

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today in 'Arts and Africa' Florence Akst provides us with what she calls 'a glimpse' of the state of the arts in Ghana.

MUSIC - Abibgromma Music - Sig. Tune

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's what the Abibgromma Theatre Company call their signature tune. It was recorded in Ghana by Florence Akst who's joined me at the microphone to talk about what she's been seeing and hearing on her recent visit there. Florence, you've been telling me that you went all the way north until you crossed the border and ended up in Ouagadougou.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes, that's quite right but in fact I want to talk about my first days in Ghana in Accra. And in Accra, one of my first ports of call was the Department of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana in Legon where there was a performance being given by a group I'd heard of but not seen, the Abibgromma, of a play called 'The Verdict of the Cobra' by Mohamed Ben Abdullah. Not exactly a play, more like a musical - music, dancing; there were members of cast playing xylophones and drums and flutes; there was some very fine miming and the music was tremendous.

MUSIC - Abibgromma - Chorus from 'The Verdict of the Cobra'

FLORENCE AKST

I expect you could hear, Alex, the switchover from them singing static to them dancing while they're singing; tremendous singing, very disciplined and lovely ensemble work. I spoke to Nii Kwei Sowah who's their dance master. We were in a little corner room full of their props and I asked him how many of Abibgromma are in fact dancers.

NII KWEI SOWAH

We have five who have graduated as dancers in the group of sixteen people. In the School of Performing Arts everyone is trained as a dancer.

2.

FLORENCE AKST

What is the discipline of dancing?

NII KWEI SOWAH

We start our work with dance technique every day. The morning session is for four hours. The first hour is for technique. Then we move to creative dance or dance technique, drumming, singing or acting.

FLORENCE AKST

How do people work as a company? Because this is very essential, isn't it?

NII KWEI SOWAH

This is the first professional company in Ghana. All the people in the group are trained people of the School of Performing Arts so they are really disciplined - they know what they are about.

FLORENCE AKST

You have created some of the dances.

NII KWEI SOWAH

yeah, for the musical, I choreograph all their movements in it.

FLORENCE AKST

Now I seem to detect a majority of African movements and some that you have brought in from other cultures.

NII KWEI SOWAH

Yes, that's right. We have a fusion of African movement and of course Western style and Eastern style. Throughout our training we are giving movement technique from all over the world. There is a chance for us to fuse all that, to come out of the world dance.

FLORENCE AKST

Rooted in Africa.

NII KWEI SOWAH

Sure.

FLORENCE AKST

And as you talk, you want to use your arms to express yourself. I can see that.

NII KWEI SOWAH

Yes, it's become part of me. I'd say I dance at anytime I talk, whatever I do, I feel like moving to it.

3.

FLORENCE AKST

And they were a most professional company, really in command of their art. Of course, there are other aspects of art and I'd very much like to play you a recording made when I was walking towards Makola Market. Just on the outside, past some stalls, I heard some singing and I thought, "Oh, I'll record this".

ACTUALITY - Pavement Evangelist singing

FLORENCE AKST

Alex, what was he singing about?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well he was singing in Twi and from the few words I heard, he seemed to be talking about his father who had done a lot for him. I suppose his 'father' is God.

FLORENCE AKST

Well, I thought he was an Evangelist. The stallholders round him were accompanying him and singing with him but he was there all by himself with a few tracks he was giving out, but they weren't in English.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's rather strange that an Evangelist should be singing on the pavements of Accra. When I was there, all this type of singing was done in churches.

FLORENCE AKST

Ah, well there's a tremendous religious ferment throughout Ghana these days and there he is, out on the market street.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And then you moved from Accra to ...

FLORENCE AKST

I moved to Kumasi. I went by bus to Kumasi. I wanted to go and see the cultural centre.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You were talking about Anokiekrom.

FLORENCE AKST

That's right, yes but there was very, very little happening. It was very tidy, well cared-for but there didn't seem to be any life at all except in the shop. That's the day I went.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh, I see. Because I would have been most surprised if you'd said that the place had broken down.

4.

FLORENCE AKST

No, it hasn't broken down but I do suspect there isn't a great deal happening. Where I did find quite a lot of life was again at the University, at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. I went to the College of Art and as I walked amongst these really rather old, pre-fabricated buildings, not the modern part of the University, I could hear this music drifting towards me through a window.

ACTUALITY - Music at the U.S.T., Ghana

FLORENCE AKST

Now you can tell they're not professional musicians; they are in fact some fourth year art students in the Department of Painting. I really enjoyed walking in there and meeting a couple of the students. One of them Henry Asare-Baah talked to me about his work. He had some oils and watercolours standing for me to look at and I asked which he preferred.

