

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to "Arts and Africa". And this is how the National Dance Troupe of Zaire is going to open the programme.

TAPE

EXTRACT - "NKENGE"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Let me set the scene: It's night time in a cemetery. The evil spirits are prowling. Into this fearful setting comes a young bride and her new husband. He was a handsome young man. Now he's revealed himself as a devil!

TAPE

EXTRACT - "NKENGE"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Scary stuff, eh? It's the dramatic climax of the latest production of the National Dance Troupe of Zaire to be seen by the outside world. Instead of a sequence of unrelated traditional dances, the dances are moulded around a story, the story of Nkenge. And here's the company's director, Mobyem Mikanza, to tell us the plot.

MOBYEM MIKANZA

We tell a story. We don't put on stage dances non-related one to the other. We, first of all, have a story. It's called "Nkenge" which is a story about a young girl in a village. She was very beautiful and she didn't want to marry someone from the village. She was looking for someone who was handsome who could keep her beauty. At the end she finds the man she was looking for. He's very rich, he's not from the village. She gets married to the man and then leaves the village with her new husband. Then she finds out that the man she married was the devil. The man brings her to the cemetery and other devils come in a macabre scene. But the girl had a young brother who was called the village idiot. No one paid attention to the boy and finally it is the boy who saves his sister from devils in the cemetery. We tell the story as the griots did it in our villages many years ago. They did it by words: we do it with dance and music.

TAPE

EXTRACT - "NKENGE"

MOBYEM MIKANZA

The story is traditional but the techniques we use are a mixture, of course. We take traditional dances to express all the scenes and the situations in which we talk about tradition. Of course, as a national dance company we have a mission to educate people. We didn't take the story and try to tell it because it's a beautiful story but we want to teach something and I think that the story of "Nkenge" is somehow the story of the African, and our continent now. We are between tradition and what we call 'modernism' and we have to find our way. Are we going to live in the traditional way or are we going to put ourself in the new way we had from colonization?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And this attitude towards the dances of Zaire has led Moobyem Mikanza to create "Nkenge" and other dance dramas for showing throughout his country and abroad. And though they have danced in Nigeria and Morocco, 'abroad' means up to the present mainly France, the Soviet Union and the United States, where the music and our interview with Mobyem Mikanza were recorded. By-the-way, he's a considerable impresario; he founded the National Theatre of Zaire way back in 1969 and the National Dance Company in '74 and he's also in charge of a couple of music ensembles and a popular show, all based in Kinshasa. Then there are the eight regional entertainment groups - altogether thirteen companies. Perhaps it's this diversity that makes him so objective.

MOBYEM MIKANZA

It's no longer possible for us to put on stage an African dance because you have to dance for two or three hours before you get into the feeling of the dance in Africa. I cannot do it on stage - keep people only for one dance, for two or three hours and we have the techniques we use to stylize the dances.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - ZAIRE NATIONAL DANCE TROUPE

MOBYEM MIKANZA

The National Dance Company started in '74. Our first production was put on in '75. It was called "Lianja" and it was another epic story we took from a legend. Before we go out with that production, it was seen by many people in Zaire for at least five years before we go out with it. Nkenge was produced mostly last year. In December it won the first prize for the best dance production in Zaire. It was only after that, that I decided to tour with that production. It means that we first work for our people. What we are bringing outside must be an image of Zaire.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The director of the National Dance Troupe of Zaire, Mobyem Mikanza.

Someone else who consciously combines tradition with modern techniques is our second guest, Fred Ibanda, an artist from Uganda. He was trained at Makerere University's School of Fine Art and then he worked as a commercial artist, first for an advertising agency and then for the Uganda government press. In 1977 he became an independent professional artist.

When Anne Bolsover visited his recent exhibition in London, she found two distinct kinds of pictures - black and white pencil drawings, looking solid and still; and vigorous ink-coloured pictures that seemed to flow or surge - land cleft by an earthquake or fluid, twining shapes entitled "The Lovers". In one, a huge bird rather like an exotic cockeral with a red comb and outspread talens swoops low over a village. Anne Bolsover asked Fred Ibanda which one he'd like to talk about.

FRED IBANDA

Well I'd probably talk about the "Lava Bird". This is purely imaginary and you know like most of these pictures in the exhibition, we don't have active volcanos in Uganda. But it doesn't prevent the artist from imagining those sort of things. So I just sat down one day and thought supposing here was an active volcano and instead of the usual lava, you see huge unique birds emerging out of the mountain and throwing all the rubble around and destroying all the creation around the hill.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How did you choose the kind of colour effect of that painting because you've used browns and kind of oranges and blacks and very darkish green, it's a very kind of dark painting?

FRED IBANDA

Well I wanted to inject a lot of action in this picture and I thought that kind of colour scheme would give me the kind of action that I wanted. I also wanted to portray the kind of heat or you know it's not the usual lava but even these birds actually give off a lot of heat. So this is the kind of thing that made me use this kind of colour scheme.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Now another picture with a very different kind of colour scheme, much more greens and blues and yellows, you've entitled it "Heaven Fell Last Night" and it's a really striking picture. Tell me about that one.

FRED IBANDA

Yes I got the title from this song which I don't even remember the fellow who sang it. But when I'm painting I really like to listen to soft, nice music. So I thought I would portray, visually, Heaven Fell Last Night. And I imagined the heavens cracking down and all these shapes falling down on the houses and crops.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Now the black and white drawings, they look very much like wood carvings. They look like they've been done with very, very soft charcoal. Perhaps we could turn to one of the them and talk about how, in fact, you did it to get that effect?

FRED IBANDA

Well I haven't used charcoal at all. What happens is that I think up an idea which actually gives sculpture. In other words I wanted to see that I can portray, sculpt your ideas on paper. What happens is that I use soft pencils to draw the objects first and then after I've drawn them to my satisfaction, I photograph them, put them onto litho plates and run off a few copies. So that's this pencil effect, when it gets sorted out by the camera. That's why you get this kind of broken effect which looks like charcoal.

ANNE BOLSOVER

This one we have in front of us, Mother and Child, can you tell perhaps about some of the ideas. It's a very interesting kind of form?

FRED IBANDA

Yes, in sculpture I have always wanted to explore the material that I'm using. I really like to bore a hole in some of them. I would like to see through the piece of sculpture and that's why you feel like you can pass your hand through one of those holes and actually pass through to the other side of the picture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The drawings and paintings of Fred Ibanda of Uganda, talking to Anne Bolsover.

And now, back to Zaire and the National Dance Troupe for our closing music. Until this time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - ZAIRE NATIONAL DANCE TROUPE.