

Arts and Africa

ALS 4/5/5/1/43

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

pp 3-4

BBC COPYRIGHT MATERIAL

ARTS AND AFRICA

First B'cast: 23.10.83.

513G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa.

TAPE

"ZIMBABWE" - Mohammed Malcolm Ben and His African Feeling Organization.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mohammed Malcolm Ben and his African Feeling Organization with "Zimbabwe".

And it's to Zimbabwe and Lesotho we travel today - where community theatre and what is called 'theatre for development' has much of that African feeling.

First to a country we hear little about: Lesotho. Andrew Horn is a lecturer in drama at the University there and is active in building a bridge between the world of theatre and the world of rural development. Andrew has experience of community theatre projects in Zambia, Uganda and Nigeria and I started by asking him about how theatre could be used for development work.

ANDREW HORN

Theatre has been used in Africa, in many countries in Africa, for very many practical purposes. I think that the idea that theatre is just amusement and entertainment passed away long ago. So what we decided to do in Lesotho was to try and take some of the techniques of theatre and apply them to the community development priorities of the country. So we are not, in other words, talking about theatre in theatre buildings, in purpose-built theatres, we are talking about theatre performances in ad-hoc, open-air venues, in villages, in prisons, in schools, that sort of thing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So it's theatre with a political message, a political purpose? Political in the broader sense of the word.

ANDREW HORN

Well not quite, something even more nuts and bolts than political. That is we try to strike at problems of life and death, health, nutrition, agriculture. I think that it's a bit risky these days in Africa to be doing overtly political theatre.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what do you actually produce? Is it improvised or is it written down?

ANDREW HORN

It's improvised but it's also rehearsed. What we do is we view the whole project as the work of a team. We choose particular areas. Last year, for example, we went to a very small village on the top of a mountain called Hardibopoa. We made an appointment with the local chief and we visited the development committee of that area and other villages. We sat around, there were about fifteen of us from the National University of Lesotho and about thirty or forty people from the village. We sat around and talked about what most concerned them, what were their biggest problems, what disturbed them most about their environment. And we developed a very long list of problems as one can imagine, Lesotho being one of the poorest countries in the world. We then asked people: "Ok why are these problems here? What have you done to try and solve them and why haven't those solutions worked?". And we got replies, a whole range of problems. For example, Hardibopoa is hard to get to, the road is frightening. Because of that there are very, very rare national bus service connections into Maseru, the capital and only one private commercial transport runs a landrover into Maseru daily. Now this means that when people have to go to the hospital or whatever, it's a big problem. Why isn't the road better? Water - the village sits overlooking a fairly copious stream, river indeed. But the water of that river is polluted because the river is used both as a toilet and as a well. Now we talked about these various problems, we talked about political problems, the fact that the village and many of the villages around, were divided politically between the two major parties of Lesotho, the ruling party and the Opposition. After taking all of this material we went back to the University and said: "Ok, which of these problems is the one that we can deal with in a play and can offer concrete self-help solutions for?". Self-help is the key word. There's no money, we cannot prize money out of the Government to build roads or whatever, to bring in electricity, to build new schools. People have to help themselves. So in that village we decided to take the pure water issue. We thought of a story line, a plot, broke it down into scenes, improvised scene by scene, put in music, put in a bit of dance and developed a play which was about twenty, twenty five minutes long. We put the play on and then it's followed up by a discussion and I think, ultimately, this is the most important thing. The play is a catalyst. It's to get people arguing, to get people thinking, and arguments do emerge. The play, for example, on pure water; it takes a fairly simple and melodramatic storyline. The village decides to dig pit latrines. One family says they're not interested, they've been using the river all their lives, they will continue to do so. And eventually the child of that family gets a water-borne illness and dies. Fairly moralistic, fairly direct in its message. But the results were very dramatic. Immediately the play was over and we invited comments, people said: "Yes, that's what we've been saying and you over there, you're the one whose been resisting".

