

Arts and Africa

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409

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying welcome to Arts and Africa. It must be about time for another discussion and today we're turning to Zambia to provide us with the subject. It's a familiar one: Is art created primarily for the satisfaction of the creator, the artist, or for the enlightenment of the community? Zambia has a variation on this world-wide theme.

Up in the north of the country the rich deposits of copper in what's now called the Copperbelt brought in large numbers of Europeans, largely British, to set up mining and associated industries. There are still many expatriate workers and over the years they've imported many items from their homeland including the popular British pastime of amateur theatre. It's taken root and in the Copperbelt, as like much else, been largely Zambianised though its Theatre Association of Zambia still contains many ex-patriate members, especially on its committee.

Now the Zambian National Theatre Association is based on the capital, Lusaka, to the south and though several of its leading lights have gone abroad for their drama training it looks on theatre as an expression of Zambian aspirations.

KAGWE KASOMA

We are trying to develop a play that is going to hammer a message into the minds of the people, to tell them about their plight in life, the disease, poverty, ignorance and then they debate those things and how to go about changing their life for the better.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's very much the point of view of the Zambian National Theatre Association, ZANTA, expressed by one of its members, Kagwe Kasoma, who's also Dean of Students at the University of Zambia.

T.C. Chanda's a playwright who's several successful plays to his credit. One, with the arresting title of "Scandalous", has recently been playing to full houses on the Copperbelt with audiences made up of both Zambians and ex-patriates. T.C. Chanda, T.C., as he's widely called, writes plays, like "Scandalous" that ZANTA strongly disapprove of, but he, too, believes that as a dramatist he has a social responsibility.

T.C. CHANDA

What I'm interested in, really, is the community be they relationships between sexes, relationships between beliefs and so forth. But what I'm interested in generally is the community. What I feel about drama is that it should be all for improvement, improving whatever aspect of life one wants to improve. As a consequence I enjoy doing light plays because, one, you promote the easing of tensions. I mean if you got a bloke with a few problems, sat him in a theatre and he is laughing himself to death, he forgets about all his problems for at least for that particular moment in the day. You have refreshed his mind. When he leaves he will be reflecting on what he has watched. If he enjoyed it he will be reflecting on it, if it was a bore he will, of course, go back to his miserable times. But I feel we should be providing an activity where people can get from it all and if in the process of getting people from it all you manage to get them to think about how to improve society, then I think I'm achieving something in drama. (Laughs) That is, I suppose, my ambition. That's why I'm not really too happy in doing freedom-fighter plays for the sake of doing drama. As a Zambian I am a happily independent man and there's no way I'm going to be fighting independence on this stage when I've already got it. If, for example, somebody came to me and said: "Look, for charity, for SWAPO," for example, "Can you do this play?" As a special favour, yes, I would do it but I'm not interested in the freedom-fighter plays. I am independent, I'm free and so forth and I like to make people happy.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now ZANTA may criticize T.C. Chanda for failing to write plays that are directly geared to hastening social development. But he is a Zambian. ZANTA's chief concern is the number of non-Zambian plays, non-African for that matter mostly British, that are put on by the companies affiliated to the Theatre Association of Zambia, TAZ. This is what makes Stephen Chifunise, Zambia's Director of Culture, so bitter.

STEPHEN CHIFUNYISE

British theatre is what it has been doing for the last seventy five years. Not a single, well only one or two, you know, white ex-patriates, have produced Zambian plays, as if there are no Zambian plays. They will never touch that or if they do, they will touch a West African play or probably some East African play but they will not produce a local play. It is quite clear that to them they must project a "decent" theatre and a decent theatre is selected from British theatre. It's not selected from our own. We, in the process, have done Western theatre, American theatre, British theatre and some of us have even directed and entered some English plays in TAZ. They will never do that. We have an "inferior" culture. They have a "superior" culture. We have "no playwrights", they have playwrights, we have "no theatre", they have theatre. So that is directing the theatre, we are not. We are even trying to make them realise that theatre is not only the British type which they want us to do.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now let's hear from someone who straddles the two camps. Emmanuel Chunda who's on the TAZ committee is none other than the

President of ZANTA. He doesn't deny the purpose of drama in a developing country but he takes the stand of an internationalist. And, he claims, to be a realist where language is concerned.

EMMANUEL CHUNDA

English, at the moment, is covering the whole country. You do a play in English and you will be very sure that everybody in the country of the seventy-three ethnic groups will get the message.

MICHAEL SMEE

Despite the fact that English is not as widespread as all that in the bush?

