

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to everyone from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And in today's Arts and Africa we have news and opinion, fact and fiction - including a brand new novel.

For once in a way we're going to begin the programme with a letter sent in by a listener, in fact, Moses T. Kainwo of Segbwena, Sierra Leone who signs himself as "a regular listener". Now, the question Moses Kainwo poses set me thinking and I've invited Arts and Africa producer David Sweetman to come along and discuss the matter with me. And this is the question: What is the difference between rhyming and poetry? Now David, your first volume of poems "Looking into the Deep End" was published this year. Did you have any rhyming poems in it?

DAVID SWEETMAN

One or two but not many, Alex, because there are not many rhymes in English anyway. Many of them are half-rhymes and most of the rhymes that we do have, have been used so often before, not only in poetry but also in songs particularly pop songs, that if you try to work with true rhyme you end up with something along the lines of "the moon and June" and "Croon a tune" sort of thing and it's a cliché at that point. So many poets today try to avoid true rhyme.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, can you have poetry without rhyme and can you have something which is a rhyme and isn't poetry?

DAVID SWEETMAN

Oh yes, taking the last one first you can have things that do rhyme, but you'd hardly want to call them poetry because they are so childish. I was thinking of something like this. It's from a poem called "Trees" and it says:

Poems are made by fools like me
But only God can make a tree.

I mean, you really wouldn't call that a poem at all, would you?

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But it certainly rhymes. Can you have poetry without rhymes? Certainly. There is Free Verse which is the most used of the modern forms of writing poetry or there's poetry that has a sort of subtle half-rhyme in it, words that are nearly sounding the same and very often that can be the most effective, because half-rhyme has a sort of haunting quality. Full rhyme has a rather blunt, full-stop quality to it if you are not careful.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well rhyme plays a very useful part in poetry. It's a sort of aid to memory. It also gives a rhythmic pattern to a poem.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Yes it does, and I think this accounts in some ways for its popularity. You see, very often in Africa poetry that's published in newspapers sent in by ordinary folk and if its poetry in English it's nearly always in very simple rhyme. I think that's because people know that they've got something to latch onto. But do you know most modern African writers have not chosen to write with rhyme? They use effects which try and recreate some of the feeling of being in Africa - one thinks of David Rubadiri's poem about a storm.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well David, I've got right in front of me that poem, "An African Thunderstorm", it goes like this.

EXTRACT FROM "AN AFRICAN THUNDERSTORM"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You have the vivid image of the storm.....

DAVID SWEETMAN

You feel the rhythm of the storm building up, absolutely. But I must say that I think there is a risk in writing free verse for people who haven't tried anything else. It can become very dull and empty. I see a lot of writing coming from many, many countries in English and sometimes you find it's a little bit spare in what it has in it, and most of the great writers of free verse have practised writing very strict forms of verse as well to see what they could do with them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

To finish this off, Moses Kainwo, you asked if there was any modern poet whom you would recommend for copying by an aspiring poet. I think the best thing to do when you are trying to be creative is not to try to copy anybody. You must learn from people, certainly, learn whatever you can from the best poets, but don't try to copy.....

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DAVID SWEETMAN

Or copy a lot of people! That's the best thing to do. (Laughter)
Don't copy one person, then you'll have a style of your own by
the time you've finished.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, that's right. Now David, at this point can I ask you what the
response has been for the Poetry Award?

DAVID SWEETMAN

It's been quite stunning really, because the number of poems,
individual poems, is nudging the thousand mark. It's quite a stunning
number, of course a lot of people have sent in many poems.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And what is the closing date again?

DAVID SWEETMAN

It's the 31st October.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well listeners there you are. And the novel I mentioned at the
beginning comes from Botswana. It's a first novel by Andrew Sesinyi
the news assignment editor of the Botswana Press Agency. Here he is
reading a passage about the rural boyhood of the book's hero, Fule.

EXTRACT FROM "LOVE ON THE ROCKS"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The story about Fule and his girl friend Moradi is to be published
by Macmillan Education Books in their Pacemaker series and it's
called "Love on the Rocks" - at least, that's what it's called now -
as Andrew Sesinyi told Jean Rowton, he had given the novel another
title to begin with.

ANDREW SESINYI

I chose the title "The Duel Role", but you see, would somebody popping
into the book shop, would he or she know exactly what he is talking
about? It's not catchy, it's not attracting the reader to look at
the novel, so it must be catchy, so that everybody wants to say:
"Hey, what's this thing 'Love on the Rocks' what does it mean?"
And there you are, you are reading the book.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

We've already met the chief character, Pule, as a young herdsman in the Botswana countryside. Later, to escape the beatings he suffered from his uncle he goes off to the capital Gaborone, and meets, for the first time, western ideas and customs. He also meets and falls in love with Moradi who's from an entirely different background. She's the daughter of a diplomat. She's westernised. The romance doesn't obscure the difficulties Pule faces in being true to his past, and to his future happiness.

