

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello from Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to "Arts and Africa". Some months ago we announced the joint winners of the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa in 1983. Well, today we have an interview, especially recorded for "Arts and Africa" in Lesotho, with the author of one of the winning publications. "Fools and Other Stories" is the title of the book published by Ravan Press in Johannesburg and the author is Njabulo Ndebele.

NJABULO NDEBELE

I grew up in a world of books. I remember coming across Dante's 'Divine Comedy' somewhere on the shelves in the house, and I read a little bit of it - to the extent that I could understand it at the time - and then I started writing some sort of poetry about the South African situation modelled after Dante's work. Basically, that's when I started taking an interest in the South African situation as a subject for literature.

MUSIC: "Msunduza" Dollar Brand playing the flute

POEM: Extract from "Revolution of the Aged" by Njabulo Ndebele in "The Return of the Amasi Bird" published by Ravan Press, Johannesburg.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Dr. Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele has a clutch of degrees - from Lesotho, from Cambridge in England and his doctorate from Denver in the United States. But as for his stories, they're all set in one place, on one small location, the Charterston Location, a small town in South Africa where he spent much of his early life. Ndebele's education may have been grounded in the European classics but his personal experience in those early days was gained from the rough and tumble of street life in Charterston. And he uses it time and time again in his stories. Here's an example:

EXTRACT: "Fools and Other Stories" by Njabulo Ndebele. Published by Ravan Press, Johannesburg, in their Staffrider Series No 19.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Young people feature largely in the stories. They are eager and alert.... and self-conscious - like the boy in the story called 'Uncle' who's deeply embarrassed when his uncle, after a long absence, picks him up and bites his ear as though he was still a small child. And here's the same boy feeling for

the dignity, or rather indignity, of someone else.

EXTRACT: "Fools and Other Stories" by Njabulo Ndebele. Published by Ravan Press, Johannesburg, in their Staffrider Series No 19.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Njabulo Ndebele is at present a lecturer in the Department of English at the National University of Lesotho and it was there that Andrew Horn talked to him for this programme about himself and his writing. "Fools and Other Stories" has been published by Ravan Press in collaboration with Staffrider. Over the years Ndebele has contributed to that lively and hardy magazine - the poem that we quoted from earlier "Revolution of the Aged" was first printed in Staffrider. How important has Staffrider been to him and to other South African writers?

NJABULO NDEBELE

First of all, I think that the advent of the magazine was a very great thing, and I agree essentially with the intentions of the people who started it in the first place. They wanted to create an avenue, a vehicle, through which writers could express themselves: writers of all kinds, of all levels of experience and of all levels of education. I think it was very exciting, and at that time there was certainly a great surge of writing coming out of the townships. There was a great vigour and vibrancy in the writing, and at the time, those who were responsible for the magazine were not really particularly hung up on questions of high art and technique and so on, they just wanted people to express themselves. So it was good in the first place to have had this opportunity.

I think now it is time for a little re-evaluation, and those who are involved in the Staffrider project should have a sense of what needs to be kept and what should be thrown away. In fact, I am aware that there is this re-evaluation taking place.

ANDREW HORN

Most South African literature of the last 20 years has been political and social commitment and engagement. What do you see as the role or roles, and indeed obligations, of the writer in contemporary South Africa?

NJABULO NDEBELE

I think that basically the role of the writer, first and foremost, is to raise the levels of social awareness, but I don't think there's a consensus about how this ought to be done - that is the problem. Because most writers had been affected day in and day out with what is going on in South Africa - racism and the whole nature of politics and economics in South Africa - they tended to want to use their writing as a sword to stab at the forces of repression. It is very problematic how you can actually turn the written word into a sword, particularly through the medium of art, fiction, poetry or whatever. The writing, particularly in fiction, tended to be obsessively dominated by the themes of oppression. Where they avoided the themes of oppression, or perhaps an extension of that, you tended to get what Ezekiel Mphahlele called 'the victim character' who is always on the receiving end. That has tremendous limitations, and I've been conscious in my writing to avoid that kind of pre-occupation without necessarily abandoning my interest in it.

What I attempted to do in my writing, was to look at the South African situation by evoking whatever culture was there in the townships. There is a

life there which has been going on and which has never been brought to the centre of our consciousness. I have attempted therefore, to concern myself with 'process' rather than with the end product. I think most of the writing has been interested in showing us the end products of oppression, but I've been interested in trying to understand the process of its evolution, the evolution of this consciousness.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In the title story of the collection, "Fools" a middle aged man, disgraced and defeated, gains his self-respect through his strong reaction to the arrival of an attractive, idealistic young man. The young man's attempts at organizing resistance to apartheid in Charterston are quite impracticable. For example he tries to stop people celebrating an Afrikaaner holiday and he's the one who ends up running away from an angry Boer who's lashing out with a whip.

The gently power of all the stories in the collection comes from a writer who's been living for a long time outside the borders of his country. Andrew Horn asked Ndebele how much it mattered that he no longer had the soil of his native land under his feet.

NJABULO NDEBELE

From my experience I found that the distance helped me to be somewhat objective and a little bit detached from the artistic point of view. At the time I was in the United States writing, things seemed to come back much more vividly than if I had been actually there looking at things. I think that the relationship between memory and creativity is much more productive when you are away from the physical environment that you are writing about, and I found therefore, that this distance was very helpful. On the other hand, one of the reasons I am happy to be back in Lesotho is that I am close enough to South Africa for that physical contact.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ndebele considers himself an outsider, a describer of processes rather than products so which reader does he write for? After all, he writes in the international language of English.

NJABULO NDEBELE

If you look at the stories in "Fools" you will find that all of them except one are set in Charterston township, South Africa, where I grew up. As I was writing I was basically thinking of them, the people I grew up with in my township. They will recognise certain buildings and names of streets. They will recognise perhaps certain popular characters in the township. They will recognise schools and shops. They will recognise all of these things and this is what I liked about writing these stories. For them, that township is a small place, provincial to some extent...

This has never been done before, but I thought, 'let me use this opportunity to write a literature in which I will really make people see their culture reflected in the writing and provide them with an opportunity to look at themselves, to re-evaluate themselves'. Beginning therefore with the direct audience being my own people in South Africa, I expanded my interest to the people in the rest of the world. By the very nature of language itself, it is impossible ultimately to say you are writing for 'So and so'. Language is such that it reverberates, and people when they come to a discourse of this

nature, a fictional discourse, will respond to language according to how they use it, how they themselves use language and understand language, so that you have, as it were, a democracy of readership in the end. But specifically as far as the direct and immediate political concerns of my writing - it is first and foremost the African back home.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The voice of Njabulo Ndebele. His collection of five, rather long short stories "Fools and Other Stories" is published by Ravan Press of Johannesburg, No 19 in their Staffrider Series of paperback books.

The music to play us out comes from Abdullah Ibrahim, better known as Dollar Brand, and is called "Msunduza". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye from "Arts and Africa" until the same time next week: Goodbye.