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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of Arts and Africa. You may remember that last week we announced our Arts and Africa Poetry Award, well we'll be giving you the details again at the end of the programme, so if you missed them last week do get pen and paper ready so that you can take them down. Now this week we stay with poetry and look at the work of the South Africa writer Sipho Sepamla. Sipho Sepamla was born in 1932 and has managed, despite the difficulties that confront writers in South Africa, to spend his life in Johannesburg where he is presently working in an Artists' Centre called the "Federated Union of Black Arts". His last collection of poems published in 1977 "The Soweto I Love" was highly praised for its vivid portrayal of the anger that led to the explosion in the black townships in the Johannesburg area. Well Sipho Sepamla is currently visiting London and is here in the studio with me. Welcome Sipho you are now here in Britain, is it anything to do with the Federated Union of Black Arts?

SIPHO SEPAMLA

Well yes and no. This visit is five years overdue. I was first invited to Britain by the LAMDA Trust of whom Janet Susman and Robert Lauder are members but because of my passport problems I couldn't take up this offer until last year when I got another invitation to go to Frankfurt to the Book Fair and, of course, the German Government put some pressure on South Africa and this way I was able to get a passport which of course is valid just for a bloody year. Anyway I am taking advantage of that opportunity and I've decided I must extend the original intention of the invitation. Originally I was supposed to come to London to see the theatres in London, the cinemas and, of course, to visit drama schools. But because I worked for F.U.B.A., which, itself, is engaged in work dealing with music, drama, dance, fine arts and creative writing, I have now decided to extend my visit here to encompass all other artistic activities and I have been visiting places like the Africa Centre, ICA, the Arts Council and others.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How is it that there's so much, such an outburst of poetic energy in South Africa? Was it all started by the events in Soweto would you say?

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SIPHO SEPAMLA

No, you know, we normally call the Fifties our golden cultural age because that's when writing was at its best in South Africa. There was a lull in the Sixties until towards the end of the Sixties when Mtshali's book was published 'Sounds of a Cow Hide' and thereafter, of course, things began moving up and we must understand that the other thing that gave impetus to the new writing was the fact that Black Consciousness which was a concept that was articulated in America, found its way into South Africa and gave a new direction a new motivation to new writers. This, of course, resulted in the spate of new writing. I happened to have been involved in fine arts at the time as promoter of exhibitions and I do know that there was, again in the field of fine arts, a lot of work that was produced by artists so there was a kind of a cultural revival in the early Seventies and this was given greater impetus by the 1976 riots; so it is a thing that's been steadily coming on its own.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well the most outstanding literary output has been of poetry, as I have just mentioned.

SIPHO SEPAMLA

That's true.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is there any reason why it should have been poetry rather than other forms of literature?

SIPHO SEPAMLA

That's a very interesting question because before the Seventies there was a lot of prose writing. I think there are several reasons to account for this. Poetry is, of course, immediate. You know in a very short space of time you're able to produce a complete statement. A poem's a thing you are not able to do with prose writing. Of course there is the question of language. The standard of English has gone down in South Africa for various reasons, one of which has to do with the educational system that there is obtaining in the country. Traditionally black people in South Africa followed English but the powers, that be as you might know were not always well disposed to English because they were themselves not English-speaking peoples. So they saw to it, in my opinion, that the standard of English would go down and this meant that the young writers did not have a kind of a tradition in language. They had to find a language and English being a foreign language, they struggled to use it you see and their vocabulary was limited and, therefore, they would try to use a medium which did not require many words. This is how I sort of see it and, of course, I would say the fact that there was this banning of works meant people had to be groping and you'd find something that is written and something that you could read very quickly, something that could become your model was a thing that you could read very quickly and poetry, therefore, especially poetry by black American writers was something that our young chaps emulated.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it fair to describe this kind of poetry such as you and others have written in the passed few years as protest poetry, or is that not a superficial description of it?

