

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello from Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC

Ya Blad Sadi Rashid.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Tunisia is a great place for film festivals and the Carthage Film Festival which often shows films by black African film directors has an enormous reputation. A new festival, to me, is the Kelibia International Festival for Non-Professional Films. New to me but it's twelve years old and older still as it's become an event held every other year. Looking down the list of 1983 awards I can't help noticing a certain Mediterranean orientation among the prizewinners with Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Portugal and Yugoslavia all represented.

Hammoudi Abdelwahab who's made around a dozen films himself, sees the usual benefits for an enthusiast attending a festival but he believes that the Kelibia Festival makes a less usual and very important contribution to encouraging young, or at least less experienced film directors, and it would be good to see such people from south of the Sahara taking part in the event. As Hammoudi says, the Festival:

HAMMOUDI ABDELWAHAB

Helps the people to get in touch with each other and to exchange experiences; to see films from different countries which is quite good; to see what the other people are doing and, of course, to learn. It is a school, a festival, it's a school. The Super-8 film-makers because they don't go to a School of cinema, they come to a festival to see with their ears and their eyes how they can learn. I think that this is the object of the Festival.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hammoudi Abdelwahab is a teacher by profession, not a film-maker, so he's representative of the sort of people whose festival this is. On the other hand, with his experience of film making he was able to present a special programme for the international audience. Like the other participants, he uses the now standard Super-8 film, film (I'm reliably told) that has much better definition than the old amateur 8 millimetre - and you can use soundtrack. Abdelwahab told Angela Martin how his home country of Algeria makes a considerable effort to support and encourage its amateur film-makers.

HAMMOUDI ABDELWAHAB

The Algerian Museum asks the professionals to come into all the cultural centres where a film workshop exists and sends them to help the beginners in Super-8. In Algeria you can find a professional showing techniques of cinema to beginners in Super-8.

ANGELA MARTIN

Did that happen in your case or did you start completely on your own?

HAMMOUDI ABDELWAHAB

First I started completely on my own. One day I bought a Super-8 silent camera. I began filming my own family but after that I had a chance and it was very good for us to have the help of the professionals.

ANGELA MARTIN

Can you tell us something about the number of people making Super-8 films in Algeria and how they meet and how they show their films?

HAMMOUDI ABDELWAHAB

Cameras are sold in Algeria and there is film stock and all the Super-8 material exists in Algeria. So people buy and some of them use their medium to make films, fictions or documentaries or other things. Some use them for 'shooting' their family, or marriages or feasts or for other purposes. But I'm sure that their number is growing.

ANGELA MARTIN

What is your main concern now as a film-maker?

HAMMOUDI ABDELWAHAB

First, I try to master this medium because I can see it as high technology and I have to learn a lot about it. If I compare my first film with the last ones I can see a great difference in techniques, in the theme, the content. I have become very demanding in quality.

ANGELA MARTIN

Are you now at a stage where you would like to become a professional film-maker or are you committed to continuing working with Super-8?

HAMMOUDI ABDELWAHAB

What does it mean to be professional? I think that 'professional' means to live with the money you gain from selling your films. But if you mean the quality of the film I think that when someone begins to use Super-8, first he makes bad films, sure, because he's learning, and then he improves himself. And with the experience he reaches a level where he finds himself to have mastered all the techniques of cinema. I think that then he's become a professional.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And lest you think that such a serious film maker makes serious films let me add that on the contrary, they are comedies, inspired by the everyday life that Hammoudi Abdelwahab sees around him.

HAMMOUDI ABDELWAHAB

There are some actions in our society which amuse me. I discuss them with friends of mine and then when we're sitting in a cafe or in some other place, we speak and at the end of the discussion I find that we have made a scenario, a script. And I think, too, that when I find something funny I notice it and then I try to shoot it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hammoudi Abdelwahab talking to Angela Martin at the Kelibia Festival for Non-Professional Films.

Wherever Europeans have settled in Africa the local people who're employed as domestic workers have experienced a curious blend of intimacy and subordination. In Zimbabwe, groups of urban workers are being encouraged to analyze their place in society by dramatizing their situation (I mean dramatizing literally). A community theatre worker who's exploring the potential of 'working with the workers' (including domestic servants) is Ngugi Wa Mirii, originally from Kenya. He's been telling Annie Allsebrook about these drama projects and how they're done.

