "Majangwa" which the drummer himself is being accosted by his wife after this terrible life of degradation that they've lived.

READING FROM "MAJANGWA"

By Robert Serumaga, published by East African Publishing, Nairobi.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Would you say that in his plays he emphasises the theme of the individual and the personal, rather than the political?

ANDREW HORN

Very much so. He's concerned with the special person, the genius, the artist, the gifted man, and the battle of that personal life against society. This personal dimension comes out very strongly in his play called "Elephants", and the central image of that play is of people being eaten from within, the idea of the pigmy that bores itself within the elephant and destroys it from inside without the elephant knowing.

READING FROM "ELEPHANTS".

By Robert Serumaga, published by Oxford University Press, Nairobi.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I think Andrew here we can listen with advantage to his own comment on his plays?

ROBERT SERUMAGA

I do think one of the reasons we reach deep human level, we work on the human emotional level and then reach a human intellect to force it to examine itself. We are working with the audience emotionally all the time, therefore when the reaction comes at the end its almost overwhelming.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Andrew, how would you assess him as a playwright compared with say someone like Ngugi Wa'Thiongo?

ANDREW HORN

Well I think Serumaga is really one of the finest playwrights that Africa has produced. He isn't as acknowledged as many of the West African playwrights have been. Part of this may be because his appeal is not popular - its often very intellectual, the audience that he has collected, but he is a playwright of extraordinary dimensions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You did say that with his plays the personal and individual come out very dominantly - how about the novel?

ANDREW HORN

The novel "Return To The Shadows" the only novel that he's written is a discussion of political responsibility, political morality. The main character Joe has, like Serumaga, returned to a country very much like Uganda from studies overseas. He's wealthy, he's "in business" and suddenly his tranquility and his comfort are ruptured by a coup d'etat, a coup d'etat very similar to what happened in Uganda in 1966 when Milton Obote overthrew the presidency of the Kabaka. Joe the main character suddenly has to question himself, does he go along with all of the people who pose as revolutionaries, but are in fact only trying to make profit, or does he sit back, take care of himself and do nothing.

READING FROM "RETURN TO THE SHADOWS"

By Robert Serumaga, published by Oxford University Press.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now here's an extract from a Writers Club interview with Edward Blishen which Robert Serumaga had concerning his novel "Return To The Shadows".

ROBERT SERUMAGA

The main point of the book, as you say, is responsibility, on the one hand, Joe tried to do something in his earlier period and tried to achieve a certain kind of social and political responsibility, but having failed to do this due to other circumstances, and then having been swallowed into commerce and become rich he doesn't want to disturb things too much, and he tries to escape his responsibility by becoming very cynical and intellectual and sort of laughing at the acts of the others. On the other hand, there are the soldiers or pseudo-soldiers, as you call him, in fact they are not soldiers at all and are taking advantage of the system when there is a coup d'etat to put on fake uniforms and try to terrorise the country. In fact when you come to that level the book even becomes a defence of the soldier rather than an attack on the soldier. I think that perhaps one of the things that come out is that the soldier is the only one that is forced to be responsible, he's forced by society to be put into uniform and being made to look after society. Well he's got a few acts of violence he commits, but he's probably the only person that is responsible within the context.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well its not everyone who spends his life's earnings on establishing and running a private theatre, it requires a lot of dedication doesn't it Andrew? Now when did Robert Serumaga go into exile?

ANDREW HORN

About two years ago, immediately after the production of his play entitled "Amayikiti", and about the time of the death of the Director of the National Theatre, Bryon Kawadwa and the death of the Archbishop Lwum.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well its only recently that the whole world cheered Danial Arap Moi for releasing Ngugi Wa'Thiongo then he put in Robert Serumaga, even though he's now released him, how would you explain this?

ANDREW HORN

Well I think that there is a distinction between those two cases. One must remember that Ngugi was put in prison apparently for his writing and for his theatre activities. Its possible that Serumaga had to leave Uganda for his theatre activities, but as far as we can glean from reports from Kenya. His arrest is probably related to things totally unrelated to his art, that is the movement to remove President Amin from Government.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well that was Andrew Horn talking about the work of Ugandan playwright, actor and novelist, Robert Serumaga. 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.

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