HENRY ASARE-BAAH

Watercolour is more spontaneous. Because it's handy, I can carry it outside and I've done some studies outdoors but in the studio I use a lot of oils.

FLORENCE AKST

There's a picture which is, what, a motor park? Is that something that attracts you or is that obligatory on the course?

HENRY ASARE-BAAH

I was born in Takoradi and I have lived there all my life. This is the kind of scene you see around. So I grew up there and it's kind of imprinted on my mind.

FLORENCE AKST

The ground where the feet are - you don't actually have feet but where the legs disappear onto a broad horizontal sweeps of colour, brown and yellow and blue - it reminds me of the litter-strewn streets, not very even. Is that what you were trying to convey?

HENRY ASARE-BAAH

That is exactly ... There are potholes here and there, people drop things too and you see some mud, you know.

FLORENCE AKST

And you don't need a beautiful object to create a picture?

HENRY ASARE-BAAH

No. Actually I think the object doesn't really matter, the subject matter doesn't really matter. One can make art out of anything.

FLORENCE AKST

What I'd most like to ask you about ... Let's move over to them. Over here there are three abstract paintings of yours. That one on the left does have something a little more representational. They could be piano keys with tails or they could be tadpoles with heads like piano keys!

5.

HENRY ASARE-BAAH

Well, I've been experimenting with this music/art theme for some time. When I paint, I try to 'play music' too with my colour and try to create a rhythm too. But I don't really think about these things when I'm painting, you see. At times, I start out with an idea but I can't really tell how a painting will come out, you know. So I just let myself go and things happen during the painting.

Actuality - More music from the Dept. of Painting, U.S.T., Ghana

FLORENCE AKST

The voice there and also the player of guitar, Thomas Odamtten, was the other art student in the room and he was telling me that the Department of Painting and the whole College of Art is really the cultural centre from the University, which is one of, as its title says, science and technology and it obviously was a very creative centre.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, I'm amazed that they have so much talent. They seem to be musicians as well as painters.

FLORENCE AKST

Spilling over. Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So what next? Where did you next move to?

FLORENCE AKST

I got on the bus and I went to Tamale and I came to the centre where there's the street for the blacksmiths.

Actuality - Drumming in Tamale

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's drumming. What has drumming got to do with blacksmiths?

FLORENCE AKST

Well, you look surprised - so was I because amongst the cooking utensils and the farm implements that the blacksmiths were making were wonderful, vivid, brightly painted drum kits. The sort of drum kits that a modern dance band has - those tall thin ones, the big bass drums, there were symbols, there were rattles and they were made by the blacksmiths from the big petrol drums. They were the authentic wooden shape but made in metal but they had goatskin drumskins to play on.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Highly innovative.

FLORENCE AKST

Well they've been making them for twenty years now and a couple of the people from the Dagbani family who specialised in blacksmith and drum kit making told me about their activities, Kassim Kuseri and Zacharia Rufai. For instance the pedals that thwack the big drums, you know how a drummer can sit tapping his foot on a spring pedal, well those are from car accelerators and brakes. They lift out a really strong spring and they have a good 'whacking' action with a wooden head. And the rattles are in fact cans of insecticide. The drums, I'm told, are not only used by dance bands but also for simpa dancing in the local villages and by churches - the Assemblies of God, the Presbyterians and not surprisingly, the Mosame Disco Churches. I didn't get to one of the church services - I'd left by the Sunday but I felt impelled standing there, blocking the street with lots of people round me and the lorries trying to get past to describe what I was seeing for sale, these drum kits.

FLORENCE AKST (in Tamale)

I think while I'm here I ought to tell listeners that what I'm looking at are sets of drums in brilliant colours. They're particularly a deep, but bright blue and one set has the black star of Ghana painted on it. They are the side drums, about a metre high? - not quite, almost a metre high - and slender and then what are the bigger ones, what are they called?

DRUM KIT MAKER

The bass drums and the side ones are the tenor drums.

FLORENCE AKST

Then you have cymbals as well. Now, these don't look like rattles to me. They look like ...

DRUM KIT MAKER

... Insecticide tins. When they've finished using them, they bring them to sell them here and we put iron balls inside, ball bearings.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Florence thank you very much for this introduction to the drum makers of Tamale.

FLORENCE AKST

It was fun, I can tell you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I can remember the petrol drums all right, but I never saw any of them being turned into drums as you described. Quite extraordinary. Well, I suggest we end the programme with Abibigromma singing for us while I say goodbye. So this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping to meet you all again this time next week. Goodbye.

MUSIC - Abibigromma music