

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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ARTS AND AFRICA

1st broadcast 15.11.81

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Time for Arts and Africa once more and this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying hello. Here in London it's London Film Festival time once again and we'll be bringing you news of the African films as they are shown. We're beginning today with one of the most remarkable. It's a film about the poverty and humiliation of life in the black townships of South Africa. But, and this is the important thing, it tells the true story of how through unity and determination one group of people have learnt to turn adversity into self-fulfillment. And adversity can mean prison.

## FILM EXTRACT - AWAKE FROM MOURNING

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The film is called "Awake from Mourning" and Joyce Seroke and her friends are shown working with the Maggie Magaba Trust to introduce self-help to the women of urban communities of Soweto. "Awake from Mourning" was directed by Chris Austin who's been telling Florence Akst about the making of this documentary and, to begin with, about the Maggie Magaba Trust.

## CHRIS AUSTIN

It's principally a body that co-ordinates self-help activity in Soweto and also acts as a fund-raising focus. The self-help activity ranges from dress-making classes to welfare work among old people - the kind of things that desperately need to be done because there is absolutely nothing in Soweto.

## FLORENCE AKST

How did you achieve this tremendous freshness and spontaneity so that particularly the women who run the Trust come over as such tremendous personalities? Had you any special techniques? Did you have to do a lot of setting-up and rehearsal and planning?

CHRIS AUSTIN

No. I mean their camera presence is very good, they are very unselfconscious. Those women in particular have an extraordinary articulateness and presence. That makes it very easy and they know their subjects and what they are doing so well it comes spontaneously.

FLORENCE AKST

There was one scene in a very small room with I think, perhaps two sewing machines, two or three. In that small room it was difficult to remember that you were in a cinema watching it, you were in the room with these ordinary women who spoke in ordinary terms. Would you have spent the whole day there, several days?

CHRIS AUSTIN

Well that particular scene, the shooting of that took most of a day but we had been to the woman's house a couple of times before then and she had also been involved with us in a number of other scenes so there was already an established relationship so she was completely at ease with us.

FLORENCE AKST

So although the Trust that we have been talking about is a sum of money entrusted to people to administer, it's also a word you could use in the making of the film - that you had to gain the trust of the people you were working with?

CHRIS AUSTIN

Yes, yes very much so. That applies, of course, to any documentary but in particular to one that's pretending to be very collaborative so that they are handing you their experiences, trusting you to represent it in a way that they would like and that they want rather than accepting the normal relationship which is the film-maker making his own selections of their experiences and their coverage. It was very much a collaborative thing in that they said: "This is what we want to show the world. This is what we feel will stimulate people to support us and understand what we are doing".

FLORENCE AKST

What about later on when you have done the filming and you've got this immense amount of footage and you have to select what is going to be put into the film itself? Were you given a free hand in selection?

CHRIS AUSTIN

There was constant referral back. When we drew up the original outline of the areas that we were going to cover, we didn't in essence, depart from that because a large process of selections is really making those individual sections and scenes work.

FLORENCE AKST

I wonder whether the South African authorities had any say either in what you showed or what you were not allowed to show?

CHRIS AUSTIN

No, they had really no awareness of what we were doing at all.

FLORENCE AKST

Even, for instance, when you were showing those scenes of long, long lines of the elderly people waiting for their pensions, how they were going to have to wait all day, some of them were just staggering along, they were so old and frail? That was an administrative area. You were able to just go in and film that?

CHRIS AUSTIN

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

Were you doing it secretively at all?

CHRIS AUSTIN

No, it was done quite openly. It's just the psychology of the place which is that, if you're white and you look confident about being there, they'll assume that you must have permission. (LAUGH)

FLORENCE AKST

I was amazed that I came out of the cinema feeling so hopeful. How do the people in the film, the members of the Trust themselves feel?

CHRIS AUSTIN

Certainly they feel that the film's been effective. It's been well received. It has generated a lot of support and sympathy and understanding. There was a lot of anxiety on their part initially because they thought they were taking a risk by being outspoken about their feelings about the system they are living under. I don't think they'll experience any harassment directly related to their having appeared or having made this film. They have, of course, been considerably harassed in the past and are continuously by the process of refusing to give them passports and, of course, Joyce Seroke and Ellen Khaswayo were imprisoned in the recent past for up to six months.

FILM EXTRACT - AWAKE FROM MOURNINGALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

From the soundtrack we heard the voice of Ellen Khuzwayo describing her release from prison and the interview was with the film's director, Chris Austin. And although the film's been made to be shown abroad he's hoping that nothing will prevent people seeing it in South Africa itself.

