

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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ARTS AND AFRICA

First Broadcast: 30/11/80

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. In Kenya, last week, the arts scene was dominated by the "Colleges Drama Festival" at the National Theatre in Nairobi. Ten Teacher's Colleges took part in the festival and each night of the week, three, for the most part, original productions played to good audiences. Greg Wilesmith has sent us these impressions of the drama festival.

## GREG WILESMITH

It was good to see the Kenya National Theatre last week being used to present national theatre rather than imported plays and musical concerts of dubious interest to local people. It was good to see too, the number of plays presented in Kenya's national language, Swahili, rather than in English. Indeed the plays judged first and second in the festival were both in Swahili. The winning play called "Palipo Mwangaza" presented by Mombassa's Shanzu Teachers College concerned itself, like a number of the plays, with Africa's political problems, the conflicting forces of democracy and dictatorship. Siba College which was the overall winner of the drama festival of 1978 and '79, had to be content with second place this year although it did win some of the other sections. The plays tended to be topical, the struggle for black independence against an apartheid regime in Southern Africa was one theme. Another concerned itself with the smuggling of Uganda coffee into Kenya. Yet another, the problems of youth unemployment in the cities. The drama festival was organised by the Ministry of Basic Education because the students training at the teachers colleges will mostly teach in Kenya's primary schools. One complaint that came up a number of times by players and producers was that although the Ministry seems to be encouraging the development of drama in the colleges, at present there is no formal drama course. Drama is incorporated in the teaching of English literature. One of the festival judges, Dr. Kimani Gecau said that that too is a mistake. The teaching of literature should not be confused with the teaching of English. For all that, the College Drama Festival was a success. The final performances on Saturday night, played to packed houses. And as an annual event, the festival can only go from strength to strength.

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Greg Wilesmith there. Interestingly, the only winning play in English was about Women's Liberation - well, in a way. This was the third prize winner "Nange Tonyo Nyotedo" which featured a tyrant Queen of that name who takes women's liberation to the point where she has completely

reversed roles - she dominates and even tortures her male subjects - inevitably at the end, the men revolt. Well, that's not how most progressive people view women's liberation but as a comedy it seems to have been a great success as we can hear in this extract where the Queen shows just what a tyrant she is.

TAPE

EXTRACT -- "NANGE TONYO NYOTEDO"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Playing the Queen in that extract was Mary Ntsaba, a student at the Kenya Technical Teachers College. Greg Wilesmith asked her how she saw the somewhat confusing theme of the play.

MARY NTSABA

Well, the play is just a satire as you can see. I don't think it really means that is how women are going to rule if they are liberated. It is just sort of mocking them, showing how they can never succeed because they will start oppressing people but I think it is just for entertainment's sake.

GREG WILESMITH

Women's liberation is a very serious topic in Africa. Do you think it is right for you to make fun of it? I mean, it's a very serious subject for many people?

MARY NTSABA

Well, usually men believe that's exactly what will happen with women if they happen to rule. They don't accept the women's liberation although we women believe we can do better all the same.

GREG WILESMITH

So you believe that by showing that women will not dominate really, that you can make fun of the whole issue of women's liberation?

MARY NTSABA

Well, just to entertain people. I think we do it just to entertain people not really that that is what will really happen.

GREG WILESMITH

Can you tell me how long the play is that the Kenyan Technical Teachers College have been preparing for this night? I means have they been putting a lot of effort into it or is it something that you have done in spare moments?

MARY NTSABA

Well, we did put a lot of effort into it. We started some time in October, the beginning of October, I think, although I can't remember exactly. At the time we started practising the play, arranging the decor and so on.

GREG WILESMITH

Were they drama students or were they students doing other things?

MARY NTSABA

Well, it's a club for the people who are interested in drama. Although we sometimes used to have some problems with practise because of studying assignments and so on, but most of the time we tried the best we can, to spare the few minutes we have and go and practise.

GREG WILESMITH

Do you think this is the sort of play that your college drama group should be doing, or should you be doing something else, something perhaps more political?

MARY NTSABA

Well, I think it was political. Was the play not political?

GREG WILESMITH

It had a lot of social comments about womens liberation, about the role of women and what might happen if they take over.

MARY NTSABA

Well, I don't know. I think the main point is that it is just to entertain people and nothing more.

GREG WILESMITH

And you seemed to get a very good response from the audience, they found the possibility of women dominating men quite hilarious.

