

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we're going behind the scenes of an unusual theatre production where the customary team of actors and actresses, director and designer is augmented by a clown and a magician.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - MUSIC OF BURUNDI.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

At the back of the stage in the Nigerian National Theatre, Lagos, a man stands holding above his head an enormous yellow disk - the sun. Then the second character appears, the farmer Ogbok, and he says:

ACTUALITY

PLAY EXTRACT.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When the cast took a break from rehearsal, Anne Bolsover talked to Eyo Leadard who takes the part of the farmer, and he gave her an outline of the plot.

EYO LEADARD

Well I get up on this beautiful morning and I see the sun, greet him, say "Hi"! to him and he tries to remind me that I have a very special assignment to do on this particular day but I can't remember what it is. So he asks me to call one of my wives, the senior one, to remind me of this special thing I have to do today. I call her but she isn't of much help. She wants to get back to her sleep. So I call the second wife and she reminds me now that the whole family have the farm work to do on the farm. They have to go out to the farm, the whole family, even the dogs and do some work from sunrise to sunset. So we go to the farm and come back and then one of my sons discovers that he has lost his flute. He forgot his flute on the farm.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - FLUTE MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now anyone familiar with the writings of Chinua Achebe will probably recognize the plot as the beginning of Achebe's "The Flute", a children's story told in the manner of a Nigerian folk-tale. What happens next? Well, the younger son has a remarkable adventure when he returns through the forest in the dark to retrieve his flute. He meets spirits and monsters who reward his gentle cheerfulness with gold. The senior wife is jealous and sends her son to pretend that he's lost his flute. He, of course, is rewarded differently. The spirits of the forest can recognize greed when they see it.

Well, Achebe's story has been adapted for the stage for young and old alike by Edith Enem and this presentation in Nigeria's National Theatre is being directed by Segun Bankole. It's an ambitious production because besides the actors, the clown and the magician, there's a family of puppets. The clown, the magician, the forest spirits in their huge, grotesque masks and the two boy actors who play the sons, all these people are clearly seen at the front of the stage by the audience. But the other actors are hidden by a head-high screen across the stage, half-way back. They speak their lines as you'd expect but at the same time they're manipulating big puppets who represent their characters and who appear above the screen looking down on the rest of the action. So it isn't only a mixture of the natural and supernatural but of human beings and puppets.

And if it sounds a complex operation that's exactly what Anne Bolsover thought when she met the play's director, Segun Bankole.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Isn't it very difficult to put it all together, especially having puppets working, also having actors and actresses working as well, comedians, magicians, you know, trying to put the whole together?

SEGUN BANKOLE

Well, you have said it. We are dealing with different levels of performance. I do not know whether you like experimenting but then in this profession, it's no crime for anybody to experiment, anyway in a positive form. For us now to co-opt other levels of performances into a puppet show is not an easy task at all. You sat in here for about two hours, I guess, and you saw what we were able to go through. Here we have some professional performers. When I say professional they are trained performers. But then they were trained to perform in a particular medium, now this is a different medium for them to perform. Here now it's a dual role. They have to say lines and manipulate the puppets, it's not easy. It involves initial training, one; two, trying to understand manipulation of the puppets and three, trying hard to co-ordinate manipulating the puppets with delivering the lines.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, from my own stage experience I'd say that Segun Bankole is making heavy demands on his players. And very, very hard work, I'd say. Eyo Leadard and all the other members of the cast are having to adapt fast to these new techniques.

EYO LEADARD

The producer asked me: "What about the idea of training with puppets?" and I said: "Well o.k. it's an experience and any experience for me is o.k.". You never know, it may come in use for you in your future so I never shy away from any new thing. It's quite a new experience for me. I'm used to acting on stage, television. I'm not used to puppets as such. This is the very first time and I must say it's very taxing especially physically, you know, the arms that you use to control and move. It's very, very taxing, you know.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Do you find that takes away from the character?

