

ALS 4/5/4/3/33

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

pp 1-4

BBC COPYRIGHT CONTROL

ARTS AND AFRICA

First Broadcast: 15-8-82

451G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hello again, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. And in today's programme we hear from the Zimbabwean writer, Charles Mungoshi, and we pay a visit to the Africa Centre here in London where there's a remarkable exhibition of photographs depicting life in rural Zimbabwe after the war. Now you may remember hearing on this programme a couple of months ago the Zimbabwean poet, Musaemura Zimunya, talking about the state of Zimbabwean fiction. He was arguing that drought and aridity were the major themes of the Zimbabwean novel. And he particularly cited the work of Charles Mungoshi. Mungoshi has now completed two collections of short stories "Coming of the Dry Season" and "Some Kind of Wounds"; a novel "Waiting for the Rain"; a collection of poetry entitled "The Milkman Doesn't Only Deliver Milk"; two novels written in Shona and he's also written a play. Well bearing in mind this diversity of talent, Florence Akst asked him whether he regarded himself primarily as poet, playwright or novelist.

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

I haven't made up my mind as to what's going to be the final thing I want to do but I do poetry and drama as a kind of discipline, I think they demand much more precision, much more accuracy, they force you more into looking for the correct word, than prose I think.

FLORENCE AKST

Well "Waiting for the Rain" is quite a long novel and I suppose you can allow yourself to enjoy the act of writing perhaps more than the act of thinking first.

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

Yes I think what happens is, usually I don't think of a theme or characters, first of all I have characters in my head and sort of place them in a room and then see what they do to each other - and then I go off.

FLORENCE AKST

So you're really describing scenes that you see in your mind's eye?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

Sort of yes.

FLORENCE AKST

Somebody has said, in fact it was Musaemura Zimunya said to me that he found a continuing theme in your work up to now, and that has been a certain interest in dryness and drought and a withdrawal, and you have that in your titles, "Coming of the Dry Season", "Waiting for the Rain". Is that because of colonial experience, is it because of your personal experience, is there a reason?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

This is a bit of a surprise to me, I didn't think about these titles - I mean there's a big difference of something like seven years between the writing of the two books.

FLORENCE AKST

But they were both pre-independence books?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

Yes they are pre-independence books. I suppose what you might say is stories written at roughly the same time tend to have the same kind of theme probably. So stories like "Coming of the Dry Season" are written over a period of three years from 1967 to 1970, so I'm sure they would be quite different from the other collection which you unfortunately haven't read.

FLORENCE AKST

No that's true and I hope to make good that omission. Are you writing at present, and if so is it a novel, are you writing more short stories, what are you writing now?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

I'm trying to do a novel in Shona.

FLORENCE AKST

And at what stage is it, is it still in your head or is it nearly finished?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

It's on page 60 (laughter).

FLORENCE AKST

Is that page 60 or 600 pages, or are you nearly finished?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

I don't know how long it's going to be I don't usually say this is going to be, so long.

FLORENCE AKST

Do you think I would consider it a pessimistic work, as I rather think your other has been, or is there a change in your outlook?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

I don't know about that (laughing) I can't say.

FLORENCE AKST

But do you expect a work of art to finish on an up-note, do you expect there to be a success at the end, that the hero has achieved whatever he set out for. Or do you look on it as a slice of life with every ingredient?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

Well I suppose that tells on the way I look, it might reflect on my growing I suppose. It isn't as if I want to have a kind of box in which I say, 'life is like that'. No I simply start off writing a story and it ends the way it ends, and I might say I don't have any control over it.

FLORENCE AKST

I was just going to say that, you sound as though you become almost a passive member of an activity, that your job is merely to write down what is happening and some other force has the imagination.

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

That's how it finally goes.

FLORENCE AKST

So, for instance, you can't tell me how your new novel is going to end?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

No I definitely can't.

FLORENCE AKST

But you can tell me who the main character is, I imagine on page 60 we've met him already. Is it a him or a her?

(4)

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

It's a him, it's a family and some friends in Harare. Some have been overseas; say been over here to England.

FLORENCE AKST

They've come back after independence?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

After independence yes. Well it's things to do with art, some people seem to think that the cultural centre of the world is out, away from Africa and this young man who is a sculptor, is saying that it should be here in Africa.

FLORENCE AKST

And is he someone who's been abroad or has he remained in Zimbabwe?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

He has been abroad.

FLORENCE AKST

And is that parallel to your experience, have you been spending some time abroad or were you inside what was Rhodesia?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

I haven't been abroad before, so it is a bit of a collage of people I know who have been outside.

FLORENCE AKST

And do you feel this is a very important issue now for people in Zimbabwe?

CHARLES MUNGOSHI

Yes, right now some people feel that you have to go to America now to be able to do anything. They think the cultural centre is America, the continent, Europe, England. But I think they are looking at the wrong thing for the time being.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Zimbabwean writer Charles Mungoshi. And staying with Zimbabwe we move to an exhibition of photographs at the Africa Centre by the English photographer Leslie MacIntyre. Despite it's no-nonsense title "Rural Reconstruction in Zimbabwe", MacIntyre's photographs reveal a rare mixture of political commitment and compositional excellence. Her subject matter is rural reconstruction in Zimbabwe and her principal characters are women and children. Producer Nick Barker went and spoke with her at the Africa Centre and asked her whether she felt the people she was photographing were inhibited by her presense.

