

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

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

We begin by taking a look at what's happening in Nigerian theatre at present. Nigeria isn't only a large and populous nation but it's also the home of cultures with strong traditions of drama. A novelist and university lecturer who's taken an active interest in contemporary Nigerian theatre is Kole Omotoso from the University of Ife. And he's with me in the studio today.

Welcome to Arts and Africa Kole. I know you've written one full length play, "Shadows in the Horizons" and you've taken part yourself in productions at the University of Ife. How would you describe theatre activity in Nigeria these days? Let's start at the University of Ife which has had a very active Literature Department hasn't it?

KOLE OMOTOSO

Yes we also have, of course, the Department of Dramatic Arts in which we have people like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi who was there before, Biodun Jeyife and a few others. In the last eighteen months we've been very busy on all sorts of experiments. As you might know we have a "guerilla unit" which was set up by Wole Soyinka which is simply to perform in any place - on the streets, on street corners and on the campus, in town, anywhere - dealing with everyday material. But we have, on the other side, a professional theatre within the Department of Dramatic Arts. This has been involved in the two experimental situations in the Nigerian theatre today. On one side we have a whole set of adaptations from Germany, Russia, Britain and on the other side we have attempts to use more than one language on the stage. Talking of adaptations, for instance, recently Biodun Jeyife did an adaptation of Brecht's "Puntilla", changing the title to "Haba Director". Before then there was Gogol with his "The Government Inspector" which Femi Osofisan adapted as "Who is Afraid of Solani". Solani, by the way, is a social critic, one of those people who was released from prison some weeks ago. Because of his criticism of the government he gets into trouble. Now what Femi Osofisan did was to assume a situation in which Solani is visiting a very corrupt village where everybody really goes berserk because of the expectation of Solani's arrival.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Which happens in "The Government Inspector"?

KOLE OMOTOSO

Oh yes. So you find that these playwrights are, in fact, using examples that have existed in other societies to help the process of debunking authority and its pretensions in our society.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now do they go through the second-hand channel because they are afraid of using an actual situation in the country?

KOLE OMOTOSO

If anything I think Nigerian press and Nigerian theatre, Nigerian literature has been very brazen in its attack of authority. But I think using another medium, another model, helps to preserve an artistic interpretation rather than a crude staging of the Nigerian situation. But you can always say that they are bathing themselves in the glory of these previous playwrights and using their works. But I think basically it is an easier - almost a shorthand way - of saying the same thing but saying it with the authority and the gravity of the names of writers like Berthold Brecht, Gogol and J.B. Priestley.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And you are also talking about multi-lingual....

KOLE OMOTOSO

.....multi-lingual situations on stage, yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you explain that?

KOLE OMOTOSO

Everybody says English or French or German or whatever language is a foreign language in Africa and this, of course, is very wrong. After 500 years I don't know how much longer English is going to be in Nigeria before it becomes a Nigerian language. Now in recent times there have been experiments to use more than one language like English, Yoruba, Efik, Urhobo, whatever you have, on stage in the same production. In December 1983 I made an adaptation of Amos Tutuola's "Palmwine Drinkard". In this we used a number of Nigerian languages including English and it went down very well. More recently Ola Rotimi of "The Gods Are Not To Blame" fame, did a play of his called "Hope of the Living Dead". It is a very interesting play that looks into the struggle of a leper colony demanding recognition in the Nigerian colonial society. Ola Rotimi uses languages like Efik, Urhobo, Yoruba, Hausa and English and for those of us who have seen it on the stage it worked beautifully. Of course the problems with such experimentation is that they do not work in writing. When you put them on paper they don't work but on the stage they are very, very effective and one wonders what is going to be the future of this kind of experimentation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it an attempt to satisfy everybody, to have a little for everybody?

KOLE OMOTOSO

No. (Laughs) It's an attempt, in fact, to evolve what can be a speakable language (or languages) of performance in a multi-lingual society.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Isn't there one already there, ready-made pidgin?

KOLE OMOTOSO

No, pidgin English is very awkward. People don't take it seriously. It does not carry the same weight when you come to discussing serious issues. Invariably, when they start talking pidgin English you seem to drop your guard - you know, if you're in a bar you're easy going. But once you want to say something more serious you resort to English or Yoruba or any other languages.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now coming to the actual plays performed in the university, do they include performances by staff for students or is it an all-student performance?

KOLE OMOTOSO

We have a professional theatre whose business is simply to act plays, that's what they're paid for and they travel. In recent times they've been doing productions, helping to get people prepared for their 'O' levels and 'A' levels.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are these students?

