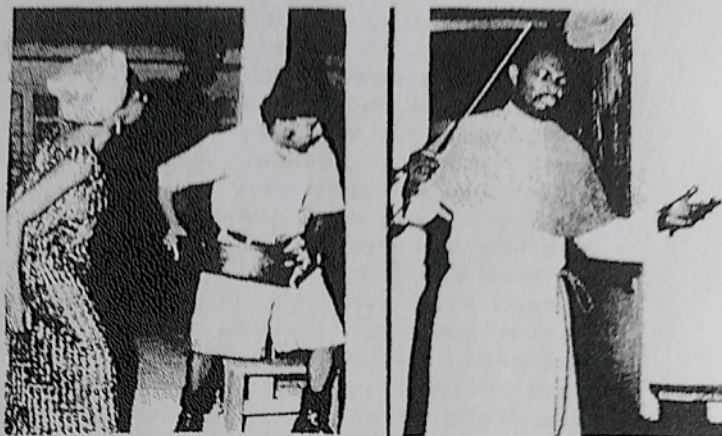


BLAMADON: ★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

The Bud Of Liberian Theatre



The Blamadon Theatre Workshop



Last year, the noted Liberian dramatist, Kona Khasu, re-organized a group called "Blamadon" - a Gola meaning "Come let us tell tale," which he anticipates will provide the foundation for the development of a national theater.

The Blamadon Theatre Workshop, the group's full name, began as far back as 1970, when it was founded by Mr. Khasu, while he was still a student in the United States. At that time, it was housed in the Olatunji Center of Africulture, in New York City, where it toured with Olatunji Dance Company, the Drums of Passion.

In September 1975, the group invited the community to an open house rehearsal at W.V.S. Tubman High School. Their performance was received with great enthusiasm by all who were anxious to see a viable theater program in Liberia.

In March this year, *LIBERIA Magazine* sent Mr. Carlos Martin, Senior Research Officer in the Information Ministry, who is also a musician and an aspiring playwright, to conduct an interview with Mr. Khasu for our Special Culture edition. Below is Mr. Martin's report:

"I had attended a couple of the group's rehearsals prior to the public demonstration at Tubman High and was immensely impressed by the hard work and intense

concentration that the young artists were putting into it. Since their initial public demonstration, the group has carried its performances to Grand Cape Mount County and Bong Mines and hoped to reach as many parts of the country as possible.

"Mr. Kona Khasu, Blamadon's director, has been kind enough to grant an exclusive interview to *LIBERIA* magazine in order to permit us to better acquaint the public with the forces that inspired Blamadon as well as the group's goals and aspirations."

LIBERIA: Mr. Khasu, from what we have seen, you are determined to develop a theater in Liberia. Can you tell us what impact a regularly performing theater is likely to have on this society?

KHASU: Well, eh, I think that one can consider the impact of a vigorous theater program at several levels. I think that one level is simply to provide a way of informing the public, the audience; and it could be any kind of information given to the public. At another level, which would be a higher level, is to motivate the public, motivate the community, motivate the audience that would seat in on these performances. And ultimately, though, I think a theater program in an African context and I supposed in any developing country is to provide a catalyst for national building or national consciousness, in that in

a country such as Liberia, and most African countries, you have a multi-ethnic situation, where there are several and various groups of culture in a larger and smaller context. And you need to mode these various cultures together into one solid culture so that they can have one goal, one aspiration and one way of achieving it.

And I think a theater program helps. It is not the only way, but it is one of the most effective ways. So, in short, I think it contributes to the development of a national consciousness which ultimately leads to a unified developed country.

LIBERIA: How many members has Blamadon and what is the age range of those members?

KHASU: Well, we have tried to deliberately limit Blamadon to something around 15 to 16 persons. The reason is simply for better control, since we have very little finance, very little resources and we have very little time in that all of us are either working full-time somewhere else or students in other areas, and we have only 3 hours a night; we cannot afford to use a larger group, so we keep about sixteen persons. These include musicians, dancers, actors and we don't make any real distinction between any -- a dancer becomes a musician or becomes an actor depending on the case. The ages can range anywhere from 5 - my son is a member; he's 5 years old and his younger brother is 4 and he's a member also -- anywhere up to 40 or whatever.

LIBERIA: How would you assess Blamadon's scope in terms of the type of materials you are likely to work with? Or do you have in mind to produce musicals and ballets or have you considered doing works from places other than Liberia? Or do you personally have any particular preference as regards to forms such as modern, realist, sub-realist, etc.?

KHASU: Well, you know, Carlos, what we are. We have studied drama and theater professionally, I mean at the very highest level here in Liberia, in the United States and in England and we are fami-

liar with all of these forms, but we have deliberately avoided using any preconceived form or any preconceived idea of what theater is supposed to be as seen by an outsider.

