

# Arts and Africa

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. The Commonwealth Institute and National Film Theatre here in London have just finished playing host to dozens of black film makers. The occasion was a Black Film Festival at which more than 50 films by British and American black directors were shown. There've been discussions, workshops, and seminars and the directors have made the most of the opportunity to exchange ideas about film making and to discuss the way they see the societies they're working in. One of the organisers of the Festival is Denise Oliver, director of the Black Film Maker Foundation in New York. Anne Bolsover asked her how relevant the black American films at the Festival would be to an African audience.

## DENISE OLIVER

There is a great relationship and interest between Afro-Americans and Africans and many of the film makers consider themselves to be African people and have done films from that perspective. In particular, I find Warrington Hudlin's film "Street Corner Stories" is about working men who get up in the morning and before they go to work they share stories with each other. It's the continuation of the oral tradition from African society and in many ways these men represent the Griots of our neighbourhoods and communities in the States. He's also done a short film - a ten minute piece called "Capoeira of Brazil". It's a film about an African martial art called capoeira. It was developed in Angola and when slaves were taken off to Brazil, they used this African martial art to try to escape from slavery and they would have slave revolts. The slave masters banned the art so they disguised it as a dance. It's been quite interesting to Afro-Americans to find out, you usually think that all martial arts come from China, and they've been very proud about finding out that there's a martial art that's rooted in Africa. Moving onto another film maker we have two films which are part of a trilogy by Robert Van Lierop, "O Povo Organizado" and "A Lutta Continua" which were two films that were made about developing African liberation struggles in Angola and Mozambique and the films were done prior to the successful liberation of these countries but they were used all over the United States to raise support and to educate the populace about the kind of struggles that were going on in Africa. I think they were the two most important films in that respect.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What kind of things did they show?

DENISE OLIVER

They showed people beginning to try to develop an awareness of how to run a country, how to build an army, the training and skills, acquisition of people on the Continent who are fighting, the need for aid and solidarity from other groups of people around the world. But for many Afro/Americans, this was their first look at Africa coming out of a neo-colonial period or colonial period. You have to remember that when you're a black person in the States you've never seen an army of black people. You've never had the concept of what it's like for there to be a country run by black people and that was very important for Americans.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How would you feel about a lot of the films of black film makers being shown in Africa because at the moment black audiences in Africa are just seeing cheap third rate Indian films, Kung Fu films, they have no chance to see anything else.

DENISE OLIVER

And black exploitation films. They see the films from the States that come out of Hollywood which are not made by blacks, they're not written by blacks or directed by blacks but those films present an image of the black American as being the sort of flashy pimp or prostitute with the Cadillac and the big rings and fancy hats, and that's not the reality of the black American experience. We feel that it's very important to make that kind of contact with Africa. We'd love to be able to bring some of the films over to Africa, share them with African people and we'd also like to encourage African film makers to come to the States with their work and we'd help them get it distributed.

ANNE BOLSOVER

So get a whole two way thing going?

DENISE:

Yes.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How could this be organised do you think?

DENISE OLIVER

Well it could be organised through the Black Film Maker Foundation which I'm the Executive Director of. If people will contact us we can start off. Maybe next year there'll be an African film festival in Africa with Afro/American work.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Denise Oliver of the Black Film Maker Foundation. One film which particularly caught Anne's attention was "Diary of an African Nun".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Its director, Julie Dash, explained what it's about.

JULIE DASH

It was originally a short story written by Alice Walker. She's a black Afro/American novelist. I adapted it to the screen because I was completely seduced by the story and intrigued by it when I read the story. Its about an African girl who wanted to become a nun simply because they were shrouded in whiteness like the mountains she saw from her window every morning. They seemed so regal and serene and so that seemed the right thing to do for a young African girl in a Catholic missionary. But when she became a nun she realised she would live a life of barrenness, a life of seclusion away from her friends, family and most importantly her culture was completely stripped away. So she had this struggle between her Christian vows and her birthright, her culture and her people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Julie Dash talking about her film "Diary of an African Nun". Seeing as we're talking to black Americans in this weeks programme, it seems a good opportunity to pay our last respects to the great black jazz man, Theolonius Monk who died very recently. Here's him playing solo piano in "North of the Sunset".

