

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 and we begin this week with another report on a subject we've been covering in some depth recently, the return to normal of Uganda's cultural life. We have heard from the late Mrs. Elvania Zirimu and writer Okot P'Bitek and this week we hear from Mr. Elly Sendi who is the House Manager of the National Theatre in Kampala. We heard from Elvania Zirimu how the artistic director of the National Theatre was taken away by Amin's soldiers and killed and when Kari Blackburn talked to Mr. Elly Sendi she asked him what sort of plays it had been possible to put on during the Amin years.

ELLY SENDI

The kind of plays we used to put on also changed a great deal because we had to estimate our steps. Plays like that one which cost our Director his life, we couldn't afford to put them on till after the liberation. So every play had to be censored by the Censor Board which is in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

KARI BLACKBURN

What sort of plays did they favour? Were they for example, very anti any plays written in the West?

ELLY SENDI

Well not necessarily in the West but any play they thought was sort of touching them in one way or another. They had that kind of guilty consciousness that they could interpret any play although sometimes the author didn't mean to, that sometimes such a play was interpreted. And many times someone was taken in to answer for it to really know that he didn't mean to damage present government then, Amin's Government.

KARI BLACKBURN

Now since the liberation have many playwrights come forward with plays which they weren't able to see produced under Amin?

ELLY SENDI

Oh quite a lot, quite a lot. Even some plays I was just telling you that our director was killed because of his play, his production which he was staging in Lagos for FESTAC. Plays like that and many others which were feared during the Amin time came up and we were having full houses which we were not getting during the Amin years.

KARI BLACKBURN

And I understand one school boy has even written a play about the rise and fall of Amin?

ELLY SENDI

Oh yes quite a number of people have written plays in fact there are more plays than we can fit in the National Theatre. You see we are at the moment only one National Theatre and there are so many people now coming up with plays. I can tell you that when we give up bookings for the last quarter, you know January, February, March, we had more than 100 groups wanting to put up plays but we could only afford about 20 or less than that.

KARI SENDI

And this is completely different from the situation which existed under Amin.

ELLY SENDI

Oh yes, quite different. Although we had many groups during that time, many of them were frightened to put up any play during Amin's time because after picking up many people and afterwards they lose their lives, everyone was scared you know.

KARI SENDI

Are most of these plays which new playwrights are putting forward to the National Theatre, are they in Luganda?

ELLY SENDI

No, not necessarily, although quite a number are in Luganda. But we've got plays in English and plays in other Ugandan languages.

KARI BLACKBURN

Kampala at the moment, is a city under curfew and it seems that this curfew is going to continue for some time. Now doesn't this make normal theatre going rather difficult?

ELLY SENDI

Yes it actually does. For the moment we have introduced morning shows on weekends which we didn't have before. Instead of evening shows which would start around 6 or 7 O'clock, we now have morning shows to replace those, although this is an experiment and really is kind of a strain because it's not very convenient for some people, but it is working somehow.

KARI BLACKBURN

What about the actors at the National Theatre, have many actors who were in exile have now come back?

ELLY SENDI

Yes quite a number have come back and others have written to say they are coming back and they would like to take part in forthcoming productions. People like Ckot P'Bitek who was artistic Director of the National Theatre, he had run away to Kenya during Amin's time, he is now back at Makerere University. Cliff Rubwa was also one of our great actors and he had just graduated from Makerere and he had started teaching when he run away after one of his productions, which sort of hit Amin about, he is now back with the National Teacher's College, Chianbogo. John Ruganda was with the Makerere University and he is one of these who have shown interest to come back to their mother land.

KARI BLACKBURN

Is the main focus of theatre in Kampala at the moment, the National Theatre because I've noticed other small theatre groups springing around in the cinemas which have been closed down and looted by the war?

ELLY SENDI

Yes actually I think I am proud to say that Uganda is one of these rich countries with their cultures and even during the Amin time, people used to make use of any large space that could be used for a theatre. And after the liberation many halls including some Cinema houses have been turned into theatres. Not only in Kampala but also up country. In fact there are people here who really prefer theatre to cinemas you know many of our theatre goers will tell you that I'd rather go to a theatre than a cinema and this is why you find that many groups have been encouraged to, even travel long distances from Kampala to go and perform in many parts of Uganda, up country.

KARI BLACKBURN

I'm really pleased to hear that theatres in Kampala are doing so well because every other area of life seems to be suffering tremendously with material problems and from shortages. Now aren't these a problem too for your theatre?

ELLY SENDI

Yes they are actually problems. We definately have problems also with our theatre. Problems about transport as you will understand that Uganda was thoroughly looted. We have no means of transport even some halls which we used to use as theatres have been gunned down by one means or another. In spite of all this our theatre artists have really shown interest and kept up and I am sure they have really done a good job to our country during this time of reconstruction and rehabilitation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Kari Blackburn talking to Mr. Elly Sendi, the House Manager of the National Theatre, Kampala. And now to a wider view of the arts, even beyond Africa with a new magazine called 'Art Links' which plans to act as a focus for the arts of the Commonwealth. The editor of 'Art Links', Mr. Peter Friedman is here with me today. There are 2 Commonwealth Arts Association and the other, the Commonwealth Arts Organisation formed as a result of the Commonwealth Arts Conference held recently. What is the difference between the two?