Censorship - whether of news or books or films - is the concern of an international magazine, Index on Censorship, that's published here in London. To celebrate its tenth birthday they're bringing out a special issue that contains quite a high proportion of contributions by African writers. Anne Warmsley, you're in charge of the magazine's African Section welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. Now, should we be saddened that there are so many complaints about censorship in Africa or should we be thankful that there are people who do make a fuss?

ANNE WARMSLEY

Of course one is saddened. One is saddened by every constraint on human freedoms and rights and one is saddened that writers, of all people, are constrained in what they are allowed to say. But I don't think you can look at the African content or indeed the content of the entire issue in any other than a very positively rejoicing way because there is so much evidence here of the way writers have kept writing despite censorship and also of the fact that in some paradoxical way, censorship actually provokes rather good literature.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now this magazine is not concerned only with Africa. In fact at the beginning, I don't think Africa was involved at all.

ANNE WALMSLEY

No you're absolutely right. It was started in response to a cry from Soviet dissidents about the trial of Soviet writers asking for attention to be drawn to them and for their plight to be more generally known. The magazine started, as you know, ten years ago and one of its very interesting aspects is the way it has broadened out quite tremendously. It now has three Third World researchers and material is gathered from all over the world and one of the very positively things that has come out of this is the way writers from very different countries have been able to help each other and formed a sort of great bond of solidarity of writers and their problems.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now people tend to think of South Africa as a state where the authorities come down hard on writers, more than in any other part of Africa.

ANNE WALMSLEY

If one's talking about censorship in its strictest sense, i.e., imprisoned writers, banned books, etc., South Africa is the country in Africa where there is most censorship. But the concept of censorship has broadened very much and the more one reads and talks to writers and is aware of their problems the more one is conscious of a whole range of grades of censorship right from the extreme, formal censorship that we were talking about to such things as what language do you write in, what is the state of literacy in your country, what opportunities of publishing your work are there?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now there is an article by Andre Brink where he says: "The repression of writers often stems not from any moral or literary origins, but purely political considerations". Do you think you are justified in publishing a magazine like this about, say, a country where writers are suppressed but where the majority of the people seem to be satisfied with what is going on?

ANNE WALMSLEY

I think from "Index's" point of view, their policy would be to support the individual writer. But I think it would be very important to look at this in the cultural context of Africa where rights of individuals and groups are differently regarded, where the role of writer is differently regarded from the West. Here at "Index" we are always seeking to be more aware of the cultural context. You probably knew my predecessor, Ahmed Rajab, who was "Index's" first African researcher. He was able to put the African context very clearly when any writer was being considered. Indeed, we try to talk as much as possible with people from the countries concerned when we are publishing the case of a writer and be guided by them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Anne Walmsley thank you very much. And our last visitor to "Arts and Africa" this week is Nick Barker who's going to tell us why we should be listening out for this tune on our radios.

MUSIC EXTRACT - FLUTE MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nick thanks for breaking off from your "African Theatre" studio session to come and talk to us. Tell us the significance of this flute music.

NICK BARKER

I found the music very optimistic and cheerful and it seemed to go very well with the title of the play and the flavour of the play which is "Come the Revolution" by a young author from Lesotho called Peter Machai. It's about an African economist who decides to return home and participate in the changes of his country but he has lots and lots of problems. But I won't tell you about that now. That's not the first play. Our first play which goes out next Sunday is "The School Reunion" by Victor Lindsey and it's the third in his trilogy of plays about this mythical country Binbina and I think our listeners will find it very amusing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Where does Victor Lindsey come from?

NICK BARKER

Lindsey comes from Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what about the range of plays? I'm sure you have quite a variety?

NICK BARKER

Yes, I think it's a good variety. We have plays set in revolutionary Ethiopia, in Sudan, in Nigeria and a play set in Ghana, a play about two market mamees during the course of the day in which everything that is Ghana today comes through very gently and subtly.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is now the time for would-be playwrights to think about next season?

NICK BARKER

Absolutely. We're already thinking very seriously about next year's season and I would like this message to go out to all young playwrights of Africa to start preparing your script now. I'd like to receive it by August 1982 at the very latest.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Nick the first play's date and time?

NICK BARKER

It's "The School Reunion" by Victor Lindsey. It goes out next Sunday at the same time as African Perspective which is 0830, 1500 and 1715 all those times are GMT.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nick Barker thank you very much indeed. The women of Soweto bring our programme to an end as they do in the film "Awake from Mourning" and I'll be back with more "Arts and Africa" this time next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

FILM EXTRACT - AWAKE FROM MOURNING.