KOLE OMOTOSO

They're not students, they are members of the staff specifically employed as actors and actresses for the University of Ife Theatre. Then we have other productions in which we need to bring in the talents of students and staff to participate. Then, of course, we have our students who are doing professional courses who also are used for performances. So there are many levels of performances and, of course, anybody familiar with the University of Ife will know that we have different theatres which can be used simultaneously by all these different groups.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much Kole. I'll be talking to you later about another aspect of the theatre in Nigeria.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Painting on glass is an art form practised in Senegal where it has quite a long history. Someone who has been won over to what he considers this exceptionally attractive method of painting is the journalist, Howard Schissel. He's just returned to Paris from Dakar where he's had the opportunity to watch the most celebrated of all Senegalese painters on glass at work. And on a line from Paris he's been telling Florence Akst about the technique and the artist.

HOWARD SCHISSEL

Instead of painting the background as an ordinary painter would do and then putting in the details, the artist first puts in the details in the outlines which he has put on the glass with pen and india ink. After the details are dry he will put in the background which would be the sky or the sea or a tropical landscape with palm trees and wild animals. So that is more or less the technique employed by the artist in this form.

FLORENCE AKST

And is it done in this sequence because when the work is finished you turn the object round to see the painting behind the glass?

HOWARD SCHISSEL

Yes, of course this is one of the reasons but another is also for the question of not mixing the different colours because the background tends to print rather rapidly while the details take time. So if you're putting the background on first it would mix in with the detailed colours so he prefers to have these small dots of black, white, red, green what have you, and then put in the more varied hues of the background.

FLORENCE AKST

Does this treatment, painting on glass, add to the brightness of a picture? What's the appearance?

HOWARD SCHISSEL

Well the appearance is very, very bright. It's like other naive paintings but it also give the impression of being a sort of...rainbow. It's very, very striking and it's something that is meant to attract the attention of the viewer.

FLORENCE AKST

This is achieved because of the function of the light behind the glass?

HOWARD SCHISSEL

No, because the back of the glass is doubled with a cardboard backing and a piece of string which is used to hand up the painting so there is no light actually coming from the back of the painting.

HOWARD SCHISSEL

This is a unique form of painting which was brought early in the century from North Africa to Senegal mainly through contacts with North African traders and of course the Lebanese who came to Senegal in the early part of the twentieth century.

FLORENCE AKST

And why has it remained a Senegalese form and not one that has spread throughout West Africa?

HOWARD SCHISSEL

Well there's a strong Islamic content in this type of art. Senegal is probably one of the leading Islamic centres in West Africa and, of course, it has the longest historical contact with North Africa which preceed the twentieth and nineteenth century. So this is the type of art that fits in very well with Senegalese traditions and its historical, cultural links with North Africa.

FLORENCE AKST

I tend to think of Islamic art as being primarily non-representational but this is very much representational. I'm looking now at a photograph of a charming young lady painted on glass. Were these pictures originally religious in content?

HOWARD SCHISSEL

Yes but this type of art is not traditionally Islamic even though it was transmitted through the Islamic or Arab connection. It originated in Antiquity in South East Europe.

FLORENCE AKST

And what were these paintings that arrived in Senegal and sparked the desire to copy them?

HOWARD SCHISSEL

Well they were mainly etchings of biblical scenes, specially the Old Testament and the French considered them at the time subversive because they didn't want Senegal to develop these important Arab connections because they thought it would hurt the penetration of French culture.

FLORENCE AKST

The photographs of the paintings I've seen have not been religious in content at all. I'm looking at a black and white photograph of a picture of a young girl with an elaborate hair style. This is the work of Gora M'Bengue. I understand he is quite celebrated for his work, does he do non-religious pictures then?

HOWARD SCHISSEL

Yes, most of the artists today do non-religious pictures because it is developed into a folk art which reflects both culture, politics and religion. Even in the religious paintings, for example the famous marabouts, or Moslem religious leaders, represent people who in many ways resisted French colonial penetration. So the painters use a very wide-sweeping number of subjects and, of course, the leading painter, Gora M'Bengue. M'Bengue is certainly the leading Senegalese artist and I spent two days in his workshop with him. He'll speak to you quite naturally as he goes about his art explaining how he does it, why he uses certain colours, even demonstrating that he could produce abstract modern art which he did right in front of me. So his possibilities are very, very wide and his fame is fast going to grow now.

FLORENCE AKST

What subjects did he use?

HOWARD SCHISSEL

You can find folk scenes for example, wives chasing husbands who are not faithful; you can find very fine portraits of Senegalese women in full attire and all their golden jewellery; you can find something new he has been doing which are miniatures - the same subjects but in miniature form. They are like cameos and they're marvellously well done and it's quite successful.

FLORENCE AKST

You have enjoyed seeing him at work, I can tell.

HOWARD SCHISSEL

He is really a complete artist with a marvellous personality, loves to have visitors. And that again is his problem because as he's getting to be well-known many people are knocking on his door. He likes that but he has to limit his contact with the public and with curious journalists like myself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Howard Schissel in Paris talking to Florence Akst.

Next week at this time I'll be back with a programme that brings you more the arts in Africa. For now from Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

CLOSING MUSIC

"LIMPOPO" - Jeremy Taylor.