



Script Service for Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

NO: 333G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTSEY

Hello and welcome to "Arts and Africa" from Alex Tetteh-Lartsey. I'd have to go a long way to find a more frightening, I could almost say more horrific title than "Nights of the Mythical Beast". That's the name of a new play by Olu Obafemi that was staged for the first time at the beginning of the year. But Olu didn't set out to terrify his audience with fur and fangs and claws - the beast he's been writing about is the inhumanity groups of people can show to one another when they become greedy and selfish and callous.

EXTRACT FROM "NIGHTS OF THE MYTHICAL BEAST"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTSEY

A speech from the play describing the enemy to the community and spoken by the author, Olu Obafemi. The play was put on here in England, at the University of Leeds Theatre Workshop but Olu is more usually to be found in the Drama Department at Ilorin University in Nigeria which he helped to set up four years ago. "Nights of the Mythical Beast" is placed firmly in Nigeria and he is using the idea of a fearsome legendary animal that carries its human victims off in the night from stories he learnt at home when he was a boy.

OLU OBAFEMI

It's actually a mystical beast called "Ugurumuu" (phon.) It is actually a way of giving physical reality to an imaginary situation, imaginary, in the sense that there is no actual beast but it was just men masquerading as beasts in the night to come and perpetrate human traffic. So I felt that that was a very good metaphor for me to use to describe such a multi-faceted evil in society, exploitation.

P.T.O.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now choosing an abstract idea like exploitation, how had Olu Obafemi presented his ideas to the audience?

OLU OBAFEMI

We started a play by doing a mime narration, a mime scene, which describes the society in pre-colonial times. We portrayed these by showing some actions of how people lived their life; their working together, their eating together, their sharing their pains and struggles together, crowning their chiefs together, moaning when they die and singing when they make a new one. And we moved on to a theme where a traditional chief who is troubled by a beast or a human being dressed up as a beast. This is the mystical beast that I used in the play. This beast comes in the night to carry people away and he wants to get rid of it. Well how does he do that? He thinks because of his magical powers that he could get rid of it. But this beast is not tangible. He couldn't see it so he has to blame it on superstition, blame it on tribal rivalries and enmities among the tribes. Then I created a scene which confronts the native intelligentsia if you can call them that, and the representatives of the colonial authority and you see the conflict between them. And then we moved on to a modern setting where there were a group of radicals, drinking in a pub with some prostitutes and with beggars and cripples coming in. The intention was for the radicals to try to give social awareness to the suffering masses and so I used these prostitutes and cripples and the blind men to represent the masses who need to be given social awareness as regards social political realities of the society. In giving them this consciousness, we have to reenact a scene, the story of political independence and it is during this period that we saw how the nationalists got the support of the people. And after independence, the expectations of the people were not realised because they were just like pawns in the hands of multi-nationals so it was the same image of exploitation that goes on even after Independence.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The political message in the play is obviously a strong one and Florence Akst who was recording Olu couldn't resist asking why he'd chosen the medium of a play for his message.

OLU OBAFEMI

Because I feel that the theatre can be used as an instrument of social change, I think live theatre can be as effective an instrument of giving people social awareness.

FLORENCE AKST

Yet, in your play you have cripples and prostitutes and drunks at the bar and your political aware people are trying to convert them into realising that they too, are citizens. Are these people the sort of people that are going to see your play?

OLU OBAFEMI

Well most of the time I think it is better if I do this type of play in places where they can see it. But it is also very important to confront the intelligentsia because the people that come to see the plays, are the intellectuals. They see the problem they've created in society, to make them confront the social situation they have created.

ALEX TETTEH-LARBY

Olu Obafemi talking about his play "Nights of the Mythical Beast". Now, I don't know how keenly you've been listening but it's just possible that you've noticed other voices in the background once or twice. Well, the recording took place inside the University of Leeds' Theatre Workshop and coincided with rehearsals for a future production of John Pepper Clark's play "Song of a Goat". And, by-the-way, when that day comes it will mean that the Workshop will have put on every one of Pepper Clark's plays. The producer of "Song of a Goat" is an English Theatre director of considerable experience, Robin Pemberton Billing, but this, he admitted was a new venture as he explained to Florence Akst.

ROBIN PEMBERTON BILLING

Oh I have to admit that this is the first time that I have ever attempted to direct an African play. I don't find this particular one, "Song of a Goat", difficult because I see it so much as an African version of a Greek play in the sense of its general structures of virtually having a chorus and it being a tragic situation.

FLORENCE AKST

How are you going to present it? You haven't, you say, knowledge of Africa so you're not going to try and make it an authentic African production, as for instance a fellow Nigerian would produce it. What are you going to do?