SIPHO SEPAMLE

Well one never goes into such things Alex but I do know that chaps that are academically inclined have a way of saying: "Protest poetry stopped at this period and now we're having a so-called militant or revolutionary poetry". Of course they are able to say that whereas in the past the black writer addressed himself to his so-called oppressor. Today people no longer do that kind of thing. You know we're at a stage where we tell the white men where to get off and we're doing a little more than just protesting, you see, so perhaps there's a case for saying ours is no longer protest poetry, it's a little more than that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well of course the most popular of your poems has been "Like a Hippo" which is often quoted.

SIPHO SEPAMLA

Oh, I didn't know this!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well it's very well known and very popular because it's so vivid, describing this lorry, this car which is destroying people.

SIPHO SEPAMLA

Yes, now a very interesting thing about that, Alex is that I saw a hippo for the first time in 1976, whereas I am told this terrible vehicle came into being around 1917, you see. So well, I mean it knocked me between the eyes when I first saw it, you know, and I then got home and I wrote about it, you know, because it reminded me very much of that other hippo.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well can I ask you about the political situation very briefly. How influential has been your poetry, your literature, among the blacks and among the whites in South Africa, within the country?

SIPHO SEPAMLA

I don't know if I can answer that one in so far as my own work is concerned, quite honestly I don't think I could make a claim there. But I do know that the poetry that is written by young people which is really more violent, more revolutionary than anything that some of us have attempted to do, this one makes white people sit up. I have attended readings, you know, where young chaps have read their works and they have frightened even me who's one of them, you know, and I just wondered how the other people were receiving the message. You know, people like them have stopped just saying, "Oh please, oh please" you know, I mean they just say: "You go to hell". You know that's the attitude that the young writer is adopting now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How do you get such poetry circulated within the country?

SIPHO SEPAMLA

Well because of some problems that we have like you know, publishing like bannings, young chaps have taken to the idea of reciting their poetry. They dramatise their poetry you know in other words it's not only just reciting a piece of artistic work you know, but it is also a way of presenting entertainment to an audience. This is how they do it, they do it to their accompaniment of music, you see, which, of course, is something that I have not started doing but the younger chaps are doing it that way.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you've been writing some poetry of late, have you got some examples here?

SIPHO SEPAMLA

Well I have one of these two poems that have just been published in the recent issue of Staff Rider and the one I'd like to read is entitled "Night Falls".

POETRY - NIGHT FALLS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's very angry and very determined.

SIPHO SEPAMLA

I've heard people say that my poetry has become a little more angry, I don't think it is surprising. At times as such one must just feed on anger.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Would you say that this new kind of poetry that you're writing is very different from the group of poetry you have in "The Soweto I love" or is it the same?

SIPHO SEPAMLA

It's definitely the same, it definitely is the same I think, only a little more angry, yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Sipho Sepamla thank you very much indeed. We hope that your visit to cultural centres and theatres in Britain will be useful for your work and that of the Federated Union of Black Arts in South Africa when you get back. We'll incidentally be hearing more about the Union and attempts to support its work here in Britain in a future edition of Arts and Africa. For the moment however we stay with poetry and a reminder of the details of our Arts and Africa Poetry Award.

DAVID SWEETMAN

The BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award for 1981. Awards of two hundred pounds, one hundred pounds, fifty pounds and major book prizes will be made for poems in the English language. The judges will be the leading South African poet Dennis Brutus, the young Malawian writer, Jack Mapanje and poet and literary critic, Angus Calder. The judges will be looking for originality and imagination and entries of maximum five poems should be received by the BBC, London on or before Saturday October the 31st 1981. The judges decision will be announced on the Arts and Africa programme broadcast on Sunday December 6th 1981. Further details and entry forms are available from BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award, Bush House, London.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And I'll remind you again of those details. The address to write to is: BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award, Bush House, London. And that's it, we'll be back again next week and this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.