ANDREW HORN

And people shouted and the headmaster of a primary school stood up and said that the school had no pit latrines, and that the following Monday all of the assembled girls there would make it a project to dig pit latrines. So in other words the outcome of the play is something concrete, something real, not just airy fairy talking and ideas.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I understand Andrew, that you also went to the prisons with your plays.

ANDREW HORN

The men's central prison in Maseru has a very progressive man who is in charge of rehabilitation and he has introduced a parole system which was never known before in Lesotho and we approached him. He was actually on a workshop that I did on theatre and development. And he approached me and said how about doing something in the prisons? So we took another team of theatre workers to the central prison and we talked in small groups to the prisoners. We tried to find out what put them into prison, why they got into trouble. We tried to find out what their problems were on re-emerging from prison and reintergrating into society. We isolated two important problems. One, we discovered that most criminality in Lesotho is directly related to economic problems. Unemployment is the greatest single cause of crimes of theft, crimes of violence. And we also found that prisoners had a very difficult time returning to society. Society was highly judgemental of them, they were naughty, they were evil, and they also had great difficulty getting jobs partly because there just aren't jobs and partly because people had to be persuaded to trust them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Andrew Horn of the National University of Lesotho talking to me there about community theatre.

North now to Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe International Workshop for development - held recently at Murewa in the North East part of the country. The workshop which was funded by the Zimbabwe Government, UNESCO and the International Theatre Institute attracted from far and wide artists, directors and those concerned with rural development. The Zimbabwe Herald announced the workshop would be 'tackling rural problems in a dramatic new way'.

Well the workshop was a Pan-African event and Julie Frederikse met Kenyan theatre director Ngugi wa Merii currently working in Zimbabwe and asked him first what the Zimbabwe authorities expected of him.

NGUGI WA MERII

What the Minister of Education and Culture in Zimbabwe wanted, they asked us to bring patriotic plays that are relevant to the people of the Third World, in particular, plays that are based on the struggle for Independence. There is a very brilliant play written by two Kenyans and they specifically asked for that play entitled "The Trial of Dedan Kimathi" by Ngugi wa Thiongo and Milere Mugo.

NGUGI WA MERII

This play is based on the Kenyan struggle for Independence which is very similar to the struggle for Independence in Zimbabwe. So what we did when I came to Zimbabwe, we started by producing the play in English and we read it out then we went into the second stage of translating the play with the peasants and workers of Zimbabwe, students and teachers, they all came together and communally, collectively translated the script into Shona. Then we produced it on stage. So it was both in English and Shona because there are some sections where we have the role of colonial settlers and we had whites playing those roles. So there is no way we could have translated that because it's a white person speaking to black people in English. So we did not translate those parts. Even when we were in Kenya, when we produced it, it was being played by the whites who played the role of the colonial oppressive settlers and judges. This is what we have done. And we have taken this play all over Zimbabwe and the play has been very well received because it is in the people's language. It is communicating to them their own history of struggle, their own commitment to changing their country for the better. So it's very relevant.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Julie Frederikse then asked him about future plans. What did he want to do next?

NGUGI WA MERII

We are now trying to introduce community theatre into all schools where the community will take part in the development of a theatre programme basing the centre of that community theatre in the nearby schools. This is because very often the education system in capitalists societies have been isolated from the community and we hope that by merging the community and the school and bringing the students, the teachers and the parents working towards a cultural programme, the parents although illiterate would teach the people something and they would benefit. The pupils would benefit a lot from their parents. It's the people's theatre meaning that the peasants and workers are the contributors, are the participants. They are the decision makers in that theatre movement, the content, the form that it takes, they are the people who decide.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ngugi wa Merii talking to Julie Frederikse there at the Zimbabwe International Workshop on theatre for development.

We'll be returning to the Zimbabwe workshop next week but for now let's have a little more of that African Feeling from Mohammed Malcolm Ben and his African Feeling Organization. The tune, "Zimbabwe". Until next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAPE

"ZIMBABWE" - Mohammed Malcolm Ben and His African Feeling Organisation.