

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. The world of theatre has always been, for me, an immeasurably exciting one; for actors and directors a precarious one to be sure, but all the same, full of attractions. Cameroonian impressario, come playwright, director and actor, Victor Musinga, is one of those people who sum up the energy, inventiveness and fantasy of theatrical entertainment. There are those that are organised and those that do the organising. Victor is an organiser. But as he explained to Florence Akst, it wasn't without some difficulties that he got his own English speaking troupe off the ground.

VICTOR MUSINGA

You see first of all it was around 1973 that it was announced that FESTAC was going to take place. Luckily, at this time, I had a play which I had written, "The Trials of Ngowa". It was based on a tradition whereby girls are engaged to old men while they are still young and by the time they are of age, they realise they can't put up with this man and they revolt. This causes most of our girls to get into prostitution at a very tender age. So luckily I had a play at hand and a suitable one too. Now my trumpcard to get these members to form this amateur group was that if we won, we would be able to go to Lagos to FESTAC.

FLORENCE AKST

Ah, so you had an enticement?

VICTOR MUSINGA

Yes, this was my trumpcard. First of all I had to get the main character, Ngowa, a girl. So I met a girl who, after meeting so many girls, she was the first person to give me a positive response. So I hooked fast onto her.

FLORENCE AKST

Had she any experience in theatre?

VICTOR MUSINGA

No, she hadn't really.

FLORENCE AKST

How did you know she was going to be right?

VICTOR MUSINGA

She was a teacher. I was relying on my grooming her on stage. I realised I was going to chew everything for her and then she had to swallow it.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes.

VICTOR MUSINGA

I just wanted somebody to give me the positive answer that they like to be involved in acting. So she was the first person. Finally I was able to have for the first time, twenty two members. Most of them had left secondary schools and left teacher-training college, at least most of them. And they were all based here in Buea. So then we went in for rehearsals. I just had to study the actors and I used some of my psychology to realise this character could fit this and this could go there. And then we went in for rehearsals. So I had to do without any training in theatre, I just had to get them on stage and start grooming them in the way I imagined this character should be. And of course I was supposed to act all the parts because in the course of writing I had to act every part.

FLORENCE AKST

That is how you write?

VICTOR MUSINGA

That is how I write.

FLORENCE AKST

Did the play go to Lagos?

VICTOR MUSINGA

Well finally there was a provincial competition. So my group came up in the South West Province and finally we had to go to Yaounde for the national finals, where for the first time, a group from the anglophone part of the country came out first. So my group was first and automatically there was every evidence that we were going to go to Lagos. So I said "O.K. let's go ahead". I gave them lots of encouragement. "We are going to Lagos". Finally when we failed, when for some technical reason, something or the other, we didn't go, this was where I had my trials. I had to get the group in tact.

FLORENCE AKST

I wonder if I could get a clearer idea, not having seen one of your plays, about the troupe and the plays. First of all, what are the subjects? Are they all traditional subjects you touch on?

VICTOR MUSINGA

No. My objective of setting up the group, first of all, to awaken our society to the world of theatre, reflect our social, political and cultural life on stage, and finally to entertain the society on stage. But automatically in the course of presenting it, entertainment should be at the forefront, yes. (Laughs)

FLORENCE AKST

I think as a member of the audience, I prefer it there.

VICTOR MUSINGA

(Laughs) You see I look at it first of all like this, the audience didn't know much about theatre. So first of all you had to awaken them to it.

FLORENCE AKST

But right from the beginning you have had a moral element because you were saying that you wanted to give people an alternative.....

VICTOR MUSINGA

That is it.

FLORENCE AKST

....to other forms of entertainment that were not so profitable.

VICTOR MUSINGA

You see when we reflect our social life on stage, at the same time we try to reform society so that is really my objective. And I think I have actually won the audience. I think at first it wasn't easy to get the audience because they are all embedded in alcohol. So what I did, when I realised this, I resorted to schools because there you have the young talents. So when the students have these plays, they are excited, they understand, they enjoy it. During the holidays when they finish school, I publicize the plays, and they tell their parents, let's go and watch this thing. They come rather reluctantly but in the end they go joyously and they want to see it next time. Gradually I get my audience. You see it is a slow process. At the same time you make sure that what you give them is what is around them. Because right now if you bring something like Shakespeare, they would say: "What is this? We don't understand this."

FLORENCE AKST

Tell me about a recent play, what is the subject and how is it performed.

VICTOR MUSINGA

Well we will take, for instance, "Madame Magrano". That's one of my very popular plays.

FLORENCE AKST

And who is she?

