

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa.

Community theatres already exist in many African countries, with the object of helping communities - particularly in rural areas - to articulate the problems they face in their everyday lives. These will include social and health problems and perhaps economic issues.

In Uganda, the National Theatre, with help from the British Council, set up a community theatre workshop in the eastern town of Mbale. Teachers, health workers, social workers and civil servants came together for a month to work out techniques for making community theatre more effective.

Nick Owen worked on the project with Jane Collins, a British theatre director, and he discussed with her and with Robert Otim, a participant in the workshop, what the community theatre is trying to achieve. First he spoke to Robert Otim - a health worker.

NICK OWEN

What particular problems will you be applying this work too?

ROBERT OTIM

Here in Uganda we have a major problem. We have some diseases which actually could be prevented, such as diarrhea, vomiting, whose sole cause could probably be eradicated by having our water source protected and kept in a proper way. Secondly, we have some other diseases which can be prevented by having them vaccinated against, that is measles, polio, tetanus and the simple ones like whooping cough. Quite a number of those are preventative diseases, if we let the people know just as we get the knowledge we pick up from these workshops.

NICK OWEN

Thank you. Jane, does this kind of work just tell people what they should be doing or do you have a different kind of approach?

JANE COLLINS

The idea is to actually get the rural communities involved in the problem. That's done in a number of ways, it depends how the groups choose to work. One of the ways we've been looking at is how the problem - as Otim has suggested - is presented. A community, for instance, that doesn't protect its well. Water is taken from the well, it's drunk, it's used for cooking, a child gets sick, the father perhaps wants to use traditional remedies which then don't work. Eventually the child is taken to the clinic and at that point we stop the action of the performance piece and then ask the audience: "Is that the end of the problem? Has everything been solved?" In some cases they might say: "Yes". In that case the group themselves will possibly repeat the same sequence of actions again with the well still dirty, the water still drunk and the child gets sick. Gradually in this way you're making suggestions for ways in which this problem might be solved.

NICK OWEN

So what happens is you present a short scene of about five minutes which brings out the problems, and then you ask the spectators to offer alternative solutions to the particular problem?

JANE COLLINS

Yes, I would say that is more or less right, that's just one of the structures that we've been suggesting.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nick Owen talking to Jane Collins and Robert Otim about the Mbale Community Theatre Workshop.

MUSIC

"TAAW" - Youssou Ndour et Le Super Etoile de Dakar.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was the music of Youssou Ndour from Senegal. He recently gave a concert in London and Chris Terrill went along to watch him perform. Well Chris that sounded very funky indeed. What was the language they were singing in?

CHRIS TERRILL

Well it was Olof which is the traditional language of Senegal, part of the Wolof culture language. Youssou Ndour is a Griot himself, a praise singer. A lot of these songs sung in Olof are singing of praise of aspects of Senegalese culture. More recently he's got into a more international perspective singing about wider African issues but nevertheless praising them, sometimes urging Africans themselves, mostly in West Africa, to be perhaps a little more responsible in considering their own roles in modern life.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well this sort of thing has already started in other parts of Africa, adapting Western instruments to traditional style. Now how important is Youssou in Senegal for doing this?

CHRIS TERRILL

He started singing as a praise singer when he was twelve years old. But it was only in the early 1980's, just a few years ago that he won a talent contest in Dakar. He started then to sing as a lead singer, but only as one of many lead singers that sang with the group, "Super Etoile". But now really he has become so famous in Senegal and Western Africa that he is synonymous with "Super Etoile", he is their lead singer, he leads them now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

He was singing, as you said, in Olof. But did the group give any sense of being French as we normally associate with these Francophone countries in Africa?

