

Arts and Africa

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OFEIBEA QUIST-ARCTON

Hello, this is Ofeibea Quist-Arcton welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa. This week's programme takes us exclusively to Sierra Leone, currently celebrating its bi-centenary. According to our reporter Lansannah Kai-Wonneh, there's been a renaissance in theatre in Sierra Leone. Theatre groups are springing up all over the country, and in Freetown alone there are currently about 30 troupes each with its own distinct style. One such ensemble is the Freetown Players. Their rather unique role is to take theatre to the people ... be it in the streets, in the markets or even in the office. The leading light behind this idea is playwright Charlie Oyeyemi Haffner ... known locally as Osori Limba. Educated in Freetown, Charlie joined Sierra Leone Tabule Theatre in 1970. A teacher by profession, he moved to the Gambia in 1978, where he wrote a number of plays. He returned to Sierra Leone in 1985 and produced Dele Charley's Tity Shain-Shain and Undat Sabi Mr. Cool. During this period the Tabule Theatre, to which he was appointed Acting Director, came to London to take part in a 1983 theatre festival. In addition to all this, Charlie is currently at Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone doing a course in cultural Studies.

CHARLIE OYEYEMI HAFFNER

Many, many. First of all recognition of the theatre artists is the number one problem. Theatre artists are regarded usually as dropouts, as drug addicts, you name it! They have fought for quite a long time now, but theatre artists have not acquired their due position in society, simply because our educational system more or less puts the theatre artists aside. Second and most important is the lack of facilities. There is hardly any 'easy to get' facilities. You want to start writing a play; your first problem is to buy a pen - expensive, paper - unavailable, if available, ridiculous prices. You manage to make your plays, facilities for publicity, they are all difficult to come by. You pay a lot of money to the radio and your plays are not advertised because of shortage of power and so on. So facilities on the whole are one of our major problems in the development of theatre in this country.

LANSANNAH KAI-WONNEH

Have you tried to prevail on the government to see about the problems ?

OYEYEMI HAFFNER

It's not easy. I hope you don't mean me - as an individual - to prevail upon the government. It's not easy. Governments usually recognise somebody after they've excelled themselves. That's what I have observed. I am sure that great men of today, great women of today, were not picked up from the gutter by any government official and put into the limelight. You have to work and if you work, you excel yourself, and then the government can pick you up at any time.

KAI-WONNEH

You have said that 1987 could be considered as the crucial year in the history of theatre. What do you exactly mean ?

OYEYEMI HAFFNER

It coincided with our bicentenary celebrations. You are quite aware, perhaps more than I of the vast programme that is ahead of us in celebrating this bicentenary. And theatre is among one of the greatest aspects to be used to celebrate this bicentenary. So I consider that now that the country's going to be 200 years old, now that the government thinks that the theatre artists can help to celebrate this bicentenary, I think it should be important for theatre artists. I only hope that after the bicentenary celebrations are completed, the government will not go back from where they came and leave us stranded.

KAI-WONNEH

You earlier mentioned a lot of problems in terms of play production, but there might also have been some improvements in the theatre seen in the country.

OYEYEMI HAFFNER

Yes improvements. Many, many, many more groups are sprouting up now. We have over 30 theatre groups in Freetown. That is one aspect of development. But apart from that, I am not particularly satisfied with the topics dealt with, not by all groups but by most groups. I am also not satisfied with the comportment of theatre artists. I am also not satisfied with the priorities of some of these groups. So in as much as, in terms of number we have developed, in terms of techniques, some groups have developed. In terms of content, in terms of discipline and so on, some groups have developed, but on the whole we still have to expect more from many, many of the other groups.

KAI-WONNEH

One important aspect of your group, is that your songs are very 'feeling'. Where do you draw your inspirations from to compose these songs ?

OYEYEMI HAFFNER

From around. Once you travel you see a lot of things. And when you travel you participate in societies that you come across. You seek the interests of people you come across, you learn about them, you show interest in what they are doing. Those things teach you a lot of lessons and it is from these lessons that I draw my inspiration.

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You see being away for some time, I was able to see my country better, to the point that I decided that there was no place like home. I further discovered that you will get money that you are in search of in another country but that is all you will have, you will not have love. The money that you will acquire in that other country will also not help to develop your country in any way. So, on returning I discovered that one way to help develop our country as a teacher cum theatre artists, is to look around and make our people, make our children aware of our social situations, of our political situations, of our economic situations. In that way I think I am helping.

