

# Arts and Africa

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa. And in today's programme we look at an exhibition of photographs entitled "Faces of Nigeria", and we hear about an unusual dance school in Senegal called "Mudra Afrique". Now when it comes to dance, Africa it would seem has little to learn from the West. Their traditions in fact couldn't be more different: Traditional African dance is built around rhythm, improvisation and physical expressiveness, whereas in western classical ballet the emphasis is on discipline, restraint, and a highly formalised artificial movement. Well one place where these two very different types of dance have been brought together is the Mudra Afrique Dance School in Dakar, Senegal. It was set up with the assistance of the famous Belgian choreographer Maurice Bejart, and has subsequently become one of the most important dance schools in Africa.

Now with me in the studio is John Matshikiza, a South African actor who has performed for the Royal Shakespeare Company among others and who has just returned from a visiting lectureship at the Mudra Afrique. Well John, you are an actor not a dancer. So how did you get involved with the Mudra Afrique?

## JOHN MATSHIKIZA

I saw a documentary film that was made by a film maker called Gudie Lawaetz on Mudra Afrique which was shown in London last year and I was very excited to see that there was work of this sort going on in an African country because it was the kind of work I felt, I have always felt, should be going on in Africa; as a vital part of development, the development of the arts. And, having searched for years to find schools of this sort, or academies of this sort, or theatre companies of some sort or dance companies that were working in this field, I was as I say very excited to find that there was something like this in Senegal, as it happened. And then I was fortunate enough to meet the director of the school, Germaine Acogny, when she came through London in, I think it was, October last year. And I expressed to her my interest and told her who I was and where I was from and what I felt my intentions were; what I felt about art in general.

And we just felt in our conversation that our ideas were very similar, her intentions for the school, for developing the process of not just dance but dance drama at the school were very much in line with what I felt should be happening in the dance and the drama world. And she invited me to come along and see if I could be of any use or if the school could be of any use to me. So that it was really a sort of exchange between us, I gave what I could from my experience and I took from them what I could from what was being done at the school.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I thought you were learning some technique at the school .....

JOHN MATSHIKIZA

Well what I did in the end when I arrived was first of all to acclimatize myself to the school and the method of work and to get to know everybody because there are about thirty, student and the staff - students and staff from various parts of Africa and the West Indies and so on. I participated in the dance classes in the morning which was quite a shock to my system to begin with. I didn't do too much classical dancing, I did quite a lot of the traditional dancing and the african dancing and some of the modern dancing classes. So that in that way I began to understand their process of working and then what I would do usually in the afternoon was work with group's that were putting on - there was for example one dance drama presentation that was being prepared by the first and second years and another being prepared by third years, so I would move between one rehearsal room and the other and give tips and advice and a bit of direction which would help in the actual presentation of the dramatic side of these dance dramas.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. Now what is the college exactly like?

JOHN MATSHIKIZA

It was started about four or five years ago, right by the coast slightly on the outskirts of Dakar. It is housed in a former art gallery so it's a huge very spacious building that is very imposing all by itself on a piece of land. It was started by the Senegalese Government basically, in association with Maurice Bejart, who had himself studied at Mudra Bruxelles School in Brussels and so the idea was that since there is a very large tradition of dance and various dance disciplines that exist on the african continent in any case, the idea was to try and form the same sort of thing in an African country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what kind of students are there, what part of the world do they come from?

JOHN MATSHIKIZA

The students are largely from the french speaking world, so there are Senegalese, there are people from Guinea, from Congo Brazzaville, from Zaire, from the Central African Republic, from Mali and so on. There are students from France and there are some students from the french Antilles-Martinique who are students there, and they come from various backgrounds. Some are very young and have come straight out of school into a dance academy at the age of something like fifteen, others are older. There were some very interesting people. For example, there was one Malian student who had spent some time with the Malian National Ballet and had been an acrobat and a circus performer and all this sort of thing in his time. There was another student from Central Africa who had virtually walked from Central Africa. It had taken him something like four years to finally arrive in Dakar; stoping off in various countries and working as a dock hand and this and that, who had previously worked in the Central African Republic in a theatre troupe of his own. So there's varied backgrounds.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what do the african dancers make of classical ballet? It's a rather odd thing to introduce to africans.

JOHN MATSHIKIZA

Yes. I think the students are very interested in the classical dancing classes. There arrived at the same time as me a french dancer called Jacqueline Rayet who had also come because of her connection with Maurice Bejart and had come to spend just three weeks giving from her point of view classical dance teaching. And of course for the students to have a visiting professor is always of great interest, so it wasn't just someone like myself who comes from an African country who gives something that the students can in a sense connect with in terms of teaching african things. There was great interest in what she could provide as a classical teacher and her classes were very well responded to. The permanent classical dance teacher comes from the Bolshoi Ballet and there is also a pianist who has been, I understand, seconded from the Bolshoi Ballet. And so yes initially there would seem to be a contradiction in hearing this classical piano playing in the middle of Dakar, Senegal and seeing these african students sort of prancing about to it, but it is regarded by the school and by the students as an integral part of what they are learning, what they are developing, since it is a centre for research and perfectionment. It's not simply a question of taking traditional dances from various parts of africa and doing them, it's a question of developing those dances and taking them further and taking oneself as a dancer or as a performing artist further.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, there is this example of the Egungun masquerade you have a story to tell about.

LEN GARRISON

Yes well that was a case where we were going through a very small village and suddenly we heard the drumming coming towards us and we were forced to pull across to one side so we realised that there was a masquerade or a festival. So I got out of the car and soon we were almost surrounded by, not only the masquerade, but young boys with whips, and people were running in all directions away from the masquerade and from the boys who were following them. Well I at first wasn't sure what to do so I began to stand to one side, but then I began to walk towards the masquerade and at that particular time it seemed a very strange thing happened. They all suddenly stopped, and it was a very big group, I mean they must have numbered about sixty to seventy people in this procession. A group of people suddenly stopped and formed round the masquerade (this was about eight feet high, this particular image/effigy) and composed themselves with me in the middle of the group and they were surrounding me while I took the picture. Now for that moment I was in fact nervous because I didn't expect anything like this to happen. I for one moment became part of the masquerade. I remember sweating and the heat coming down on me and I almost forgot what I was doing because I just didn't expect this instant elevation, it was as if they were paying homage to me, I mean suddenly I got that kind of vision. And the picture does capture this feeling of people paying some kind of respect and paying homage to me and I was trying to do the same and then they just proceeded. I mean I just stood to one side and everybody got back and the whole thing returned to kind of normality but it was a moment of excitement.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's extraordinary. Len Garrison thank you very much and the best of luck for the future. And let's end the programme with the drums that accompany the Engungun Masquerade Dance. I hope you'll join me at the same time next week till then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.