



Script Service for 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. Regular listeners will know that Florence Akst is one of the producers of our programme. She has recently been on a visit to Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. She was there primarily to look at the development projects and at the aid projects for refugees. But, of course, she was also on the lookout for interesting events in the arts and I'm happy to say that while she was in Eritrea, she managed to go to the theatre. I asked Florence how this happened.

FLORENCE AKST

By chance. It was entirely unexpected. I had flown from Asmara, the capital of Eritrea to the coast to Massawa, a delightful old Arabic-looking town. While we were moving round it and I was being shown it, I saw a man with a loudhailer with a group of children round him. I wondered what he was shouting through the loudhailer. "Oh, there's going to be a theatre performance tonight at the new cinema that has just been rebuilt, it was only opened yesterday". That was, of course, a great temptation so I asked my companions whether we could go and at nine o'clock in the evening we set off for the theatre, a very fine building with the auditorium open and a closed stage. There were lots of facilities and there was a company from Addis Ababa touring with a play called: "The Mirror". It was a political play. We sat and watched the gradual unfolding of a political situation that had apparently been very common in the workers kebeles, the communities of workers particularly in the capital Addis Ababa about three or four years ago. This was the days of the red and white terror when people were executed by unknown gunmen during the night and this happened to one or two of the characters in the play. There was a lot of political debate. It wasn't full of action, there was a little action, a little background music but lots of set speeches and to my surprise rather, the audience joined in enormously.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, of course, Florence those days of red and white terror are gone so I suppose the subject is not as touchy as it would have been at the time. Now why was this play put on? Was it stating any political point or was it just for pure entertainment?

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FLORENCE AKST

Oh no it was very much to the point. The theatre is subsidised and supported by the State nowadays and most of the plays put on, I learnt, were ones that have a message. And the message of this play is one, that the days of violence are. Also it is showing people who are organised throughout the country in communities of peasants or workers, that they should control their groups, that they should elect and get rid of people who are corrupt. It also is a way of unifying the country so that various parts of the country can see what happens elsewhere. This was an Addis Ababa situation being shown in a quite different situation in Massawa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hmm. How many theatres did you find in Addis?

FLORENCE AKST

There are two theatres. Quite different in scope. One of them, the oldest one called the Hager Fiker which was this company on tour and has run this play in Addis Ababa for a year to packed houses, that's the older of the two and was founded forty years ago. The theatre, that is straight plays are not a traditional Ethiopian art form, they arrived in the country about fifty years ago and the Hager Fiker was set up soon after. That's very much a popular theatre. And right from the beginning it's attracted what's called the market audience, ordinary people in the city who like entertainment and go along there. But it's also always had some sort of political attitude, not necessarily to do with the government. For instance when it first started, it put on plays and entertainment that encouraged local people to set up in competition with the ex-patriate traders so that economically they were learning how to run businesses. Now it is very much one way of teaching the brand of socialism that the government is implementing. It's very broad acting, it goes for laughs. Whereas the National Theatre which is twenty five years old is much more cosmopolitan, puts on foreign plays. It had just been putting on a performance of the famous Russian play, "The Inspector General".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Who takes part in these plays and what sort of standard are they? Are they professionals or are they just amateurs?

FLORENCE AKST

The standard I saw there varied from perfectly acceptable acting to extremely fine acting. They are now paid by the State, they have salaries, whether they're in a production or not and they also have special State pensions which I think shows the way forward for actors in other countries perhaps.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Florence Akst talking about theatre in Ethiopia today.

And now to news of a writer who although in his late 60's can be said to be having a new lease of life. The South African author, Modikwe Dikobi, is best known for his novel, "The Morabi Dance" but outside of a small circle of admirers, he is not very well known as a personality. He spent most of his working life in Johannesburg but decided that he needed to retire from the squalor and bustle of township life to the country where he would have space and quiet to write. He now lives in Seabe in Bophutatswana, one of the so-called homelands within South Africa. Whatever we may think of Bophutatswana, the space and quiet have certainly worked for Modikwe Dikobi who is about to have a new collection of short stories and a biography published by Raven Press. Gill Garb recently went to see Modikwe and I talked to her on her return. As we know so little about Modikwe I was fascinated to know just what he looked like.