CHRIS TERRILL

No, they didn't. What emerged initially and superficially was the Western style of their performance, not French, not American, not English but, you know, the Western popular musical style. But it didn't take long before you could see that underneath that there was a very definite African traditional element. Even though there were these superficial electronic noises, the rhythms, the percussion came out very strongly African. Now one of the songs, in fact the song we've just heard, was "Taaw" and that means "eldest son". He himself is an eldest son and recognises the responsibilities of being an elder son very much. It's very important in Senegalese society because they are head of household when the parents are away. They recognise their responsibilities. So he is singing about his own responsibilities to his family especially when he was growing up in Dakar. This is something he wanted to put over to other young people who might not be recognising their own responsibilities so much. But having said that, a lot of his money doesn't come from record sales as our own popstars here - they get their money from however million records are sold. But he is showered with money quite literally when he goes out to sing, especially when he sings to the rich and the famous. They are expected to throw money at him and this happens in Senegal.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Was he actually showered with coins when he was performing in London?

CHRIS TERRILL

No, he wasn't showered with coins but he was certainly showered with adulation at the end. Particularly after everybody got dancing and moving and particularly again not so much because of the songs themselves and the lyrics, but the drums. That's the most important aspect of the whole concert and all his music, because not only is the modern Western type of instrument there but there are the African drums, the talking drums, and these really did grip the audience. They were fantastic to listen to.

MUSIC

DRUMMING MUSIC - Youssou Ndour et Le Super Etoile de Dakar.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you Chris Terrill. Our reporter Aida Brako has recently returned from a trip to Botswana where she visited the Phuthadikobo museum in Mochudi, to the north of the capital Gaborone.

AIDA BRAKO

The museum is right on top of the Phuthadikobo Hill which is in the centre of Mochudi. The museum is housed in an old school. This school was built between 1921 and 1923 by a massive community self help project directed by the regent at that time, Molefi Pilani. The museum was started in 1976 and it was intended that it would develop to act as a pivot around which a whole range of educational and community activities would exist. The director of the museum is Sandy Grant who took me round some of the exhibits.

SANDY GRANT

I've tried to arrange the material chronologically. This as you see is a room before the period of 1902. I have chosen 1902 deliberately for local reasons. It doesn't mean that everything in here is that old, but some of the things are representative of items that have been used for several hundreds of years.

AIDA BRAKO

But why did you chose 1902 for local reasons?

SANDY GRANT

Because this was the one tribe in botswana which was involved in the Boer War. The Chief of that time over there you see....

AIDA BRAKO

What was his name?

SANDY GRANT

Chief Linchwe the First. He sent his people off to work in the mines in South Africa to raise money to buy guns.

AIDA BRAKO

Oh, so they are not actually original pieces?

SANDY GRANT

Oh yes, they are!

AIDA BRAKO

Used by the Bakgatla people?

SANDY GRANT

Oh yes, look at that one. It's absolutely magnificent. That's the oldest one we've got, I'm going to put it at about 1850.

AIDA BRAKO

What about these pots in this cabinet?

SANDY GRANT

They are rain-making pots, they were used perhaps in the 1920's for rites associated with rain-making. As you can see there's a broken one, - they're not too complete but they are the only ones I know of in public ownership anywhere in the country.

AIDA BRAKO

When you say rain-making what exactly do you mean by that?

SANDY GRANT

You have a series of photos of a rain-maker at work, casting his bones, he is divining bones to discover if it's a propitious time to begin his work. There he is blowing his whistle to call the rain bird bringing the rain in its beak. The next one shows his medicines. You can see in photo number four he is burning his old material so that the smoke again will bring those rain clouds.

AIDA BRAKO

You have a show piece here for letters and reading materials.

SANDY GRANT

Yes, of local interest. Let's take this one letter on the right dated September 1933, addressed to the chief here from tribesmen saying that the situation of the black people of South Africa - in fact he's referring to Southern Africa including here - is hopeless and as far as he can see it's going to continue being hopeless as far as he can see in the future. He is requesting that the chief strike his name off the list so that he is no longer a member of the tribe because he is intending to take himself and his family off to America.

AIDA BRAKO

And did he do that?

SANDY GRANT

Apparently not. He stayed and became a fairly prominent leader of the ANC in South Africa, I believe.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That trip around the Phuthadikobo museum in Mochudi ends today's edition of Arts and Africa. I'm Alex Tetteh-Lartey and I'll be with you at the same time next week. Goodbye.