

Arts and Africa

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ACTUALITY - The Junction Avenue Theatre Company

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The voices of The Junction Avenue Theatre Company welcoming you to Arts and Africa. I'm Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we go to Gaborone in Botswana where an extraordinary arts festival has just been held. Entitled "Symposium on Culture and Resistance in South Africa" the occasion brought together some 500 people intimately involved in the arts.

The attendance list reads like a Who's Who of the South African art world: musicians Dollar Brand and Hugh Masekela; the writers Nadine Gordimer, James Mathews and Wally Serote; the photographers Alf Kumalo and David Goldblatt; the artist Gavin Jantjes, and a host of others. For all who attended it was a unique opportunity not only to perform but more important to discuss their role in opposing apartheid, and to explore the peculiarities of their predicament.

JAMES MATHEWS:

I wish I could write a poem, recording the beginning of dawn, the opening of a flower, the approach of a bee, describe a bird's first flight; then I look at people - maimed, shackled, jailed - the knowing is now clear, I will never be able to write a poem about dawn, a bird or a bee.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

A poem by a participant from Cape Town, James Mathews, lamenting the lack of innocence in his work. It's one of the many anomalies of South African society that so many artists from inside the republic were actually allowed to attend the symposium. It was, of course, a unique opportunity to meet and discuss with their counterparts in exile. And for the exiles, the experience was probably even more invaluable. Wally Serote, often called "The People's Poet", left South Africa 8 years ago. There's no doubt in his mind that his work would have made more progress had he stayed at home.

WALLY SEROTE:

One would have developed, grown-up in terms of understanding, because you are involved with people. And in South Africa right now, the stage that South Africa is in, we should view it that it's a very rich moment in our country because we are all dealing with matters of death and life, and I don't think there's any period when people can be more enriched than now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

But for the Cape Town artist, Gavin Jantjes, exile has meant exposure to a range of ideas and people not possible had he remained inside the country.

GAVIN JANTJES:

Being outside has been a tremendous advantage, I would never have had the kind of debate, the kind of intercourse with other artists, professional artists, that I've had outside. And the South African society is aimed at preventing that and not encouraging that, simply by the nature of it's society. Very, very few internationally known artists, professional artists, who in fact do have certain things to say will align themselves with South Africa; some of them won't even put their foot across our borders. From that point of view South Africa is extremely limiting and you sensed this all the time. From the time you started doing art seriously, with the intention of being a professional practicing artist, you sensed all the time that there was a limitation, and in a very short space of time in fact you felt you had reached that limitation and you needed to go somewhere else, and there just wasn't any kind of room for development, any kind of exchange any more and you needed that. So the intention was then to go outside and get this intercourse, and get this dialogue going and get the experience from it and then to come back.

MUSIC EXTRACT - "Soweto Is Where It's At" - Dollar Brand

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The inimitable sound of another South African exile, Dollar Brand or Abdullahi Ibrahim as he's now called. Playing with fellow musician Hugh Masekela he caused a sensation at the Gaborone Town Hall. And speaking at a press conference he spoke about his music's message and the importance of his nationality.

DOLLAR BRAND:

I have to sound South African, my accent, because I'm born in Cape Town I can't sound like Chinese. But I have to recognise my nationalism before I can become an internationalist and then speak from that natural platform of my being. But what I say is not a national message it's a universal message, in fact it's not my message at all I'm just a messenger boy - I just pass it on. That message is a universal message so where ever people are they respond to it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the symposium was the attendance of so many white artists - something unthinkable in the heyday of Black Consciousness a few years ago. So after all the agonising by South African artists has some common ground finally been found? The internationally acclaimed novelist, Nadine Gordimer, spoke about how she saw the role of both black and white artists.