What we are trying to develop is an authentic theater based on our Liberian traditional concept of performing art. And by that, it means we must almost totally forget anything we know about forms or theories about theater and start from observing in a very empirical way what is happening when you go up to Lofa County or to Bomi Territory and you see the people performing. They have theaters there, they have music, they have dance. What happens there? For long years, these forms have been used to impart knowledge to the people, to impart understanding, to mode a group's attitude and ethics. And this is what we are trying to do; something they do, some way they do it that makes them effective in conveying and creating a closely knit culture and community, in order for them to have withstood the kind of hardship they did.

We are coming to implement this. We are beginning from observing the facts, what's happening in Liberia today and from there, later on, maybe, five or ten years from now, we'll begin to theorize about Liberian theater. You see, we are now so, for example, we may take a form, the story-teller form, which is very popular in Liberia and popular all over Africa. We take that form and we observe that when a man takes that form, he begins with a definite greeting to the audience, he says one or two scenes in the story and then he puts a song there and the audience joins in the song and starts singing. We are trying to look at this form and see how it can be utilized for modern Liberian theater performances. So, you see, this is why we call our group the Blamadon Theatre Workshop, because it is a workshop in that we are trying to discover the essence of Liberian performing arts in terms of theater.

So, as much as I would like to speak to that question, I would not like to go into it at this point until after we have

come up with some tasy observations, some concrete observations that we can then compare to what we already know. And right now, what is more familiar to most people who studied drama would be these western forms. I might add, though, in a partial answer to your question, we are training a group in dance and dance is movement according to time and music. And we are trying them in dance, in speech and in improvisation - in creating characters - and these groups will be able to take a play from Germany or an English play or an American play and do it. They are acquiring that skill to do any play once it is for stage. So, it is unlimited in that sense, however, our main material is with the Liberian scene and some other African countries. For example, we are preparing to do Wole Soyinka's play called "The Trials of Brother Jero." We've been rehearsing that now for a week and that's from Nigeria.

LIBERIA: Do you feel that the fact that we don't have facilities to enable artists to enter the theater on a full-time professional basis is a problem facing the development of theater in Liberia?

KHASU: Definitely, Carlos. It is definitely a problem and people don't realize that it is a problem in a very big way. And what we are talking about is not facilities in terms of paying actors lavish money or they have films to do or those sort of things. What we are basically looking for is something like we don't have anywhere to do the shows; when we work all night for all week, five nights a week and we prepare a show, we have to go and pay huge sums of money to halls - and we are not doing this for commercial purpose. I think it is in the interest of the masses and country for us to have a vigorous theater program. It is in the interest of the national government to have this, you see. But at this point, you know, in the Liberian life, there is no place where the government or the city has provided and say alright, this is for cultural thing; groups can go here and rehearse, all you need to do is book up, go rehearse, do your performances there; art exhibitions can be held here, musical concerts can be held and so forth.

The only place they had something like that was the City Hall. Now, I understand, you have to pay some money to use it; in the past, you had to deposit \$50 and if you didn't destroy anything, your money was returned. I think that this was a way of encouraging, not that a lot of groups blossomed, but it could potentially encourage groups such as ours and others which are trying to do something, but now that we have to pay money and we don't have the money, it is a handicap, and it is a big handicap.

LIBERIA: Would you like to see government support a national theater?

KHASU: Certainly Carlos, I would like to see government support a national theater. I think that is going back to my theme of the use of theater in the whole national development process; you see, most times, government's policies and plans cannot adequately be conveyed to the vast population, to the masses, for several reasons. One, it is in the form which people don't understand, that is, the written English; two, even if people read it, very few people can comprehend what they read, even in a very highly literate society and the Liberian society is not that literate in English. Three, if you put it in the newspaper, very few people read the newspaper -- I think the circulation is something like two to three thousand copies, maybe in all, six thousand copies.

Now, very few people read it. But if you put it in a form that the people accept, the form that has high validity and acceptability to these people, then it is easier for them to understand it in that term in which they have been more accustomed to and that is, in terms of having songs written that will talk about the national aspirations; in terms of plays, when you create actual live characters. Let me give you an example. You could sit here and on a platform lecture to a group about sanitary and health and all these things and they may or may not hear or they may or may not understand you, but you could then take the same lecture, translate it into a story, get actors to act it out and show maybe the result; maybe in the play, somebody dies

because of bad health condition. Suddenly, it is a strike, the images -- yes, because it is dramatic -- so this is the kind of thing that can help to create a strong citizenship and a thinking and understanding citizenship.

LIBERIA: Do you see any possibility of there being a school for the performing art in Liberia?