GILL GARB

Well Modikwe is a very unprepossessing man in his late sixties. He is a very slight man and he's actually living a very simple life at the moment. He retired about five years ago and it was this that motivated him to go back to the country. He felt that to stay in a city as a retired man living on a pension with a wife and child was very difficult because, I am sure you know, the South African labour migration situation, people don't actually own their own homes in the city most of the time unless under very unusual circumstances. Modikwe was paying rent like most black Africans and his family did actually own a plot of land in the country and he felt that he could be thrown out of where he was living at any time and it would be a much more sensible idea to retire back to the country. He was actually working for the Johannesburg Municipality in their pay office, checking people in and out of the various jobs, and he'd been there for a very long time. He said that he had always been a bookworm even though he had had no formal education. He suddenly decided that if all these people could write such good stories (he was fascinated by "Uncle Tom's Cabin", he said) why could he not write his own story and thought that he would try. He did say that he thought English a very difficult language initially because he'd never been schooled in English and he found the medium difficult.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What actually is he concerned with in this book? Is it a comment on social life; on blacks as a whole?

GILL GARB

I think "The Morabi Dance" basically centres around the conflict between traditional life and urban life. What he is trying to do is to say that the young people of today in the cities, have their own problems. City life is no worse really than country life but because of the South African political situation blacks are put into incredibly difficult situations. And the clash of the two cultures is a very potent or difficult one because it's very hard for people to actually find enough faith both physically and spiritually to develop in any way and to create their own urban culture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now he's lived most of his life in the city. Now he's back in the homelands, tired or forced I don't know, what does he feel about the homeland situation? The whole system of homelands?

GILL GARB

I think he found going back to the country unexpectedly difficult. When I talked to him about it he spent a lot of time talking to me about how hard it had been to leave the city because he felt very much a city person. And I don't think he'd expected it to be quite so hard. He found people in the country very unpoliticized. The pace of life in the country was very slow, the bureaucracy was incredibly irritating and the people didn't accept him any more. They were suspicious of his city ways, they were suspicious of the fact that he said he could write. He's different from them in the fact that he had a lot of books in his house which was immediately something to be suspicious about. He lives in a very simple house on a small plot of land. He works really as a subsistence farmer and he grows all his own vegetables, all his own maize and that's really all he lives on because he lives on a pension of 35 rand a month which is equivalent to £15 or something and without the food that he actually grows, they could barely survive. He suggested to me that the first six months that he came back to the country, he was in a kind of culture shock and that he couldn't write. He says when he thinks to the first six to nine months back in the countryside, it's a blank to him. He has been writing very prolifically since then. He writes every night, works in the fields during the day which is remarkable for a man of sixty eight. I mean he puts in an eighteen hour day. He had, in fact, written a sequel to "The Morabi Dance" with the characters carrying on their lives, what happens to them afterwards. In fact, the main character, George, from the book, he is actually echoed in his own life. George goes back to the country and George in the sequel, he was saying, found it difficult to go back to the countryside as Dikobi himself. Dikobi grew up in Doornfontein in the very area that he is describing where Martha and George meet and where Martha and her family live in the 'Molefe Yard' which is the way people lived in Doornfontein in those days and in most black settlements or townships in Johannesburg today. Very crowded accommodation, rooms sort of four by five feet, with twenty people crammed into a small yard. When I talked to him about his feelings about politics in South Africa, he suggested that he'd first been politicised when he used to go to open-air meetings as a very young man, as a teenager, when he was in Sofia Town and how amazed he was when after a meeting out of a hundred people only two hadn't been in jail at some time in their life. A few years later he, himself, was arrested for a petty offence either not carrying a pass or not paying a poll tax. Also, a rather amusing incident, he told me how he felt, not that he would really come down on what town did to women but his first wife came from the

country and he felt that town really corrupted her and she left him after a few years, corrupted by town ways. In several characters a woman character in the book comes from the country to find her husband in the city and soon is corrupted and leaves her husband and sets up a beer hall. She is, in fact, the lady who sets up "The Morabi Dance" hall, the title of the book. In another way that's why he left to go the country to take his wife back to a more rural environment where she wasn't going to be corrupted by the influence of the town.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Gill Garb talking there about the South African writer, Modikwe Dikobi. And now here's more news of the Arts and Africa Poetry Award.

DAVID SWEETMAN

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 Dennis Brutus, Jack Mapanje and Angus Calder. Further details and entry forms are available from BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award, Bush House, London.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And I'll just give you that address again. That's BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award, Bush House, London. And that's it for this week and as we began with Ethiopia, let's end with a little traditional Ethiopian music, an Amhara Battle Song, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.