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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In today's programme: African Shakespeare, black American photography and the prospects for radio drama in West Africa.

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey inviting you to join me on this weeks "Arts and Africa".

Remember Shakespeare's Macbeth, the power-hungry clan chief and his scheming wife? Murder was the only way he could realise his ambition to become king. The original Macbeth lived a thousand years ago in Scotland - today he is alive and well in Kenya. This Kenyan Macbeth has been put firmly in the twentieth century and rechristened "Makabeti"; his creator? Kenyan playwright Luka Wasombo-Were: He's kept the pomp and circumstance of power, but dropped the play's sixteenth century Shakespearean English, substituting English as it's spoken in Kenya today.

TAPE

ACTUALITY - "MAKABETI".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Felix Wilson was at that Nairobi performance of Makabeti - it's subsequently been on tour in other parts of Kenya - and afterwards he asked the play's producer, Luka Wasombo-Were, what was the point of an African Macbeth?

LUKA WASOMBO-WERE

Basically we have felt as a group that Shakespeare's language, because he writes mostly in verse, is quite obscure to many Africans and especially students. We thought that, as a group, we could also try to show students and everybody else that Shakespeare is relevant by simplifying the language, making it more modern and making it Kenyan.

FELIX WILSON

And how far do you feel that you've succeeded in that?

LUKA WASOMBO-WERE

It's difficult right now to tell how far we've succeeded, but a few students and a few Kenyans, or Nairobi theatre-goers who have come to the play have felt that they have been able, now, to see Shakespeare in a different light.

FELIX WILSON

Why, in particular, did you choose Macbeth/Makabeti?

LUKA WASOMBO-WERE

Well we feel that Shakespeare's Macbeth is quite relevant at this time just as it was relevant in those days and more so now in the African continent because right now we hear of coups, military take-overs and we feel it can be a good lesson to our politicians as well. It's only unfortunate that politicians are never good theatre-goers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Felix Wilson talking there to the creator of Makabeti, and Luka Wasombo-Were has plans to do another tour of Kenya, but this time to bring Shakespeare even closer to the people; he wants to translate Makabeti into Kiswahili.

Now if you're writing a play for radio, the language you put it into, the way that language is used, will underpin the whole success of the play. With radio all you've got is sound to get the message across, sound to convey characters, looks, plot, location. So writing a play for radio is a special technique, it needs special talents; on the lookout for both talent and technique was African Theatre producer Nick Barker when he went off to West Africa to investigate the radio drama scene there. He's now back in London and he's joined me in the studio to tell me about what he's discovered on his travels. Welcome Nick.

NICK BARKER

Thanks a lot Alex.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now it was four countries that you visited wasn't it?

NICK BARKER

Yes, I began in Sierra Leone, then onto Liberia, Ghana and Nigeria. It's the twentieth anniversary of African Theatre this year and we felt that it would be very good for us to get out to West Africa, talk to writers, talk to drama producers, find out about their problems they are experiencing with their radio drama and also so that we could better reflect in our annual African Theatre Season, new trends in African radio drama.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what were some of these difficulties?

NICK BARKER

The difficulties are enormous. Too numerous almost to mention. Just to go through a list of some of them, you begin with technical ones. In a place in like Ghana, they've hardly got any tape left. They are actually recording now onto tapes from the archive library. I mean the situation is absolutely desparate, so that was a problem. All the radio stations have actually cut back on their radio drama departments and because these cuts are being made, young writers simply don't have the opportunity to experiment with the craft of radio drama. It's a perculiæ craft and you need practice.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you mentioned difficulties which you have explained and you also told me about trends in radio drama. What did you mean by trends?

NICK BARKER

Well a trend which I was interested in in Sierra Leone, for example, was Creole drama. Now whilst I was in Sierra Leone there was a play on called "The Yellow Peril". Now the "Yellow Peril" is a play whose history you need to understand. Recently there was a rumour going around Freetown that a white woman was causing the death of African taxi drivers, and all the taxi drivers stopped giving lifts to white women because they thought that they might be the yellow peril woman. (Laughs) Now an enterprising sort of theatre impresario has started putting on plays in Freetown, written in Creole. I mean very much sort of light comic soap operas and these are going down terribly well. They are being packed out every single night. When I spoke to a man, Kwame Cumale Fitzjohn who is the editor of a cultural magazine called "Awareness", I spoke to him about this and I was interested in the way his response reflects all sort of difficulties they are having on this question of language.

