

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa, which this week is devoted to the memory of one of Uganda's best loved writers and theatrical personalities - the late Elvania Zirimu. Mrs. Zirimu's recent death in a car accident on October 31st 1979 was a tragic blow to Uganda's cultural life. But let's begin with a celebration of the artist, let us remember Elvania Zirimu the writer. Fifteen years ago she published a short story the "Hen and the Ground Nuts" about a young girl perhaps Elvania herself who leaves her cooking, to join the other children and fails to notice that the chickens are eating all the ground nuts for the sauce. Here, Florence Akst reads the end of the story where the girl has discovered what has happened and decides to punish the chickens.

EXTRACT FROM: "THE HEN AND THE GROUND NUTS".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

"The Hen and the Ground Nuts". But, of course, it was with drama that Elvania Zirimu was best known. As well as being head of the English Department in the National Teacher's College Kyambogo she was also Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Cultural Centre of which the National Theatre is an integral part. She had worked with the schools broadcasting service from 1967 to 1970 and was a fellow in creative writing at Makerere University from 1970 to 1972. Along with her first husband Pio Zirimu who died in Nigeria during FESTAC she was involved in many aspects of Uganda's cultural life. Just before the fatal accident Mrs. Zirimu was interviewed for us by June Deckter who asked her about her involvement with the National Theatre.

PTO

ELVANIA ZIRIMU

My involvement in theatre has been mostly on the writing and producing side but I've acted in many plays. There are a number of plays that we presented as part of various festivals. I played the bossy neighbours wife in "The Brothers Wife", which was my own play. I think that was the last time I acted in my own play, actually. And I was Rebecca in Jesse de Graft's "Through a Film Darkly", and I was the girl in Pirandello's "The Rest is Silence" mostly I've been writing and producing others rather than acting myself particularly in the last few years, you know, because producing is not a very popular thing and if you want theatre and you realise that this is not a popular thing and yet without it theatre can't be. Well I had to sacrifice all other interests to fulfill that interest.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

As well as being an actor and producer Elvania Zirimu was of course well known as a playwright particularly for three plays: "The Hunchback made Rain", "Keeping up with the Mukasas", and perhaps most controversially "Snowing Strangers".

ELVANIA ZIRIMU

It's about two men who are fleeing from their home area because there is too much death and then they realise that they can't actually run away from it because wherever they go death is there and they end up with people dropping dead all around them and they realise that there is no running away.

JUNE DECKTAR

Then that play was not objected to by the people in the Amin regime? It sounds like it's a direct affront to their policies.

ELVANIA ZIRIMU

No really. You see it is about two very simple men in the village, and really it is about two very simple men in the village and it really is very entertaining and in any case, I mean, these people wouldn't come to the theatre. I mean if people like that read this play, or worse, still, if they see it, it isn't offensive. It's entertainment, it wasn't meant to be political, at least I wasn't. I knew of the sub-conscious part of me that was dictating to the conscious part, if one can talk of writing a play with a conscious part, but really, I mean, it wasn't political indoctrination.

ALEX TETTER-LARTRY

But despite her desire to be free of any direct involvement in politics the terrible years of the Amin regime were to plunge everyone in Uganda into the political maelstrom. June Deckter asked Mrs. Zirimu about those terrible years.

ELVANIA ZIRIMU

We struggled on, of course, the teaching went on. Many times we had to be interrupted with this and that. There was a time when we had a very bitter experience when one of our students who had just started first year was taken away and killed. Of course as the shortages grew and grew, we had to do without books and we had to make do with the few books we had. If new books came out, or if we wanted a change, we couldn't because of the shortage and being unable to obtain others. There were times when we had to close down because the water systems broke down and there was no water in the college, and, these conditions really made things very miserable. The students didn't - neither the students or us, the staff, were operating at full capacity. Then the theatre - sad very sad things have happened over the last eight years. Theatre here is entirely voluntary. The premises themselves are owned by a para-statal body, and a trust, with some financing from the government but the activities which go on there are voluntary, and groups work very very hard after working hours to put on productions and I must say, you know, they keep going. There is a production every week but during those days, with fear and so on, sometimes you'd be told this day would be dangerous, or, you know, it was as if there was a lion about. Anything, could happen and we were operating with people who had neither the appreciation or the understanding of the things we were doing. And many times they were suspicious because they didn't understand and because they were not in any way involved. And when they saw something going like that they thought something fishy was going on. And, of course, the year '77 was the saddest and the most crippling for the theatre when the director who had spent so much of his energy, he'd actually started theatre when he was a school boy in a private school and he was a self-made theatre man but he had devoted so much of his life to the theatre, was just taken away and killed. And this, together with the '77 wave of killing actually was, I think, probably the most crippling. I would say that was the time when our theatre colleague was killed immediately after the Archbishop and together with the people they shot, you know, at the clock tower. And then there was another one who was again very closely connected with the theatre who was doing research in the Ministry of Culture and this was immediately after the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture when we artists and worked so closely together, bringing together artists from other areas outside the capital as well as people who had been working here a long time. And so the taking out of these figures really crippled the spirit.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

The terrible suffering during the Amin years and in particular the sad death of Byron Kawodwa. It is particularly tragic that after having survived this terrible experience Mrs. Zimiru should have died at the young age of 41. She had recently re-married and had been appointed High Commissioner to Ghana by President Binaisa and what is particularly moving is the sense of hope for the future which she expressed to June Deckter at the end of their interview when she summed up her views on theatre in Uganda.

ELVANIA ZIRIMU

Theatre in Uganda is not political in the indoctrination sense of the word. It is social, it's social oriented and, therefore, it cannot help, of course, concerning itself with and reflecting what's going on among the people, but it does that in the same way as if you sit listening to a natural composition of people, in any community, about a number of things that go on in their life every day. So that without actually being a form of politicalisation it reflected what was going on. Of course it did it too much we knew very well that somebody's head would roll, but it actually reflected what people were feeling, what people were aspiring too and what people were doing to survive.

JUNE DECKTER

How do you think now that Amin is gone the people will be able to have a greater sense of freedom about their work?

ELVANIA ZIRIMU

that

The spirit/was kindled after the overthrow of Amin is something that I had not experienced for a long time. You could actually feel energy being liberated and I'm sure that within the next year or so this will be very very obvious. It is obvious to those of us who are involved in writing now but to the observer from outside I think perhaps it may not be really obvious until within a year or so.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

The late Elvania Zirimu, Mrs. Lubwa P'Chong, author, actress, woman of the theatre who talked to June Deckter just before her fatal accident in October 1979. And that brings us to the end of Arts and Africa and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.