

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey - what you're about to hear might be rather difficult to understand, but see how you make out.

PTIKA NTULI

Story Extract in Flytaal.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

(Laughs) Hmm. How did you get on with that? Well for those who couldn't make any sense out of it, it was in fact a story about a man who borrowed some money from another man and used the money to buy some whisky - the story was told in a language you may not have heard of before, Flytaal - we'll be hearing about Flytaal and its origins in southern Africa later on in the programme.

I don't think the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola speaks Flytaal but he has used some pretty strange and colourful language in his writing career; until now it's been confined to novels and short stories, but now he's exploring what for him is a very new form of artistic expression - he's recently finished a play. Apart from an adaptation for the theatre of his classic novel "The Palmwine Drinkard", this is his first dramatic work, but let Molara Ogundipe Lesley, Lecturer in Literature at Ibadan University, take up the story; she's somebody who has always had a deep interest in his work and has been closely involved in this, Tutuola's latest venture. Here she is in conversation with Fiona Ledger.

MOLARA OGUNDIPE LESLEY

The play's entitled, "The Sword of Vengeance" and unlike the work he used to write before of fairytales and novels of fantasia, you may say, this is a straight forward realistic story about a poor man who decides he needs money and goes looking to borrow money. But he couldn't so he had to pawn himself and then experiences with the pawnbrokers.

FIONA LEDGER

He had to pawn his possessions?

MOLARA OGUNDIPE LESLEY

No, his body.

FIONA LEDGER

Oh himself?

MOLARA OGUNDIPE LESLEY

Yes. He is making a comment on poverty and the unreliability of men or unreliability of human beings, not men as opposed to women. The "denouement" of the play takes place when the pawn broker deceives him but he is able to wreak vengeance on this person who duped him and duped his father before him. So I think that's why it's named "The Sword of Vengeance".

FIONA LEDGER

Can you tell us what the vengeance is he wreaks or will that give the story away?

MOLARA OGUNDIPE LESLEY

I think it might. (Laughs)

FIONA LEDGER

And how far has Amos Tutuola got with the actual getting the play performed?

MOLARA OGUNDIPE LESLEY

Well the play is written and interestingly it's not written in the usual format of a play. I mean for one thing he admits he doesn't know how to write a play. But he's just used his natural talent and all that. So it's like a combination of a novel and dialogue. So having finished the play he gave it to me. I looked at it and I thought it was very good and I handed it over to a playwright on the campus of the university of Ibadan who was very thrilled by it and who wants to produce it. So plans are on the ground to have it produced at Ibadan.

FIONA LEDGER

And you would recommend it?

MOLARA OGUNDIPE LESLEY

Oh yes, I would recommend it very much. It shows Tutuola as a very good portrayer of character and a person who really understands human beings, the quirks of personality, particularly the personality of the women. There are scenes in which the man and the women are talking about their impoverished state and the things she says, the kind of psychological attitudes she adopts towards her husband, are so familiar and so true. It is a realistic story of a man and his wife

MOLARA OGUNDIPE LESLEY

and their efforts to solve their financial problems.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Lecturer in Literature at Ibadan University, Molara Ogundipe Lesley. And now to Zimbabwe, for a musical break, but we stay with the money problems of ordinary folk; a woman complains about the way her beer drinking husband spends all the money, leaving her and the children to go hungry....

GRAMS

DAI NDIRI SHIRI by Patrick Mukwamba and the Four Brothers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that was Patrick Mukwamba and the Four Brothers singing "If I were a Bird" from the album, Viva Zimbabwe, one of the latest albums to come out of Zimbabwe.

And now back to that strange language you heard at the beginning of the programme, Flytaal. The person speaking it was South African, Ptika Ntuli - he's best known as a sculptor, but he's got more than a passing interest in languages and literature. He explained to Patricia Morris the fascinating mixture of the strange mixture of Zulu, Swazi, English and Xhosa which makes up Flytaal: Colourful and subversive it's not an easy language to classify.

PTIKA NTULI

It may not be perhaps Creole but it is a language. It's a revolutionary language in the sense that when we speak it, the predominantly African and the predominantely English don't understand what we are trying to say to each other although we understand each other. And they say something like, "Oh no this Baas here, what he's trying to say", and chip in a word in Zulu or Xhosa insulting him.

