

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, welcome to Arts and Africa.

Back in the early sixties a black South African actress called Peggy Phango left her hometown of Johannesburg to come to the United Kingdom. She never returned home.

PEGGY PHANGO

When I left to come over here, that was twenty two years ago, we didn't have places like the "Market Theatre" then that helped us, because there were no theatres, as such, for black artists. So I thought my best bet while I was out, was to learn here - I'd get more chance of learning over here, which I did. Say now I was in South Africa, I couldn't have married my husband to begin with, because he's English and white. It's against my country's law for a black to marry a white person because my husband is a 'person' I am not!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Bitter truths from actress in exile Peggy Phango, we'll be hearing more from her later on. The Market Theatre that Peggy referred to is one of several venues in South Africa which stand as landmarks in the development of black South African theatre. In today's programme we're going to look at that theatre, through the perspective of writers and actors alike, all of whom have recently been performing in Britain.

Things have changed since Peggy left the country, the writing and acting of black South Africans is now received with acclaim all over the world; black and white people can get together on the stage and in the auditorium, but apartheid remains, the divide between black and white is still an institution. In the opinion of Ronnie Governder, the politics of living apart underpins the whole nature of theatre in South Africa today. Ronnie Governder should know - he's been involved in theatre for thirty years, writing and directing.

RONNIE GOVERNDER

For the precise reason that you are human and humanity in its humanness is what the artist is concerned about. You cannot ignore so-called politics in this country, it becomes embedded in your psyche, in your being. Therefore, in a play such as "Woza Albert", "Vuka", "Egoli", "Sinomali" and "The Lanish Pleasure" they are not protest plays, as the average white South African critic would use the word, they are plays which catch the drama of ordinary life in South Africa.

EXTRACT FROM PULA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Members of the Soyikwa Theatre singing in a play called Pula, the Tswana for rain. Pula is about the tensions between city and rural life and how this is exacerbated by the drought. The Soyikwa Theatre Company was founded in 1976. It was a response to the riots which took place in the Soweto township and the tide of oppression which followed.

Pula is a play full of songs. By contrast musical relief is noticeably absent from Soyikwa's other current production, "Impumbe" a grim and terse play. It's set in Bethel prison in the '50's when prisoners rioted when they heard bodies were being used as fertilizer on the potato fields. In this scene a prisoner angers one of the warders, he's hauled away in the middle of the night; his fate remains uncertain.

EXTRACT FROM IMPUMBE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A scene from "Impumbe". Although the Soweto riots provided the original inspiration for the founding of the Soyikwa Theatre, Rapitse Montsho, European representative of the Soyikwa Theatre Company, wants to reach people all over South Africa.

RAPITSE MONTHSO

We tried to take things further afield because to concentrate on Soweto only is an over saturation of work. I mean, Soweto is too much focused on. There are human beings living in other parts of South Africa as well who need to be made aware of the dilemmas and who need to be educated as well and, from whom, we also have to be educated in order to remain within the grass roots of the situation. So we also try to take it further afield. Also we do not discriminate against who comes, for instance some of our boyfriends do come through the productions of the performances, so we both try to strike up and down.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Rapitse Montsho talking about the type of audience the Soyikwa Theatre Company wants to reach. The Hungry Earth is a play performed by the Bahumutsi Theatre Company currently on tour in the United Kingdom. It ranges outside South Africa, reaching out to Africa, mother Africa.

EXTRACT FROM THE HUNGRY EARTH

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mother Africa wake up before the white man rapes - pretty heady stuff, but the Hungry Earth itself is in plot a good deal more focussed; it's a story of hardship among migrant miners. It was written by Maishe Maponya four years ago; he's the Bahumutsi Theatre's director and resident writer. The performance of his latest play, The Nurse, was delayed because the lead actress wasn't granted a visa to travel outside South Africa. It's now running, with an understudy; like Soyikwa's Imbumba there's a theme of confrontation in The Nurse; patients and nurses are up against a ruthless hospital administration, indifferent to the catalogue of hardship that they must endure.

