

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

327

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of Arts and Africa which this week looks at a new venture in France. We're all familiar with cultural centres in our capital cities - usually set up by foreign governments to promote their country's art as well as something vaguely referred to as their "way of life". What you may not know is that Africa is not neglected and that many cities outside of Africa have centres for African or more generally "black" culture. Here in London we have the Africa Centre and Arts and Africa often looks at events and exhibitions taking place there. But, surprisingly Paris has, until recently not had such a centre. Surprising because of France's involvement in the continent and the numbers of Africans, including artists, who live in the French capital. Well last Autumn saw the opening of a centre, the Theatre Noir and today we take a look at its work and what it hopes to achieve. As well as putting on plays and performances of music and dancing, the Theatre Noir also gives courses in traditional arts. Here's one of the groups who use the centre.

## TAPE

MUSIC BY A GROUP WHO USES THE THEATRE NOIR

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Paul Wade went to Paris to look at the work of the Centre and spoke to one of the organisers, Sonia Emmanuel from Martinique. He asked her how the Centre began.

## SONIA EMMANUEL

Before there was a theatre troupe called 'Black Theatre' - 'Theatre Noir' which was directed by Benjamin Gerosette and for 4 black people, 4 black artists, it was very difficult to express themselves so he decided to create a black cultural centre so he did this one. Before, black people were-well-they wanted to be white, they didn't want to be black so now they try to be black, they know they are black and that they have very interesting traditions, musical, theatre, arts. Well now we are beginning to find ourselves.

## PAUL WADE

There are various ways in which black people can find themselves. Are you in fact, going back to Africa and looking for traditions there?

SONIA EMMANUEL

We know that we come from Africa, so we use the African traditions and being West Indians we have special traditions, West Indian traditions. So we try to mix both of the cultures because West Indian traditions are a bit different from African traditions.

PAUL WADE

What are the ambitions, because not only do you have plays and music going on here, you have classes going on?

SONIA EMMANUEL

Yes, because we want black and white to know our culture so we have classes of dance, music so everybody can come, everyone is pleased to have this centre, black and white because they discover a culture they didn't know and black too, they discover a culture they had forgotten completely and that's important.

PAUL WADE

The other interesting thing is that there are all sorts of cultural centres in Paris, Italian, French, German, whatever but this is the only one that is not actually paid for by a government, this is an independent organisation?

SONIA EMMANUEL

Yes. And that is very, very difficult to manage because we have no subsidy, none at all so we are trying to do everything ourselves. We are typing, we do everything. But it's okay, we like it really.

PAUL WADE

And an ambition in 1980. What are you all working towards doing. What is the thing you want to do this year at the centre?

SONIA EMMANUEL

We want people to know us and to come and to say we come to this cultural centre because we know that what they are doing is good and we want people to phone us and ask us if there is a play tonight or what's happening, we are coming.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Sonia Emmanuel, one of the organisers of the 'Theatre Noir'. The evening that Paul visited the Centre he watched one of their performances, a play with music. Here is some of the music.

TAPE:

MUSIC FROM A PLAY PERFORMED AT THE THEATRE NOIR

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

One of the most fascinating things about a Centre like this is the way that performers from different traditions have to come together. Paul Wade asked Ugandan Geoffrey Onyema how these different traditions merged when they worked on the play that he had just seen.

GEOFFREY ONYEMA

It's tragedy I must say so, we had to look for something tragic and I picked up a few traditional numbers from my country. Then Charles who is a congo player he picked up his own numbers and we got this together and rehearsed it, ourselves. And then a few weeks later we got together the whole group and it seemed to work out.

PAUL WADE

Apart from the plays at this cultural centre there are also classes. Do you get involved in giving classes as well?

GEOFFREY ONYEMA

Yes I teach traditional music here. I teach the kalimba which is the hand piano and the flute and the 7 string harp, 3 times a week.

PAUL WADE

What are the plans and projects that you have got for this coming year?