PATRICIA MORRIS

And the white person doesn't understand?

PTIKA NTULI

No, he doesn't understand. Some even though they're black middle class who do not speak the language, they also become victims of the same kind of language. So when you and I say we speak the same language, we'll talk differently when there's a white. We tone it a bit higher when we meet a kind of black middle class person whom we do not want to understand what we are trying to say. It's also calculated for him, and also for some of the people within our own class or background.

PATRICIA MORRIS

Would you call this a working class language then or is it more than that or something other than that?

PTIKA NTULI

Well although the majority of the people who speak are working class, the rough-riders, the criminals, but even within the middle class, the black middle class, you hear people speaking it, so there's still those kind of links. What is important now is that it is used in art, it is used in plays, in poetry. We may not speak pure English old chap, but we can speak our own language so we can just say it as it is and not be apologetic about it. For it is no longer the way in which you say it, but the artistic manner in which we express it. Either in a mixture of six or seven languages or in one language that you made to liberate the break in order to get the images that you want.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ptika Ntuli talking to Patricia Morris.

The Commonwealth Institute in London is currently holding a series of workshops for actors and dancers from all over the world; the aim is to exchange ideas and techniques. One of the African participants is Joseph Beegu from Nigeria. He's in charge of a 22 strong troupe which dances and acts under the auspices of the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture.

Fiona Ledger went to see him in between workshops and asked him first about his work in Nigeria.

JOSEPH BEEGU

We produce plays from what we call Kwahi. Kwahi is a storytelling theatre of the Tiv people. Sometimes we write stories or we do improvisation and from here we make it a play.

FIONA LEDGER

Well we're talking about traditional stories, theatre plays, do you take modern ideas and the problems of modern life, the crises and the worries that modern Nigerians have to face?

JOSEPH BEEGU

Yes we do that. We have an international workshop. This one is based on popular theatre.

FIONA LEDGER

This is in Benue State is it?

JOSEPH BEEGU

Yes, this is in Benue State. We go to villages, we find out the peoples problems and we present or improvise the villages participating. It's a way of telling them how they can solve their problems themselves without depending on the government.

FIONA LEDGER

Do they find that funny? I mean do they enjoy that?

JOSEPH BEEGU

Oh I think they enjoy it and it actually helps them.

FIONA LEDGER

Now you're coming over here for a month's visit. What do you hope to do here? What sort of things do you hope to discover?

JOSEPH BEEGU

I have come here to teach some movements and dances and to learn from the different people that have come from all over the world. In this kind of workshop, I am learning and I am teaching. When I go home there are some techniques which I will use which I think are good. But there are some things I expect which would not be correct in a Nigerian situation like there are some Chinese movement there and Japanese movements. Well these ones, I think, are not good in a Nigerian situation.

FIONA LEDGER

It wouldn't work?

JOSEPH BEEGU

Well it would work quite all right, but it means I would be taking this kind of culture into our own culture so I don't think this is good.

FIONA LEDGER

Does that mean that you have a purist attitude to Nigerian culture? I mean when you work on your plays do you try to be as true to original form as possible, as true to original traditional form?

JOSEPH BEEGU

I told you our plays reflect only the culture of Nigeria. That's what I said.

FIONA LEDGER

Now you said that some of these Chinese, Japanese movements would be wrong. Are there other things that you've seen that you want to try out when you get back home?

JOSEPH BEEGU

Yes. There are some things that I have seen like today we learnt how to act and we have been learning how to develop movement.

FIONA LEDGER

What kind of movements?

JOSEPH BEEGU

Like acting or dancing, when one brings one small dance or movement. We learnt how to develop this and get as many dance movements out of it as possible. I think this is good.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Joseph Beegu, dancer and performer from Benue State, Nigeria. And that's it for this week. Just a reminder that our African Theatre Season has got underway: Every Sunday from now until Christmas Day you can hear the very best African drama. That's every Sunday going out first at 0830 GMT with repeat transmissions at 1500 and 1715 GMT.

And let's end with some more music from the album, Viva Zimbabwe. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey leaving you with Patrick Mukwamba and the Four Brothers singing "Zvinonaka Zvinodhura" - "Good Things Are Expensive".

MUSIC

"ZVINONAKA ZVINODHURA" - Patrick Mukwamba and the Four Brothers.