MARY NTSABA

Yes, that's how most people thought. That's what they came to tell me that if women take over, that's exactly what would happen. I got many compliments from people coming to tell me that we women are happy about it, but the men were quite against it.

GREG WILESMITH

Do you really think that is what will happen or is that just the play?

MARY NTSABA

No, it's just the play. I don't think it will ever succeed, for anything like that.

GREG WILESMITH

Do you see any differences between the standard or style of drama here in Kenya and in Lesotho, your home?

MARY NTSABA

Not much. I don't think there is any difference because in Lesotho people also like drama very much. You'll get schools competing and so on. So I can't say there is much difference.

GREG WILESMITH

Now, your play "Nange Tonyo Nyotedo" was in English, the plays that came first and second place in the drama festival were presented in Swahili. Do you think that there was a bias against English in the drama festival?

MARY NTSABA

Well, what I believe is that mostly, they are trying to promote the plays in Swahili although I didn't know the ideas of the adjudicators as they were doing that. But the play by Siriba College was very good in Swahili. It was very good. So I don't know how we acted because we couldn't notice ourselves on stage so I can't comment much between the two plays but all I know is that Siriba College's play was good which was given second place. Whereas Shanzu, I wasn't very much impressed but possibly it impressed some people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARNEY

Actress Mary Ntsaba talking to Greg Wilesmith. The three judges obviously had a difficult task picking the winners out such a diverse array of material, but what was the true standard of production and acting? Was there any improvement on last years standard? Greg Wilesmith put these points to one of the judges - Albert Wandego.

ALBERT WANDAGO

I'm afraid to say that the quality hasn't very much changed compared to last year and we can't really say that the standard, if we can say so, has improved. We have had basically, from the results, you can see that we have the same colleges which were winners last year, coming in as winners again this year apart from Shanzu Teachers College from the coast. So basically I don't think that the quality has changed.

GREG WILESMITH

Why is it that the Siriba College has tended to dominate?

ALBERT WANDAGO

Oh, there are several reasons. I think first because you have more people there who are keen on theatre and drama in general. Then they have an advantage over the other colleges in the sense that we know that many other colleges who are interested, who are keen but they do not have the right expertise for drama, they don't have the right teachers who are capable of handling drama and this is a problem, definitely a problem in some colleges. Whereas in Siriba they have quite a number of tutors who are good in drama and theatre, who are writers in their own right. This is definitely a big advantage for them.

GREG WILESMITH

Do you think the standard of drama presented by the colleges at a festival like this might be higher if the students had better access to drama teachers and tutors, if there was a drama course at the colleges?

ALBERT WANDAGO

I definitely think so because, from experience, we have found out that there are some colleges where you have students and tutors who have never been exposed, at all, to drama. In fact, the only time that they ever get involved in drama is when they get letters from the ministry telling them that "we have a colleges festival, can you please prepare a play?". So they just get down with whatever they can get and go ahead and do it. Obviously with such a group you don't expect them to present a very high quality play because they are just doing it perhaps because they are directed from the higher circles and they have to present something. We do hope that the ministry is going to find a good reason to believe us and put in drama as part of the course in teachers training colleges.

GREG WILESMITH

Now in judging this drama festival, did you have a bias towards plays that were presented in Swahili rather than in English?

ALBERT WANDAGO

No we didn't. In fact, if we were to have a bias perhaps we would have chosen an English play because one of the new things that has happened in this years drama, is that we have had more Swahili plays than English which is something really new. Normally it is the other way around, so there is definitely no bias for or against Swahili.

GREG WILESMITH

But you would applaud this new direction, the fact that there are more plays presented in Swahili?

ALBERT WANDAGO

Of course, we are happy about it because it has been one of the criticisms when the drama festival was started, there had been a lot of criticisms as to why we keep on encouraging plays in English which is not our national language. I think this criticism has taken effect and more and more colleges and schools are taking Swahili plays more serious than ever before. This is definitely a good turn.

ALEX FETTEH-LARTY

Albert Wandago, one of the judges at last weeks Kenyan: "Colleges Drama Festival". And our thanks to Greg Wilesmith for sending us that report. That's it for Arts and Africa for this week. We'll leave you with a piece of music from the prize-winning play, "Nange Tonyo Nyotedo" and this is Alex Fetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAFE

MUSIC EXTRACT - "NANGE TONYO NYOTEDO".