KHASU: Well, I would again wish to consider the question only in the context of if they are going to be utilized for the popular arts. Because sometimes people get the impression that when we speak of art, we think of something that is so esoteric that only few people can understand and so we create a school, a whole school, in the University that is going to train 50 persons to cater to the taste of one per cent of the population. If this is what it is tended to be, then I don't see any reason to do that. But if it is going to be utilized to develop educational materials, to develop methods of teaching, say, educational television where you can have actors come in and prepare teaching materials for the kids, where you can have health workers' messages conveyed through radio dramas or television plays, where national messages of development can be conveyed and attitude created and motivation -- I mean this has been done in several countries, I can name a number of them, where they use theater, music and dance to project the image, a strong image, of the nation and to mobilize the people. I refer primarily, for example, to Guinea which is right next door to us, they use it a whole lot. They have created a whole body of plays and literature and songs on the Guinean National Development plans and objectives and they have been very successful in motivating the people. And I think it can be done here. In those terms, yes, I think we need to create a small training program at the University to do this, where it will help in educating our people.

LIBERIA: So then you feel that the artist, what is very essential in the education of the artist, is a high level of social consciousness?

KHASU: Yes. He has to be, Carlos. You see, there is no way out. You see, the artist by definition is a man of the

people. He feels very intensely about the little man in the street who is being trampled upon; he feels intensely about even the big man, if the big man is being treated unjustly.

The artist is a kind of conscience of his people, his race. And a true artist is one who will not see injustice being done to people and let it go by; and a true artist is also one who's always within the vanguard of his people, the common man, he feels for them; he expresses their aspirations; he's their barometer, not only just telling the temperature of the age but forecasting what is coming ahead. This is what I think a true artist is, an African artist, an artist in a developing country, the Third World artist.

But those people who feel that an artist is a peculiar being who should be pampered, who should have peculiar ways and dress differently from the masses, from the people, and behave all sorts of way and they justify it, I think they are just pampering maybe some crazy people. And in that sense, that kind of artist is crazy, but that's not the kind of artist I am or would like to see in Liberia.

LIBERIA: Can you say something about the spiritual value of the artist to the community?

KHASU: Well, you know, the artist in fact historically developed out of the whole thing of the priest, the sharma, where, before, way, way back in the very beginning of time before our very, very forefathers, before they went to hunt, they got the priest and they went through several ceremonies to prepare to go and have a successful hunt.

They would go and imitate the voices of the animals, the ways the animals walk and by this, they felt they could better control these animals and when they went out there, their hunt would be successful. Or if they saw something that they could not explain, a mystery rock, a tree or something that became the work for the priest to come in and make it understandable; so in the same way historically, this thing has evolved to this point where the artist is or should be a spiri-

tual leader; he must be upright, he must be a good example for people to follow; and he must follow the examples of the people also, because it is from these people that he has to learn to do his work. This is why I feel that an artist cannot live outside of his own environment too long without losing his effectiveness. In that sense, he's a real spiritual leader.

LIBERIA: Do you feel that the public, the Liberian public, has any responsibility to our artists and to the development of the arts in Liberia?

KHASU: A responsibility only in the sense that they should encourage those artists that they feel are in their interest and who are working for them. And these are the artists they should encourage. They have the responsibility to see a national theater develop, because it is in their interest and the interest of the nation. And if they are thoughtful Liberians, Liberians who are patriotic, who want to see the country grow and develop, then they will support those things that contribute to the growth and development of this country. But I don't think that it is something that they are forced to do, I think that it is something we artists should try to develop by working harder, by trying to publicize our works, trying to get the people to come. I think more so, the people who are really responsible to see this thing forwarded are the people in the news media because they are the opinion-makers and so they have that responsibility to transmit the work of the artists, explain it, criticize it, in fact, not

every artist, in fact all artists will make mistakes now and then. And the news media should be on their backs and straighten them out if they are going on the wrong track. And then the people will come in and give their support.

LIBERIA: Thank you very much, Mr. Khasu, I am sure that our audience have found your statements very enlightening. I know I have found them very enlightening. We shall, in keeping with your request that journalists promote the art, we shall make a point to print this interview in LIBERIA magazine.

COMING BLAMADON EVENTS

Festival of Liberian Dances - January '76

Murder In The Cassava Patch - April '76

Homage to Africa - July '76

Blamadon High School Theatre
Festival - October '76

Blamadon hopes to include the following projects in its workshop:

1. Speech for teachers of Language Arts
2. Creative Dance, and Traditional Liberian and Musical Instruments
3. Research and Documentation of Liberian Arts and Culture for Possible Integration and Utilisation in the School System
4. Construction of a National Theatre

For Love of Liberia

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