

# Arts and Africa

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## ARTS AND AFRICA

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### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of Arts and Africa. We begin this week with a look at a series of plays being presented at London's Riverside Studios, all of which concern black people and their societies. David Sweetman reports....

### DAVID SWEETMAN

The series was originally the idea of director, John Burgess who produced the successful South African play, "Red Earth" at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. The original notion was to put together a series of plays in conjunction with London's black cultural Centre, The Drum Arts Centre that would highlight Britain's relationship with the third world. But when funding was withdrawn from the project, it looked like aborting until Peter Gill, the director of Riverside Studios, stepped in. What we have now are some of the original plays from the Drum programme with others added. They range in location from East Africa to Trinidad and are by well-known writers like Mustapha Matura and by newcomers like Nigerian Tunde Ikoli. Peter Gill himself has produced one of the plays and John Burgess two of the others including the opening play, "One Fine Day" by Nicholas Wright. This is a comedy set in a teacher training college in East Africa where the arrival of a new English lecturer provokes a confrontation between the students and the villainous local party leader. The play presents an hilarious picture of life in an emergent country. I talked to John Burgess about the series and I asked him if there was any theme that linked the five plays.

### JOHN BURGESS

Very broadly speaking about migration. "Black Man's Burden" is a play set in Jamaica and Brockley. It's about the very familiar story of a girl brought up by her grandmother in Jamaica while the parents are over here. She is the eldest girl of the family and then she's brought over when she is a teenager to meet her younger siblings which she has never seen before and her stepfather that she has never seen before. She goes mad. The play, I suppose is about loss and about what people sacrifice in order to make a better life, and they kind of give up the strength they need to live in order for a better life they never obtain.

P.T.O.

DAVID SWEETMAN

There does seem to be a strong grain of comedy running through them all, is that right?

JOHN BURGESS

Well, yes they're all plays in what I call "The English Manner", that looks at serious themes in a kind of rather humourous way which is not to say that it's like a situation comedy but that they are like Bernard Shaw's "Major Barbara". The manner of the telling is light and witty except that what the plays are about is very serious. I think to undersell either half of that would be not true, I mean I wouldn't like it to sound like an endless knees-up, or that they were, on the other hand, very poe-faced and uninviting.

DAVID SWEETMAN

It's usually a problem in this country, finding black actors. In the past there have been very few for obvious reasons. We now get more and more black actors coming forward but very few jobs for them so they have great difficulty in perfecting their skills. Has it been difficult to flesh out so many plays in such a short time?

JOHN BURGESS

It's been difficult in that we've been doing quite a lot of plays and are operating under extremely tight financial constraints. The season is being borne by a company of, I think, 19 actors when if you cast each play seperately, you would be dealing with a company of about 40. But there is also, which is very encouraging, a great deal of work for black actors around at present which is a very good thing. But I get the sense that there are an awful lot of very talented actors who are not used or are very under-used, so in that sense it's actually rather a joy to be doing.

DAVID SWEETMAN

John Burgess, who originally planned this series. The best known of the playwrights is Trinidadian Mustapha Matura whose plays: "Welcome Home Jacko", "Nice", "Rum an' Coca Cola" and "Play Mas" have all been very successful. His play in this series "A Dying Business" tells about a young man who returns to Trinidad from England for his father's funeral and whose plans to open a business using methods he has learned in England go comically wrong. I asked Mustapha whether there were problems in being a black writer working in a white culture.

MUSTAPHA MATURA

Black culture seems to go in phases. Suddenly it becomes fashionable and I think it's fashionable at the moment. That's no bad thing, I mean if it takes a fashion for people to notice our way of looking at the world that's wonderful. It's a pity we need whims to do it.

DAVID SWEETMAN

We often find that black actors when they take part in European plays,

are using different acting techniques is this a problem for you?

MUSTAPHA MATURA

Well it is a problem because we are working in a very kind of strange environment. We are working within a European context, a European convention, trying to project a very, very specific third world point of view and there's lots of contradictions in it. There's lots of disadvantages, because we are split down the middle because of our environment.

DAVID SWEETMAN

But do you find that when you are writing that you have to now consider the fact that it is going to be presented to European audiences. Do you find yourself making alterations because of that?

MUSTAPHA MATURA

No, not at all. I find the best way to achieve my objectives is to assume I am writing for a third world audience. But I find the English audience very perceptive in terms of theatre, in terms of receiving ideas, in terms of bridging that gap they seem to make it in the theatre much more easily than they can make it in the outside world. There is a safety about sitting in the theatre and being exposed to new ideas that the English are very accommodating about. But when they are faced with it in real life, they reject it totally.

