

Arts and Africa

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ARTS & AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. And this week our subject is the cinema. The recent London Film Festival featured a number of films from Africa and this has given us the opportunity to examine and compare the sort of work that is being done today. The other thing is the opportunity to meet and talk to the directors of the films. They all have the same problems of finance and distribution and in many cases censorship, as well as having to compete against the mass produced popular cinema, usually the product of several Hollywoods: original American version or more recent productions centres in Egypt, India and Japan. We asked Egyptian born journalist Susi Benghiat to cover the Film Festival for Arts and Africa. Susi has been doing this for several years now - don't you get a little tired of seeing all those films?

SUSI BENGHIAT

Not at all Alex. I have seen over 40 films and I love it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well what about Africa?

SUSI BENGHIAT

Well the 4 African films shown in the programme illustrate very clearly the points you made earlier on. Souleymane Cisse's 'Baara' set in Bamako, the capital of Mali focuses on post-colonial urban life in a country just beginning to industrialize. It tells the story of a young man freshly arrived from the countryside who's trying to make a living as a street porter. He is befriended by a young engineer who gives him a job at the factory where he works. The film shows the realities and hardships of life in the city and casts a critical eye at the corrupt elite that sets out to murder the engineer for having tried to organise the workers in the factory. This early work of the Senegalese, Ousmane Sembene, the pioneer of African cinema. However, Sembene in his latest film

'Cedo', made a few years ago has left the city and started to explore the history of his own country. And this is what Ola Balogun the Nigerian film director has done in 'Fight For Freedom' - the first Nigerian film to be shown to an international audience (it was presented at the Moscow Festival before coming to London).

Ola Balogun has chosen a universal theme: the fight against oppression but he expresses it through the story of the uprising of a people against a tyrannical Yoruba king in the 18th century. He has also drawn on the Yoruba Theatre tradition of making this film with a great flourish of dance, music and fantastic fight scenes. Most of the protagonists are actors with the various Yoruba theatre companies and one of them, the star of the film Ademi Afoloyan is also the co-producer with Balogun. I spoke to him after this film was shown and asked him how he had started the production.

ADEMI AFOLOYAN

I got the money and when I got the money, I invited the director to come and direct the film.

SUSI BENGHIAT

Why did you choose him?

ADEMI AFOLOYAN

Because he had made a film starred by me. The name of the film is 'Ajame Ogun' so we have worked together before and we have a mutual interest.

SUSI BENGHIAT

The film has been out now for about a year so it has been shown in Nigeria, how was it received?

ADEMI AFOLOYAN

Well, it was received overwhelmingly I think, the most, how will I call it, it is now leading in the box office of all his films played in Nigeria. I think the James Bond film, 'The Spy Who Loved Me' is in the second position at the box office.

SUSI BENGHIAT

So it has made you a star over-night?

ADEMI AFOLOYAN

Exactly.

SUSI BENGHIAT

What does it feel like to be a star?

ADEMI AFOLOYAN

Well I have been acting for the majority of my life and though I have been acting on the stage, now that I'm in films I'm happy, I'm proud.

SUSI BENGHIAT

What do you prefer working in, theatre or film?

ADEMI AFOLOYAN

I think I've been working in the theatre for a long time but now I just want to see what I can do in movie making. One day I will direct, not very long and I will direct myself if possible. To star and be the director is what I am aiming at now.

SUSI AFOLOYAN

Is there another film you have produced that hasn't come out yet?

ADEMI AFOLOYAN

Not at all. I'm still working on my new film, the script is on now and whenever it is ready then I will set it in motion.

MUSIC.

SUSI AFOLOYAN

That was some of the music from 'Fight for Freedom'. From Nigeria we now move to North Africa and the film 'Alyam Alyam' (Oh the day, oh the days) by the Moroccan director Ahmed El Maanouni. It is the story of a young peasant who is so obsessed by the desire to emigrate that he is always making up stories about the permit he is supposed to have got to go to work in France. But the film is of course more than that as Ahmed El Maanouni explained

AHMED EL MAANOUNI

It's about the peasantry, about conditions of living and this is represented by conflict between a young peasant and his family especially his mother and this conflict is a true representation of the clash between the past and the future.

SUSI BENGHIAT

The film is set in a village near Casablanca. Apart from the main character played by a young actor Ben Brahim, all the protagonists are played by the villagers themselves. The film feels so authentic that it is difficult to realise that the director was not brought up in the village. But as El Maanouni explains, he came to know the villagers very well long before he started to make the film.

AHMED EL MAANOUNI

Well, actually it was during a meeting with the peasants, from the anecdotes and stories they were telling me I just got enthusiastic about the reality and the problems they are living and I would like to say one thing, when you love something, you are able to talk about it, the love is the main motivation to invest your time to invest well your money. Actually we worked in a very close relationship with the peasants. There was always a feed-back from their side and from our side and finally the dialogue in the film which is one of the main assets of the film, is absolutely their property, their dialogue.

