

# Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.

I wonder what you make of this extraordinary mix of sounds.

TAPE

FILM MUSIC - "HIS MAJESTY'S SERGEANT"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you baffled? Well stay with us and all will be made clear when I talk to our main guest today from Ghana.

But first we consider a problem for African artists that's been highlighted by a week long event here in London. The Commonwealth Institute has been holding a Festival of African films. Most of them have been around for some years, films like "Ceddo" by Ousmane Sembene from Senegal and "Love Brewed in an African Pot" by the Ghanaian director Kwah Ansah but very few of them have had more than token showings to British audiences. And without some kind of commercial exposure outside Africa, it's very difficult for a film-maker to get his money back from his last film and fresh money to make his next one. But why are commercial distributors so reluctant to give screenings to films made in Africa? I discussed the problem with Jim Pines who is a fellow of the British Film Institute and the man who organised the Festival at the Commonwealth Institute.

JIM PINES

What's tended to happen in this part of the world is for the socialist left-wing independent small distribution groups picking up the so-called Third World films. They don't always make the sort of money that perhaps people would expect from a more commercial operation. Also the films tend to be shown in very marginal areas, you know, arthouse cinemas, really trying to attract audiences with a very particular specialist interest in Third World cinema, independent cinemas and all that. One of the problems, obviously, is that a film maker from a non-European country probably has an

JIM PINES

image of European/American distribution companies being very kind of capitalist orientated that will make a lot of money for them. Invariably it's a disappointing kind of situation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why haven't the African countries, when these films have been made, why don't they get together to support their film makers, their citizens?

JIM PINES

Oh they do. There are a number of governments which do support their film makers and quite a number of the films made in Africa do have a lot of government support. Certain governments did nationalise their film industries. I mean Algeria did it after the revolution, it happened in Mali and other countries. They were boycotted by the European/American commercial firms.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I suppose, Jim, it's also true that some of the African films that have been shown in Britain have not been very good technically compared with the very slick, very professional product that comes from Hollywood, say, or the European film industry. But there have been some very good films from Africa, I'm sure. What can be done for those to get a better financial return in the West?

JIM PINES

It's important that films remain here for a long enough period of time so that a lot of people can start to see the films. When the films are put into circulation, the film makers will start to benefit financially from the arrangement. At the moment Ousman Sembene is the only African film maker whose films are distributed in Britain. I hope that by the end of the year that there will be at least half a dozen more African films. So anybody interested in this area, you know, cinemas or independent groups exhibiting films, will now be able to select from a wider range of films from Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What about the content, the sort of cultural values of those films? Do you think that puts the distributors off?

JIM PINES

There are certain assumptions about what is a good film or what audiences want. And those assumptions are usually based on the Hollywood film. And now you get an independent film maker who comes along and his or her film doesn't appeal to the kind of Hollywoodian types of values, but it does try and say something about his or her own culture. That film maker is not going to get that film into the cinema, that film maker will have to work very, very hard to set up other ways of getting that film shown. Some film makers accept that they won't make a huge killing on their film but they want that film to be shown.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Jim Pines, who was appointed to his fellowship at the British Film Institute specifically to try to increase the exposure in Britain for films from Africa and other developing nations of the world.

Well a film maker who will be hoping for the widest distribution he can get is with me now. He's Ato Yanney from Ghana who's in London to edit a new film that he wrote and directed. It's called "His Majesty's Sergeant" and this is part of the soundtrack.

TAPE

FILM EXTRACT - "HIS MAJESTY'S SERGEANT"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Ato the music sounds military and so does the title "His Majesty's Sergeant". Is it about war?

ATO YANNEY

Yeah, during the Second World War, Africans weren't free but they were made to go and fight to defend their freedom of their oppressors. This film is about the psychological situation in which the African fought in Burma. He, himself, wasn't free. He was fighting to defend the freedom of others and that is it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Briefly what is the story?

ATO YANNEY

It's a story of three soldiers, a Sergeant an Africa, a corporal an Indian and a private a British soldier. The three of them are missing, roaming up and down the forest. The question of who is in command comes in. The African says he has to give orders, the British young man says no. He is British, he has never had anything to do with any black in his life so he can't take orders from him. And here, what I've tried to do is to sort of make the African have some understanding of the man because it's true, he hasn't had anything to do with any black, and this is what goes on throughout the whole film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Ato, your name is very new to me as a film maker. So I would like to know a little about yourself.

