

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with news of theatre in Nigeria and music in Ghana.

MUSIC

LOVE SONG - AFRICAN BEATS.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The African Beats playing a plaintive love song. But more of that later in the programme, as I want to begin with a rather unusual conversation.

If you had the chance to listen to the African Theatre Season the BBC broadcast at the end of last year, you won't have forgotten the play with the extraordinary title "Die Still, Rev. Dr. Godspcak!" It was the new half hour play specially commissioned for African Theatre from one of Nigeria's - one of Africa's - most celebrated writers, Wole Soyinka. "Die Still, Rev. Dr. Godspcak!" was broadcast last December. This January a stage version was being performed by the University of Ife Theatre Company, directed by the author himself. Wole Soyinka is professor of Dramatic Art at the University of Ife and his friend and colleague Dr. Kole Omotoso who worked with the Theatre Company on the production has been talking about the version of "Dr. Godspcak" which has become a new stage play, four times as long as the radio original. And the person he has been talking to for "Arts and Africa" was none other than the producer of the African Theatre original production, Nick Barker. Naturally, Nick was not surprised to learn that there had been quite a few changes. Even the title was different.

KOLE OMOTOSO

The title of the stage version is "Requiem for a Futurologist". The futurologist in this case is Godspcak Igbehonda. The 'requiem', of course, is insisting on the need for a wake-keeping for Godspcak who refuses to die. And it is kept by the population of the town who having been told that he was going to die on a particular date come to the house to insist, against Godspcak's own protestations, that he must die.

NICK BARKER

I wonder how much the stage production has changed from the original radio draft, because in the play that I produced there were only eight characters. Now I should imagine there were plenty of people in your production.

KOLE OMOTOSO

There were a lot. In the first place, if you were really to have a crowd - you would have to have about fifty people - vendors, bicycle repairers, women selling things, - in fact it's almost like a picnic, you know. People have simply come to pitch their tents near the house of Godspoke Igbehonda to have a wake-keeping and different people come. First it is the tailor who says he has been sent to come and measure the dead body for the suit he will wear until he's buried. Then comes the coffin-maker who in this case happens to be a Ghanaian who had had to leave his country because of the economic situation.

NICK BARKER

Now the coffin-maker is new. He certainly wasn't in the radio production.

KOLE OMOTOSO

Ah, o.k. He's a very stylish coffin-maker and he said, when he took a look at the picture of Igbehonda with his top hat, he knew that the only way he could be buried would be in a coffin in the shape of a top hat. Then comes this Indian who is referred to in the play as an 'Indian looney' who says he has felt the vibrations of changes taking place in Africa and through Godspoke and he has come to verify them for himself. And, of course, there is Eleazar Hosannah who takes on two other characters, that of Alaba servant of Godspoke, that of Dr. Semuwe ...

NICK BARKER

They're played by the same person?

KOLE OMOTOSO

....they are played by the same person, and Eleazar Hosannah as the assistant of Godspoke. There are three characters played by one person.

NICK BARKER

It is, I think, a brilliant play. The central idea of this man Godspoke, an ageing astrologer who, throughout his life, has fed off the ignorance and gullibility of the public. Indeed he's promoted it and yet he is of course a victim of it. This is a wonderful concept isn't it?

KOLE OMOTOSO

It is, at least for Nigeria. It is so contemporaneous to the situation. In no other play has Soyinka been able to touch so closely to society to the extent that people could recognise the characters. The printed programme we made for the play included recent predictions for the year 1983 by different parapsychologists and futurologists. So it was a very contemporaneous thing. To that extent it has aroused a lot of interest that a story written in 17th century England can be so contemporaneous with the situation. Of course it's not surprising, given the situation of the society in transition.

NICK BARKER

And of course although the play is a sort of moral drama about the gullability of ordinary ignorant people, Soyinka draws the characters with great affection and great humour doesn't he? I remember one particular scene where one of the members of the crowd seizes the newspaper and cites the evidence that, yes, the death of Godspcak has been predicted and of course they all agree.

TAPE

EXTRACT - DIE STILL, REV. DR. GODSPEAK!

NICK BARKER

Tell me about the structure of the play, because in the radio play, the action was continuous. It begins with an angry, impatient crowd outside the house of Godspcak. Then you have the arrival of the doctor and the action switches to the interior of Godspcak's house and then in the final part of the play, we return to the crowd. Now how was this staged? Did you have a separate middle scene inside Godspcak's home?

KOLE OMOTOSO

Exactly. In fact, it was the longest sequence and the most difficult to accept, I must say, for the audience. It's a very long bit, so much talk. And a lot of people said it was very difficult for them to take in especially as the English was so standard.

NICK BARKER

Now what you say about language interests me immensely because this play is a brilliant play, it's a masterpiece in my opinion, but I suppose some people might criticize it for being so heavily immersed in a western literary tradition and this comes over particularly clearly in the language, as you say.

