

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

*all*

ARTS AND AFRICA

NO: 317. 318

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. Last year we looked at the Ravan Press, a South African publishing company that has managed to publish Black avant-garde writing despite the risks of banning and other forms of legal persecution. We then heard about Staffrider, the press's literary magazine which has made itself the focus for much of the new writing coming out of the Johannesburg townships, particularly Soweto. We knew that Staffrider had become a focal point in the townships and wanted to know more about it and our opportunity came with the recent visit to South Africa of one of our colleagues, Dorothy Grenfell-Williams. She is now back from her tour and is with me here in the studio. Dorothy, Staffrider is a very interesting title for a magazine but what does it mean?

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

Well, Alex, when I was in Johannesburg I did actually go to the Staffrider offices, a very hectic office and one of the people I met there was a young poet who writes a lot of stuff for Staffrider called Jackie Seroke and I asked him why the magazine was called Staffrider.

JACKIE SEROKE

You see, in our situation we have to travel by train and during the trip they usually climb on top of the train and get in through the window. I mean, that's playing "staff", that's what you call it, playing staff. That's very dangerous, so in a sense we see us as writers playing a dangerous game which is very important at the same time.

PTO

DOROTHY GREENFELL-WILLIAMS

It sounds like a very frightening business, being a writer in South Africa?

JACKIE SEROKE

Yes, it's frightening but at the same time, it's necessary to do it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I've been looking through the magazine and I noticed there was a preponderance of poetry.

DOROTHY GREENFELL-WILLIAMS

I wondered, does poetry have a special importance for the people of Soweto, for the people of the black townships in South Africa; I asked Jackie Seroke just that.

JACKIE SEROKE

Poetry, you know, involves everybody in Soweto. Everybody, at least we could say everybody is a poet. We have poetry reaching which is how poetry and people have contact. I am more interested in poetry rather than in prose because South African literature, especially black writings, is mostly poetry. Time is crucial for us to have, to write prose, because, like putting it in my case, where you have police harassment in the middle of the night. I'm busy writing prose, they come in, that's disturbing so to make it short I just write poetry, a few lines, that's how we sneak around, but still we still see the need for prose because prose in our situation has more impact.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of magazine is it? Is it meant to be popular or is it meant to be literary in the sense in which we know it?

DOROTHY GREENFELL-WILLIAMS

Well you know Alex, I can only describe Staffrider as I saw it as a sort of literary club for the people of Soweto. It isn't a literary magazine in the old-fashioned sense, it's a place where anyone from Soweto who's writing, and a lot of people are writing, can publish what they're doing. The editorial policy is decided by a sort of ad hoc committee of people who just happened to be in the office. They look through what's available and decide what to put in. They very rarely reject any writer wholesale. I mean, obviously they can't put in everything that comes in of every writer but rather than rejecting a writer and saying, no we're not going to take your stuff, they'll take one of his poems, perhaps not all of them, but the old kind of literary standards that we're all used to, is it a good piece of literature, is it well-written, I don't think they apply to

Staffrider. The important thing is that the stuff is being written, that Staffrider should be a forum for the people of Soweto, not whether it's a pure piece of literature or not. I think that makes the magazine rather unique and very important to the people in the townships.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is that the reason why, going through the list of poems, the contributions, I didn't notice any established poetic names?

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

That's right. It's not for established, famous writers, though of course a lot of the Staffrider writers have now become very famous in the townships.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you think they would publish anything which might actually lead to banning? I heard Seroke say there that they had been publishing some rather dangerous stuff.

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

My impression was that they certainly don't reject things because they think they might get them into trouble with the police. In fact, Mtutuzeli Matshoba who's a writer whose stories have appeared very often in Staffrider, when I talked to him in the Staffrider offices, it was two weeks after a collection of his stories, most of which had been published in Staffrider, had just been banned. The first printing had sold out, they'd done a new printing and at the moment when the new printing came off the press, the book was banned. I asked Mtutuzeli how he'd started writing.

MTUTUZELI MATSHOBA

It was these incidents that kept happening around my life that moved me into writing. It's actually my environment I'm trying to describe. You know, it's like laying an indictment against the whole apartheid system.

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

Are your stories widely read in Soweto?

MTUTUZELI MATSHOBA

Yes, they are. And people have got to know me through my stories and it's actually a very different thing to put up with because they always come to us you know, in person, they have some aspects of their stories that they'd like details about and it's like last Sunday, I was sitting at a friend's place and this guy saw a report

in the Sunday Express which was about the banning of black works, literary works, so he, it was early in the morning, so he came there and he wanted to know about how I had reacted to the banning and that kind of thing as he had read the stories and he had never spoken about them until then.

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

How had you reacted to the banning?

MTUTUZELI MATSHOBA

At first I thought it should be treated with the kind of contempt it deserved and later on I began to feel sort of depressed by it because I couldn't go on with my work, I found myself almost censoring my work, you know, that is censoring my stories, censoring what I was writing but I think now that it's been some time, you know, two weeks, I'm getting over it and getting back to being myself.