SUSI BENGHIAT

Ahmed El Maanouni with his labour of love. Another labour of love is 'Alexandria: Why?' by Youseff Chahine. Here, I must declare my interest since the film is set in the forties, in Egypt -the time and country of my adolescence. Chahine has managed, in a work of fiction, through the the story of three families in Alexandria one of Muslim one Christian and one Jewish, to recreate a whole period. The atmosphere is fantastically authentic with the complexity of Egyptian society of the time, its life, laughter, loves, its pathos and all that against a background of war and Hollywood films, especially the musicals. But however close up I feel to the subject, my enthusiasm was also shared by a young Egyptian critic, Youseff El Nasrani, with whom I discussed the two arabic films shown at the festival.

YOUSEFF EL NASRANI

'Alexandria: Why?' is definitely not representative of trends in arabic cinemas or nothing at all and this is what is so magnificent about a film like this, it's extremely personal, it's extremely new, it's full of details that have never been seen before in an arabic film. Look how he deals with questions like the military, look how he deals with questions like showing the heros. The family that we see in the film is a Christian family, minorities, usually, in arabic cinema are never specified. Arabic films aren't personal and this film is extremely personal and this is the first autobiography in arabic cinema. The principle relation is between the Jewish girl and Egyptian boy, and there are communists and you don't have that in arabic films. You don't have

homosexuality depicted that way in arabic films, Women are not depicted that way in arabic films, it's very new, it's very fresh, it's very beautiful.

SUSI BENGHIAT

Now since it's so unusual and since it touches so many taboos in lots of ways, how is it received in arabic countries?

YOUSEFF EL NASRANI

Well, it hasn't been received. It's only been shown in Egypt and well it did fairly well about 8 weeks in Cairo and 8 weeks in Alexandria and so far it has been banned in most of the arab countries.

SUSI BENGHIAT

Why?

YOUSEFF EL NASRANI

Supposedly, they say or try to insinuate that the film is a pro-Sadat film which it isn't of course. It's because of the question of Jews.

SUSI BENGHIAT

It's because of the Jews who are depicted as being part of Egyptian society at that time?

YOUSEFF EL NASRANI

Yes. The Moroccan film is quite unique again. Usually what we have is films depicting the situation of arab workers abroad but there are very, very few films that show why actually, arabs leave their country to go abroad and I think this is one of the only films that has made so simply about the situation and which is not only about why peasants leave Morocco for example to go to France but also about the situation of Morocco after independence and you see its relation to the old colonial powers. There is one scene in the film which is very, very beautiful where you see all the peasants working for a French food company canning and things of that sort and you see its quite amazing how quiet the film is and it doesn't push its statements, it's a very, very submersive film, its been banned in Morocco. At any rate 'Alyam Alyam' is again a very beautiful film and very pure film, for a first film it is extremely under strain. It is El Maanouni's first film as a director, he's a camera man. Chahine's film is very funny. Everybody thought that 'Alexandria: Why?' was the first film because he put so much in it.

SUSI BENGHIAT

Do you know what he is doing?

YOUSEFF EL NASRANI

During an interview I had with him in Cairo a couple of months ago, he said that his next film would be about women.

SUSI BENGHIAT

Another taboo subject?

YOUSEFF EL NASRANI

Yes in a sense because actually he is one of the very, very few directors who reflects a different view of women in his films. I mean women aren't objects, women aren't just beautiful, it's not only the women that are beautiful, men are beautiful in his films as well. It creates a very, very different kind of sensuality in his films which you don't find in other arabic films.

SUSI BENGHIAT

Egyptian film critic Youseff El Nasrani on the cinema in North Africa and its problems of censorship but let us end on an optimistic note with Ahmed El Maanouni the director of 'On the days' whose film is yet to be seen in his own country.

AHMED EL MAANOUNI

Well I am sure that many people have seen the film and are really eager to help its showing in Morocco. If it is not shown how it will be shown, the film exists I'll go on struggling to make it shown. Like I am struggling now to get the money to make the second film. Distribution is the same problem as production because our distributors do not believe in our cinema. They earn enough money showing the same films, in Morocco they show Egyptian soap operas and Hong Kong karate films or lousy western films. They have no imagination, they just don't want to do a little effort to show Moroccan films and I am sure it happens in every African country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Susi Benghiet was talking to Ahmed El Maanouni and bringing us her impressions on the African films at the recent London Film Festival. And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week and we leave you with some music that is unusual for us - not African but music that was played during the film 'Alexandria: Why?' and which is part of that Hollywood era that seems to have had such an effect on the Egyptian people - Glen Miller's Moonlight Serenade.

MUSIC - MOONLIGHT SERENADE.