

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa and a look at another aspect of an art form that is becoming increasingly important to people all over the continent - film making. We've heard recently from Lionel Ngakane about the increasing interest in serious cinema in English-speaking Africa, a change from the days when art films were only made in Francophone countries like Senegal. But despite these new moves in countries like Ghana and Nigeria, the only true indigenous cinema creating films at all levels, both popular as well as artistic, is in North Africa and the centre for this is Egypt. Cairo is the Hollywood of this industry turning out everything from musicals to epics, from war films to domestic comedies. And like Hollywood the driving force behind such film making is commercial. But Egypt also has serious film makers concerned about the quality of their art and determined to improve the content of film making at all levels. Under the patronage of the late President Nasser, the High School for Film Making was created as part of the Academy of Arts in Cairo and there are now future cineastes studying there from North African countries Tunisia and Algeria and also from Sudan. Suzy Benghiat has recently returned from a visit to the High School in Cairo and is here to report.

SUZY BENGHIAT

As soon as I got there I knew I was in the middle of the examination period. Clusters of anxious students pacing up and down the corridors, stopping for an animated discussion, then rushing towards a door to greet a colleague coming out smiling or looking miserable....

The examinations, like the courses, cover all the aspects of film making(except acting), direction, photography, continuity and script writing. The undergraduates spend four years doing theoretical and some practical work. For their final graduation examination, they have to produce a film with the students each acting in the field they have chosen. Some will go on to take a masters degree. That takes about ten years. In spite of the very tense examination atmosphere, I was made most welcome, in the traditional Egyptian manner, when I talked to the students and their new director, the film maker Dr. Hesham Abdul Nasser, a doctor in the film studies of the University of California. Dr. Abdul Nasser was appointed a few months ago, and I thought that the best way to find out about his plans for his school was to talk first about him as a film maker.

DR. ABDUL NASSER

After ten years in the States everybody said: "Here comes the American cowboy; you know, he went to the States very young, twenty or twenty-one years old, and he has been completely Americanised, and he will give us a typical imitation of the American films". So I made a more profound film about the seamier side of Egyptian life, a more Egyptian film than those done by Egyptian film makers, who didn't go as far as twenty miles out of Cairo. But you see that doesn't mean that I didn't make any use of my studies. I used the techniques and all that I had studied in film language in giving content, an Egyptian content, a purely Egyptian subject that's analysing the social contradictions in my country.

SUZY BENGHIAT

Does this mean then that you apply also this experience in your teaching?

DR. ABDUL NASSER

I urge the students to challenge what I say, to do something more creative, different. I evaluate the student by how different he is from everybody else, especially his professors. In the beginning I found resistance. They are used to a very solid, dogmatic way of teaching. They are under the tradition that the teacher is half-god or something like that, and that they have to memorise what he says. And here comes a crazy guy who tells them "Don't believe everything; you have to dig in; you have to suspect; you have to use your mind; you have to research freely, and the more free your research is and different from what I say, the more you are valued.

SUZY BENGHIAT

Dr. Hesham Abdul Nasser explaining how he encourages his students to be independent. Then we went on to talk about his new post and the difficulties he's encountering.

DR. ABDUL NASSER

The competition is getting higher because the students are graduating in bigger numbers and the market needs cannot absorb all of them. That, I think, was the defect in our institute. So we are trying, next year, to limit the amount of students we admit. We used to take one hundred students, for instance for all majors, so it came out that twenty or thirty directors graduated each year, which is so incredible. So we will be getting back next year, God willing, to five as a maximum. But we will be offering more on the practical side rather than the theoretical side. And that lead me to one of the difficulties that you are asking about. We didn't have, until now, enough equipment. We don't have, for instance, - which is the major problem, I think, - a film archive, a film library. That is so, so shameful. I can see your face. (Laughs).

