

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 another edition of Arts and Africa. This week we take a look at the work of Lesotho playwright Zakes Mda. We begin with an excerpt from his play 'Dark Voices Ring'. The scene, a hut. An old man lies silent on the floor. His wife and a young man are talking.

EXTRACT FROM 'DARK VOICES RING'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An extract from Zakes Mda's play 'Dark Voices Ring'. But the play that has attracted most attention is 'The Hill', a chilling drama about the desperation and degradations of the migrant worker system. This short extract gives some idea of the play's theme. The scene is a hill outside Maseru, the capital of Lesotho where destitute men camp while awaiting the chance to be offered contracts for work in the South African gold and coal mines.

EXTRACT FROM 'THE HILL'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An extract from 'The Hill' which won for Zakes Mda the Amstel Playwright of the year award in 1979. Zakes is fast becoming one of the most talked-about playwrights in Southern Africa. In 1978 he was granted the Amstel Merit Award for his play 'We shall sing for the Fatherland'. Andrew Horne spoke to Zakes Mda for Arts and Africa. He asked him how he came to work in theatre when his initial training was as a visual artist. Andrew asked him what got him into the arts in the first place.

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MDA

When I was young, you know, at school at lower primary school I used to do sketches in my books every time and my father had to buy me books every day because at the end of the day they would be full of sketches.

HORNE

So how did you make the jump from sketching in your school books to writing plays?

MDA

Writing plays? Well this started at high school, we had a small theatre group there. We wanted local material, we couldn't get it so I decided to write plays for them.

HORNE

You actually came to Lesotho from South Africa, you were actually born in the Cape?

MDA

I was born in the Eastern Cape, I came to Lesotho in 1963, I came with my father. My father is a refugee from South Africa.

HORNE

A political refugee?

MDA

A political refugee.

HORNE

And there is a political and social commitment that runs through a lot of your plays isn't it?

MDA

Definitely, in fact all of them.

HORNE

Your first play to be produced professionally was 'Dead End'.

MDA

It was produced in 1973. I'm sorry, 1978. 'Dead End' was produced by FUBA. FUBA is the Federated Union of Black Artists in Johannesburg, and it toured Soweto in 1978.

HORNE

And this is a play about urban problems, is it?

MDA

About urban problems, yes.

HORNE

And then came 'We shall sing for the Fatherland'.

MDA

Here I'm looking at a black state after the revolution. And incidentally this is a state which has opted for a capitalist type of government. And here we have 2 veterans of the freedom wars, guys who were actually fighting in the bush to overthrow the old order and now after independence these guys have to resort to begging and so on. They have nothing to live on because those big guys are busy making money.

HORNE

The next play that was produced was called 'Dark Voices Ring'. Now this has got a very different kind of setting.

MDA

Yes, 'Dark Voices Ring' is set in a farm in South Africa and I'm looking at a farm labour situation there, the ill-treatment of farm labourers and things like this. It was published in 'Sketch' and 'Sketch' is edited by Sipho Sepamela, you know, the poet Sepamela, he's the editor of 'Sketch' and it was also produced in Cape Town by the people's Space Theatre. In fact, it is still running now, it is a double bill 'We shall sing for the Fatherland' and 'Dark Voices Ring'.

HORNE

You mentioned the Federated Union of Black Artists. Could you tell us some more about it? This is a very interesting development in black theatre in Southern Africa.

MDA

Yes, I think at first it was meant to serve as a trade union to protect the rights of the black artists, but now it has extended its services because it holds workshops and actual teaching sessions training artists and so on.

HORNE

And where is it based?

MDA

It is based in Johannesburg.

HORNE:

Yes, you certainly have by now, and you're only in your early thirties, quite a lot of plays not only published but, much more importantly, produced. And music seems to be involved in a current project, is that right?

MDA

Yes, this new play which I'm writing, this play is actually based in the times, during the times of King Moshweshwe the first king back now, in the nineteenth century.

HORNE

This is around the time of the founding of the Basuto nation?

MDA

Yes, Yes, definitely yes. So it's going to be a musical play and Mr. Mirani is going to write music for it.

HORNE

And there's another project that you're working on as well, something called 'On The Road'?

MDA

Yes, in this play two men meet on a road. He's an Afrikaaner farmer from South Africa. He's coming to Lesotho, you know they are allowed here for holidays and so on and a Basuto going to work on the farms and they meet on the road there and they learn a lot about each other. The farmer is coming to Lesotho where he can enjoy himself to see pornographic films and to sleep around with black prostitutes and the Basuto is going to work on his farm.

HORNE

And that will eventually be called 'On The Road'. Let's now listen to a piece from your most recently finished play 'The Hill'.

EXTRACT FROM 'THE HILL'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The final extract from 'The Hill', our thanks to Andrew Horne for talking to the playwright Zakes Mda about his work.

And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey it is goodbye as we leave you with some traditional music from Zakes Mda's homeland, Lesotho.