NGUGI WA MIRII

We do the work collectively with the workers. It's their own ideas, how they live, how they interact with the other social groups and so on. So we develop our theatre-work based on the workers' way of life.

ANNIE ALLSEBROOK

So just what kind of workers, what groups of workers are you working with at the moment?

NGUGI WA MIRII

With very many types of workers, but in particular working with the domestic workers. This category of workers has in large measure, been deprived of educational opportunities, cultural opportunities. They have had no access to culture. So I thought that it would be good to work with them so that's what I have been doing of late. The other types of workers that I have been involved with are those workers working in industries like metal and workers in engineering industries and the clothing industry in Zimbabwe. There are also people who have got problems like the domestic workers. They have problems at their work places, they have domestic problems in their homes. And specifically because they are workers from the same background of industrial disputes and industrial problems they often create plays that are related to their workplaces. I have found it interesting to work with the domestic workers who have not only made plays based on their own workplaces where they have got conflicts with their masters - they have a master/servant relationship - they have also created plays that are related to the social problems that cut across class boundaries of the elite as well as the petit-bourgeois and the workers themselves. They are very creative, they have got a lot of talent so it has been quite interesting to work with them.

ANNIE ALLSEBROOK

How do you go about introducing a group like the domestic workers to the idea of theatre?

NGUGI WA MIRII

Particularly with this group that I'm working with it was initiated by one of the Zimbabwean Cultural Officers who introduced the idea and then came and invited me to take part because he knows that I'm employed to promote community theatre in Zimbabwe. So we went there and started several sessions with them. We also invited another lecturer from the University to come and assist because when you are mobilising a group you have to have all of these sorts of people at hand. So we started off in that way.

ANNIE ALLSEBROOK

Can you describe one of the plays that the domestic workers have helped devise and have performed?

NGUGI WA MIRII

The firstone which we actually did was an improvisation based on the master/servant relationship where the masters know it all. They treat the domestic workers as if they don't know anything, as children, their own children - although some of them are adults, calling the 'boys and girls', 'my girl' and so on. We used this language of the master/servant relationship and related it to them, but as we were rehearsing you could see these people were not only acting but leading their everyday life. The next scenario was created by one of the maids. It was a play that depicted the relationship between the husband and the wife. The season here in October and November is the cultivating season and the wives of workers are sent home from the farms by the domestic workers to go and cultivate. So the theme was: what happens to the husband when he sends the wife home? So this husband develops a relationship with a young girl in town as he comes from a football match. And he cheats that he is not married and so on. He dates this girl and when he dates the girl he has already promised to go home, to go and see the wife.

NGUGI WA MIRII

So when he goes home the wife insists that she is going to come back to town with the husband. But that same weekend is when he has a date with this other girl. So they come home and the women fight and the police are called and so on.

ANNIE ALLSEBROOK

And the domestic workers themselves wrote these plays?

NGUGI WA MIRII

Yes, it was initially sketched by one of the domestic workers, a woman domestic workers and then it was developed and improvised. We presented this play in one of our major cultural festivals that we organised last year in one of the co-operatives because we are also responsible for promoting cultural activities in co-operatives, in the cultural co-operatives and other co-operatives.

ANNIE ALLSEBROOK

Have the other groups of workers you've been working with been as responsive and creative?

NGUGI WA MIRII

Well, yes they have been, because workers are creative and then when they go on stage, because the content of the play is being drawn from their own concrete life situations, it is very, very powerful and very vivid.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The theatre organizer there was Ngugi Wa Mirii and he was talking about the workers theatre project to Annie Allsebrook.

And now some music from Zimbabwe - traditional music played on the mbira. But this special version uses the half of a large gourd as a resonator with the mbira inside it so the player's hands disappear as they tip up the base of the gourd to play.

MUSIC

THE SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Music by the Ephat Mujuru Ensemble ends today's programme. I'll be back with more "Arts and Africa" this time next week. For the moment, from Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.

MUSIC

THE SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE.