

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa.

MUSIC EXTRACT - "BAGANNA"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The characteristic sound of the Ethiopian lyre, one of the instruments used to accompany a film about Ethiopia that I saw at the recent London Film Festival. A remarkable film that told a tragic story. And later in the programme I'll be talking to its director. But I want to begin with Christopher Hope's novel "A Separate Development" which has just won a British literary award, not his first as his poetry has been equally successful. Christopher Hope is here with me now and I'd like to begin, Christopher by asking what led you to turn from poetry to fiction.

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Well I suppose what I really wanted to do was to attack, where possible, the sort of absurdities one finds in the South African society and the racial set-up in South Africa. And prose seems a more potent weapon than poetry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Christopher, the title of your novel is: "A Separate Development" which, I suppose, means apartheid.

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Yes, it's one of those convenient terms that the government uses for apartheid.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Give us a brief description of what it's all about.

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Its theme is the way in which people, races, are divided from one another in South Africa. It's not something particularly exceptional there, it's in the marrow, it's in the bone and it afflicts everyone - some more than others, but everyone. It means that communication is simply not possible between the racial groups and as a result, misunderstanding is deepened and antagonisms set up and these antagonisms are encouraged by those who actually administer the system. That is what I try to expose in the book.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you are, by no means, the only writer who has attacked this system or written about it. Shall I put it that way? What is unusual about your book?

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Well I think most South African novelists tend to see apartheid as a very serious business and they tend, sometimes, to moralise apartheid. I tried not to moralise apartheid, I tried to ridicule it. I tried to show the absurdities inherent in the situation, therefore, what they are, bizarre and horrible but nonetheless in a terrible way, rather funny.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes I quite agree with your description of the book as very funny. I found the first half extremely funny where Harry Moto, the hero, lives as a white man in a white society but he's a little suspected by his friends. And the second half I thought was a little sad, where he leaves the society, and lives as a black man or a white kaffir as you describe him. But I'm not sure what the overall effect is. Do you intend it to be a satire or a tragedy or a mixture of both?

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

I mean it to be a funny tragedy I suppose. It seems to me that both elements are present in the society and Harry has to live through both. The tragedy is precisely that he has no colour. He has no race. And that is almost worse than having a white skin or a black skin in South Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. I find it very hilarious, I mean your use of language and the characters themselves, the way they live a life of lies.

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Absolutely, yes, yes. That's very well put. They do, and a life of lies is normality in South Africa. It's the way we are. But I think what one has to remember about South Africa is that in a way it's like an asylum in which the inmates have taken over and it is in many respects an insane place. At the same time one has to recognise that people live according to their own lies. Those lies are tremendously distorted and I try and reflect that distortion in my novel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why do you think the satiric style is the best way of conveying your ideas about this kind of society?

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

I think so because for so many years now people, in writing about South Africa, have said: "Look how awful it is, how sad it is". I think people know that, they understand that but what they do not understand is that there is tremendous resilience in people generally and that their weapon, their only weapon, for people who are down at the bottom of the society, is their humour and they laugh at the ridiculous apparatus of apartheid.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What has been the reaction to this book in South Africa?

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Well, in South Africa the reaction has been very mixed. I think people were both pleased that the book took on the system to some extent and appalled that anybody should suggest that it was at the same time richly funny. (Laughs) It's an ambivalent reaction in South Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And I understand that the South African hates more than anything to be laughed at. He doesn't mind being attacked brutally, he takes that as one of those things.

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Yes exactly, but then he hates being held up as ridiculous, and ridiculous, I'm afraid is very much what he is.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I see. Now what are you thinking of doing in the future? Are you going to write a follow-up to this very interesting and I think very pleasing novel?

CHRISTOPHER HOPE

Well, I am busy with another one now which will take the same themes but will perhaps explore them a little more broadly but, yes, I'll stay where my roots are, in Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Christopher Hope thanks for coming along to "Arts and Africa", Christopher Hope's new novel, "A Separate Development" is published by Routledge and Kegan Paul at £6.95 pence in the United Kingdom.

The film about Ethiopia that I mentioned at the beginning is called "The Lion of Judah", one of the titles of the late Emperor Haile Selassie. And the Emperor himself features in it. That's because the film is made up entirely of actual footage shot during Mussolini's invasion of his country in 1935 and '36. The Italians filmed their preparation for the war with Ethiopia and their bombing - even their use of poisonous gas. And cameramen from other European countries, notably the Soviet Union and Great Britain filmed from within the Ethiopian heartland. The film's producer and director is Lutz Becker and he told me that it's taken him more than twelve years to complete this impressive, two hours long record of modern colonial aggression. Just gathering together the footage must have been an achievement - footage that begins with the dictator Mussolini rousing Italians to embark on a war of what he called 'glory' and finishes with them entering a stricken Addis Ababa after desperate resistance by Ethiopian forces armed with little more than spears and muskets. Just how did Lutz Becker achieve it?

