

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. Now you may remember hearing on this programme not too long ago about the Noma Award for African Publishing. To my delight a favourite from my own country, Ghana, was this year's winner. It's called "The Brassman's Secret" and it's by Meshak Asare. And it's the adventures of Kwajo, a young Asante boy, the son of a brass smith. What was special about the book for me was the way the printed word and the illustrations told the story together.

Well, as part of the African publishing Fair, 'Bookweek Africa' which has just been held here in London, Meshak Asare and the Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta (she writes for children as well as for adults) held a public discussion on African children's books. Speaking to both of them afterwards, Mark Ralph-Bowman began by asking Meshak what his story was about.

MESHAK ASARE

The story is about gold weights. Now gold weights are now only objects of art - they are collected by Westerners mostly for decoration - but their traditional uses have now been ignored altogether even by the same people who produce them, they produce them as trade items. Now I have created a story first of all to demonstrate how the gold weights are made by the lost wax process. I have explained it to other children also as one of the functions of a child - you know in Asante society he has to help make things. It shows also his exposure to technology even though it is old-fashion technology; but I see it as technology all the same. And then it goes on from demonstrating how it is made to a section where it also explained the original function of the gold weights. And there I used fantasy, I used magic to put a child into the situation where the gold weights were functioning as they originally were. Then it goes on finally to explain the morals, the symbolism, of the gold weights. I put the three parts together in a story.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An interesting story, I think you will agree. But what Mark wanted to know was what was so different about the way Meshak had treated his story.

MESHAK ASARE

I think what sets this book apart - what makes it successful - is its completeness as a picture book. It is complete because it tells a story. You can take it just as a story, you can enjoy it as a story if you read it from the beginning to the end. At the same time it teaches. It teaches about the people's customs and traditions. It is also complete because it is well illustrated, well bound. If you say 'a story', you know it won't be a story if it is just a plain narrative without any mystery or without any fantasy. Fantasy is used a lot, it is part of our mythology, our religion. I have used it to make the story a complete one.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

If I could come now to Buchi. From what you were saying earlier on at the talk you gave here at the Africa Centre, you seem to be saying that you've got some of your ideas for your stories from your children. How much do you think that your method of getting the stories from the children is a possible method for the writer of children's stories in Africa?

BUCHI EMECHETA

I think it's very, very basic because you realise that children, all over the world really, mostly have the same expectations and they have the same love for mystery and love for adventure, because at that age they are very, very curious to find out how people do things and how people live. Then around Christmas you see how people on television here in England get children ready by asking them: 'What do you think of Jesus? What do you think of Christmas?' And they will find different interpretations of Christmas and you can build fantastic stories on that. You find children's innocence is for such a short time that it should be encouraged. Children should be encouraged to be children for a long time and so, before adult-hood sets in, as I said in the talk, I believe in children learning through joy. So you find that you can get over a lot in facts. Children know what they want to read, they know the type of thing they want to see, so I think it's adults arrogance to try to impose on them what we think they should be reading. I think most children in this age know exactly what they want.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

You've both talked of a moral aspect to stories. Do you want the stories to be moral because the children want the world to be right or because you want to teach them right and wrong?

MESHAK ASARE

I don't deliberately set out to teach morals with my stories. It is just part of it. I set out because I'm excited about something and I set out to express it simply, I set out to make it as exciting as I felt for the child too. Now if in the process I said something about morals then it was only part of what I had to communicate.

BUCHI EMECHETA

Well I think mine is the same thing. I don't set out to go and teach but each of my stories have got something, a tinge of morality at the end of it. But it is only an adult who would discover it very quickly, a child would go through it, it would take time. And the idea is to encourage the joy of reading and stimulate the thinking process. And then the child would be able to think and then at the end of it realise 'Oh yes, maybe if that had happened, this wouldn't have happened'. So they start to question, not only through teaching. The idea is to question the adults as well - what they have inherited. So that's why I build on the facts that they gave me as the source. Then I enrich that source with my African background of injecting morality. So mine has to be what I know because I have to come out of a mixture of both. That's why I find I write books with the children all over the world in mind.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Buchi Emecheta and Meshak Asare talking to Mark Ralph-Bowman about African children's books.

