

Arts and Africa

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BEN OKRI

Hello and welcome. This is Ben Okri and I'm bringing you a special edition of 'Arts and Africa' from the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Edinburgh. It has been the third event of its kind, and was planned as one of the greatest gatherings of talent from 49 countries composing a quarter of the world's population. It was to see a coming together of the best talents from English speaking Africa, but as it turned out only a fraction of participants took part. It was the refusal of the British Government to come out in favour of sanctions on the South African regime which led to massive boycotts. Not for a long time has a cultural event been so spiked by politics. At the opening, instead of the Kenya Choir, or the Ghana dance ensemble, or the National dance troupe of Sierra Leone, the only black band performing was the Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra.

MUSIC: 'POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE' TRINIDAD ALL STARS STEEL ORCHESTRA.

BEN OKRI

Starting off the festival here, ironically, with their version of Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance', music from the days of the Empire.

MUSIC: TRINIDAD ALL STARS STEEL ORCHESTRA

BEN OKRI

Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra in a muted mood reflecting that of the rest of the festival, including that of the organisers.

BILL BURDETT COUTTS

Inevitably it says a lot about apartheid and everybody's attitude to apartheid, I think one of the things here is that we all sympathise with the reasons why people are boycotting the Arts Festival and the Games. We are caught in the very difficult position on the one hand of having to do a job and wanting to present a festival well, as well as supporting the idea of the breakdown of apartheid so we have dedicated the Festival at this point to 'Artists against Apartheid' and we are making the best of it as we can.

BEN OKRI

The voice of Bill Burdett Coutts, Artistic Director of the Commonwealth Festival Theatre Programme. Before I left for Edinburgh on the Thursday of the opening ceremony only Nigeria and Ghana, out of all the Black African States, had declared their position and withdrawn government sponsored participants. On the train I heard of Achebe's and Ngugi's boycotts. And by the time I arrived, countries and prominent individuals had begun to dent the credibility of the events. The front line states met the following day to arrive at their decisions. Many actors and performers like South African born Botswanan actor, Emmanuel Rametsi, found themselves hanging around in an awful state of suspense.

EMMANUEL RAMETSI

I feel really confused, really, because if they decide otherwise I will have no choice because I personally also support what they want, that's all.

BEN OKRI

So if they say you shouldn't participate, you would not participate?

EMMANUEL RAMETSI

Yes, I wouldn't, but as an artist I wish to express my skills on the stage and also deliver the message the play I'm making carries.

BEN OKRI

And we'll be hearing more from Emmanuel Rametsi and the Marangarena Theatre Company later on in the programme. Beyond the main framework of the Arts Festival, but planned to run concurrently, was the Writers Conference. One of the main features of this was the launching of the collected works of the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo, published by Heinemann. A man of international stature, he died in 1967, one of the first casualties of the Biafran War. Professor Donatus Nwoga was one of the speakers at the Writers Conference. He is studying the Igbo roots in Okigbo's poetry. He knew Okigbo personally and grew up in the same part of Nigeria.

DONATUS NWOGA

Actually, before Okigbo was born, his father was living in my village as the village Headmaster, because he was a teacher moving from place to place. That fact of Okigbo being Catholic, being a teacher's son and a very sensitive person meant that wherever he went he just picked up a lot of influences that were available.

BEN OKRI

Later I interviewed Professor Nwoga, but before we get to that, here's a snatch of Okigbo's poetry. Angus Calder is reading from 'Lament of the Silent Sisters'.

ANGUS CALDER

Poetry extract: 'LAMENT OF THE SILENT SISTERS'.

BEN OKRI

The Writer's Conference was itself thrown into some turmoil by the absence of Ngugi, Achebe, Lenrie Peters, Mongane Serote and Zimbabwean, Musa Zimunya. The organisers wrote out their names on cards in big letters and called them The Absent Friends. All the writers who did attend the Conference, myself included, found ourselves in a situation of sinister ambiguity. The turmoil forced us to clarify our positions and this is the statement we presented.

READER

What began as a cultural event has necessarily become a political issue. The responsibility for this situation does not lie with the organisers of this conference but with the British Prime Minister. By refusing to impose sanctions on the South African regime she has betrayed not only the principles for which the Commonwealth stands but the guiding tenets of literature. This Conference is about literature and literature is an implicit denial of apartheid. A gathering of this kind would be impossible in South Africa. Apartheid depends on silence, on lies and on tyranny. Silence is never an option for the writer, the least we can do is to add our voices to the universal sense of outrage generated by the South African regime and the continuing support it receives from the West. We call for the complete isolation of that barbaric and abhorrent system.