QUIST-ARCTON

Sierra Leone's Charlie Oyeyemi Haffner, also known as Osori Limba, director of the Freetown Players. And this is the sound of the Freetown Players.

MUSIC - FREETOWN PLAYERS

QUIST-ARCTON

Sierra Leone's Freetown Players. And we stay in Sierra Leone for the second part of Arts and Africa where Lansannah Kai-Wonneh has been investigating cultural orientation in schools. Lansannah says that for a very long time, Sierra Leonean traditional and cultural values have been influenced mainly by the West, going back 200 years to the liberation of the first slaves to the then colony, Freetown. Today this trend is losing ground and some schools in Sierra Leone are beginning to integrate cultural teaching into the curriculum allowing students to appreciate their own traditions. Bumpe High School in the Bo district was the first to start, followed by Sierra Leone Grammar School in Freetown - where the schoolchildren have seized the initiative to set up their own cultural groups. Six of the country's ethnic groups are represented in this theatre club. And they perform demonstrations of naming ceremonies, marriages, music, dance etc. The brains behind all this is Gloria Palmer, Head of the Languages Department at Sierra Leone Grammar School. Lansannah Kai-Wonneh asked her about the influence of the West.

GLORIA PALMER

The Western culture is very dominant in our society. Maybe in the past people were taught to regard their own culture, or African culture as being inferior to the Western culture. But with this kind of presentation, one is able to appreciate one's culture better and one is also able to be in a position to compare the two kinds of influences - the Western influence and the influence of one's own background and to keep the two either separate or see what benefits can be obtained from a merger of the two.

KAI-WONNEH

You said earlier that the group consists of six ethnic groups in the country. Would you like to comment on aspects of each of the groups that have been demonstrating on stage ?

PALMER

Each group tells about its origin, about the early occupations of their ancestors and each group also tells about some of the cultural practices, the costumes also say a lot about the way of life of the people and the music and dancing of each group also go a long way to preaching about the culture of the different groups.

KAI-WONNEH

Do you teach drama at all in the school ?

PALMER

Yes, in the classroom situation. During a drama lesson, dramatisation is encouraged and even during a poetry lesson, as far as possible, where dramatisation can be implemented, it is made use of by teachers and in a way to develop talent in drama, there is also a drama club in the school which I am in charge of. That is where students who are talented at acting are given an opportunity to show what they can do in the theatre. It is also the place where we tap the talents of the withdrawn ones, the ones who have to be drawn out. It is an avenue indeed for drama to be developed in the boys because this presentation has contributed a good deal to educating not only just members of a particular group about their history and culture, but about the history and culture of other groups as well. It has also served as a way of informing the general public about the history and culture of these main groups we have featured in the pageant.

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Gloria Palmer. Abdul Razak Serray-Wurie is one of the student performers in the group. He represents the Fullahs.

ABDUL RAZAK SERRAY-WURIE

Our people are greatly influenced by Islam. Our cultural background traces as far as the Futu Jallon. Our people migrated from the Futu Jallon to Sierra Leone with the aim of spreading Islam during the jihad days. Our people are greatly influenced by Islam - we have produced Islamic scholars known as 'karamokas'. During our pageant show we are presenting a traditional ceremony. The naming ceremony of the baby is called 'idenabu' or 'Finbugal'. During the ceremony the karamoko who is an important man in the Fullah community plays an important role. He is the master of the ceremony. He slaughters the sheep or goat and pronounces the baby's name. After we have a lot of cultural dances. The people who dance these cultural dances are traditionally called 'nyamakalas'. In our own cultural dance, we have a dance that is similar to the disco, or breakdance. The nyamakalas who are the dancers, they have some acrobatic performances, that are just like the breakdance. Our people have been dancing this breakdance before the Western people started. Our traditional dance is just like the breakdance.

KAI-WONNEH

How did you consider your culture in the past ?

SERRAY-WURIE

Our people have been influenced by Islam and my father is a practising Muslim so I had always been brought up in the Islamic way. I always consider my own tradition superior to the Western one.

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Abdel Razak Serray-Wurie brings to an end this edition of Arts and Africa. Goodbye from me, Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, and thank you for joining us. And here's more music from Sierra Leone's Freetown Players singing about the country's bicentenary celebrations.

MUSIC - FREETOWN PLAYERS