

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and our programme today features two radically different entertainments. I've been attending one, and attending the other was Queen Victoria. I'd like to begin with what I have witnessed with my own eyes and ears.

### TAPE

"MUSA, RAHMATU AND THE SEVEN-EYED GOD"

### TETTEH-LARTEY

Weird and wonderful sound effects, trumpets and Soul music, dancing and mime have been combined in the production of a new play by Ghanaian-born Rauf Adu. I've just come back from the Keskidee Centre in North London where his play, "Musa, Rahmatu and the Seven-Eyed God" has been having its premiere. It concerns Musa, a young handsome peasant in the village of Sekou, who through his discovery of the potato becomes a wealthy and powerful idol of the villagers and the merchant travellers trekking through his village. He quickly becomes the toast of all the women and during a journey with his wife, Rahmatu, he deserts her for the young wife of the village cryer who charms him with her powerfully seductive dance, but she also represents his conscience and leads him to the seven-eyed god who has been witness to the desertion and to Rahmatu's agony. The god recreates him and sends him back to his wife.

But this is not a play in the usual sense. Rather it's a fantasy - poetry in motion. Rauf Adu has discarded straightforward dialogue and uses the rhythms, repetitions and the sounds of words to convey his meaning.

### TAPE

"MUSA, RAHMATU AND THE SEVEN-EYED GOD"

### TETTEH-LARTEY

As I said, unusual and, as far as I was concerned, strangely attractive. After the performance I talked to the author not only about the production but about the message it contained.

### RAUF ADU

I think essentially, basically, it's male lust for power and the

ADU

often destructive consequences that can follow. It's a verse play so it builds up and builds up and at the end, hopefully, people saw a moral and the consequences of people's lust for power and what comes at the end of it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And what does come at the end of it? Destruction?

ADU

Destruction. Destruction.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, not only was the play written in verse but I thought the presentation itself was very poetic. You are presenting concepts on the stage expressed in dance-form and in music.

ADU

Mime, music ...

TETTEH-LARTEY

Right. Now, unfortunately, if I could put it that way, there's nothing African about it. Would you say there was anything African about it?

ADU

Yes, I think there is a whole lot of things African about it because, being a black man, if a black man writes music it's black music and being an African, everything I do, I see as African. But if you're saying there was something traditionally African about it, then I'd say no. I hope it's a reflection of me, Rauf Adu, and the people that I'm working with because these are people who are obviously Africans born outside of Africa.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I wouldn't say that the theme was African, I would say that it was more universal, more belonging to the human race. All the feelings you express there belong to mankind as a whole. It's presented in the form of a fantasy. You have this statuesque movement on the stage which Jeanette was doing superbly, in a ballet form. Now is it a fantasy?

ADU

It's dreamlike, but underneath all that there's reality, so it's an embodiment of the two.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, normally when one goes to an African play one sees something completely different from what you are doing. Is it an experiment you are making? Are you trying out something new?

ADU

Yes, because, and it would be quite presumptuous of me to say it is a progression of African culture or Afro-Caribbean culture, that would be presumptuous, but culture didn't start in one day. If it's dance someone makes this new movement and when a new generation comes along they add another movement to it. But I think we are, the whole African people are, at this stage, looking back and looking back all the time to the traditional things and we make the mistake that if we don't add something to it then the culture will be invalid sooner or later. We would become so static, you know. It has to move. I'm interested in that.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, you talk about movement. The very opening lines of your play actually give a sense of timelessness, something which happened thousands of years ago is happening now and will be happening in the future, so hold time as it were, so that this is a timeless performance.

ADU

Yes, yes!

TAPE

EFFECT OF STORM

TETTEH-LARTEY

Rauf, I thought the effects were tremendous, the effects of the storm and the effects of lightening and all that. What part did they actually play?

ADU

We had storms any time Conscience got up. Anytime Conscience was despatched from the eternal womb where the seven-eyed god lives there was that storm-like movement she used to give. So there were various sounds, and I wrote music specifically for that.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh, was the music all yours?

ADU

Yes.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Composed by you?

ADU

Yes, composed by me.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh, that's incredible. I thought ... (laughter)

ADU

It was written and arranged by me.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Very modern sort of Soul-like music. It's obvious there was a lot of work put into it. The whole production was really marvellous and I'd like to congratulate you once again.

ADU

Thank you.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And I hope you have a lot of success with it.

And I was talking to poet, musician and playwright, Rauf Adu.