KWAME CUMALE FITZJOHN

Most of the drama is in Creole and that is a pity, of course, for the international audience because they wouldn't be able to understand Creole. Perhaps we could think of something like a middle-of-the-road answer like pidgin-English for example. We could have plays in pidgin-English and that, perhaps, could have a wider audience. Perhaps some of these plays could be translated from Creole to English but then they would lose their effect to a large extent.

NICK BARKER

I've also noticed since I've been here there's clearly an enormous commercial boom for theatre. There are a lot of weekly Creole plays, drawing large audiences to the centre of Freetown.

KWAME CUMALE FITZJOHN

Yes, that's a pity you know and I noticed that what happens is that most of the people who do these plays, they try to exploit the audience's potential for laughter and they get these out of the Creole plays, you know. This sort of rip-roaring, side-splitting fun is what they really aim at. It has a commercial potential, you know, but that is not good enough.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Seems to be a kill joy to me this Camale but is there competition, would you say, between the local type of theatre that is written in the local language, and English?

NICK BARKER

I wouldn't say there's competition but I would say there is this central confusion on this question of language. I feel that the biggest shackle around the neck of West African drama today is the Queens English. People don't speak this English. If you write in a sort of antiquated, staccato English script. You can't get your actors and actresses to lift these words off the page. So I must say that when I got to Nigeria, where I spent a lot of time with FRCN, the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, I was very heartened to explore and find out about their developments in Pidgin drama. Then somebody said "Well, we've got this programme here called Gandu Street, I'm not sure you'll like it, it's in pidgin English". I heard this programme and I just thought it was wonderful, it was sparkling, it was vivacious. It's a fifteen minute programme which goes out every week, highly topical. It's about one street in Lagos where you've got a wonderful sort of collection of characters, talking about their life, the programme reflects on current affairs, there are always references to things that dominate the newspapers. Another programme which I discovered almost by accident was a programme called "On The Bandwagon" which isn't made in the drama department, it comes under the light entertainment department. It's a very interesting programme but what they do is they've taken an outside broadcast unit and they go out to a sort of church hall or bar and they set up their microphones and the programme consists of a number of sketches, a mixture of English and pidgin, comedy sketches in which the audience is invited to participate, and to respond and one aspect of this programme is you have a radio commentator who is reporting on a sort of mythical football match and through his dialogue there's a certain amount of political satire about what's going on in the country at the moment.

TAPE

EXCERPT - "ON THE BANDWAGON".

NICK BARKER

Now as you can hear there's wonderful audience response and I think this is real innovative radio.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what's the deadline for scripts for the African Theatre Season?

NICK BARKER

Well the deadline is now (Laughs) So if anybody has got a script, they should get it on an aeroplane as fast as possible because I'm going into production with the first play in about four weeks.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Nick Barker thank you very much indeed. I want you now to think about whether black people born in America have anything in common with black Africans. Of course the black American intellectual in search of his African roots has become something of a familiar figure, but does he have anything to offer Africa?

Roland Freeman is a black American who thinks he does have something to offer. He's a photographer; his work records the effect on Black Americans of movement from the rural area in America to the towns. With his exhibition of photographs he wants to get over to Africans the cultural and social problems that black Americans experience. Patrick Smith met Roland Freeman in Lagos on the first leg of his African tour. As he told Patrick bridging the cultural gap between Americans and Africans is what really delights him.

ROLAND FREEMAN

There are many curiosities throughout black Africa about their less fortunate brothers who were taken away to America and other parts of the diaspora. What happened to those people? I remember talking to a lady in northern Kenya in a farming village and through a translator, after we had finished talking she looked at me and said: "Thank God you didn't lose your colour". A plain person who was a farmer. So she was interested in what we eat, what type of religion we have and she wanted to know about this tribe she's heard about called "negroes". She didn't know much about black people in America but she knew enough that she understood that we were called "negroes" and she wanted to know about this lost tribe called "negroes". So I was the first opportunity that she had to even question anyone. So I'm very sure that because my work deals with traditional culture and because it covers marriages, funerals, religious practices, people at work, people at crafts, these things the African can readily identify with. One of the major problems I had, one of the things that hurt me the most when I was travelling about Nigeria and other parts of Africa is that I see people who look just like my relatives. It's very frustrating when I walk up and want to talk to them and because of ignorance of their language I am unable to communicate verbally. But there are many ways to communicate with people and if you love and respect folk, then you will find a way.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Black American photographer, Roland Freeman talking there to Patrick Smith. Join me again next week, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAPE

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