EMMANUEL CHUNDA

Well, I think it is widespread because you get schools in the bush, you get colleges there, you get government postings there, you get people from other regions working in different regions. So that the only communication to them is through English. You cannot use a local language in such areas any more. We have a lot to learn from the European drama because I think I like to believe those people who say: "Theatre is international". You cannot really say this is that drama because it is international. The problems that it looks at are the same everywhere else. There are social problems and we learn from each other all over the world. We will get a play from Europe and bring it to my country and perhaps adapt it and it will solve one of the social problems locally.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This could sound like a comment on the state of health of indigenous drama: The traditional form, the re-enactment of tribal history no longer serving any useful purpose in a modern nation and contemporary forms not yet established. Well, Stephen Chifunyise and Kagwe Kasoma deny this.

KAGWE KASOMA

You can only talk of embalming a dead body. And there is no dead body here, the culture is not dead. If you were thinking of a culture that we are aligning ourselves to old, old cultural traditions which are no longer living, which are dead and we want to embalm those things for our museums, for people to see that this and that existed. That is not the case. At the moment we, as modern Zambian playwrights, are looking at the old tradition of culture in the light of today and we think that culture is dynamic. So the things we are developing now are a mixture of the old traditions with new traditions. We are still looking at modern world through our African spectacles.

STEPHEN CHIFUNYISE

We aim at using the traditional role of drama in the past of communicating ideas and using it today. We are scared of the type of drama that does not communicate anything, that is being utilized in some of the urban centres which, of course, because the people who have that drama, have nothing to communicate except western culture. So we are not changing anything, we are only transferring the knowledge as it was in a traditional society. In the Makanda (phon) ceremony you are transferring to a method of life from the old generation to the new people and you do that through the performance. You are transferring all the knowledge about the body, the agriculture, the rules and regulations of the society, the politics of the community through the performing arts, the oral literature and so forth. That is our method now.

KAGWE KASOMA

We also have a very serious problem about illiteracy or literacy. A number of people who never get to school and who will never be able to read and write, a number of people who never had radio sets, who never have a television set and who must be given an opportunity to communicate with the rest of the country and learn what the rest of the country is doing and to appreciate the technology that is being used whether wrongly or rightly and to contribute in the development of this country. Theatre is probably our only most useful way of communicating with these people. Just looking at that logistically it is a better weapon than investing millions and millions of pounds in building a television station only to cover people who are already over-communicated! I mean they receive too much to be useful at all.

MICHAEL SMEE

What is your attitude in the midst of all this serious purpose? What is your attitude to the creative writer who is nearly always, in some ways at least, an anarchist. You know he is an anarchist and he won't write to order, he won't create your social drama, although he might fulfill your purpose by accident?

KAGWE KASOMA

Even our own type of creator (now we are talking of creators of drama who work with people in creative drama) now you're talking of an individual writer who sits away from the rest of the people and writes his piece and then takes to the stage. He may not help in the social reconstruction that we are talking about. He is useful, he gives us another view of life, he gives us another element of ourselves, the independent part of ourselves. We know we are always aware of the collectiveness of our arts, the way of life which is slowly being destroyed and has been destroyed by the so-called modern way of life. A writer that we think is useful is one who is bringing together that collectiveness and who, when he has written, goes back and sits down with the people and says: "This is what I've written, I would like you to act it". And the people say: "But we never do these things, we never say these words, we never move our heads like that when we are talking to an elder. You don't stand up, you sit down, you don't pat the back of your mother-in-law". All those people make you a writer, especially when you are like most of us Africans who have been trained

in English, been trained by ex-patriate English people who tell you the value system that is completely contradictory to yourself. You're told to clap hands when you're not supposed to clap hands, you're told to stand up when you're supposed to sit down, you're supposed to say: "yes" when you're supposed to say "no". I mean there are a number of times when we clash because of those basic contradictions. That writer cannot really specifically write something useful to us unless he goes back to the people because he has no form of communication.

STEPHEN CHIFUNYISE

In fact the writer is not sitting on a literary island. He is a member of the community and that community has a culture which that writer is living. I don't see him writing anything that is really away from the people. I don't know, maybe you can suggest to me how this writer can manage to write anything that is not the experience of the people that he lives with in the community.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now does that mean that a play written for a specific Zambian situation will be irrelevant to an audience in another part of the world? You can see, the debate doesn't stop here. But our programme does. Our thanks to all the people who've taken part - to Stephen Chifunyise and Kagwe Kasoma whom we've just heard, to Emmanuel Chunda and T.C. Chanda. Until next week **this** is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.