BEN OKRI

After the Conference I spoke to Professor Nwoga and asked what he thought Okigbo might have done, in terms of protest, had he been alive now and a participant.

DONATUS NWOGA

Okigbo thought that politics was different from poetry. But then he also thought that the poet, as a person, must be political. That means he could write his poetry about anything but when it came to taking a political stance he would take his stance as a normal human being. I think he would have reacted quite vigorously to what has happened now and been ready to take on any issues that would make it possible for us to realise the proper objectives of the destruction of the apartheid system in South Africa.

BEN OKRI

What is it about Okigbo that he is able to inspire this continual renewing interest in his own work?

DONATUS NWOGA

Well to start with, you realise Okigbo was one of the earliest of the poets who, at a time when it was quite exciting and new, wrote poetry in English. Not only was he one of the first, he was also one of the best. Admittedly his work was very difficult but progressively people have found ways into this poetry and the interest in Okigbo has grown and will grow because the more you read him, the more you appreciate how good a poet he was. This new collection will certainly increase the interest in Okigbo because it contains practically all that we know he wrote.

BEN OKRI

Meanwhile Producer Florence Akst discovered a tranquil contrast to the extraordinary tensions and debates of the Writer's Conference. And she found it amongst the textiles at the Edinburgh Arts Centre. There were exhibits from all parts of the Continent, though their creators were not present.

FLORENCE AKST

The textiles display has a large African component and amongst them some of the most impressive are from Botswana. I am standing by two ceiling-to-floor lengths of fabric with some unusual and most attractive designs. This one and its neighbour come from the Phuthadikobo Museum in Botswana and they both have transferred onto cotten lengths designs from traditions that are nothing to do with textiles. The one I am looking at is copying patterns of traditional basketwork and on its neighbour there are bold squares with repeated patterns that come from the designs of paintings on the outsides of houses - designs still used to decorate dwelling walls in Botswana and they're used for an all-over pattern in bold brown on a buff base. From Nigeria there is a heavily embroidered Hausa robe and also some Adire cloth from Abeokuta in the South of Nigeria, tie-dyed, indigo-printed. There is one with a pattern that is called 'plantain' and gives a translation of the original Yuruba name for the pattern as 'The lazy man can't be proud', but it's a very fine indigo and white pattern which I thought anybody would be proud of.

BEN OKRI

After Friday's meeting of the Front Line states, Botswana and Malawi emerged as the only countries willing to appear at the Festival. So Emmanuel Rametsi was put out of his suspense. The Botswanan government gave him and the Marengarena theatre group the premission to go ahead with their production of Athol Fugard's play 'The Island'. It is a play within a play - in essence two black South African prisoners on an unnamed Island prison rehearse the Greek tragedy 'Antigone'. The theme of the individual challenging the might of an oppressive state is doubly underscored.

EXCERPT FROM A SCENE FROM 'THE ISLAND'

BEN OKRI

Emmanuel Rametsi as Antigone being state-crushed. Both he and fellow actor Lammi Shoba were in no doubt that, having got their permission to stay, performing at Edinburgh provided an important personal achievement and the opportunity to launch an attack against apartheid.

LAMMI SHOBA

Exactly!

EMMANUEL RAMETSI

Oh yes, yes! I want to believe that any artist who's invited to the Arts Festival in Edinburgh should actually find this the highlight of a career.

BEN OKRI

What problems did you have bringing the play over here?

LAMMI SHOBA

If you must talk about the Marengarena, this Company has been formed five years ago and established so that artists, budding and potential people, who have maybe the interest could come and learn something from people who have theatrical experience. Financially the Company is working on a shoestring budget and there is virtually no finance, so it has been a struggle to bring us up to Edinburgh.

BEN OKRI

What relationship do you think 'The Island' has to the Commonwealth? Because in a sense that's what you are doing - you are bringing a South African play to the Commonwealth.

EMMANUEL RAMETSI

Dictatorship isn't really a way to deal with people, that is all it says.

LAMMI SHOBA

We want to present a message as artists firstly, because this is what the Commonwealth is all about. And I want to believe that as much as people are reading and listening to the radio and all the other media to learn about South Africa it is as artists that we think we have been offered a platform to come and show just a tiny way in which people live out there in South Africa, being subjected to all this injustice. This is precisely what we

have come for and I think it is for us as well it is the highlight to be able to be here.

BEN OKRI

Out of all the confusion about boycotts, the ambiguities of our positions, the tensions and resultant conversion of a cultural platform into an overtly political one, the festival emerged tattered but oddly defiant. One lesson learnt is that in our times art has no choice but to be political. It cannot sit on the fence and cannot afford ambiguity. This is Ben Okri bringing this edition of 'Arts and Africa' to an end.

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