

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. We begin with a tribute to Robert Serumaga, the Ugandan writer whose recent death has come as a shock to those who admired his work as a leading man of the theatre in East Africa. Only in his early '40's Robert Serumaga is reported to have died of a brain haemorrhage in Nairobi where he had been living since the fall of Ugandan President Yusufu Lule's government in which he was Deputy Minister of Commerce. Serumaga's active interest in politics came towards the end of the Amin era when he organised a force of guerillas to operate in Uganda from their base in Kenya. After Amin's overthrow he became a member of President Lule's short-lived government. But when that fell he chose to live in exile in Nairobi. So, he was clearly a controversial political figure but our concern here on Arts and Africa is to assess Robert Serumaga, the playwright and novelist. David Cook the African Literature specialist knew Serumaga. Cook is a leading expert on East African literature who lived in Uganda for many years before he too was obliged to move during the Amin years. He now works in Nigeria and is currently in England on study leave. David Sweetman spoke to him and asked him when he had last seen Robert Serumaga.

DAVID COOK

Three or four weeks ago when I was in Nairobi I ran into him outside the National Theatre. He saw me on the other side of the road and dashed up and greeted me. He looked, I must say, very well then.

DAVID SWEETMAN

So it must have been a shock to hear that he had died so suddenly?

DAVID COOK

Indeed, a complete surprise, no hint of this.

DAVID SWEETMAN

It was as a man of the theatre that he was known in East Africa, wasn't it?

DAVID COOK

His group, "Theatre Limited" is probably the most remarkable thing he has ever done, and this travelled widely internationally and, in some ways, more widely than it ever did in Uganda. So I would have thought it was primarily as a figure of the theatre that he is known and, in some ways, his very interesting novel is not as widely known as one would like it to be.

DAVID SWEETMAN

How would you appraise his work in the theatre, what do you think it was that attracted such attention?

DAVID COOK

He was, himself, a brilliant actor. He was a man of very extraordinary theatrical talent and he was one of the most notable African actors whom I have seen. He acted in London first of all with Athol Fugard and then acted a good deal in East Africa. Then he became a playwright and his active life in the theatre, I think, really falls into two halves. First of all while he was writing what, I think, should properly be called "African drama of the Absurd". The first play which is much too little known which was published locally which he simply called "The Play", was probably the best of his scripted plays, the most interesting of his plays. It was very provocative in an international manner, though very much East African terms in content and subject matter. Then he became fascinated with modern movements in theatre in terms of movement and design and human activity on the stage as completely opposed to verbalisation. He created, first of all, a company. "Theatre Limited" was a remarkable company and in many ways quite outstanding particularly in their early years when they were very vigourously trained in a way that was quite unfamiliar in East Africa by Robert in techniques and the psychology of modern approaches to stage, space and use of the body, so that they could hold an audience by movement and stage patterning and the dramatic use of theatre. Not exactly divorced from the word but divorced from the word which most of the audience would have understood. When there were words in these later productions, they were in a variety of Ugandan languages which it didn't really matter whether they understood or not. They were part of a total pattern. He expressed what could be called, the beginnings of theatrical genius, quite extraordinary and he created a young company who were completely committed, with relatively little financial attraction, to total theatre in a 1960's sense of the word.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Although we are concerned here with his work as a creative person and not directly with his politics, nevertheless, the question does impose itself, how much did politics impinge on his writing, was he a political writer?

DAVID COOK

He was a political writer in the sense that it would be unintelligent to be unaware of politics in any Third World context. He was a political writer in the sense that he was very aware of what was going on around him. He had a natural satirical and sardonic manner which illuminated often, to use a vogue word, the absurdity in the situations around him without necessarily always expressing a localised political view. He was much more likely, in fact, to take a Ugandan situation and generalise it in fairly universal terms through his drama. He was in charge of the team who made the colour film of the Kabaka's funeral in Kampala and he was, in later years, quite interested in film and I think it is a pity he never had the time or opportunity to work more in films. I think he would have been very effective in film in many ways.

DAVID SWEETMAN

You don't think there's a sense in which he had almost abandoned the creative life and decided that this was not going to make the sort of impact that he wanted?

DAVID COOK

I don't know. I do get something of this impression out in recent years when I have not been inside East Africa myself, unfortunately, and I've not been in contact with him, all I can say is that that is my impression.

DAVID SWEETMAN

How would you assess his first novel, "Return to the Shadows" which I think came out in 1969?

DAVID COOK

I think it is a very interesting novel, a very promising novel and in some ways a rather disappointing novel. There is, in a sense, a big gap in the writing in the middle and if it had been a first novel rather than the only novel, I think it might have led on in other directions. He became rather disillusioned but in a rather sophisticated way with the word and, in fact, when he took up the company and the "Theatre Limited" work, in the end he really very much became, perhaps exaggeratedly in some of our views, anti the word and perhaps this was part of the reason why he didn't continue with his writing.

