

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, and welcome to 'Arts and Africa' this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey back from a months break. My thanks to Ben Okri for keeping the presenter's seat warm. While I was away Fiona Ledger went to the annual Fringe Festival in Edinburgh to look at things African.

MUSIC FROM WOZA ALBERT

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was an exert from the South African play Woza Albert. The company who did that Fiona, The Abigromma Theatre Company from Ghana were originally meant to be formed at the Commonwealth Arts Festival last month, weren't they?

FIONA LEDGER

Yes they were, and they were very much looking forward to it but because of the political situation and the decision of members of the Commonwealth to boycott not only the Commonwealth games, but also the Commonwealth Arts Festival, they had to hold off and stay at home, but they made it for the actual Fringe Festival in Edinburgh.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Was there much South African stuff at the Fringe?

FIONA LEDGER

Yes in fact there was. It is a strange situation that the Commonwealth Arts Festival was dominated by South Africa in a very political way and a negative way, one could say, but in the Fringe Festival many of the things that were going on were in fact from South Africa. For example, Woza Albert although performed by Ghanaian actors, it's originally a very South African play. There was a play by the Azanian National Theatre from Johannesburg 'Burning Embers' and there was also a group of musicians who were extremely well received - the Amamondo musicians and dancers from Cape Town.

MUSIC by the Amampondo musicians.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Very exciting music.

FIONA LEDGER

It was and I must say the audience was really gripped by that. That was one of the songs they performed called Mawethu and it was dedicated to a friend of the actual group Amampondo. It was a very personal kind of song with a lot of passion in it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how about the Ghanaian performance of Woza Albert, we did it of course as part of the African Theatre Season four years ago, can you remind us a bit about the actual theme.

FIONA LEDGER

Very simple play with two actors, the two original actors were Percy Mtwana and Mbogeni Ngema and it's the idea of Jesus Christ returning to present day South Africa, the expectations and hope he arouses in the black population in South Africa and the hostility and antagonism that the South African authorities feel towards him; they see him as a sort of a dissident, even as a sort of communist, because of what he preaches in terms of goodwill and peace, and because he doesn't recognise the distinction between people who are black and people who are white.

In this excerpt that you are going to be hearing it's a scene which sums up some of the peculiarities of living in South Africa. It revolves around the whole business of having these pass books. If you don't have the correct information in your pass book, which you have to carry all the time, information saying who your employer is and where you are meant to be working (it also has to be dated), you are in trouble. Here you can hear the two Ghanaian actors Nii Kwei Sowah and Albert Kwesi Akonu Atta, acting out this scene with Albert playing the policeman, harrasing Nii whose pass book isn't quite in order.

ACTUALITY FROM WOZA ALBERT

FIONA LEDGER

And there you've got that extraordinary blend of slapstick, satire and humour, but with a very serious, if you like, message underneath and that I think is the hallmark of Woza Albert. After the show I did manage to collar the two actors Nii and Albert in a rather noisy room off stage. And I was interested to know from them how they set about adapting a play which in its initial conception was created in South Africa based on improvisation.

NII KWEI SOWAH

I have read much about South Africa and we got hold of the script. I didn't see Percy and Mbogeni acting the play. But working on the script as an actor I bring the things home, looking at the situation in every scene

FIONA LEDGER

Albert the second actor is standing over here would you like to come and join in on this? I would first like to say that it was a super performance, you must be very tired?

ALBERT KWESI AKONU ATTA

Yes just a little bit.

FIONA LEDGER

Do you find it perhaps in your acting career one of the most demanding performances you have ever done.

ALBERT KWESI AKONU ATTA

Yes it is one of the most demanding performances really because it is the kind of play which keeps you moving right from the beginning to the end

FIONA LEDGER

Have you ever met your counter parts Percy and Mbogeni.

NII KEWI SOWAH

Yes I met Percy three days ago, he came to watch the performance we didn't know him before. After the show a guy came and he said: "Percy is here" and we knew we had our man, and he really appreciated the play.

FIONA LEDGER

He really liked it?

ALBERT KWESI AKONU ATTA

Yes he really liked it. He was really fascinated to see that we had interpreted it in our own way.

FIONA LEDGER

Albert, Nii thank you very much indeed and it was a real pleasure watching you putting your show together, it was fantastic.

ALBERT & NII

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Fiona I must say I was very much impressed by the acting of those two Ghanaians. They made the thing sound very authentic although the play is South African.

FIONA LEDGER

They got the accents very well and of course there were a lot of South Africans in the audience besides Percy Mtwā, who they referred to in the interview who originally played in Woza Albert;

there were other South Africans from whom they got nothing but compliments. Full houses every night.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I am not surprised to hear that. Now the Azanian National Theatre were also there what were they doing?

FIONA LEDGER

They did a play called 'Burning Embers' and their play was I would say a lot more serious than Woza Albert in the sense that it wasn't the sort of play where you laughed very much. They had a series of sketches looking at different aspects of the very troubled and tense situation in South Africa at the moment and the emergency. So it was a very urgent, very tragic and serious play with no let up at all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now I was asking you about the Amampondo musicians from Cape Town that we heard earlier in the programme, you went to see them too didn't you?

FIONA LEDGER

I went to see them and it really was quite something. They had a combination of instruments, singing and dancing and I think this excerpt you are going to hear now captures some of the atmosphere.

MUSIC from the Amampondo musicians.

FIONA LEDGER

That was a song called Kalagala Embwembwe from Uganda in fact.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well that is another interesting comment on the South African musicians playing Ugandan music, rather like the Ghanaian group playing a South African play.

FIONA LEDGER

Yes exactly. They play not only Ugandan music but also Zimbabwean music and they have an incredible selection of instruments and their leader Dizo is something of a musicologist himself. His father was a musician and I spoke to him after the performance about the kinds of instruments they used.

DIZO

All of them they came from different parts of Africa because the music we play is not only mainly South African music it is from all over Africa.

FIONA LEDGER

And you've got a lot of what to an outsider like me looks like xylophones I think I counted about five different xylophones of all different sizes, where do they come from?

DIZO

Those come from the Transkei but originally they are from Zimbabwe.

FIONA LEDGER

And you've got one which comes from Uganda in fact.

DIZO

Yes that one is called Madinda. It was made by a musicologist of South Africa, Mr Andrew Tracy. We don't have the chance to go through all the African States and learn the instruments.

FIONA LEDGER

Dizo, when you introduced one of the numbers you mentioned that it was a song which your father had composed, do you come from a very strong musical family yourself?

DIZO

Yes my father is a traditional witch doctor, somebody who helps the people in South Africa with their sickness. When the witch doctor is celebrating or he is going to help the people with their sickness he always get together drumming, singing and dancing. So I grew up in that kind of environment.

FIONA LEDGER

So that link between spirit and mind and body and music that is still very strong for you?

DIZO

Yes because when I sing my father's song, and when I stop singing and do dancing everything starts to reveal itself in me and I am born with that kind of music and I love it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

He is obviously a very dedicated person isn't he?

FIONA LEDGER

Yes he was a fantastic person.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I'm afraid that is all we have on today's programme. Fiona you still have some music from Amampondo to end the programme.

FIONA LEDGER

Yes I have and it's called Zingqi Zomhlaba Zabantu which is a mixture of the xylophone and drums and it was composed by the group itself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And with that exciting mixture of sounds from the group until the same time next week, it's goodbye from Fiona Ledger and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey.