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# Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and we're launching today's programme with music.

MUSIC - KWELA "GOOD NEWS"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

One of the most popular of all South African songs this time in a special arrangement by Dudu Pukwana for Gwigwi Mrwebi's band and it has been providing an introduction to another highly regarded South African name - the author Nadine Gordimer. A new selection of her short stories has just been published - it's called "Six Feet of the Country". It is making a double impact because simultaneously with its publication comes the showing here in Britain of seven short films made for television out of these stories. But before we hear about the films here's an extract from a story called "Oral History" to give a sample of the power of her writing.

EXTRACT FROM "ORAL HISTORY"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nadine Gordimer has been fortunate in having as a colleague on the project a fellow South African, Barney Simon, a man of the theatre, best known for his production of the celebrated play, "Woza Albert." Here he is, explaining the choice of the stories.

BARNEY SIMON

We tried to choose stories which would cover the kaleidoscope of South African experience, but essentially through her eyes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Barney Simon was most closely involved in two of the television films, "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" and "City Lovers". When he came in to talk about them, Florence Akst suggested that he first give a brief account of the stories themselves.

BARNEY SIMON

"City Lovers" which is a film that I scripted and ultimately directed when the other director fell out, is the story of a German geologist who's working in South Africa and living in a rich, white suburb. He becomes involved with a young mixed-blood girl, South Africans call them 'Coloureds' who's working as a cashier in a local supermarket. She begins by delivering groceries to his flat and, in time, they become involved. She lives in a small location for coloured people outside Johannesburg.

FLORENCE AKST

Much poorer than the area he lives in?

BARNEY SIMON

Yes.

EXTRACT FROM "CITY LOVERS"

BARNEY SIMON

The house, the whole house, that she lives in with her mother and her grandmother and her sister is smaller than his bedroom, and in time they become involved with each other and she becomes aware of other possibilities, ones she'd never dreamed of, in the way he lives, in his music, his books, his history. And he's kind of flattered by her. He's a solitary man and, I think, he begins to thaw, to become a warmer person through his relationship with her.

You might wonder why we have chosen to tell the story of these two people, but then it is set in South Africa and that's the key, because at a certain point there's a knock on the door. To him, a knock on the door means it's something he has to answer, to her it means it can be the police. He goes to answer the door and she drags him away from the door to the bedroom and she flings herself into the cupboard and gives him the key and tells him to lock her in to hide her. Then the police come in. They know the girl's in there, they're looking for her because it's illegal for a white man and a black woman to sleep together. They know that she's there, and so it is just a question of a cat and mouse game that they are playing, but they wander around, very lackadaisically, looking for evidence. And the evidence they are looking for is for signs of sex and signs of the woman - her hair, stains on the sheets or underwear. They wander round collecting these things and then finally they get to the cupboard and they ask him to open it and he says that he has lost the key. Then they force it open and the girl is squatting

BARNEY SIMON

there. They take them to the police station and they are both stripped. They both have to strip before a guard. It happens to him and it happens to her. Finally she is stripped and, to me, it is the ultimate rape by that society of women (I won't even say black women because they have no respect for anything) they, a doctor, and I chose my own doctor who's a very gentle man to play the part, I wanted to show how it's the system, that sometimes good people are used by the system. Anyway he's doing this job, and he puts her on a bed, puts her feet in stirrups and scoops her out for signs of sex.

FLORENCE AKST

Gives her an internal examination?

BARNEY SIMON

Internal examination.

FLORENCE AKST

You would equate with a form of rape?

BARNEY SIMON

Yes. That's the film which I scripted from Nadine's story and directed.

FLORENCE AKST

That's the more powerful of the two films to watch, but the other film, "Good Climate" also has tremendously powerful undercurrents.

BARNEY SIMON

This is one that I scripted and a man called Lynton Stevenson directed. That's a story of a middle-aged white woman who works in a suburban garage as a clerk, she runs the place more or less.

