

Art Review:

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'The piece truly kicks in when audiences accept the absurd premise that I am a local Ghanaian' - Doug Fishbone

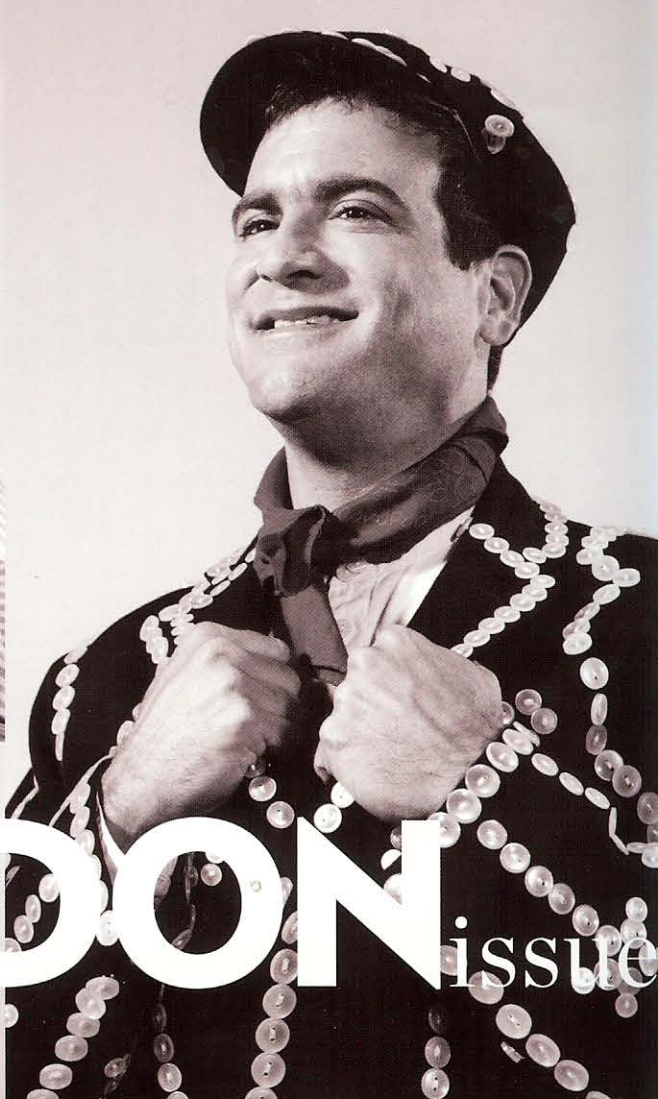
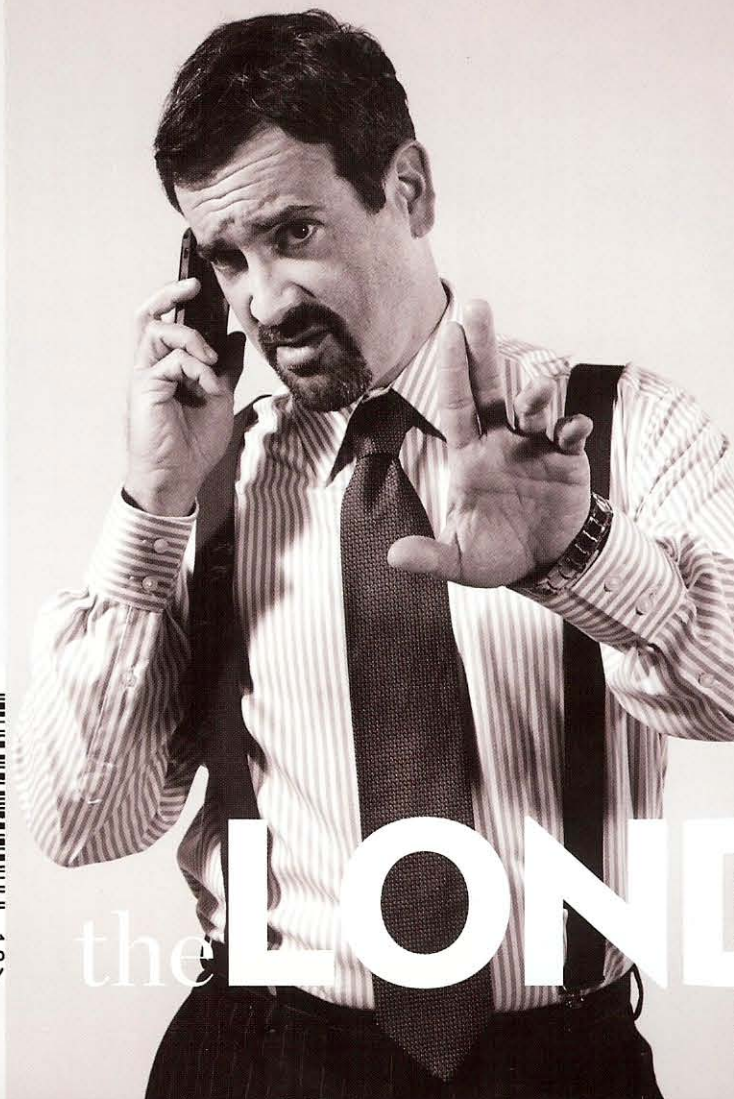
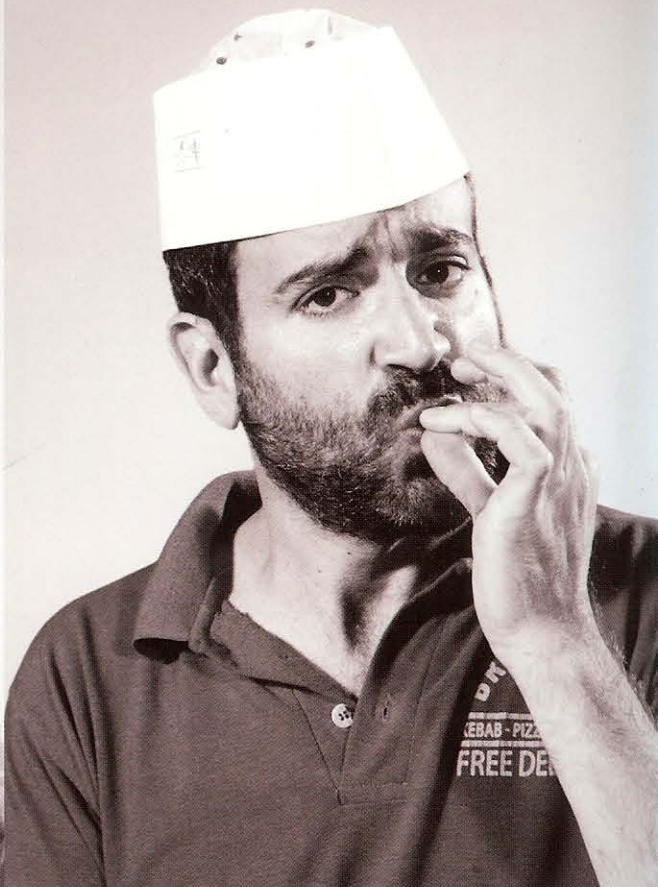
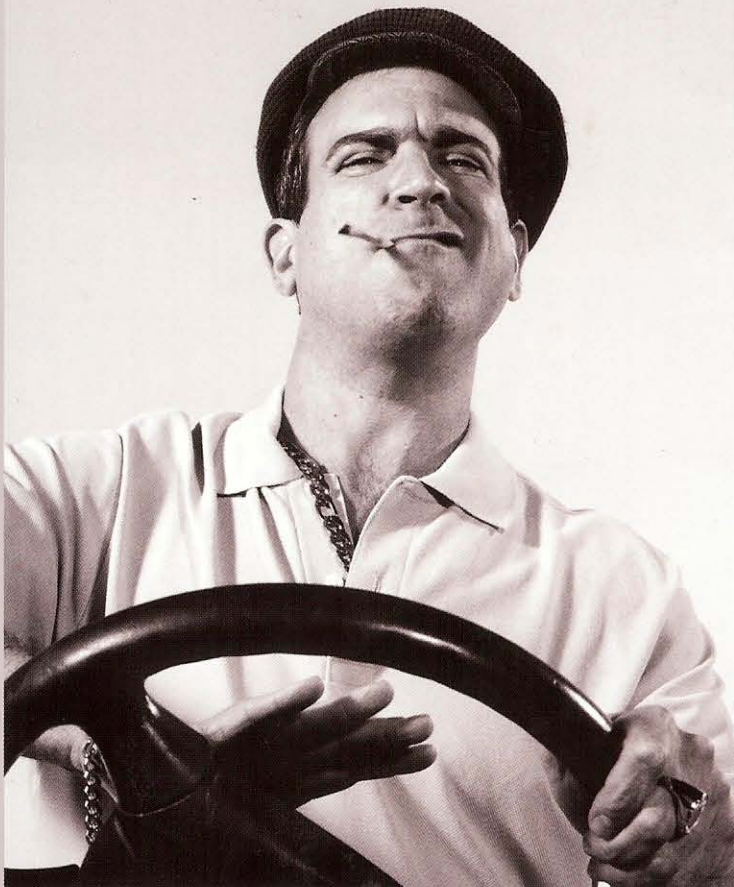
October 2010