VICTOR MUSINGA

Ah well Madame Magrano is a housewife who gets suspicious of her husband, by his movements. She thought that her husband was involved with some extra-marital love dealing. And she was inflamed by a piece of advice given to her by a friend that her husband was running around in some extra-marital dealings. This friend advised her to meet this medicine herbalist who would be capable of reviving this supposed feeling of love. Unfortunately for this Madame Magrano, she went to a medicine man or herbalist who had been looking at her with some lust.

FLORENCE AKST

Ah ha!

VICTOR MUSINGA

(Laughs) And incidentally instead of this medicine man giving her the right charm, he gave her poison which she ignorantly poisoned her husband with. But wisely, or as fate would have it, she had a bit of this poison on her. And eventually she became the wife to this medicine man but she also, in the end, poisoned the medicine man with the remaining of the poison.

FLORENCE AKST

Now that is the real stuff of melodrama.

VICTOR MUSINGA

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

Do you ever act on stage? You are acting, not only directing the others?

VICTOR MUSINGA

What we did here, I directed and also acted.

FLORENCE AKST

Now what sort of part do you take. Are you the deceived husband, are you the wicked man?

VICTOR MUSINGA

That is it.

FLORENCE AKST

Which the second?

VICTOR MUSINGA

The witch doctor (Laughs), because I actually wanted to make the housewife understand that paying a visit to the medicine man with the mind to getting a charm to revive the supposed failing love of the husband, that is always a sham. So it is so real and so vivid that the women in the audience are terrified. After another play I introduce the cast I give pieces of advice telling them that if you do this, if your husband, like Madame Magrano's, seem to be fading off, relax, he is going to come back. But if you pay a visit to the medicine man, you will be like Madame Magrano. (Laughs)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The amazing Victor Musinga, being interviewed there by Florence Akst. And we'll be coming back to her in a moment.

TAPE

Music from the Central African Republic.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The big band sound of the Central African Republic recorded by Florence Akst on her visit to that rather neglected part of the continent. Small, diamond-producing, briefly notorious as the domain of Emperor Bokassa, the Central African Republic doesn't get a lot of attention nowadays, so Florence Akst is joining me now to dispel that obscurity. Welcome back to the Arts and Africa studio Florence after all your travels.

FLORENCE AKST

Thank you Alex.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Florence, the Central African Republic is in a rather obscure part of Africa. Does it have a distinct cultural character?

FLORENCE AKST

It does have a cultural character of its own but I'd like to dispute some of the adjectives you've used because it's small in terms of population, two and a half million people approximately, but it's a vast area in geographic spread. It's between Cameroon on the west and Sudan on the east. That's its position. It was part of the big French Equatorial African colony of the old days and because of that, of course, it has a considerable French influence. But it does have one thing going for it and that is that the Central African Republic has a language of its own, an indigenous language

FLORENCE AKST

called which almost everybody, ninety percent anyway of people, understand and well over half, I am told, use their first language. So that is a unifying factor. People sing in S popular songs are in people write in and of course as I say in French.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So far you've only mentioned music and the language. Did you find any other sings of cultural tradition?

FLORENCE AKST

What I saw was limited because it is an extremely poor country. There are no constant performances, there are no publishing houses and there's no record industry. Now all that means that people have to work very hard in order to let the audiences know what they are up to. I would like to illustrate that by mentioning a couple of people I met. One of them a writer, he's the secretary general of the Poets and Writers Association in the Central African Republic, Richard Bagouma. He had written poetry in French and in and he's written a novel. But none of these have been published and indeed none of the writings of Central African Republic writers are published in the country. So when I asked Richard who he would choose as perhaps the most celebrated authors, he mentioned people who had been published elsewhere. For instance, Bacumbo Bamote who lives now in Montreal in Canada and has won a French/Canadian prize for a collection of short stories called "Stories on Bangui." At the commercial level there is very little happening. At the spontaneous level, a great deal is happening. For instance there are quite a lot of authors. I heard four orchestras in Bangui that are playing regularly, that are well equipped with modern instruments and are very popular. Difficulty? There is no studio big enough or sophisticated enough to record them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And does the government help in any way?

FLORENCE AKST

It does particularly as far as the national ballet is concerned. This has been revived in the last 12 months since a period of decline. It has some excellent dancers, I'm told. It's a company of twenty five who, in fact, have appeared at FESTAC in Lagos and they try and maintain, in a modern way, the traditional dances from the various regions particularly the Pygmy region.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Florence Akst many thanks for that insight into the arts of the Central African Republic. And you're off again yourself, aren't you?

FLORENCE AKST

Yes, but this time not to Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well wishing you Florence a good trip and all you listeners a good week, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAPE

LIMPOPO - Close sig.