EXTRACT FROM: "GOOD CLIMATE, FRIENDLY INHABITANTS"

BARNEY SIMON

There's a black man, an older black man, who is in charge of the selling of the petrol and the third person in the film is a young Rhodesian - it's set a bit back - a mercenary.

FLORENCE AKST

A white mercenary?

BARNEY SIMON

A white mercenary, and one's not sure if he comes from South Africa or from there. But he has been a mercenary in Zimbabwe and he's sleeping at the Zoo Lake in a park in a Mercedes, an old battered Mercedes. He comes to get petrol and he moves into this woman's life. He obviously sees her as bait and he forms a relationship with her. She is lonely and very middle class and very proper and she becomes terrified of her need for this man because she wants him sexually and I think she is afraid of that part of herself that wants him above all.

Bit by bit he begins to terrorise her life and the black man in the garage is witness to a lot of her pain and at a certain point when the man has moved out of her apartment and she thinks she is free of him, he comes to look for her at the garage on a day when she is away at the hairdresser's. The black man tells him that she has gone away, she has gone to live in Zimbabwe. That's to save her from him. The story is framed in a letter that she is writing to her daughter and what you watch is what is actually happening to her and what she chooses to report in her letter and at the end you realise that she still doesn't understand who has been the civilized man. The black man at the end runs the Service Station and you realise that actually he is the person who rules.

FLORENCE AKST

That was a wonderful performance. Sam Williams, I think was the movie actor, I thought he was really tremendous. He has a small role, he's not on screen very much of the time and you say he's a witness of what's happening, but in fact, he only, as far as the viewer is aware, sees her state of mind when she is at work, but from that he sees the whole story. Both the stories are very much the South African world through women's eyes?

BARNEY SIMON

And through a white woman's eyes you could say. Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

The first story definitely, the second one is a coloured woman who is equally naive, but perhaps for different reasons.

BARNEY SIMON

When I said a white woman I meant Nadine Gordimer.

FLORENCE AKST

I see, yes.

BARNEY SIMON

But she is a very special pair of eyes.

FLORENCE AKST

Would you say that in "City Lovers" (the older German and the young Coloured girl are lovers) that the coloured girl is a portrait of a city person? Because usually city people are more aware than she was, she was very innocent.

BARNEY SIMON

I looked around myself to find the right house for the family to live, and I found a little house that I really loved and I loved the woman that owned that house. She was a coloured woman of about sixty and ultimately I got her to play the mother in the film, the girl's mother. Next door I found an old woman who I got to play the grandmother and working with those people I became so much aware of the great pride in keeping their houses absolutely spotless. Well, they are very Christian people and it figures that this girl, too, was brought up quite strictly but with love. She's not a worldly woman. I decided to make the German appear on television, he's being interviewed on television when she first sees him, which is what first stuns her, that this man who's been on television comes and buys groceries from her. So he's a glamorous figure to her, so she's like a fan. It's that naivete.

FLORENCE AKST

And he's also a door that opens into possibilities of a wider world?

BARNEY SIMON

He's also a non-racist.

FLORENCE AKST

I wonder whether people in Africa will have the chance of seeing any of these films on television? If so, what are they going to learn about South Africa that they haven't known before?

BARNEY SIMON

The thing that's come through to me travelling as I have been recently with my play "Woza Albert" as well as dealing with the films, has been the fact that racism is a problem all over the world. In South Africa it's a law. I think they'll get a sense of the country, and the sense of the absurdity of the situation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Barney Simon. And I'm glad to hear that people in other European countries will have the chance to see this series of films on their television screens. Let's hope they do reach Africa. By the way Nadine Gordimer's book "Six Feet of The Country" is published by Penguin at £1.75 in the United Kingdom. The extracts from it were read by Meryl O'Keefe. And remembering the innocent young coloured girl in "City Lovers" here's some music that she could have danced to. "Mini Skirt Jive No.1" finishes the programme. All that's left is for me Alex Tetteh-Lartey to say goodbye and see you next week.