There was no equivalent of "Musa, Rahmatu and the Seven-Eyed God" on the London stage in the 1880's. But it may come as a surprise to learn that there were African performers. As far back as the beginning of the nineteenth century people from Africa were coming (or rather, being brought) to Britain to become part of the entertainment industry. The ignorant curiosity of the British and Americans of those days and the Africans who were the objects of that curiosity have provoked Bernth Lindfors to undertake a tremendous amount of original research on the fate of these performers. Bernth Lindfors is Professor of English and African Literature at the University of Texas in the United States and he's been telling Florence Akst some of the stories his researches have uncovered.

LINDFORS

They came mainly from southern Africa initially, at the beginning of the century, and in the middle of the century there were groups brought from South Africa by European managers who thought they could make a good living exhibiting these peoples. Some of them, in fact, were just human specimens. There was a woman in 1810, for example, on the London stage who became known as the Hottentot Venus and she was put on display in London for a few years, and later in Paris. But these were human curiosities, in other words, people being brought from the Third World - one found American Indians at the same time, Eskimos, people from the Sandwich Islands ...

FLORENCE AKST

So they were introduced just to be looked at by people who were curious?

LINDFORS

They had a show. They would play a musical instrument or they would dance. The Hottentot Venus was exhibited in a cage and was paraded on a chain and was commanded to do several things.

AKST

And of course this was still the time of Slavery, I suppose.

LINDFORS

It was. Though slavery had been outlawed in Britain by that time and, in fact, the managers of the Hottentot Venus were taken to court. As it happens they lost the law case because the woman testified on behalf of her manager and insisted that she wanted the show to go on. She felt she was earning good money and didn't want her rights as a performer to be interfered with. But that's another story.

AKST

Do tell us a little bit about the entertainments that were put on; whether they were traditional dancers; whether people wore traditional costume; and what effect they had, whether people enjoyed it. They got a big audience did they?

LINDFORS

Well, let me give you two examples from the middle of the century. In 1846 a group of San performers, that is Bush men, as they were known ...

AKST

From the Kalahari Desert part of South Africa?

LINDFORS

That's right. Yes. Two men, two women and a child were put on display and the act consisted of their imitating some of the events in their lives, capturing creatures in the desert, for example, or showing how they use the bow, the arrow, the javelin. And the thing that comes through the reviews was that the performers were exceptionally talented. They threw themselves into their roles to such an extent that the reviewers often said that they wished that we had English actors this talented. A later group in 1853 was a larger group of thirteen Zulus who came and acted out what was said to be a typical day in Zulu life, which, of course, wasn't typical at all unless you had in a single day a marriage ceremony, a war party going out, a witch doctor smelling out a witch, actual combat between rival tribes, that kind of thing. But this was a dramatic display accompanied with a great deal of very vigorous singing and dancing. It won enthusiastic applause all through the summer of 1853. It later went on tour through Paris, through Prussia and other places in Europe.

AKST

But we still have companies, national dance troupes sometimes, who take very similar fare from Africa to Europe.

Going back to those early days in the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, what sort of audience turned out? You said what the critics thought and that they were complimentary but who went along to these shows? Were they just anybody and their family or were they particular parts of British society who made up the audience?

LINDFORS

Everyone went. This was what was remarkable about the performances. Some of them were priced very low to enable working people to come. But there was also in the advertisement a list of very prominent people,

LINDFORS

dukes and earls and duchesses would attend and sign a guest book. All of these performers in the middle and later part of the century performed before Queen Victoria, often at command performances at Buckingham Palace.

AKST

But if their cultures were misrepresented then prejudices could be either established or re-enforced.

LINDFORS

Well, when you represent someone coming from Africa as being a creature incapable of speech ...

AKST

And this happened?

LINDFORS

... Yes, as some of these performers were said to be. That they were part of the animal rather than the human world ...

AKST

Did they go along with this? They were willing to remain dumb ...

LINDFORS

Well, many of them spoke no English when they arrived. Some of them learned it very rapidly and this comes through some of the reviews that after they were here a year or two they could actually converse with the audience and this was regarded as evidence of their progress. It's often sad to see the nature of the commentary, the assumptions made, the arrogance of the audience in viewing other human beings.

AKST

And it sounds as though this was one of the ways that Queen Victoria thought she was finding out about her empire.

LINDFORS

No doubt was. It would be very interesting to see Queen Victoria's diary entries on the days that she actually saw some of these performers.

TETTEH-LARTEY

It's amazing, don't you think, that one has to do research to find out about these performers when they were so sensational in the theatre at the time. Well I hope Professor Bernth Lindfors will have the opportunity to continue his research. Next week at the same time I'll be back with more news and interviews for "Arts and Africa". Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC

LIMPOPO