GRAMS

NORTH OF THE SUNSET - THEOLONIUS MONK.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The inimitable sound of Theolonius Monk playing "North of the Sunset". Another successful contribution to the Black Film Festival was "Syvilla - They Dance to her Drum". It's a documentary about the first black American concert dancer Syvilla Fort who was greatly influenced by African and Caribbean dance movement. The director of the film is Ayoka Chenzira and Anne asked her what Syvilla Fort's dance technique is like.

AYOKA CHENZIRA

Syvilla Fort taught a modern dance technique that used movement resources from Africa, the Caribbean and South America all blended into a modern dance style. This particular technique evolved from what is known as the Catherine Dunham technique. Catherine Dunham is known as the mother of black dance in our country and she set up a school in New York City and Syvilla Fort was the main feature, the driving force of the school and it was the only place where black dancers could go and train.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What kind of African rhythms and movements were they taking in the dance?

AYOKA CHENZIRA

You see in Africa it's not only just moving but there are reasons for moving. One part of the country may be interested in pelvic movements because procreation is so important. Another one may focus on the arms or another one just on the upper parts of the body. These things were analysed by Catherine Dunham. She extracted many of those movements and the reasons for the movements and found a link between what many of the African dancers were doing and the folklore of black Americans.

ANNE BOLSOVER

So what did your film show? Did it show all the different types of dances?

AYOKA CHENZIRA

Actually it focuses on the woman. We take a look at her early dancing days through still photographs and I recreate some of her early choreography from the 1940's. I show her teaching a vital dance class where you see many of those pelvic movements and the arm movements and the rolling of the head and the moving of the upper torso. You see her demonstrating that with drummers in class. We see a final tribute to her which was done five days before she died. Then newspaper clippings would say: "She's gone". Then you see her dancing which is a real treat.

ANNE BOLSOVER

The other film you brought sounds very different. It's called: "Hair Piece - A Film for Nappy Headed People". Now what's that? (Laughs)

AYOKA CHENZIRA

(Laughs) All right. It is a film that takes a look at black women and men and their relationship with their hair. If you turn on the television, and you can't see your own image, what you see is the images projected by the host culture in terms of how you should look, how you should present yourself etc., etc. Many people have found that very difficult to deal with and have thus changed themselves, consciously, to fit into the guideline set down by the host culture and have not in many cases wanted to deal with what they or we have like nappy hair. Nappy hair being kinky, nutty, woolly, rebellious hair, hair that you can't get a comb through, hair that you have to fight with etc., etc. This film takes a look at that and at the end says: "This hair is beautiful too".

ANNE BOLSOVER

Do you think both your films would be suitable for an African audience?

AYOKA CHENZIRA

Yes, I do. I think that the African audience would enjoy "Syvilla - They Dance To Her Drum" because they would recognise a lot of the movement patterns and drumming rhythms that are presented in the film.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Would you like to see a much closer relationship between African film directors and black American ones?

AYOKA CHENZIRA

Yes I would. African film makers, black American film makers, black British film makers, Afro/Caribbean film makers. Yes I would like to see some kind of network happening where being black Americans, we could have our films shown to the African audience and the African film makers could have their work shown in the United States. We are very far away from one another in terms of distance but in terms of basic understanding of things, common problems and common interests, we are very close, very close in spirit and I think that when you bring our work together, that's one of the things that hits you very clearly.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ayoka Chenzira talking about the potential co-operation between black American and African film makers. If you'd like to find out more about independent black American films or would like to work with black American film makers, you should write to the Black Film Maker Foundation, New York, NY 10007, USA.

That's all we have time for now so let's end the programme with another solo by Theolonius Monk. Here's "Everything happens to Me", until next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

GRAMS

EVERYTHING HAPPENS TO ME - THEOLONIUS MONK.