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Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

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

TAPE

Extract of interview with Kenyan Theatre Director, Ngugi wa Merii.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kenyan Theatre Director, Ngugi wa Merii talking on last week's programme about the recent workshop on "Theatre For Development" held at Murewa in Northern Zimbabwe.

Well what do the rural people want? Organiser of the workshop, Stephen Chifunze, is sure of one thing: he knows what they don't want.

STEPHEN CHIFUNZE

We don't want escapist theatre which is predominately being done with white theatre groups in our urban theatres. With Western written plays, they're hits in London, they come and are performed in Harare and people write them as fantastic because somebody has acted the way the main actor in London acted. Now to us that is irrelevant theatre because it doesn't even show our national character, it doesn't grapple with the problems that we are experiencing, social and economic, it doesn't even deal with the reconciliation spirit that we want our theatre to show for the new Zimbabwe. So what we have said to these people here is just that we are with them in their theatre. We may be in the urban centres, grappling with the problems of an elitist white theatre, trying to bring it to our own needs, but they have also a new orientation to give to us. We will not come here with well-made plays from the urban centres just as we don't want well-made plays from London or from America coming to Zimbabwe. Here we are, in villages for three weeks, for twenty one days in a village. People have come with no scripts, people have come with different languages but they have been able, for three weeks, to work with the peasants of Zimbabwe in a theatre experience that is

Cont...

STEPHEN CHIFUNZE

much more enriching than their theatres at universities or in their towns. So I hope when they go back, they're going to think seriously about this peasantry approach to theatre which is that you go to the peasants and the peasants together with you create the theatre.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - Traditional Community Theatre music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The opening scene of traditional community theatre there with music, dance and song being interwoven with dialogue and audience participation. But what about external influences? Julie Frederikse asked Stephen about existing white-European theatre, was there room for that in Zimbabwe?

STEPHEN CHIFUNZE

There's very little room for Western theatre in Zimbabwe. But there is room for Western-trained theatre artists. A good number of our group leaders here are white people, American, Canadians, West Germans who have been trained in Western theatre traditions. But they've adapted to these traditions. The people who are going to find it difficult to adjust are white Zimbabweans who have been involved in theatre, of proving to Zimbabwe that they have not cut their cultural ties with Britain. Now if you tell them to try and express the type of performing arts of the people of Zimbabwe, they believe that you are telling them to cut their traditional ties with British culture. Those are the people who are not going to adjust. The only way is let them continue practising a theatre which makes them feel at home, culturally, but which becomes completely relevant to Zimbabwe.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

What are the specific skills that you think that Western theatre has to offer this kind of theatre? Where are they of use, these people?

STEPHEN CHIFUNZE

The uses are; puppetry has been very useful here, make-up has been very, very useful, mime has been very useful, those are the three areas of Western theatre that we have found very useful because they are new to us.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

For Stephen Chifunze, the question is one of direction in all sense of the word.

STEPHEN CHIFUNZE

What we are trying to fight against is the whole question of a person who comes from a Western theatre training of a university who believes that there is only one way of producing a character, or there's only one way of producing a play. This whole question of a director - we didn't have directors, we had villagers directing.

STEPHEN CHIFUNZE

Even when a play is performing, a villager comes and says: "No, no, no. You move to there". You know, instant direction.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - A Shona War Song.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A Shona war song calling for unity, spirit and involvement of all Zimbabweans in the development of their country. A fighting song, and fighting words there from Stephen Chifunze, organiser of the International Theatre Workshop for Development talking to Julie Frederikse. But theatre isn't only about the serious issues of community development and national unity. It's also about enjoyment and the fun of taking part and here's a recipe for just that: take one band of Ghanaian musicians and dancers; one hundred or so lively primary school children; throw in loads of traditional instruments; clothes, and the latest synthesizer - add a dash of excitement and you've got Lord Eric's Agor-Mmbe African Roadshow. David Stephens went down to the Commonwealth Institute in London to meet Lord Eric and to join in the fun.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - Lord Eric Agor-Mmba's African Roadshow.