PETER FRIEDMAN

Yes well the politics of Commonwealth Arts Administration is extremely complicated. I'll try and simplify it as far as possible. The Commonwealth Arts Association is the organisation that published 'Art Links'. It's a smaller London based organisation though the members of it are from all over the Commonwealth. It was the organisation that was responsible for organising the festival in Edmonton in 1978, although broadly it's envisaged on a much smaller scale than the new organisation which is called the Commonwealth Arts Organisation. It was set up last month at the Commonwealth Arts Conference which has a much smaller far reaching Pan-Commonwealth aims with a larger full-time staff and a larger amount of money involved and more ambitious projects.

ALEX LETTER-LARTEY

I'd like you to tell us a little about your Art Links magazine. What exactly does it aim to do? You have talked generally about acting as a focus for the arts of the Commonwealth. Can you give us further details?

PETER FRIEDMAN

Yes. As I said in the editorial in the first issue that we'll aim both to entertain and to inform so hopefully people will enjoy reading the magazine for it's own sake but maybe more importantly we'll act as a vehicle for the exchange of information between people involved in the arts in different Commonwealth countries. Also to keep people in touch with news articles and a calendar of events, previews of forthcoming festivals and exhibitions and conferences and that kind of thing. But apart from the news articles there will be longer in-depth feature articles really explaining the background to Commonwealth art forms and maybe interviews with prominent Commonwealth artists. And finally and more broadly we'll try and act as a voice or pressure group for Commonwealth arts generally, and try and make our presence felt in the Commonwealth and within the rest of the world. In the long run the aim is to make the magazine self financing by building up a large list of subscriptions across the Commonwealth and as the circulation grows, by collecting more advertising and that kind of thing. Although in the initial stages we'll have to try and raise support from organisations like the Commonwealth Foundation and possibly private industry.

ALEX LETTER-LARTEY

I see that you have an article here by Ngugi wa Thiongo is that the sort of contributor you would expect?

PETER FRIEDMAN

Yes we were very lucky to get that article, in fact we would like to get some well known figures. In the future we have been promised a feature by Ali Mazrui on just a general overview of the main themes in African Arts at the moment. We're having an article by a less well known African writer Dambudzo Marechera from Zimbabwe on the state of Zimbabwe Literature at the moment. Those are the best known figures in African Arts at the moment but hopefully as the magazine gets more established we'll be able to attract more and more well known and respected figures in African Arts.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

How do you expect to work with or link up with the Commonwealth Arts Organisation?

PETER FRIEDMAN

Well that's a question that is being debated at the moment. After the recent Commonwealth Arts Conference we offered our services and we offered to come under the umbrella of the new Arts Organisation to act as their official organ. There was no formal reply at the time but I think the answer or reply to our offer will be given in the coming months. I don't know the answer to that question at the moment.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Well Peter you have talked about bringing pressure to bear on various governments of the Commonwealth by hard-hitting articles. We've just said, there is an article in your magazine by Ngugi and you are expecting similar important literary figures in the Commonwealth to contribute articles like that, now are you prepared to go the whole way to write about sensitive issues. For example, say somebody like Ngugi was sent to prison or where somebody like him would be fighting a losing battle against the government.

PETER FRIEDMAN

Yes, well we don't want to offend people just for the sake of being controversial obviously and to an extent being more or less a trade magazine and operating within a closed community you have to be a little bit careful about being controversial. But I think it's easier in a way for an arts magazine than any other magazine to talk about sensitive issues because the artist is often seen as dissident or a social critic. But I hope we won't be afraid to treat controversial issues in bold ways. Just to give you a second example backing up the Ngugi article in the first issue, we are having a rather broad wide ranging article on the subject of the censorship of the arts in Africa in the second issue so I hope that will tell it as it is. It's being written by Ahmed Rajab who works on the Index on Censorship so he is a full time researcher into the subject. And I see no reason why we'll hold back for fear of offending anyone. To give you a slightly different example, I am writing an article on the subject of the loot of empire for the second issue and the various pressure groups and calls for the return of treasures that were taken during the Imperial period and that is a tremendously sensitive issue on both sides. I hope I will be able to be as honest as I can and to tell it as I see it. I would like it to become the pre-eminent journal in the field of Commonwealth arts but to use words like mouth-piece or phrases, as I did, the official organ, before, I don't want to suggest by that that being the official organ will mean not being able to offend anybody or not being able to treat controversial or sensitive issues.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Peter Friedman thank you very much indeed and that's it from Arts and Africa this week and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.