

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa.

MUSIC - KUFENA'S FLUTES

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's the opening music of New Earth, a dance drama from Nigeria currently on show here in Britain. It's one of two African entries for this year's London International Festival of Theatre - or LIFT as it's known.

In a moment I will be talking to its director and choreographer Peter Badejo but first I want to warn everyone who is interested in drama that the BBC African Theatre season will be with us again soon. So if you are interested in contributing to this year's season fetch a pen and paper for the details because we will soon be hearing from African Theatre's Producer, Fiona Ledger.

Now, New Earth, as I said is a dance drama. It's performed by the group Kufena who come from Ahmadu Bello University - or ABU as it's known - at Zaria. It's a spectacular and vigorous performance in five acts. It combines a wide range of music, traditional songs and dances from all over Nigeria. For example, we see incorporated in the drama the Idoma and Egungun masquerades and we hear the songs of the Bori spirit possession. But New Earth is not simply a show case for Nigerian culture. Rather it uses the country's varied heritage to tell a modern political story. And its message would seem to be that Nigeria's farmers get a raw deal when confronted with the establishment, symbolised in the show by a stylised professor, soldier and traditional ruler. Well I asked Peter Badejo, Kufena's director and choreographer how he came to put his views on stage like this.

PETER BADEJO

Yes, when I was commissioned to do these performances for LIFT, at that time the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies, ABU, were doing research into agriculture and its problems in the country, so I thought, well, this is a good opportunity to bring research material onto the stage. And I looked at the problems, and what's going on with farmers and the elite society, and I decided to come up with this 90 minute show on agriculture, its products and distribution and who really gains from it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's a very unusual subject for drama.

PETER BADEJO

It is very unusual, but you see the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies is unique for something; it's not just performances alone but it uses material from what their research produces, to do performances, and this is what we have just done.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How did you work out the story line?

PETER BADEJO

We got research papers together, about what the farmers go through, how things are distributed to them, how their products are being sold, what they really gain from the products that they have, and I finally came to realise that there is some imbalance between distribution and the resources that come out of it. So I decided that it might be a story line, that would be not only national but international. I decided then that if I was going to do a thirty minute thing, which is going to exhibit the cultural tenets of Nigeria, and also follow a contemporary story-line, which is to benefit people, in terms of experience and understanding, then I have to look at the cultural dances and utilise the symbols understood, not only nationally, but those that can cut across the international language barrier. You know, I believe very much in movement as a form of communication that can cut across countries and it has worked perfectly, and in terms of the music, I looked out for the major themes that can be easily recognised and I choreographed them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you suggesting that this piece of drama is realistic? My impression was that the intelligentsia as represented by the professor, the army, which is in government....

PETER BADEJO

Well, I just used 'the force'.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

'The force', right, and the traditional rulers, are all in collusion?

PETER BADEJO

As far as I'm concerned, the élite, generally, are in collusion, it's something that is reflected in the play. But I leave a translation of it to the audience.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was wondering what reaction you would get from the Nigerian authorities, if you presented this play?

PETER BADEJO

The interesting thing about it is, as a non-verbal form of communication, it's left for the artist to create pieces, and for the people to translate. If someone translates it as an anti-government thing, it's something to which I can easily say, "no, that's not what I said".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, but it's quite obvious that the authorities, for example, snatch the trophy from the farmers. It's a form of corruption you're portraying isn't it?

PETER BADEJO

Yes, it is. But if you look at the end, I did not give any solution. The artist, should not, I think, really come out and offer a solution, but rather make people aware of what's going on and let them find a solution to it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about the costumes, and the rituals which we see on stage? Are these things which happen in reality?

PETER BADEJO

In reality the first ritual is an adaptation; I adapted it from the traditional Bori ritual, which I inter-mixed with the Yoruba Egungun festival, which is usually the rounding up of the festival. So I kind of inter-mixed it, but specifically it is heavily based on the Bori cult of northern Nigeria.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Some of the dances are obviously very traditional, whereas others are not so traditional, they are really like caricatures. Can you give us some examples?

PETER BADEJO

Yes, if you look at the dance, where the three masquerade leaders come in, with the raffia costume, that is very traditional and that is taken from the Idoma. The Idoma community in Nigeria have a linguistic connection with the Yorubas and since I was using the Engungun Yoruba I decided to use the movement and not take it completely out of context because it is used in the same form even within the traditional masquerade festival in Idoma, but I brought it on stage and only changed the choreographic flow pattern just to suit it. By contrast where you see 'the force' behind the rulers, its movements were purely creative. I just choreographed it purely for that, it's not taken from any traditional movement.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Peter, in the past, performers have come over here and used African dances as merely demonstrations of cultural tradition. Now you seem to be breaking new ground.

PETER BADEJO

Yes, I am definitely, I think it's high time these dances in Africa are not just brought as a form of museum exhibition. Traditionally the people used story-lines within the traditional set up and we should be able to fit them into the contemporary setting, in the form of story telling and quite a few people are doing this now in Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And building it into.....

PETER BADEJO

.... The content of the contemporary setting.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Peter Badejo talking about his show New Earth currently touring in Britain but soon to return to play in Nigeria. Now, as I said earlier the African Theatre season will soon be upon us once again and its Producer Fiona Ledger is here to tell us about it, Fiona.....

FIONA LEDGER

Well this is just to say that we're about four months away from the African Theatre season, and I still haven't come to a final decision about the six scripts that I'm going to be producing. So if anyone is listening with a writing urge, if you're professionals or amateurs, it doesn't matter, please send in scripts as soon as you possibly can. Now if you've written something already, and maybe it's a bit long, or it's maybe for the stage, that doesn't matter, send it in, and it'll be great if we could have a look at it. Otherwise if you're poised to write something, here's a few tips to remember; cast of actors should be no more than six or seven, the length of scripts, 28 to 30 pages long, that's typed with double-line spacing, that will give you a thirty minute script. Now if you want to send your scripts in, or if you want anymore details about the season, here's the address: BBC African Theatre, Bush House, London W.C.2.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Fiona thanks very much and I will give you that address again at the end of the programme.

The Music of the Royal Courts is the title of a sumptuous series of concerts that have been performed recently here in London. Most of the music has been Asian - from the former courts of China, Japan, Laos, India and so on. But Africa has also been strongly represented by musicians from Morocco, Mali and Zaire. In today's programme we are going to hear some of the Zairean music. This first piece is played by Elanga N'keke a Mongo musician from Northern Equatorial Zaire. He plays a small seven-key Sanza - or thumb xylophone which has a small metal key board attached to a gourd resonator. What we are about to hear is an exert from a song called 'Yoru Yoru Kogu Koleke' or The River Yoru. The story is this. Two women go fishing in the river, they get into an argument about the division of the catch and they come to blows. Their husband then comes along, separates them, reconciles them and they all live happily ever after.

MUSIC - YORU YORU KOGU KOLEKE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Mongo musician Elanga N'kake. The next piece is from the Pende people represented here in London by five musicians from Gungu, the Pende capital. In this extract of the song, Mama Kasanji we hear a lament for a lady who has died while tilling the fields.

MUSIC - MAMA KASANJI

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mama Kasanji played by Pende musicians from Gungu. Our final piece of music is from Zaire's Babunda people. Before we hear it though let me remind you of that address for African Theatre - for those who want guidelines or already have completed scripts. The address is: BBC African Theatre, Bush House, London WC2. Until next week then, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey leaving you with Nay Mayangol a Babunda lament from the war scarred time which succeeded independence. A young woman weeps on the battle field. It seems as though the miseries of war will never end. Goodbye.

MUSIC - NAY MAYANGOL