NADINE GORDIMER:

I think that the role of the white artist is pretty much the same as the black artist. What we have in South Africa is a dying way of life, I would say it's dead already; we're living in the past. We know that apartheid is finished, how it will come about is in question and whether we'll all live to see the other side of it, we don't know. But the fact is that I think we have to begin to think about a post-apartheid culture. What have we had up to now? We've had an imported culture from Europe, very old by now 350 years old, by people from various European backgrounds who simply assumed that the culture they brought in their suitcases from abroad as the culture and they discounted from the very beginning that there was any question of establishing a new culture by taking root along with an indigenous culture. The indigenous culture was totally discounted. Then you had blacks who for many years had it dinned into them that their culture did not count, that all they did was make a noise instead of making music, that their dancing was not really dancing and so on. And blacks then were for a time convinced that they had to acquire white cultural modes and they did and some of them of course they would never wish to give up, and why should they. The writing of poetry, plays, novels, essays; the form. The imaginative power was there it went into other things, it went into praise songs, it went into wonderful oral tradition, but the fact is that it was not written down until the white man came. So now we've arrived at a revolutionary stage in our history and we find that there is no common indigenous culture. Perhaps there are many blacks who would say that the thing to do then is to discard the white culture, that it is a kind of concreteing over, a temporary concreteing over, of the real roots of culture. But there are many others who indeed have made such wonderful use of various art forms that came from other countries, that came from western civilisation, that they would not like to discard these from their own civilisation. And indeed I can't see why there should be any question, because if we all had to unravel our cultural roots and see where we got the mode of writing a sonnet from, and where we got the mode of writing a symphony from, if we had to make these divisions there would be no real culture at all. So what we have to do now is to think about a new culture based on both the heritage from Europe and the pre-colonial heritage here.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The novelist Nadine Gordimer. During daylight hours the participants devoted themselves to papers and discussions on the individual arts, and there was constant talk of the need to relate artistic activity to 'resistance' in South Africa. Not surprisingly the debate was frequently heated and the poet James Mathews even questioned the very usefulness of the symposium. He objected to what he saw as it's elitism.

JAMES MATHEWS:

When I read my paper almost 90% of the people sitting there must have attended a university at some time or the other. When I'm sitting outside in the sun I find the majority of people who obviously have less education, and people are from towns and people who are from the ghetto's, why is it that they are sitting outside?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Another complaint was that many of the people attending the festival had only turned up to hear the big names, such as Dollar Brand and Hugh Masekela. But on this count James Mathews was less anxious.

JAMES MATHEWS:

What I've realised is even if they had come for the music they have slowly been affected by what they have heard and what they've seen, and they are beginning to look at things in a different light. I met a couple and they work on an Afrikaans newspaper, and obviously Afrikaans newspapers are government supporters, and speaking with the male he had to admit that he has a new conception of what is happening between races and is beginning to have a better understanding as to why certain things are said. He would not have heard that if he did not attend, so even if taken on that scale the festival is successful.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

But for the poet Wally Serote the success of the festival could only be judged in terms of it's revolutionary potential.

WALLY SEROTE:

If from this an energy can be released from the cultural workers, to participate directly in the workers struggle, learn from it, contribute and participate very directly. Because that's the only force that will liberate South Africa. Now we have to learn from that very experienced section of our community, we have to contribute, we have to walk side by side with them all the time. If this symposium, the ideas that came from this symposium, can release that energy - then we shall say the symposium is successful.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the festival was that it actually took place at all. Exiles spoke with non-exiles, revolutionaries spoke with liberals, blacks spoke with whites.

NADINE GORDIMER:

There's a tremendous amount of dissension, there's a lot of straight talk, but that's wonderful because as recently as three years ago I don't think you could have put this conference together. I think what blacks would not have wanted to sit around and discuss the implications of the struggle and the cultural revolution that must go with it, they would not have conceded to sit on panels with whites and discuss this. So now we are talking again and we're finding common ground again. But of course I think that common ground - white's have to realise you can only step on that common ground if you truly do identify yourself with the black struggle.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Nadine Gordimer talking about a remarkable development in the South African arts. And lets end the programme with some more music by Dollar Brand, it's called "African Herbs". From me Alex Tetteh-Lartey goodbye.

MUSIC EXTRACT - "African Herbs" - Dollar Brand