DAVID SWEETMAN

But he does sound, in some ways, from what you have been saying, rather like someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time?

DAVID COOK

Well yes, except that somebody with that kind of sparkle and that kind of energy is bound to contribute a lot. There is a sense in which context was not one in which he was ever able to really contribute the maximum of his potential. Really Robert had a very great potential indeed. Sometimes one was quite annoyed with him, in a good humoured way, for not exerting the immense potential which was inside him. One felt here was somebody of enormous creative energy and while, no doubt, his interest in business and in many other spheres was a very great advantage to many people, those of us who think of him primarily as a creative artist are impressed and grateful to look back on what he achieved but are aware that there was a greater possibility which, in fact, he has died before he could possibly fulfill.

MUSIC - ROYAL DRUMS OF BUGANDA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was an assessment by David Cook on the work of Robert Serumaga, controversial man of the theatre. And from Buganda, these are the Kabaka's Royal Entenga drums.

MUSIC - KABAKA'S ROYAL ENTENGA DRUMS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now for more happy news, we stay with the theatre but move to Nigeria. Nigeria has one of the best funded and most ambitious television networks in Africa and recently Nigerian television has arranged a number of co-productions between its own film makers and those from other broadcasting organisations. The latest of these was a co-production with BBC television, filmed in Nigeria, processed in England, and designed for simultaneous showing for British and Nigerian audiences. It is a portrait of a very remarkable man, Hubert Ogunde, the founding father of modern popular theatre in Nigeria. Elizabeth Blunt has seen the film and is here to report.

ELIZABETH BLUNT

In a way the subject of the programme is so remarkable that any film about him really couldn't fail. You see him on stage, on the road with his travelling players, telling the story of his life from the depths of a huge leather armchair, and all the time he is fizzing with energy, smiling, waving his arms, demonstrating exactly what he means with a graphic gesture; in fact, the only time in the whole film that he's still is when he is mimicing a British theatre audience, watching plays in glazed passivity, a very far cry from his own audiences, who are obviously anything but passive.

The programme explains the roots of theatre in Yoruba speaking areas of Nigeria, where masqueraders in elaborate costumes have always been a feature of village life. As Ogunde himself explains, one of the biggest problems when he first set up a professional theatre company was persuading people to pay to watch a spectacle rather than expecting it to happen, free for all, in the streets. By the time he formed this company, in the late 1940's, Ogunde had already

become known for his religious dramatisations performed in churches in the area. He had nine pounds, his savings from eight years work as a teacher and policeman and with this he bought props and costumes, and put an advertisement in the paper for 30 actresses. There were no replies. He tried again. This time he advertised for 30 clerks, for what he called his "African Music Research Party". He was swamped with applicants, and from among them he found his first actresses.

Nowadays he has solved the problem; as he has prospered he has married many wives, at least he's a little coy about exactly how many: but more than ten and his wives and children staff his touring theatre company. His senior wife is also his leading actress, and the organiser of his large and obviously very happy household. Even he baulks at the idea of subjecting his wives to an audition before agreeing to marry them, but he tells viewers that he chooses new wives from an area where everyone learns to dance and sing, and so far, he says, none of his wives have turned out to be useless on the stage.

Of course, this system has the merit of keeping the takings in the family. The Ogunde Travelling Theatre is a purely self-supporting enterprise, no government grants, no subsidies at all, and draws such large and enthusiastic audiences in every town and village it visits, that the family is obviously prospering. Ogunde has just made a feature film, using all the tricks of the cinema to show the effects of magic and the supernatural which he can't do on stage. We saw the Ogunde family enterprise as work; two wives manning the projectors, another taking the ticket money, others selling soft drinks in the cinema and Ogunde records to the audience as they went in.

But at least Ogunde gives his audience value for money; the play included in the programme is a traditional story of a girl persecuted by her co-wives, whose baby is thrown in the river, but then comes back years later to claim his true mother. The story is told in Yoruba, but also in vivid gesture and dance so every shade of feeling is made plain.

This film will certainly open British eyes to some of the wealth of theatre in Nigeria. I got the feeling that Ogunde himself, talking to an English director behind the camera was explaining his life and art for that audience, perhaps in a way that might seem strange at the time to his Nigerian viewers. But, of course, Nigeria is huge, and not even all Nigerians know Hubert Ogunde and his work. Even those who do may welcome a chance to see some of it preserved on film, and so sympathetically presented.

MUSIC - I.K. DAIRO AND HIS BLUE SPOT

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Music by I.K. Dairo and his Blue Spot. And that was Elizabeth Blunt reporting on the British and Nigerian television film "Ogunde, Man of the Theatre". And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.