

# 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". And in today's programme we hear from two very talented actors, one an Englishman, taking English drama to Africa, the other from Africa playing to appreciative audiences here in London.

For many, many years the British Council has performed its function of promoting British culture overseas by sponsoring tours by leading artists and performers. In recent years, sensitive perhaps to changes of cultural imperialism, the Council has tended to get performers to work with local groups in Africa, but the sponsored touring company, presenting performances of the English classics, does still exist.

John Dryden has just completed a tour of six countries in West Africa where he's been doing plays by Shakespeare. But far from having the large company you need for Shakespeare, John was accompanied by just one other actor. For two people to perform Shakespeare sound extraordinary. John, welcome to Arts and Africa. First, what plays were you doing and who were you doing them for?

JOHN DRYDEN

Throughout the whole of West Africa we played four Shakespeare plays "The Merchant of Venice", "Twelfth Night", "Julius Caesar" and we did excerpts from "Taming of the Shrew" and "Macbeth". Mainly we were performing to schools and colleges.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But all those plays have quite a big cast. How on earth can only two people do them?

JOHN DRYDEN

The scripts we devised consist of a series of links, linking scenes. I mean, for example, "Macbeth" would start off with Leslie Bennett, who was the actor with me, and myself playing two witches. Out of which I would suddenly become Macbeth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How were you dressed as a witch?

JOHN DRYDEN

Well we designed costumes, very lightweight costumes made out of rags and hair and fur which were totally wrapped round us so that our faces weren't visible. And going from one line into another we would do something like (as witch) "Fair is foul and foul is fair, hover through the fog and filthy air," (as Macbeth) "Stay you imperfect speakers, tell me more", at which point she has whipped off the cloak and I'm standing there in my leather and chains as Macbeth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So you did away with the third witch.

JOHN DRYDEN

Oh yes, we couldn't afford a third witch. We couldn't even afford Banquo and Macduff.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Where did this take place, in the open air?

JOHN DRYDEN

In the open air or in university halls or in the open air theatres. There are some splendid theatres in West Africa, particularly in the north of Nigeria; Maiduguri has a wonderful open air theatre.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Out of the Shakespearean plays which was the most popular?

JOHN DRYDEN

I think "Twelfth Night" purely from a visual point of view, because I had to play something like eight characters, and Leslie the actress I was working with played Olivia, Viola and Maria, the three parts for a woman in the play. Consequently I was nipping off stage and changing from Sir Toby Belch to Malvolio to Sebastian to Orsino. And in a way that was probably the most appealing to the students because a) they knew the text and b) suddenly there was this strange English actor coming on as fat Sir Toby or thin Malvolio or glamorous Orsino.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how about the actual benefit to the students. Do you really feel that they learnt something and that from what they've seen of you they stood a better chance of passing their examinations?

JOHN DRYDEN

Well judging by the reactions afterwards, Alex, many of them wanted to come back-stage to swop addresses, to talk about the text. We would be stopped in the street and asked, "Can you tell me the meaning of so and so in Merchant of Venice" or "Why did you do this when the play says that?" They were definitely interested not just in watching something as a piece of entertainment or to take them out of the classroom but were really involved in the text because they saw it coming alive on stage.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

John Dryden thank you very much indeed. Our next guest is a South African actor, currently working in the comparative comfort of the National Theatre in London. He's performing in a play by white South African playwright/director, Athol Fugard. It's called "Master Harold and the Boys" and it's largely autobiographical. John Kani, who is our guest plays the character of Sam, a servant in a not particularly well off white household in South Africa. The father of the household neglects his son Harold. Harold is based on the young Fugard. Sam and Sam's fellow servant Willie are Harold's closest friends. They've been with him since his infancy. Now Harold's relationship with Sam in particular is tender, confidential and full of fantasy.

EXTRACT FROM "MASTER HAROLD AND THE BOYS"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Sam and Harold in conversation. But the warmth and trust that Sam and Harold share is not to last. The prospective return of Harold's crippled and alcoholic father throws the adolescent Harold into a crisis; Sam becomes a scapegoat and the victim of Harold's bitterness against his father. Their relationship degenerates into that of unfeeling master and humiliated servant. Well the man who plays Sam the servant, as I've said, is John Kani and he is with me in the studio now. Welcome John. What was your personal reaction when you first read the play?