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

Do you aim at your stories actually having a political effect?

MTUTUZELI MATSHOBA

Yes, I do. In fact, what I'm trying to do with my stories is to, you know, bring back to the consciousness of people those things which have become part of their lives which they don't even know and which they don't see the wrongs of so I'm actually raising these things and making them think. I want to stimulate thought because they stimulate thought in me so I want them to stimulate these thoughts. It's like passing the ball over to other people.

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

You see, Matshoba sees his writing as a kind of two-way relationship with the people who live around him in Soweto. They talk to him about incidents that have happened, he talks to them about them, he writes them down, he doesn't feel that he's a sort of isolated creator in the old-fashioned sense of a writer at all, he's a sort of voice for the people he knows around him in Soweto.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What is his reaction to this constant harrassment by the police?

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

Well actually I talked to Jackie Seroke about that, because you'll remember when you heard him talke before, he talked about harrassment by the police and in fact he had a terribly bad time as he tells you here.

JACKIE SEROKE

I've been writing poetry for up to three years, it's three years writing serious poetry and while I've been having troubles with the Security Police of South Africa. They came to my place in the middle of the night and I'm being questioned, interrogated about other writers and what I am doing. You know, at one stage they just came in when they arrested me, they just came in, no knocking or anything, they just came in. They know where I sleep and wake me up. They usually take me to the local police station in my area and question me there for maybe two or three hours and take me back. Most of the time, I mean in all three times they have been taking me in it's, they've questioned me in twos - which is, one asked me this while the other asked me that and they have even confiscated some of my poetry and they read it to me, that kind of thing. But most basically they are interested in what the other writers are doing, black writers, like, where is say, a writer like Mophosi Mphahlele, where is he staying and what is he doing. What involves him politically, that kind of question.

DOROTHY GREENFELL-WILLIAMS

And at the moment, Jackie Seroke is actually under a suspended sentence because he was finally arrested and tried. I asked him what was his reaction to all this constant battering from the police?

JACKIE SEROKE

I've heard that this thing happened in South Africa so I only take it as part of our liberation struggle. I usually keep quiet when they take me, I talk when I'm supposed to because I'm usually a shy person.

ALEX TETUHE-LARTEY

Dorothy, how often is this magazine published?

DOROTHY GREENFELL-WILLIAMS

Well, it comes out roughly monthly. I mean, it's not absolutely regular but it aims at being a monthly.

ALEX TETUHE-LARTEY

And can the people of Soweto afford it?

DOROTHY GREENFELL-WILLIAMS

Well, they seem to buy it in large numbers, but I think also, you know, that each copy gets seen by a very large number of people. I mean, I think it's handed round. I mean, it is sold on street corners in Soweto and I heard one story of one of the salesmen standing on a street corner holding up a copy of Staffrider and shouting "Knowledge", which gives you some idea of how it's regarded in the

township, and you know, one interesting thing that I noticed when I was reading Mtutuzeli Matshoba was that he sometimes uses language very much in the way that it's used in the townships. He doesn't just write straight-forwardly in English, but every now and again he uses a local African language because that is the way the people actually do talk in the townships. He had this to say about that:

MTUTUZELI MATSHOBA

You know, I write in English in order to reach, you know, a wider readership. I'm Xhosa speaking, but that's not really important. I speak Sotho, I speak Zulu as well so I just speak a mixture of these languages. So I actually want to come out the way I feel, the way I see, the way I express myself, I mean in my ordinary life, so I find that there is this tendency for me to want to use either Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho phrases in my writing just so ..... It's actually a feeling inside me that by writing in English I'm sort of suppressing, you know, the originality of what I'm talking about so it comes out quite often.

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

So you find you're increasingly actually using other languages as well as English mixed in with English which is the way you would naturally talk anyway, is it?

MTUTUZELI MATSHOBA

Yes yes, that's the way to it.

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

And in fact, it's not only South African African languages that the Staffrider use. One of the most famous of the Staffrider writers is a poet called Ingoapele Madingoane and he's written a poem which I think is very important to the people of Soweto. It's called "Africa my Beginning" and "Africa my Beginning" has actually got a lot of Swahili phrases in it. Jackie Seroke had an anecdote to tell me about what that poem meant to somebody he knew.

JACKIE SEROKE

We have a poet Ingoapele Madingoane who wrote "Africa my Beginning". We have a case where a friend of mine who is my age got mental disturbance at some stage, you see, and when he got this illness she used to recite "Africa my Beginning", He knew it by heart, you could say.

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

And I can tell you Alex, a lot of people in Soweto know that poem

(7)

completely off by heart although it's got passages which really must be quite difficult for them because they're in Swahili, like this one:

EXTRACT FROM: "AFRICA MY BEGINNING"

DOROTHY GRENFELL-WILLIAMS

So you can see, Alex, that the poets and writers of Staffrider are very conscious of what's happening in Africa to the north of them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Dorothy, thank you very much indeed.

That was Dorothy Grenfell-Williams talking about the avant-garde literary magazine from South Africa - Staffrider.

And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.