EYO LEADARD

Yes. For somebody who is inexperienced like me, you know, I'm still find it difficult to adjust both to movement and the dialogue; my own imagined movement of what the puppet should do up there because I'm down here and the puppet is up there and then having to concentrate on my lines.....It's difficult but I think as time goes on, I'll adjust.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And the farmer and his two wives are not only having to adjust to the idea of working with puppets but to the effort of manipulating them above their head while they're speaking the lines. They're not small puppets either, but almost a metre tall. So the Director needs all his determination and enthusiasm to lead his team.

SEGUN BANKOLE

It needs a large degree of concentration, hard work and, of course, dedication. It's not easy. I guess some of them have pains in their arms and so on now. I have to get a specialist to massage their arms for them. It's not easy. (Laughs).

ANNE BOLSOVER

As a director, how are you talking to the actors? How are you telling them to bring a dead puppet, a dead kind of object to life?

SEGUN BANKOLE

Hmm. Well they have to make these puppets become lively characters. The puppets now have to live. How do they do that? How do they achieve that? They as performers, as actors and actresses now have to imagine, assume they are the puppets up there, they see themselves as puppets up there although they are the people manipulating the puppets. They have to assume that the puppets are the performers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A great deal of the responsibility lies with the creator of all the puppets and the masks, Kenneth Enem, who's gained immense experience as co-Director of the Puppet Workshop in the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan. He showed Anne Bolsover the puppets with their movable arms and legs and heads. They're not manipulated from above, dangling on strings or wires, but from below which is why the actors' arms ache with fatigue. They hold the puppets above their heads so that the puppets are in full view of the audience, and they move the rods that are attached to the legs and shoulder bars of the puppets up and down from behind to make them lifelike.

Now for the other performers in "The Flute". Remember, the play is being put on for children as well as adults so they in particular, appreciate the clown when he comes on to link the scenes with his clowning, and it's quite obvious that Chief Mazi Prempeh relishes his role.

CHIEF MAZI PREMPEH

As a comedian I hope that I'm going to keep my audience very happy and this will also expose me to my numerous fans for them to see other aspects of my act because I've been taking parts in straight plays, straightforward plays and I believe that in this very play, "The Flute" in which I'm going to play the clown, will enable them to enjoy more of my own part.

ANNE BOLSOVER

But how does your part as the clown fit into the whole play, "The Flute" with the puppets and with the actors and everything?

CHIEF MAZI PREMPEH

Yes, well, the clown has got a message. You see his message is going to co-ordinate the puppets and all the actors there to the audience so he is going to be the centre of attraction.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Now how are you going to do that?

CHIEF MAZI PREMPEH

Well, I'm expected to meet a young magician. I have a part to play with him. The young magician's name is Young Pela, I have an act to perform with him. Again I have a different act to perform in the play, reflecting the message already from the puppets to the audience and so I come in, in between the plays to display my act.

ANNE BOLSOVER

So basically, you're there to hold the play together, to bring the actors and puppets together and also to make people laugh?

CHIEF MAZI PREMPEH

Yes, yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

As Chief Mazi Prempeh has said, some of his scenes are played with the magician, Young Pela. Pela has the secondary role of a forest spirit but it's playing the magician that comes most naturally to him.

YOUNG PELA

Well my father is a magician by profession and I was born in magic, I believe. I'll be a magician for ever.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Was it very difficult to learn?

YOUNG PELA

Very, very difficult. Our audience believe it's just a play, they take it lightly but we magicians we know all we undergo before we become professional. So magic is not as easy as people take it to be.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Do you like acting in plays like this with other actors and actresses or would you rather perform a one-man show as a magician?

YOUNG PELA

Ah I love to perform as a one man show as well as I love to perform with actors and actresses.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How do you feel about acting with puppets?

YOUNG PELA

Well, this is going to be my first experience and I believe it should be nice. The things we have undergone during rehearsals, you know, I love it.

ANNE BOLSOVER

But do you feel strange when you're talking to a dead object?

YOUNG PELA

No. I won't because we magicians, we deal with spirits and I don't think they will frighten me. I have been able to talk with spirits before. It's just going to be fun.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - FLUTE MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The director and some of the cast of the production at the Nigerian National Theatre of Chinua Achebe's tale, "The Flute".

Let me remind you that there'll be more of the arts of Africa next week at the same time, while for now it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey, goodbye.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - FLUTE MUSIC.