ROBIN PEMBERTON BILLING

No, I think that would be quite wrong for a number of reasons. It seems to me that it stands up perfectly well as a piece of theatre in its own right and doesn't necessarily have to be seen in an

African context at all. But can be seen as about a young man who, as it were, destroyed himself because of his pride.

FLORENCE AKST

Now sitting with us, although he has been silent so far, is Olu Obafemi and I'm wondering as a Nigerian writer and dramatist and theatre man, whether you accept that this is a valid attitude because it is quite possible, isn't it, that Pepper Clark wrote the play with a Nigerian, let alone an African audience in mind? Not a British audience, not a South American audience or a Chinese audience. Do you feel it's possible to do this or do you think it should be treated with more respect?

OLU OBAFEMI

I think I will answer yes and no. First, why "yes". Because a lot of critics who have interpreted Pepper Clark's plays, especially the earlier ones, always look at it as a kind of Greek derivative which J.P. Clark has tried many times to deny. So although he has given them a lot of opportunities to do it by his own approach to theatre, to follow in a lot of ways the Greek models of theatre, having said that, bearing in mind the type of audience Robin has in mind, the British audience, it is not going to do him any good producing as an African piece. Secondly, I think it is right for him to produce the play in the mood that he thinks will suit his audience. Well, fidelity I don't know! (Laughter)

FLORENCE AKST

How would you feel about one of your works being taken up, the script being read for instance, in the Soviet Union and a director who had never been to Africa, perhaps never outside the Soviet Union saying: 'There is something about this play that I like, I think the people who go to our theatre should see it.'

OLU OBAFEMI

Well, I think it will be more difficult to produce a play, say my play, or a play of most young Nigerian writers now, to produce them the way you could take a Soyinka play and produce it or take a Clark play and produce it, because most of these plays are more localised in terms of preference, in terms of theme, in terms of approach to theatre.

FLORENCE AKST

Robin, I would like to put you on the spot and ask you whether that means that you would think these plays had less about them and were less valuable if they can't be transferred from one culture

to another?

ROBIN PERMBERTON BILLING

No I don't think so. You see it seems to be that, for example, with "Song of a Goat" that if one is going to direct it for an English audience you have to make it accessible to them. You need to emphasise it through the sort of plays they understand and they understand, to a large extent, the Greek tradition although I'm not suggesting for a moment that J.P. Clark, in fact, deliberately wrote a take-off of a Greek play. All I'm saying is that that happens to be the "way in" for an English audience to understand it. In the same way, if an African country produces a Shakespearian play, then presumably they produce it for an African audience and it wouldn't be done in the same way as we would do it in this country for an English audience. I wouldn't expect it to be done that way.

OLU OBAFEMI

Well, the beginning of drama in English in Nigeria started off with producing Shakespearian plays like "The Taming of the Shrew", "Macbeth" and I think the major difference you find there is the difference between the type of audience reaction to plays. Here in Britain I find that people listen until the end of the play and then give you a traditional applause. But in Nigeria there is an attempt for the audience to make sure that they are enjoying it, they are participating in it and they are encouraging it with approbations, with repetitions and that thing will be making the play relevant.

FLORENCE AKST

If you had been handed one of Olu's plays to put on, would you want to refer to him about the production or would you feel free to go ahead and produce it as you, somebody from another culture, thought fit?

ROBIN PERMBERTON BILLING

This would depend enormously on the sort of cast I had for it. If I had an African cast for it, and was attempting to do it in an African style, then I would certainly want to draw upon those experienced to help me to direct it. If I were producing it for an English audience with English actors I would not in any way want to imitate the way in which African actors might do it, because that would again seem to me to diminish the play. In the same way that I don't suppose for a moment Olu, if he was doing a Shakespearian play in Africa, would attempt to imitate the way in which the Royal Shakespeare Company would do it.

P.T.O.

OLU OBAFEMI

Because I don't even know how they do it. No I wouldn't.

FLORENCE AKST

And you've emphasised the question of the audience, who they are....

OLU OBAFEMI

Yes, it is a fundamental thing there. Because if the audience can not identify with your images, with your approach to the play, your interpretation, that is if it is alien to their experience, then it might affect their perception of the play.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Olu Obafemi and Robin Pemberton Billing talking to Florence Akst. And when they referred to productions of Shakespeare's plays in Africa I couldn't help recalling the very popular Zulu version of "Macbeth" presented in Africa and in Europe by Welcome Msomi and called by him "Umbatha".

EXTRACT OF MUSIC FROM "UMBATHA"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A dance by Macbeth's Zulu warriors in an indisputably African production of Shakespeare and they are going to sing and stamp us to the end of today's programme. Until the same time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

EXTRACT OF MUSIC FROM "UMBATHA"