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the **LONDON** issue

Doug Fishbone

Elmina, Art Now, Tate Britain

9 October – 2 January

With the proliferation of international art fairs comes much talk about how globalised art scenes have become, and how artists can now achieve fame on a worldwide level. But as contemporary art circles in India, China, Africa and the Middle East gain prominence, do artists still relate themselves to the locality of the cultures from which they come, or do they become detached – entering the transnational orbit of the global art scene? And what happens when an artist looks beyond the artworld itself, to open up a dialogue with other cultural economies, and not on the artist's home turf, but thousands of miles away?

That's what the New York-born, London-based artist Doug Fishbone has done with his groundbreaking project *Elmina* (2010), premiering at Tate Britain this month. Fishbone is better known for comedy-driven video monologues that muse on the philosophical absurdities of life in the West, but with *Elmina* he has taken his wider interest in the relativity of human cultures onto entirely new ground. Working in collaboration with Revele Films, a Ghanaian film and TV production company, Fishbone here coproduces and takes the lead role in a feature-length drama, to be released on Ghana's thriving VCD (video-CD) market – and simultaneously released as a limited-edition art video in the 'Western' artworld. Remarkably, *Elmina* sees Fishbone – a white guy from Queens – taking the role of Ato Blankson, a Ghanaian farmer, among a cast of Ghana's leading film and TV stars. Key to the work is that at no point is the presence of a white actor playing the role of a black Ghanaian ever commented on or referred to.

Elmina is therefore a surprising, entertaining and disorienting work: Fishbone has handed over all creative responsibility for the film to Revele's Emmanuel Apea, the film's director, who cowrote the script with his brother, John Apea, a well-known actor who also plays a leading role in the film. The brothers have come up with a potboiler featuring globalisation, local corruption and political intrigue, in which Fishbone's farmer pits himself against the local chief, who is conniving with Chinese industrialists to convince the local community to sell its land, so that the Chinese can build a car plant, a cigarette factory and a distillery. It's high soap opera mixed with social commentary about economic change and the mixed blessings of modernisation and prosperity.

So *Elmina* will spark debate, both for its timely content and for how it short-circuits two very different cultural situations – Western conceptual art and African popular cinema – while raising tricky questions about the politics of art's audience. Although the artworld likes to congratulate itself for its cosmopolitanism, its contact with a wider public is usually restricted to the narrow channels of gallery, biennial and art fair – communicating with a preselected, self-selecting audience. By drawing on wealthy Western art collectors to bankroll a piece of popular African cinema, Fishbone opens an unlikely channel between two contexts normally worlds apart. Art audiences find themselves dealing with the narrative conventions of a non-Western popular film idiom, while Ghanaian viewers encounter the unlooked-for presence of Western conceptual art, embodied in the curious shape of Ato, the nonblack Ghanaian farmer.

How that will play with its intended Ghanaian audience, who won't necessarily have the backstory to hand, is hard to predict, but Fishbone is hopeful: "We've aimed to make a watchable, thought-provoking film, in which the insertion of the white artist will hopefully be absorbed early on, thanks to a compelling and properly acted and well-shot story. That's the point at which the piece truly kicks in – when audiences accept the absurd premise that I am a local Ghanaian, and it ceases to matter." He points to how an actor's race has become incidental in theatre (as with the recent all-black production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in New York and London), yet how it remains more rigidly circumscribed in cinema. "If it can be done in a film", says Fishbone, "not to mention a complex one which deals with collision of cultures in many ways, and across race lines, I think *Elmina* will have done something interesting." *J.J. Charlesworth*

