

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

BBC COPYRIGHT CONTROL

ARTS AND AFRICA

First b'cast: 3.7.87

706G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. In this edition sculpture and theatre from Zimbabwe. When you say the words 'Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture' many people automatically think of Henry Munyaraze, more popularly known as Henry of Tengenenge, the Takawirya brothers, Nicholas Mukoberanwa. They think of art that's inspired by traditional mythology and the spirit world that's the kind of Zimbabwean stone sculpture that has in the last few years become internationally known. But in Zimbabwe itself sculpture is taking a new direction and this was clear to many at the opening of Tapfuma Gutsa's one man exhibition in June, at the National Gallery in Harare. Gutsa's sculpture is energetic and different in that he's willing to mix his materials. Some of his sculptures are made of wood but stand on stone bases. One named 'Blues for Mandela' has a wooden head emerging out of a solid block of stone. His hair is made out of copper wire. Other sculptures are totally abstract but some have snake like figures which give them a strong sense of movement. And it's perhaps because of his willingness to innovate that Gutsa at 31 has been hailed as the leader of a new generation of artists in Zimbabwe.

He grew up in the rural areas and says that he began to model clay animals while herding cattle as a child. He always knew he wanted to be an artist of some kind and in 1981 he became the first Zimbabwean awarded a British Council Scholarship. This took him to London and a three year course at the City and Guilds Art College. Fiona Lloyd who sent us this report began by asking Tapfuma Gutsa whether he felt that this formal training had perhaps taken away his spontaneity.

TAPFUMA GUTSA

No, no way. I have always been a person with a set of ideas and things I believe in, and they change from time to time. My art reflects that kind of thinking - I call it philosophy. Art school only enhanced it, it enhanced my working techniques and things but my actual thinking is still the same. There is a certain part to my work, there is the lighter side of it and all these same facets which existed in my work

before going to college and after college and they are still there but the techniques have been revamped in some ways.

FIONA LLOYD

Tapfuma Gutsa is critical of much of the mainstream Zimbabwean stone sculpture. While it may sell for huge prices in foreign galleries he feels it has little relevance at home.

TAPFUMA GUTSA

I think the sculpture is a bit behind the times because what can be the point of talking about spirits in a world where people are actually struggling for material things, this materialistic struggle is there and we can't do anything about it. I am not saying that Shona should do away with their spiritualism, I am a Shona spiritualist and am deeply involved with it but I would like to be quite objective commenting on things like baby dumping, rhino poaching, thieving and all that sort of thing of which Shona sculpture seems to fail to fulfill that commitment to the general public.

FIONA LLOYD

But one of the names in Zimbabwean stone sculpture that Tapfuma Gutsa does admire is Nicholas Mukomberanwa and the feeling is mutual, as I found out when I met Nicholas at the Gutsa exhibition.

NICHOLAS MUKOMBERANWA

At first when Gutsa went overseas many people had a feeling, including myself, that maybe he is going to be influenced by what he has seen there. But when he came back and one looks at this exhibition, you will notice, of course, that he learned a lot from the school, but his interpretation from the knowledge that he got he is now putting it into our own culture in a different and better way. Although they are African they are more into this modern world.

FIONA LLOYD

Tapfuma Gutsa's one man exhibition is called 'Ootonga' - a Shona word for which there is no exact English translation. But it refers to that moment just before sunrise when the sky is suddenly alight with glowing light. It is a good name for an exhibition which marks something of a new dawn in Zimbabwean sculpture, new because of the way Gutsa explores different materials: stone, wood, copper wire, even egg shells to convey messages which have less to do with the spirit world than with ordinary people.