DAVID SWEETMAN

You've done other plays, three is that right?

MUSTAPHA MATURA

Yes that's right this is the third.

DAVID SWEETMAN

What was the reaction to the other two?

MUSTAPHA MATURA

They were very good. What happened we did "Welcome Home Jacko" which is basically a play about young black teenagers in a youth club and we got a young black teenage audience. There was huge discussions taking place after the play was over, outside in the bars. I mean we got a reaction, you know we created a dynamic in the place. There were a lot of young kids who grew up in this country. They're interested in black history, during their school life they have been exposed to drama and they can see the relation with drama and real life and they want to come out to the theatre and see that life being represented, whatever aspect of it. That is wonderful.

DAVID SWEETMAN

But how about you, do you ever feel that this is a little bit of a limitation that here you are writing these specifically black plays for black people? Don't you feel sometimes, "I'm a playwright, I want

to be universal, I'd like to get away from all that"?

MUSTAPHA MATURA

Oh, I do, I do. But I have to respond to my community as well. This is one of the strange things about being a black writer in England in as much as that the sense of responsibility to the community is much stronger. I mean I need their approval and I need their respect and so I have to relate to them in many ways that a white writer doesn't have to. I mean I will write a play and they will come up to me and say that was wrong, it was terrible you misrepresented us. I mean that never happens to a white writer and this is the reality that I have to respond to. And in a way, it's wonderful that we have to be aware of our community.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mustapha Matura, talking to David Sweetman who was reporting there, on the series of plays running at Riverside Studios, London. Sydney Sipho Nhlapo is a South African painter currently exhibiting here in London. But Sydney Nhlapo has more interest about him than just being a painter - he is deaf and dumb. He is a Sotho probably about 45 years old and he was originally discovered in Johannesburg, walking the streets, abandoned. After some years in various hospitals a consultant psychiatrist introduced Nhlapo to Marian Lindquist, the Director of Sesame an organisation that studies the use of movement and drama as therapy for the mentally disturbed. Marian Lindquist is also a member of the Council of the British Institute for the Study of Arts in Therapy. She made two long visits to South Africa where she worked with Nhlapo introducing him to painting to help him control his schizophrenia and master his disabilities. Anne Bolsover spoke to her and asked her how she had begun.

MARIAN LINDQUIST

I offered him paints and paper and brushes of different sizes and indicated that I hoped he might paint some pictures and that is more or less all that I think that I could say I did. Of course, sometimes I might say, "This is a very beautiful painting", or, "the man is working in the fields" or something which I saw in the painting, or "the people are going on a journey, where are they going"? I might occasionally do that. But apart from that he had no need of help, he just needed to have the circumstances, it seemed to me, in which he could express what was going on, his inner visions, his inner world and I think that previously he had only been given pictures to copy which he had executed in very striking murals on some of the hospital walls. In my way of working through drama and movement and my small knowledge of art therapy told me, of course, that this would not be the way to approach him if it was to be therapeutic it must come from him, it must be exactly what he wanted to paint.

ANNE BOLSOVER

When he made that transition from painting copies, painting murals and then to painting his inner vision, as you call it, how did his paintings change. We have a very full exhibition here, perhaps you could talk to me about a few specific paintings that you think show the transition, show this inner vision.

MARIAN LINDQUIST

They were his, they came from his vision, he had nothing to go by. As you notice here is a story of two women and two men who are going onto the little mountain and here in the huts you see the figures of two women and two men and one of them is a sick warrior. In the final painting of these four, you see a very, very strong warrior standing outside the village, so this is the completion of that particular story. I think an important part of his paintings is that it was what he chose to paint and that it constituted stories which were like reading a book.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How do you think that being able to paint like this has helped him?

MARIAN LINDQUIST

I think that these paintings have provided an enormous opening up of a very silent withdrawn man so that the hospital staff say he kind of walks differently, he walks with a purpose. I realised that he was a Sotho man because he had written down his name which a lot of people didn't know because "unknown" is written on his case paper. I said to him one morning "Du mela" which is a form of greeting for Sotho people and he looked up and smiled so that is one occasion on which I am almost sure he could hear. So we just begin to wonder and all of us are very interested, both this country and, of course, in his hospital setting, as to what is going to happen next.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Marian Lindquist talking to Anne Bolsover about her work with deaf and dumb artist Sydney Sipho Nhlapo. And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.

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