ATO YANNEY

Well it's rather unfortunate that I had to wait for some twenty years for my name to be heard of because of the difficulties one faces in looking for money to make films in Ghana. But I have made a lot of documentary films, a lot of shorts and I think now is the right time because if I had made this film much earlier, it wouldn't be what it is now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Where did you pick up this experience of documentary film making?

ATO YANNEY

Oh I studied here in the fifties. I studied film making, script writing and directing in this country. I went back home to work for a few years and I was offered a scholarship by the Polish Government so I was in Poland for six months to brush up my directing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Tell me how did you come to make the film?

ATO YANNEY

I wrote the script in 1972 and I went from ministry to ministry and from bank to bank pleading for help to make this film because I thought it could contribute something to the revolution going on in Continent. But then people didn't seem to understand me. I would go to a place and I would be asked silly questions, questions I didn't expect from people I thought I knew better. But then what can you do? I went round and round and it came to a point where I felt I could bring together some cinema owners, so that we could come together and make this film. And I think my dream has come true.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So these cinema owners provided the money, that's what you're saying?

ATO YANNEY

Yes they did. About four of them. My contribution is my technical know-how.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. Now where did you shoot the film?

ATO YANNEY

In Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Everything?

ATO YANNEY

Everything took place in Ghana. We had somebody who fought in Burma so we went round with him and he chose locations for us. I think they look authentic on the screen.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And who are the actors involved?

ATO YANNEY

We signed on a British actor, and an Indian actor from Bombay and the one who plays the leading role is a Ghanaian.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now about the film crew?

ATO YANNEY

With exception of the special effects man and the make-up artist who came to Ghana from Britain, all the others were Ghanaians.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you said that your aim, or one of your aims, was to correct peoples impressions about what happened during the last war, in other words you want to educate the younger generation to know what actually happened. Now your film is in Britain, how do you think your film is going to succeed in breaking through this barrier?

ATO YANNEY

You see as an artist I get satisfaction from what I have done. Now the satisfaction I want, I think I've got it and that is more important. Apart from that Britain is not the only country on this earth. There are a lot of places and I'm sure they would like to see it. One thing I forgot to add - you know it is relevant at this stage of our revolution because as I have said we fought to defend the freedom of others. Do we have to fight again for our own freedom, like what took place in Zimbabwe, Angola and what is going on in South Africa? This is it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well there has been a danger which has been remarked on by Jim Pines, for instance, that a lot of African films have had a lot of political content, a political message, a moral, call it what you will and this has been emphasised to the detriment of the entertainment value of the film. In what way does your film entertain?

ATO YANNEY

Yes, you see I would say there is entertainment in it. The intellectual aspect is there alright and the entertainment is there alright.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it the fighting, is it action, is there a lot of action?

ATO YANNEY

Yes, as for action yes it's there alright. But what we have tried to do here is for the first time we used Panavision and the battles are fierce and this sort of thing. So I could describe it as most ambitious.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You also talk about its promotion of African culture. In what way does it promote African culture?

ATO YANNEY

Some people tend to think promoting African culture is trying to sort of build stories around it. Well that, I think, is the wrong notion. I think you have your story and you try as much as you can do to bring it in somehow but not deliberately. So what I have done in this one is - we see this young man in Burma shouting with the Indian colleague, then he recalls the reception given to his father when he returned from the First World War, so we see a big Durbar, a very big one where the Ochiame (phon) stands up and gives a welcome address.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So that actually plays a part in the story?

ATO YANNEY

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it in colour?

ATO YANNEY

Yes, it's in colour.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How long does it run for?

ATO YANNEY

Ninety two minutes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's quite long, and it costs a lot of money I suppose.

ATO YANNEY

Yes it did.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You hope that you will be able to get it back?

ATO YANNEY

Oh yes by all means. Yes because at the moment we have got a reputable Wardour Street distributor who is negotiating with us for the world rights. If he thinks that way then I think it's something to be happy about.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Ato Yanney thank you very much indeed and can I wish you the very best of luck with your film and let's close this edition of Arts and Africa with some more music from the film "His Majesty's Sergeant".

For now, goodbye from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey until next weeks Arts and Africa.

TAPE

SOUNDTRACK FROM "HIS MAJESTY'S SERGEANT".