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The first Commonwealth Arts Festival

16th September to 2nd October 1965

Some notes for patrons by REX COLLINGS

LONDON - CARDIFF - GLASGOW - LIVERPOOL—these are the centres where the first Commonwealth Arts Festival will be held this year. 1965 has been Commonwealth year. After the Prime Minister's Conference, the Peace Mission, and the New Zealand test matches comes the first ever festival of the arts, a festival sprawling untidily across four cities and three countries, a festival with no unifying theme and no common language. The only common ground being that all the lands from which the entries and performers come are still members of the Commonwealth.

The programme will include ballet from Canada and tribal dances from Sierra Leone, a musical from French Canada and a play from Bombay set in the brothel area, a Folk Opera (in Yoruba) from Nigeria and a full length play from the same country. There will be The Kinks from England, the Merry Men from Barbados, and (for the squares) the Christchurch Harmonic Choir from New Zealand. There will be concerts and exhibitions, wrestling and ballet, fireworks, and, heaven help us, dancing and bands in Trafalgar Square.

PROBABLY THE MOST EXCITING DRAMATIC EVENT will be the World Premiere of Wole Soyinka's *The Road* at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East on 14th September (two days before the official start of the Festival). Soyinka is Nigeria's leading playwright and is, I think, undoubtedly one of the most exciting of the young dramatists writing in English anywhere in the world today. He has wit and humour and compassion and mercifully his writing is free of that obsession with colour problems that dominates and so often ruins much of the contemporary work of black writers. The great mystery is why this play or one of Soyinka's others is not the official Nigerian drama entry. However, it is fortunate for us, and for Nigeria's reputation, that David Thompson and Stage Sixty are putting it on for a month. Some of Soyinka's poems, too, will be read at one of the Verse and Voice programmes at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square.

REX COLLINGS is a publisher who has been responsible for the first London publication of several African playwrights.

Three other plays that promise well are *Klondyke*, the French Canadian musical at the Old Vic; the Trinidadian Errol Hill's *Man Better Man* at the Scala, a play combining music, singing and dancing; and *Oba-Koso* the Yoruba Folk Opera by Duro Ladipo. These three dramatic events illustrate well the range of the Festival—one in French, one in English and one in Yoruba.

ON THE MUSIC SIDE, orchestras like the Sydney Symphony, the Toronto Symphony and the London Philharmonic Orchestra are giving concerts at the Royal Festival Hall—their choice of programmes tends perhaps to be a little conservative and unimaginative. At the Festival Hall too one will be able to hear Ghanaian and Indian music. Probably one of the more imaginative gestures of the Festival organisers, certainly a sure box-office success, will be the Pop evening presented by Brian Epstein with groups such as The Kinks and Gerry and the Pacemakers.

IF DANCING IS YOUR LOVE, you can on one day dance in Trafalgar Square or watch the Kathakali Dancers from India at the Scala or on another the Australian Ballet at the Royal Opera House, or if you are a glutton for noise, excitement, passion, and abandonment the Great Dance Gala at the Royal Albert Hall will provide you with all four. My only proviso here being that perhaps the organisers have attempted to pack too many dancers from too many countries into too short a time—the result may be a little bitty: with luck it will be superb.

THERE ARE FIFTEEN DIFFERENT VERSE AND VOICE PROGRAMMES at the Royal Court, one sometimes two an evening. On paper the programmes look interesting and catholic—you can have Betjeman and Kipling, nostalgia rampant, or contemporary poems from Africa, India and the East. Beside the Betjeman I shall try to go to No. 4—*Africa: A Contrast of Culture*; No. 7 Cecil Day Lewis introducing Commonwealth and British poets reading their own poems on each other's countries; and No. 14 *Poets Debating*, a free-for-all discussion presented by John Wain. The work of South Africans has been included for its part in the development of Commonwealth literature.

MOST OF THE EVENTS I have mentioned so far will take place in the evening; there are alas! few afternoon performances of anything; but the EXHIBITIONS will be open all day and these on paper at least look attractive. At Burlington House the Royal Academy are showing "Treasures from the Commonwealth" and at the Design Centre in the Haymarket, the Council of Industrial Design have organised "An Exhibition of Commonwealth Textiles, Ceramics and Wood-carving."

FOR CHILDREN EASILY the most popular event will surely be the great Firework Display designed by John Piper. This takes place on 15th September on the evening before the Festival officially opens, and is being staged in Hyde Park. It is free, lighting up time is 8.30. One can watch from the north bank of the Serpentine.

IN THE THREE PROVINCIAL CENTRES the main events—except *The Road*—will be able to be seen. But there are some interesting extras. In Liverpool there will be a Military Tattoo and a University Music Conference. In Cardiff, alone among the centres in this respect, there will be some sporting events including rugby and wrestling, and also a Journalists' Conference. In Glasgow a Book Exhibition and exhibitions of sculpture and painting. Cardiff is also strong on Films; in London at the National Film Theatre will be a showing of feature films too.

IN ALL, THERE IS MUCH to see and hear, and the organisers have shown great imagination and talent in building up an exciting and representative programme. There is much to see and hear and many of the events are on for a few days only, some like the concerts and verse programmes for one performance only. The London Festival Box Office is at Keith Prowse, 90 New Bond Street. All branches and agencies will have copies of the brochures.

Final assessment of the Festival must wait until it is over. That certain parts will be outstanding can be confidently predicted, that it will succeed over all is problematical that it is worth doing is without question. If it is to succeed you must support it. ●