TAPFUMA GUTSA

Perhaps because I can't express myself in terms of language I have found sculpture as an alternative. So what I can't speak about or what I feel wouldn't be proper to speak about in society, I take it out in my sculpture. Also from the experience I had in England I learnt something about subtlety, avoiding being dramatic but still getting the message across in a way that the audience won't be shocked outright, because if you shock a person directly then they will just walk away and forget about it but if you give them a riddle then they go away and want to come back to find out what exactly it was that caught their eye in the first place. If there is a small sculpture hanging on the wall and it is called 'Fish in a Trap', and there is a fish, an abstract form of a fish and something that looks like an octopus about to eat the fish. I am not talking about a fish and an octopus, really I am talking about people, dog eat dog and that kind of situation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The sculptor Tapfuma Gutsa. You may remember that a month ago on Arts and Africa we talked to the Zimbabwean writer Charles Mungoshi and one of the things that he talked about was the controversial play Workshop Negative by the playwright Cont Mhlanga - which because of its depiction of corruption in the country was prevented from touring abroad. Well recently returned from Zimbabwe is Chris Hurst. He's a Zimbabwean born actor who lives here in Britain but who spent the last year living and working with Cont Mhlanga's group, Amakosi, who are based in Makakoba, a working class area of Bulawayo. Chris Hurst was one of the key actors in Workshop Negative and Tim Judah asked him first exactly what the play was about.

CHRIS HURST

Well the play looked at society in transformation since independence. It took a white character who had been involved in the war and a black character who had also been involved in the war, and they were both working in the same job in a metal work-shop and then there was a boss who was also involved in the liberation struggle. It looked at the problems between those three characters and it moved towards them wanting to reconcile and create unity, its statement was: 'that is what we want, but is it easy?' It looked at the difficulties in each of those people's positions in coming together. The controversy was caused because the owner of the factory was a corrupt politician and some people found that offensive or disturbing.

TIM JUDAH

Who, who for example criticised the play?

4.

CHRIS HURST

The Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture. They didn't want the play to travel outside the country.

TIM JUDAH

And they in fact prevented it from doing so, didn't they?

CHRIS HURST

That's right they did yes.

TIM JUDAH

How did that hit the group, what did Cont, the playwright for example think of that?

CHRIS HURST

The play and that decision has been debated quite a lot in the press there and in some of the press outside the country. Cont just seems to have gone on and written more plays, I don't think he was put off at all. His plays are about social issues and they are the views of people in his position and his class in society, it is a very strong voice of the working class people who are living in townships, and it is society viewed from their point of view as he sees it.

TIM JUDAH

So it is society viewed from a particular point of view. In that case how popular was the play, you toured all over the country didn't you?

CHRIS HURST

Yes. The play and his other plays are very, very popular. He gets large audiences, he has built that up over the last six years or so. We will play 'Sugar Estate and Triangle' and we will play to different communities there, to a labourer community and to middle management and usually get good houses. We play centre of town, schools, middle class venues even predominately white venues and he usually does a free performance either in the market place in Makakoba where he did "Nancy Landoda", where you will get a 1000 people turn up and watch. We did "Workshop Negative" outside a supermarket so as you can see his plays move right through the spectrum of society and has an appeal there - I think because his plays are funny, entertaining. He is a very good playwright.

5.

TIM JUDAH

Surely the fact that the play was banned from touring abroad must have come as rather a shock. Wasn't this seen as an infringement of his rights really, or the group's rights?

CHRIS HURST

He may have seen it as that but he has to say that if he felt that, not me. I was very surprised and very sad about it, I enjoyed working with the group very much and I think it may have made other writers a bit frightened to deal with social issues which isn't wise in a country which is growing and coming out of colonialism, finding its own culture and finding its new direction for the culture. I think you need to have your writers looking at the society and reflecting it and exploring it. There are a lot of theatre groups in Zimbabwe and it would be nice if some of that theatrical activity was reflected on a wider scale outside the country, it would help give Zimbabwean theatre a stronger identity once it gets international recognition.

TIM JUDAH

You say that theatre is flourishing in Zimbabwe but Cont's group, Amakosi, had rather a curious beginning it didn't start in theatre did it?

CHRIS HURST

He was running a karate group for some kids who wanted to learn karate so he taught them. When his back yard got too full he got a hall to teach them in and so that carried on. One day they turned up at the hall and there was a theatre workshop and saw that, got interested in theatre, attended other workshops and then asked the group whether they wanted to do theatre as well and they said yes, so the group still to this day do karate and theatre.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The actor Chris Hurst. Since Workshop Negative ended Amakosi have not been idle and in fact they are currently taking part in the filming of "World's Apart" - a film about the life of the assassinated South African anti-apartheid activist Ruth First. Well that's it from Arts and Africa for another week and this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye, and leaving you with the sound of the Bhundu boys - one of several Zimbabwean groups currently enjoying great success here in Britain.