EXTRACT FROM THE NURSEALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A song to beat the system with. When Athol Fugard wrote The Island in the early seventies, Zimbabwe was, in many ways, like South Africa is today, a country ruled uneasily by a white minority. Athol Fugard is one of South Africa's leading playwrights, a white man, writing for black people and about their tragedies, caught up in a system dominated by whites. Today a Zimbabwean company, The Sundown Theatre Company is performing Fugard's Island. A play about two political prisoners on Robben Island who survive through their imaginations - here one of them imagines he's on the telephone to the family back home.

EXTRACT FROM THE ISLANDALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The actors in the Sundown Theatre Company production of The Island are Walter Maparutsa and Dominic Kavaenti, directed by John Haigh. They talked to Mark Ralph-Bowman about how they got involved in the Sundown and how they survive financially. Here's Dominic Kavaenti first of all.

DOMINIC KAMAVENTI

We got involved with Sundown when John wanted actors, black actors, and he put adverts in the paper for auditions. That's how we first came into contact with Sundown Theatre.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

How long ago was that?

DOMINIC KAMAVENTI

1975

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

You both joined in 1975?

DOMINIC KANAVENTI

The first play we did with Sundown Theatre was in 1978. This was an all black cast and John Haigh did the production of that play.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

And what is your background Walter, what do you do?

WALTER MAPARUTSA

Well, I've done several things, but at the moment I'm working for a consulting company in the marketing division.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

Would you be interested in pursuing acting and theatre more?

WALTER MAPARUTSA

Yes, oh yes. In fact, we started way back with Dominic Kanaventi and this was sort of teaching ourselves. We sort of graduated from religious drama and we started doing our own little things, playlets and since then we've been doing this kind of thing until we joined John Haigh's Sundown Theatre and we started doing serious plays.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

And Dominic, the same with you? What's your background?

DOMINIC KANAVENTI

As Walter says, I work for a vehicle manufacturing company, as a sales representative, and this is where my bread comes from. I am involved in the theatre as a hobby and that's the same for all of us. There's no professional theatre in Zimbabwe.

WALTER MAPARUTSA

We never received any sort of training, until such time as we met John and we started talking about what he's supposed to be doing there. But some of the things we knew from just reading books ourselves and so on

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Walter Maparutsa and Dominic Kanaventi of the Sundown Theatre two highly professional talented actors, but economic constraints assign to them an amateur status. Of course, for Peggy Phango who we heard at the beginning of the programme, since she's been in the United Kingdom that hasn't been a problem. She's currently acting in London in a production of Medea a play based on a Greek myth and adapted by the German playwright, Grillparzer, at the beginning of this century; Barney Simon is the Director; her co-star is white South African Yvonne Bryceland, another exile who has found permanent professional work in this country. Yvonne and then Peggy talk about and explain the story of Medea.

YVONNE BRYCELAND

Jason sets out to win this dazzling prize, the Golden Fleece, and he arrives in this country which is a dark country unlike the country of Greece - he's a Greek - and he arrives in this place called Kalkos, where the fleece is protected by mythical creatures, a dragon and various other things, and Eros shoots an arrow through the heart of Medea thereby making her a slave lost in love forever to Jason and she falls in love with him and she helps him to win the Golden Fleece. He falls in love with her to and he takes her back to his own country but in his own country, surrounded by what he is familiar with, he rapidly falls out of love with her because she and her companion Gora, which is Peggy, are totally unlike anything that are in his country.

PEGGY PHANGO

She is dark so we must be kind of witches or barbarians or whatever.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The actresses Yvonne Bryceland and Peggy Phango talking there to Nick Owen. And to end this week's edition of Arts and Africa let's listen to a song from Peggy Phango's childhood called "Cindy", the child has left home, the parents still miss her. Peggy Phango sings Cindy unaccompanied. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.