LUTZ BECKER

I compiled the film out of documentary footage which I found in film archives in East and West Germany, in Russia, in England and in America. And these materials I put together into a dramatic documentary film using archival material.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, when I was watching the film I felt this very much that it wasn't just a mere documentary but in a way a kind of theatre in itself.

LUtz BECKER

Yes. Even though it shows the real image of real moments, it's only a selection of such moments so what you have to achieve is a synthesis. You have to build up the film into an order, a system that tells the story and in this case it is the chronological order interjected with dramatic devices, especially on the soundtrack.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You superimposed the sound, the music on the film?

LUtz BECKER

Yes. Most of these scenes which I found in archives are silent scenes or have a sort of 1930's propaganda music and commentary on it. This all had to be dismantled. Therefore, I had to create my own soundtracks. I used various sound effects, authentic sound effects of guns and aeroplanes, motor cars and voices to bring these images to life again.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. And also the story itself had enough drama in it.

LUtz BECKER

My God, indeed! It is an incredibly dramatic story, an epic really, a story which generations will talk about once they remember it again.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Were there any particular portions of the film which you found in the archives and which fascinated you?

LUtz BECKER

Well there is one sequence which I am particularly keen on, because I think it is a very successful one. That is the bombardment of the city of Dessie. I got from Italian archives the Christmas 1935 celebrations of the Italian soldiers and then shots of a tree that was a Christmas tree that was decorated with ammunition, grenades, machine-gun ammunition, and soldiers would take this ammunition load it onto a plane and fly to Dessie. From the Russian sources and German sources I found material that showed the whole scene from the point of view of the people of Dessie, children, people just listening to the aeroplanes arriving and then the amazing bombardment of Dessie, the devastation, the sadness.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The children were eating out in the open fields and then when they heard the bombs and the planes they ran into the trenches.

LUtz BECKER

Yes, like the children in Vietnam, the same shots really, the same images.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you entitle the film "The Lion of Judah". Do I take it to mean that you were stressing the personality of Haile Selassie as a sort of hero?

LUTZ BECKER

I admire Haile Selassie very much. He had been a remarkable man and also in his failures, later on in his life, he was part of the decline of our world and entanglement of our world in neo-colonialism. In those days when he, single-handedly, pulled his nation together, many tribes of very different languages and beliefs, religions, he pulled them together to fight against the Italians, the Italians who suddenly invaded, out of colonial greed, the Horn of Africa. The Italians owned Eritrea, to the north, Somaliland to the south, and in the middle lay an independent country and that just attracted Italian greed to such a degree. Haile Selassie tried to stem all that and indeed very bravely. He installed that brave spirit in his warriors, his many, many peasant warriors who rallied to defend their country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now did you in any way have the co-operation of the present Ethiopian government or did you consult with them when you were making this film?

LUTZ BECKER

When I actually originally conceived the idea to make this film (that was in 1968) Ethiopia was already a very poor country because of these successive agricultural catastrophies that country had, still has, so I could not ask them for support. Later on, when Haile Selassie was dead and the new regime was in force, I applied to travel to Ethiopia and to film there. This was rejected. So I had to make the film here out of archival material on my own and I had to run around to find the money. That has been very difficult.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now do you see any modern parallel in the story?

LUTZ BECKER

Yes, of course, These parallels are absolutely striking. I was born during the Second World War. I was a student during the time when Europe was at peace but war was in Vietnam and I finally was able to make this film at a time when the Russians are in Afghanistan. What I'm trying to do in this film is to show an historical example really, in the form of an allegory, the nature of war, that undefended people are not left in peace in this world because somebody in the neighbourhood, strong powers have the weapons, the aeroplanes, the poison gas, to just go in and tell you what you have to do. This obviously is part of the trend of history and partly human nature and I think peace will only come to this world if human nature actually changes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, let's hope it does. I was talking to Lutz Becker about his latest film, "The Lion of Judah", a film that certainly should be seen across the African continent.

And, of course, we're ending the programme with music from Ethiopia, a modern singer with a modern song - "Tezeta" sung by Seyfu Johannes. And this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey looking forward to meeting you at this time next week for more "Arts and Africa". For now, goodbye.

MUSIC EXTRACT - "TEZETA".