JOHN KANI

First the play is set in Port Elizabeth where Athol and myself live at this particular time in South Africa. When he first gave me the script and I read the play, I was very interested. I know Athol, I know his mother, though I've never met the father because when Athol and I met in 1964 it was quite a time after his father had passed away. And I know Sam, who is a New Brighton ballroom dancing champion, the man I'm playing. So I was very curious as to whether Athol was going to be honest to the situation and the things I know about the relationship between him and Sam, and between him and his father as he's told me over the past years. It's a very beautiful play. I remember saying to him after reading the script that it felt like I'd heard this tune before, I'd read this poem before.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Your knowledge of Athol doesn't arise merely through his directing you in this particular play.

JOHN KANI

No, we'd been friends since 1964. That's when I joined the Serpent Players, a little drama group which he belongs to as well in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And you find the sentiments he expresses in this play are really genuine?

JOHN KANI

To the best of his ability from his side in relationship with Sam. The unfortunate part is that I was unable to meet Sam after having done the play because he died two days before I had to commence rehearsals. I had to go and look for him to invite him to see the opening but unfortunately he had passed away, so I never quite had the other story of the incidents and the things Fugard talks about in the play or what was Sam's point of view.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well this play has been described in some quarters as the play of a white man exorcising his guilty conscience. To you is it more than that?

JOHN KANI

As I've known the man and I've worked with the man for quite some time I think it is an important milestone in his life, to decide to use a true incident in his life in the attempt to bridge the widening gap between the peoples of my country, in the attempt to say something in a country where silence is the norm. It's again an attempt to improve the relationships between black and white because the entire South African white society has a Sam, a servant in their lives, and these are the things that they would not consider even when they try in their political sense to improve the relationship. They would change certain laws, relax certain things but they will never touch the attitude, and I feel this play deals with the attitudes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it therefore an attack on apartheid? Is that the ultimate goal of the play or has it greater, wider human dimensions?

JOHN KANI

Basically, every work from South Africa by any writer or actor or artist is first and foremost an attack on the present regime and the unfair system called apartheid. But the play to survive has to transcend those dimensions and go into nobler areas, into universalities and meanings that are more acceptable in the world as a whole, and this play does that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And how does it do it, this particular play? How does it achieve this universality?

JOHN KANI

Sam is a great fighter for decency in the world. That's how it does it for me, just decency, decent relationship between two people, a decent relationship between people of the world. Humanity, just being a man. That's what I teach the boy all my life, to be a man, a human being, which in the end, of course, reminds me I'm a boy.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. You yourself don't live up to your high attitudes, as it were. You lose your composure.

JOHN KANI

That's exactly when I'm unable to control a situation which I'm supposed to be superior in. And thus in the end I say "We can still fly another kite".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I notice in the theatre, particularly during the last part, that the people were very emotionally moved. I could hear sniffing all around the place. Now to you, being one of the principle players, with whom do your sympathies lie - with Sam, the character you're playing, or with the young Harold?

JOHN KANI

It's a difficult situation. With both I would say, because in my country it is very difficult to live a life without the other. We are tied down geographically, historically, and we refuse to understand certain basic needs of living together as human beings. And that's when we have to hurt each other.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You have two people getting hurt here. Harold gets hurt first, although he thinks he's hurting Sam, and Sam also gets hurt when this young Harold spits in his face and turns, roars up on him venting all the anger against his father on Sam. Now with whom do you sympathise more? Who is in the more vulnerable situation?

JOHN KANI

Oh the little boy. I sympathise with him, he's going through changes. If you look at the excerpt we just played about the kite, when I ask him, "because one is white and the other is black", those are the feelers. It is the voice of right testing whether the pupil is following the lesson of humanity properly and seeing what he would answer if I put a black and white situation to him. Unfortunately he says "I don't know", which means he is still bordering on innocence, on the possibility that I'll be able to create a human being out of this white boy. But unfortunately in the end I say "I've failed". He does leave us a little bit of hope, however, that maybe tomorrow as Willie says "It'll be okay tomorrow, good sir".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

John Kani, thank you very much indeed. I did enjoy the play tremendously.

And now it's time for me to say goodbye, but do join me again next week in Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying once again - Goodybe.