GEOFFREY ONYEMA

I am working on a record on an LP which should come out by the end of this year and apart from that I am working on play which I wrote. I presented this play at the Cultural Centre in Nairobi 2 years ago, that's what I'm working on right now. I hope it will work out.

PAUL WADE

So when you write your plays, do you write now in French or do you write in English?

GEOFFREY ONYEMA

I write in English and it is translated. I work with people from Senegal, people from the Congo and some groups from Cameroon. Our aim is to come up with something universal.

TAPE

MUSIC FROM THE THEATRE NOIR, PARIS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Some more music there from the 'Theatre Noir' in Paris and an insight into how musicians and other artists work from Geoffrey Onyema who was talking to Paul Wade.

Filming is now completed of the \$5 million feature film: Rise and Fall of Idi Amin and editing is now underway. The film is set in Uganda in the 1970's and traces the rise to power and the eventual fall of Idi Amin. Here's an extract from the film where we can hear Amin played by Joseph Olita, at the height of his glory.

TAPE

FILM EXTRACT OF 'RISE AND FALL OF IDI AMIN'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Joseph Olita as Idi Amin. The film has been produced and directed by Sharad Patel who's in London to edit the finished product, he's here with me in the studio today. How long have you been in the business?

SHARAD PATEL

Well almost 17 years now. Since Kenya got it's independence I have made a film called 'Uhuru, Birth of a Nation' at that time.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ngugi Wa Thiongo, who is very well-known as a writer in Kenya, has always attacked the sort of films shown in Kenya, especially the foreign films as completely unrepresentative of the social level of the people.

SHARAD PATEL

Well unless Africa starts making films there is no other alternative but to show foreign films and this is why we say it is a good start to make films in Kenya now. And one success follows another one and we intend to make more films in Kenya for exhibition in African countries. But there are a few problems, for example there are less cinemas to justify making a feature film only for Africa. Either we make films for the world market incorporating the requirements of the African people and their aspirations.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, tell me, how did you come to chose this subject? Was it sensationalism?

SHARAD PATEL

Well not necessarily but staying near to Uganda and being Asian I am a bit hurt by the hatred of people. One of my friends was killed during the early years of Amin's regime.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Were you impartial when you were doing the film or did you take sides?

SHARAD PATEL

Well, obviously there is nothing to take sides for Idi Amin. The world knows the story, the Africans know the story. Alright; let's say it's about the poor masses. They probably liked it in the beginning because he was right in his policy of sacking the Asians out of the country and I am not against that policy. I am against the killings which went on in Uganda.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now in this film you hardly show any saving grace at all for him, don't you think that when people see it, they will think that you are biased in your representation of him and they will tend to remember the good things or whatever they like about him and therefore far from making him a villain, they will make a hero out of him.

SHARAD PATEL

Not necessarily. Because you know when they see the killings in the prisons and when you see the tortures going on there and how the Ugandan people rose against him, it's not the outsiders. Alright Tanzania helped to get their freedom back but if you see the movement that started in Uganda, that is why we feel that he will never be called a hero.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well this is presumably the first full length film made in Kenya, And you intend to present it at the Cannes Film Festival?

SHARAD PATEL

We are definitely entering the film in the Cannes Festival either official - or on the market place. But I think that it stands a very good chance for winning some sort of an award.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Sharad Patel thank you very much. One incident from the life of Idi Amin that I'm sure we all remember was the saga of Dennis Hills, who incidentally plays himself in the film. Hills was arrested when it was discovered that he was writing a book about Amin that described him as a 'village tyrant'. It took massive intervention from the British Government to get Hills released and in this extract from the film we can hear what the British High Commissioner, played by Geoffrey Keen, had to contend with.

TAPE

Extract from the film 'RISE AND FALL OF IDI AMIN'

ALEX TETTEH LARTEY

And that's if from Arts and Africa for this week. And leaving you with a final burst of music from Paris, it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey, goodbye.