LORD ERIC

We come in from the audience or the back of the stage and sing, welcoming them in and then we say something like everybody say "Agor-mmba" and we tell them what wonderful children in the world they are. Then the show starts with music, we sing a couple of songs, then we start the stories. After the stories, then we start the demonstration calling every name through the drums, we demonstrate how they are played and what the movements are and go on again then we bring on the traditional. First we play the highlife, the contemporary music.

DAVID STEPHENS

Is that with electric guitars and drums?

LORD ERIC

Sometimes with electric guitars and sometimes we just use the drums.

DAVID STEPHENS

Now highlife music is very danceable. When I hear highlife music I want to dance. Do the children start to get up and dance?

LORD ERIC

Yes, yes, they can't sit down.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - HIGHLIFE.

LORD ERIC

They dance. Then we bring in the traditional dance. Then we show them how we play the traditional drumming to the dance. Then we get them involved.

DAVID STEPHENS

What's the best place that you've been to? What's the most memorable place you've been to recently that you've really enjoyed?

LORD ERIC

It's the Notting Hill Gate Carnival. The 1983 one. I'm saying that because the first one we took children, we had our own company, we had six weeks of training some children in dance and drama and Camden Borough gave us a truck. We went into the procession and then we came to the square where we acted and played music. It was wonderful, wonderful.

DAVID STEPHENS

Did you get any police joining in?

LORD ERIC

As you can see in the picture there the people are, you can see but you can see the policeman too.

DAVID STEPHENS

He's having a bit of a jive.

LORD ERIC

Yes, he's jiving.

DAVID STEPHENS

Music with a beat I suppose (Laughs)

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - Lord Eric Agro-Mmba's African Roadshow.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

After the show David got in amongst the crowd and asked them what they thought of it.

VOX POP

It's brilliant, fantastic show.

VOX POP

It was brilliant and it was good, the music was really good.

DAVID STEPHENS

Would you like to go to Africa?

VOX POP

I come from Africa, I come from Ghana.

DAVID STEPHENS

Where do you come from?

VOX POP

I come from Ghana as well. I like it too.

DAVID STEPHENS

Was it terrific?

VOX POP

Yes, it was alright.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Across the table from me now is David Stephens. Well David this was obviously a lot of fun for the school kids but what does it actually do for the community?

DAVID STEPHENS

Well I think two things really. I enjoyed it very much and I thought the value of the whole event was for social and for educational reasons. Socially I thought it was important that the children were enjoying themselves, schooling these days can often be a grind. There they were having fun, and I thought it was a multi-racial occasion. There were children mixing together. So that's a very important social reason. I thought, educationally, it was important because the children were encountering things that they hadn't seen before, African instruments, African clothes. They were putting them on and actually playing the instruments. They were doing things and I think it's very important for children to learn by doing. So I thought it has an important social role and a very important educational role.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well people tend, when they are talking about Africa, to always want to pass a message, some political message through about the African this and that. I don't think you could find this sort of thing with the Agro-Mmba group.

DAVID STEPHENS

Well no they are not specifically political and I think that's where they're different from what we've been hearing about in Zimbabwe in the community theatre there. When I was speaking to Lord Eric he did say to me that he wasn't a political entertainer in that sense of the word. What his job was, how he saw it, was to bring

DAVID STEPHENS

children together, to show them things they hadn't experienced before and to show that Africa is about music, it is about mime, it is about dance, it is about bringing people together and actually doing things, learning by doing, a very traditional African way of learning something which is perhaps what we have lost sight of.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well David I agree with you that there's a lot of music and dance in Africa but I get worried sometimes that people tend to think of Africa only in those terms, that when you go to Africa all you find is people dancing and drumming and that's the sort of thing. Do you have that feeling?

DAVID STEPHENS

Yes I think there's a danger there that if you present children in London with dancing and drumming all the time, they lose sight of the serious issues, not that music and dancing isn't serious. And I think that's the job of the geography teacher, the history teacher to actually show children that Africa actually has a serious side, and that's where development studies needs to be encouraged in primary schools and secondary schools so we have the Agor-Mmba Dance Band on the one side and we have development studies showing the important developments that are taking place in Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much David. Now let's end "Arts and Africa" for this week with Lord Eric and his Agor-Mmba African Roadshow, playing Sugu Mugu. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

GRAMS

SUGU MUGU.