

# A SPACE

## MEDITATIONS ON THEATRE

She talked with her neighbor about his participation as a killer in the genocide.  
He replied: “We killed you and now we miss you.”

—Immaculee Ilibagiza, panelist, Arts in the One World Conference, 2006

BY ERIK EHN

**A GROUP OF STUDENTS AND FACULTY FROM THE** School of Theater at the California Institute of the Arts, along with other working artists, traveled this past summer to Rwanda to study that African nation’s tragic experience of genocide and explore ways art participates in reconciliation and rebuilding.

This was our second such trip, en route to an annual pattern; plans are underway for next summer’s project. We spoke with survivors, perpetrators, artists (overlapping categories: artists were among the engineers of the genocide as well as among the victims, survivors and relief workers—while perpetrators lived through the genocide and many suffered trauma, they are not called survivors in the same sense that the targets are; language—the passion of culture—must be radically argued at every turn). We also spoke with teachers and scholars, ambassadors, the president of the country, former exiles, priests, social historians and more, to garner their insights and reflect in mutual witness to our interwoven but distinct histories. We read and rehearsed plays, moved together, watched films by emerging filmmakers (under the stars, goat on a paper plate and a bottle of Fanta) and confronted difficult questions.

I am not certain reconciliation is always

possible, or necessary to peace; we have said that peace and joy are not obliged partners; there is so much to recover from in Rwanda that the country cannot even be said to be rebuilding—it is *building*. What theatre is in this context, how it can be an effective frame for testimony, for slow speech and for slow hearing, is entirely up for grabs. We are establishing an exchange program with Rwanda, because gigantic acts of creation are underway, acts of global significance.

### WHY RWANDA?

The answer is the same as it might be to the questions: Why Paris? Why Edinburgh? Because it is beautiful; it is a cultural center. The country is un-scripting the deadly drama between Hutus and Tutsis, which was fashioned by the Germans and Belgians as fixed and racial, when in reality the groups were fluid and economic. You can feel the energy of this project everywhere—the effort to recreate a history, to remake the word “Rwandan.”

The answer is also the same as the answer to: Why Los Angeles, or Why Valencia? Because we live here. Particularly as regards the genocide, our conscious turning-away enabled the perpetrators. *We exchange with Rwanda because it is a global center for cultural innovation and because the damage there results from a failure to witness—to be with.* As with France, Scotland and Valencia, the time we spend in the place is not definitive, comprehensive or complete; it is part of a spectrum of initiatives that help us map and move through the world as artist-citizens.

Rwanda is not a case study; it is itself. We do not compare genocides. Rwanda is at this event as our teacher, our guide.



# FOR TRUTH

## AND THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

With at least 50 genocides behind us in the latter half of the past century, with the racism and economic terrorism revealed through Hurricane Katrina in our recent past, with Darfur before us, the time is always right to consider how culture frames and enables inhumanity, how it creates and destroys identities, and how it can share in love's triumph over suffering. The CalArts initiative is regional as the conflict was regional, and any solutions must take into account the welfare of the entire East African community. We traveled to Uganda as well (where discord is spread by the Lord's Resistance Army and Ugandan/Rwandan involvement in Congo), and our working group, 40-plus-strong at its peak, included Ugandan writers throughout.

This winter, CalArts hosted the second Arts in the One World conference, focused on the Rwandan situation and expanding to consider ways in which arts, social services and the needs of peace-building live in interdependence. Our program is run in partnership with the Interdisciplinary Genocide Studies Group (IGSG, dually based in Kigali and Berkeley), and in particular with Jean-Pierre Karegeye, one of IGSG's founders. He is sine qua non.

### WHY GENOCIDE?

- By breaking theatre against genocide (beyond words) we expand theatre's capacity for representation.
- Violence begotten by artistic lies must be addressed by artistic truths.

*We are trembling and drifting—electricity without a light bulb; ghosts, looking for our bodies. We will find our bodies in the project of ecology—new, fluid patterns of interrelatedness.*

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The rate and scope of the Rwandan genocide, and the world's complicity, bring conscience to acute focus. (The international community, clearly aware of the threat prior and the actions during, refrained from making even token, risk-free interventions—e.g., satisfying the desperate request that we in the U.S. jam the hate-mongering radio. We deemed it too expensive at a few thousand dollars a day. One speaker at last summer's AOW conference, a former United Nations official, defined the "international community" as a set of independent and wealthy powers united largely by their shared desire to remain disengaged from participation in the lives of the less advantaged.)