I wonder which African country you would single out as the most prolific in terms of playwriting and drama? Well one place where the dramatic arts are thriving at the moment is a country we don't hear enough about on this programme - Malawi. A new Degree programme for Fine and Performing Arts has been set up at the University of Malawi, and a great number of new plays are being written and staged on the campus. The Head of the English Department at the university is Professor Adrian Roscoe - author of two major studies of African literature: 'Mother is Gold' and 'Uhuru's Fire'. Andrew Horn asked him about this upsurge of dramatic activities at the university.

PROF. A. ROSCOE

The university is splendidly active in drama, it's throbbing with dramatic activity. This year for example we've had about twelve productions already and now with only about three weeks to go before the end of the academic year we have another six productions ready to go on to the stage. We do at the university now have a very strong dramatic tradition and this has been built up very ably by people like Mupa Shumba, David Kerr, Chris Kalongera and James Gibbs and others, and of course it's been fed by such writers as Steve Chimombo and James N'gombe.

ANDREW HORN

Well with such a proliferation of theatre activity what sort of facilities has the university to offer to playwrights, producers and actors?

PROF. A. ROSCOE

Well I think facilities even now are very exciting indeed. We've got an open-air theatre, an open-air theatre which works extremely well, I myself much prefer to be sitting under the moon and watching theatre than sitting inside and scratching and sweating and so on. An excellent open-air theatre which James Gibbs was responsible for. We also have what you might call a regular or captive audience of five hundred to six hundred students for our local playwrights. Shakespeare had his London audience, O'Casey had his Dublin audience, and Malawian playwrights have their Zomba audience and I think this is a tremendous advantage for a young playwright. We also have a travelling theatre, plays are put on in the open-air theatre first of all and then they are toured around different parts of the country. We have a local magazine at the university "The Muse" which critically discusses dramatic performances. And I would stress that the performances are not only acted well but there is a great deal of attention paid to such items as, starting on time, finishing on time, there is a good deal of discipline in the productions and so on. So all in all we have some fine facilities and these are now being added to by the construction of a huge new Fine and Performing Arts complex. This is a gift from the President and this will be opening later in the year.

ANDREW HORN

Well to make it more vivid and concrete, could you give us some idea what's going on now in theatre in Malawi, or in recent months?

PROF. A. ROSCOE

Well one of the most exciting things that has happened, I think, in recent months has been a series of improvised plays done in Chichewa under the direction of David Kerr and also a new scripted play by Steve Chimombo. Steve Chimombo you may remember wrote "The Rainmaker" and this was first performed in Zomba some five or six years ago. Steve has come a long way since "The Rainmaker" and this new play is a play in Chichewa and it was first performed only about a week ago I attended that performance. We had an audience of about six hundred students and this was to my mind a very exciting piece of work, probing different areas of Malawian modern life and receiving a very sensitive and intelligent response from the audience.

ANDREW HORN

Well of course one of the problems in Africa is disseminating new plays, in other words publishing. You mentioned "The Muse" at the University?

PROF. A. ROSCOE

It is true to say that publishing opportunities are not as great in Malawi as they are, in let's say, Kenya or Nigeria. However, more publishing houses are showing an interest in our young writers and we do have the Malawian writers series which comes from the Montfort Press in Blantyre and so we do find an outlet there. And James N'gombe, who as you know is one of our very active young playwrights, has just been made manager of Dzuka Publishing House and I'm rather hoping that he will show a great deal of interest in publishing the plays of some of his young Malawian playwright colleagues.

ANDREW HORN

Will theatre workers in Africa generally, work under a whole host of constraints? Malawi is known for one of the most stringent censorship policies in Africa. Has this had a significant effect upon theatre work?

PROF. A. ROSCOE

I think it's true to say that in the past it has had a rather dampening effect on the theatre work. But it's also true to say that the censorship seems much lighter now and it is, as a result, much less of a problem for Malawian writers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Professor Adrian Roscoe, Head of the English Department at the University of Malawi, with Andrew Horn.

And to stay with Malawi for a little longer here is Robert Fumulani & The Likhubula River Jazz Band with 'Kudala Kwa Malawi'.

MUSIC EXTRACT - 'Kudala Kwa Malawi'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and I hope you will join me for more Arts and Africa at the same time next week. For now it's goodbye.