KOLE OMOTOSO

Yes, exactly. It is very unusual because Soyinka's plays are so active and so much stage action is involved unlike this continuous talk which is about thirty to forty-five minutes of the play. The leading actors, the two people who played Godspcak and Eleazar, are final year students doing degrees in dramatic arts. Funso Alabi who is a very, very brilliant actor played the parts of Eleazar Hosannah, Alaba and Dr. Semuwe, all three characters, and Niyi Coker played the part of Godspcak. Then you have others like Tope Popoola who played the part of the Indian with the intonation and movement and everything. We have Bigiga (phon) who played the part of the Ife priest - because there is a whole range of religious representation, you know. The Muslims chanting their prayer, the traditional religion is chanting the Ifa, the people from the Aladora are singing their praise songs, there were people from the Student Christian Union, all sorts of things. So they were all represented. Fatomilola played the part of the tailor, Jimoh Fakoyejo played the part of the coffin-maker. I think those are the major parts.

NICK BARKER

Kole Omotoso thank you very much indeed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Talking to Kole Omotoso was Nick Barker.

And now I'd like to welcome the bearer of the latest news of the current music scene in Ghana. John Collins welcome to "Arts and Africa".

JOHN COLLINS

Thank you.

GRAMS

"HIP HIP HOP" - BOKOOR.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ah ha, I should recognize that song shouldn't I, John? For the sake of listeners who haven't heard of you before I would like to say that was your Ghanaian band "Bokoor". How is it faring?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, we made that record about two years ago when I brought the band to England and we teamed up with some West Indians. So that particular song is a cross between Ska, Highlife and South African jive really.

When I went back to Ghana about eighteen months ago some of the musicians had scattered and then with the coup and the curfew and such like I decided to leave the band for the time being and switch over to recording because I brought over a recording studio with me for my band. Some musicians discovered I had it and since then I haven't been able to do much playing at all. I've had to do recording all the time. I've recorded about sixty album-length demonstration tapes for various bands in Ghana. At the moment in Ghana there are only really two studios which are operating and there's no other demo. studio in the country. I've got the only one. So what I'm doing is quite useful.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's interesting to hear you say that you've taken to recording. I remember the last time I spoke to you which was two years ago, you mentioned the great difficulties, the desperate shortages of plastic for cutting records and this and that. Has the situation improved?

JOHN COLLINS

No, not really. I don't think records are being made at all in Ghana, only cassettes. But on the other hand, the Government is giving a boost to the arts at the moment, in a way which the previous government wasn't.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So what happens is that you do the recording and then you bring the tapes over to England for the actual discs to be cut?

JOHN COLLINS

Well, no. What was happening was that a lot of the musicians I recorded took the tapes to Nigeria or to Abidjan and had them cut there. But the tapes that I was making for them in Ghana they were using them for GBC radio and the cassettes as pure demo. tapes to get contracts.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do I understand you to mean that because of these economic difficulties, there is no commercial music left at all?

JOHN COLLINS

I wouldn't put it quite that way. But what's happened is that the urban music has suffered because nightclubs and such have had to close down but the rural music is still there. When I came to England this time some writers were saying that Highlife is dead and so on, but I couldn't understand this because if you go to town in Accra, maybe you don't hear E.T. Mensah any more or the Ramblers but if you go into the villages you hear Highlife all the time. I mean, there are about two hundred guitar bands of Ghana, there are probably about two hundred gospel groups, there are hundreds of what they call 'cultural groups' which play a sort of Highlife not using the guitars, like Wulomei and these type of groups. They've done away with the electric instruments but it's Highlife that they're playing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now in England here, so much interest is being taken now in African music.

JOHN COLLINS

Yes. In fact what I've discovered, here in London say, is that a lot of bands like Jazira, Highlife International, Banana Bunch, all these groups that are playing African music are practically all Ghanaians. This is one of the things about the way the musicians have had to leave Ghana. It has benefitted the rest of the world musically.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There are also a lot of recording companies now producing African music here.

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, Island, Virgin, Rough Trade. Yes, in fact they all are. They've all gone into the African market but the thing is they haven't been touching Ghanaian music because, as I say, the studios are few there and they've been getting most of their material either through France, the French-speaking countries in Africa or through Nigeria. So I'm interested in pushing the Ghanaian side.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well John, you'll come back and tell us more for another programme won't you?

JOHN COLLINS

Yes, no problem.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I think I'll leave you now to choose our closing music for us. What is that going to be?

JOHN COLLINS

Ah well, this is something a little bit more modern. It's sort of Afro-rock by a band called Amartey Hedzoleh.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And all that's left for me to say then is goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey and Arts and African until next week at the same time.

MUSIC

AMARTEY HEDZOLEH.