LESLIE MACINTYRE

I couldn't say any of them were inhibited, I mean they were conscious there was a camera there but often if I was spending the day or two in one place it was forgotten after a time, so it was very relaxed, nobody objected to me photographing them. And I just felt a great warmth and a delight in a way that they had somebody there, especially a woman, photographing them, and recording their early days of independence.

NICK BARKER

How would you describe the nature of your photography, it's very narrative isn't it, you try and tell a story?

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Yes I do. I'm very conscious of the aesthetics in the pictures but also I want it to be quite a straight forward message that people get from each image so that there's no confusion. I mean I want it to reflect a specific aspect of the reconstruction that I witnessed and they are happy pictures because people were feeling very good.

NICK BARKER

And presumably you are aware of the danger of simply producing a propagandistic photograph.

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Yes I'm not actually very interested in that. I suppose I want the story to be clear enough, you know, if the women look strong and dynamic - that's the story in itself, they don't all have to have clenched fists for me to make my point.

NICK BARKER

Now in most of your photographs there's a great deal of activity. And so I'm wondering what, in fact, is your method of operation, when you press the shutter button, what's going through your head?

LESLIE MACINTYRE

I will have been watching everybody very carefully and following the movement of whatever scene I'm observing and I try to anticipate a moment that is going to be strong, visually and also reflect an apex, if you like, in the meeting or whatever, where there is a gesture and a moment that's going to crystallise the whole event.

NICK BARKER

Perhaps at this stage we could actually go round the exhibition and look at certain photographs.

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Okay, fine.

(6)

NICK BARKER

Leslie here we're standing in front of, I think certainly one of my favourite photographs in the exhibition, perhaps we can attempt to describe it.

LESLIE MACINTYRE

It's a photograph of four school children looking through a little louvered window, obviously from a class-room, and they're in uniform and they're all smiling at me because they're obviously conscious that I'm there and quite delighted that I'm there. But outside the school building there's a boy and a girl again looking at me and conscious of being photographed but it's a warm picture.

NICK BARKER

Were you in fact speaking to the girl and the boy outside the school room first?

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Well the boy and the girl had been following me around, and I happened to stop at the window anyway because the girls were sort of asking me questions and asking me what I was doing there, and I was explaining that I was there and photographing their school because it was also where there's a village health worker class which is based there.

NICK BARKER

Now to me the boy looks as if he's proudly showing you his school?

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Yes it's almost like he's got his hand up and showing me a painting or something, it's very strange, which is contained within this little window.

NICK BARKER

Now over here we have another delightful picture of a group of seven or eight women sitting outside a hut is it?

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Yes that's right. There was a meeting they're all members of an agricultural co-operative and I spent a day with somebody who worked at Silvera House in Harare who had obviously been on a course there and then gone back on to the communal land and were functioning now as a sort of collective farm.

NICK BARKER

Here they're enjoying a tremendously funny joke, by the look of things.

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Yes I knew, I was very conscious when this woman stood up because I had been aware of her from the moment I arrived that I felt she was the person that they were looking forward to hearing from. And also she was definitely, she knew I was there with a camera, so there's a gesture that she indulged in that was sort of quite remarkable.

NICK BARKER

Perhaps we should describe it further. There's this one central woman in the middle of the picture in a pink dress and she is making this very funny gesture and all the women sitting around her are falling apart, collapsing in laughter.

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Yes but also looking at me again, so they were obviously aware that I was there photographing it I think, and delighting in that.

NICK BARKER

Now over here we have a black and white photograph of again a group of women standing up, there are three main figures in the foreground. And in the bottom right hand corner there's a little tiny boy, looking away from the action. It's an interesting photograph in that two of the main women in the foreground who are smiling and looking up are looking in one direction but then many of the women standing behind them are looking in another direction. Now were you aware of all these different activities when you pressed the button?

LESLIE MACINTYRE

Yes. I mean this photograph was taken after quite a long, I mean a few hours of sort of speeches, it was taken at the opening of a women's agricultural co-op just on the edges of Harare and we were getting to the moment when actually the string was going to be cut and the women could then go out into the fields and start working them. So it was like everybody was getting up having sort of sat down for hours and hours and that's why in a way there is sort of slight confusion, everybody's looking in different directions, they know this is the moment and the child was just off in a world of his own really and clapping his hands, because he knew something good was happening but he wasn't quite sure what it was.

NICK BARKER

But you with your eye you could isolate all these various sections of the scene when you pressed the button.

(8)

LESLIE MACINTYRE

I was very conscious yes, of everything that was there and I just hoped that I got it really when I took the photograph.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The photographer Leslie MacIntyre talking to Nick Barker. And lets end the programme with some music by an extremely popular band in Zimbabwe: Thomas Mapfumo and The Blacks Unlimited. This song's called "Chitima Cherusununguko". Till the same time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.