The more active professors try their best. I go to the companies, the representatives of Warners and Paramount and so on and so forth, and to the T.V. companies, begging for films because I have to teach them to the students. And we do succeed, but not in the way it should be. So we have to have a film archive as top priority.

SUZY BENGHIAT

Can you describe the work of your most promising student this year?

DR. ABDUL NASSER

I think every year we have at least five or six brilliant students who slip in somehow to the institute, and they are very promising, very promising. I see one or two who will graduate this year after they have finished their projects, who are very independent thinking, and who have very free and cinematic vision, and that's great, I love that really, and I think they will overcome us; we will be old fashioned.

SUZY BENGHIAT

The enthusiastic Dr. Hesham Abdul Nasser. I then met a twenty-two-year-old first year student. She is Hanem Chouhani, who, after graduating in mass communication studies knows exactly what she wants.

HANEM CHOUHANI

I hope to work as a director. You can't find any Egyptian woman working as a director except maybe in T.V. or something like that, but there are no women movie directors.

SUZY BENGHIAT

But I have noticed that there are quite a lot of students here, women students.

HANEM CHOUHANI

Yes but nearly all of them work as assistants: they never work as directors fully responsible for the film, maybe because most producers just think that a woman cannot take the responsibility of a lot of money and a whole film. As an assistant yes, but as a director, not yet. I think by the time I have finished at the institute, maybe there will be hope for me to be a director.

SUZY BENGHIAT

What kind of film would you like to make?

HANEM CHOUHANI

I am thinking of really Egyptian films because, as I see it now, the Egyptian movies are not so close to the Egyptian life. If you look at the houses, in the film, the decor around, how the people speak, this is not Egyptian. What I am thinking of is doing an Egyptian film by an Egyptian director with an Egyptian point of view.

SUZY BENGHIAT

You said you've only been one year at this school. What were your expectations of the school and were you disappointed or on the other hand, pleasantly surprised? You can be very frank. Your director told me that he encourages frankness.

HANEM CHOUHANI

Okay, then let me be frank. The thing is that you don't practise, it's only study and papers.

SUZY BENGHIAT

Too theoretical?

HANEM CHOUHANI

Yes, very theoretical. We practise only in the fourth year, which I think is too late. We should practise before then. But I think the rest is good. We have, of course, very good professors; there are excellent one, while I think the others are trying to be. I am only still a student, so I can't express a full opinion about it because I don't know everything about the movies. I am trying to know but frankly speaking this is my opinion about the school.

SUZY BENGHIAT

Hanem Chouhani. Another student is the Sudanese Amin Mohamed who is much older since he already has a career behind him.

AMIN MOHAMED

I was working in the radio field. I am the head of the drama section in Radio Omdnoman and I also write for the T.V. So they sent me to study scenario also. Really I find myself in a new field, and a very amusing field, and I love it very much and I think I can do great things when I go back to my country.

SUZY BENGHIAT

What do you think is the most important thing that the school in Cairo gives you?

AMIN MOHAMED

They showed me how to use my imagination, how to make it work.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - DAUGHTER OF THE CITY.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well there are not many films that one can imagine without music. This tune, called "Daughter of the City", is from an Egyptian one, and it rounds off Suzy Benghiat's report on the High School for Film making in Cairo.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - DAUGHTER OF THE CITY,

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now a reminder of our Poetry Award.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

As you may have heard by now Arts and Africa is offering awards totalling £350 for poems in the English language. The first prize is £200, the second £100 and the third £50. There will also be book prizes for the best runners-up. Our judges are, themselves, poets. They are Dennis Brutus from South Africa, the young Malawian Jack Mapanje, and the English poet and critic Angus Calder. They will be looking for a high degree of craftsmanship and originality. We are already beginning to receive poems and they show a promising standard, but there is still plenty of time for you to send for your entry forms. Full details about the award and the entry forms can be obtained by writing to the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award, Bush House, London. And that's it for Arts and Africa for this week. We leave you with more film music from Egypt. Until the same time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.