ANDREW SESINYI

I'm bringing the traditionalist, the ardent traditionalist into the picture and I'm trying to bring some clash even at that level, say, the ardent traditionalist as against the so-called elitist group, let me say, which is Moradi's parents. Within the two set-ups, the traditional set-up and the modern set-up, if you take them on the basis that they must be perfect, they must remain as they are, then you are going into extremes and I'm trying to say there must be a compromise. I was avoiding being a prophet of doom.

JEAN ROWTON

When you come to the characters and the situation, that, too, did seem to reflect the present day Botswana very much. For instance, you talk about refugees and also about Uncle Boet who used to work in the mines. Do you base any of your characters on real people?

ANDREW SESINYI

Well, this is a work of fiction and any resemblance to any living character, of course, will be by pure coincidence. But when it comes to Uncle Boet, I can, in fact, confidentially say that, yes there is a gentleman, and it is very difficult to locate him, but I've tried to use this person.

JEAN ROWTON

Perhaps you could just read a little bit about the character, the development of Uncle Boet.

EXTRACT FROM "LOVE ON THE ROCKS"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Andrew Sesinyi, describing Uncle Boet, a character from his novel, "Love on the Rocks", about to be published by Macmillan Education Limited in their Pacesetter series, price 90 pence in the United Kingdom.

Now not long ago, the Theatre Association of Zambia held its twenty-ninth Annual Drama Festival. The Festival is largely held in the towns that make up the copperbelt and in colonial times the contesting amateur dramatic companies were for expatriates working in the mines

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and industry of the area. Nowadays, however even if some of the plays performed are European in origin, the members are a mixture of people with a high proportion of Zambians taking part. But this year, at any rate, the adjudicator was British - Michael Smee of the British Guild of Drama Adjudicators - and he came along to the Arts and Africa studio the other day to tell me something of what he found at the Festival.

MICHAEL SMEE

Well I'm presented with the programme of the Festival, which was 12 plays, in separate towns, and eight school or student entries. And my task was to go round to each separate town, see the play, judge it, mark it, and then select five finalists from the adult section and invite them to a central place, this year, Lusaka, for a Festival Week. The five finalists play their play one after the other and then from that second final performance, so to speak, I was required to select the best production and also to nominate a best actor, best actress, best stage presentation, best this and best that.....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Michael, what was the winning play?

MICHAEL SMEE

Well it was the Athol Fugard play from South Africa about poor whites called "People are Living There". The company that played it did have a really tremendous performance from the leading woman. But they also had excellent back-up from the other three people in the cast and they had a brilliantly atmospheric set with marvellous lighting.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Theatre Association. Yes, it does. It encourages entries from schools, and in the student section there were eight entries and they were all, except one, Zambian or African plays. The one exception was a biblical entry from a Convent school called "Jezebel", with, once again an extraordinary performance from a very powerful young Zambian girl in the part of Jezebel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Who was the brilliant girl who performed the part of Jezebel?

MICHAEL SMEE

Well, she was a very striking young woman who, I think, has won this prize before, or something like it, and very apt in the part, with a big voice called Chandiwah Mosuka (phon).

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how about the story of the "Elephant Man" which seems to have been striking?

MICHAEL SMEE

Well aside from the best production prize there's always, of course, a prize for the best actor, and it would be perfectly normal to expect that prize to be found amongst the finalists. In fact, it wasn't and I think many of the entrants were surprised, not to say disappointed, by this because of course, since the play was not among the finalists most of the people at the last week's final showing hadn't seen it, didn't know what it was about, didn't know who the Elephant Man was, probably didn't know the play. When I had to say the best actor was the man who played the Elephant Man, Jack Chansa, in fact, there was a slight hush. But there was absolutely no doubt in my mind, and there was also no doubt, I was very happy to discover, no doubt in the minds of both Africans and expatriates who'd seen it there in Kitwe.

The Elephant Man is an extraordinary play, it's about an extraordinary situation of a hideously deformed man, a real story, a documentary story, what actually happened in Britain in the 1880's of a man rescued from a snow-ground who was taken into a London hospital and looked after and finally died of his deformity. But in the play the actor simply has to convey his deformity by twisting his body and his face. This actor did something more than that. This man conveyed the loneliness and desperation of spirit of the Elephant Man in the most extraordinary way. I think I can say I have very seldom been so moved in the theatre, certainly in the amateur theatre.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Michael Smees back from Zambia. And that gives me a cue for our closing music - that Zambian evergreen by Alick Nkhata, "Shalapo Nomba Naya". Until Arts and Africa next week it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye.

MUSIC: "SHALAPO NOMBA NAYA" - ALICK NKHATA