The conflict in Rwanda is often written off as an eruption of ancient tribal rivalries,



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In conversation: Not a minority (noun) but minoritized (verb).

Nearly a million dead in 100 days, killed largely hand to hand, with farm tools and clubs. It had been planned for years, and rehearsed for decades. There were ample warnings prior and clear calls for help throughout. But, this being “only Africa,” the rest of the world chose to let the slaughter burn and fade of its own accord. The killing stopped when the exile army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, took the capital. The French, with Operation Turquoise, allowed for the escape of key perpetrators under the cover of peacekeeping. The refugee camps were public health nightmares, and actually concentrated killers with their targets, allowing the destruction to continue. Orphans and AIDS, legacy of rape as a tool of genocide, continue to afflict the society.

The Rwandan justice system (the entire national infrastructure) is shattered—there is no way to imprison or try all those who are culpable. The *gacaca* system has emerged—village-run convenings that gather testimony (confirming or overturning prison sentences, readmitting the accused to the communities). These civilian courts are charged with processing the thousands and thousands of backlogged cases overwhelming the justice system. They are inefficient, heavily pressured—also indigenous, therapeutic and essential to a sense of justice owned.

Truth-telling (in advance of forgiveness, which may never come) is a vital aspect of reconciliation.

The words “Hutu” and “Tutsi” have been

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## 5 VOICES OF WITNESS

Genocide obliterates rituals of birth and death (the connection with the past is severed). Daily rituals are changed forever. Neighbors, who used to greet each other, no longer can.

—Marie-Chantal Kalisa, AOW panelist,  
 assistant professor of Francophone studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Artistic response to genocide is the effort to create a space between possibility and impossibility, to find speech for the unspeakable, an attempt to represent a “non-object.” An artist who tries to represent genocide becomes ipso facto a witness.

—Jean-Pierre Karegeye, co-director, CalArts Rwanda exchange,  
 director of the Interdisciplinary Genocide Studies Center

The engineering of genocide requires the social construction of fear; in order for this to take effect, powerful narratives need to be in place. We must create counter-narratives.

—Roberto Varea, AOW panelist and practicum leader, founding artistic director of Soapstone Theatre Company, a collective of male ex-offenders and women survivors of violent crime, and El Teatro Jornalerol, a performance company that brings the voice of Latin American immigrant workers to the stage

The notion of a culture of peace emerges from the Seville Statement on Violence, the outcome of a meeting of scientists addressing the question of whether war is inevitable, if violence is simply a part of human nature. They concluded: “The same species that invented war is capable of inventing peace.”

—Cynthia Cohen, keynote, AOW '06, panelist '07, director of Coexistence Research and International Collaborations at Brandeis University

The task of the artist is to turn death into prayer.

—Ntare Mwine, panelist, AOW '06, '07, first generation Ugandan-American, author of the play *Biro* and recorder of the lives of Ugandans for the past 19 years through photography, theatre and film

struck from ID cards; the effort is afoot to create a new Rwandan identity.

*Murambi was a trade school in the south of the country where 50,000 victims were concentrated and killed; many of the bodies were limed where they lay, and brought stiffened to be stacked in the small brick rooms to lie on palettes in the postures of annihilation to serve as memorial. These are verses written by Nyiringango Nadine Kelly, a participant in last summer's Rwanda/Uganda trip, in response to a visit to the Murambi Genocide Site:*

the remains of a child,  
barely 2 years  
clad in a stained  
red sweater  
half his head smashed

the other "surviving"  
half with what remains  
of his babyish hair  
next to him lies another  
no older than she/he  
his/her arms raised high  
the face caving in  
where she/he must  
have been hit  
its hard to imagine that  
humanity was and is  
capable of this

*Witness by proxy.* Is such a thing possible?  
At the core of artistic ideas of representation:  
How does fiction represent a very real reality?  
What does it have to offer that adds to  
direct testimony? Also—*fiction is complicit* in  
the realization of genocide—it is complicit,

through the articulation and popularization of ideology.

In conversation: We need more artistic representation, even if it's bad.

## **METAPHOR AS PEACE**

In the *Book of Urizen* William Blake describes a cosmos constructed by a God of Reason. In this circumstance, the essential features of being are unable to contact one another. Love withers, empathy becomes pity, justice is embittered, and the only offspring capable of surviving is violent revolution—and even this burns itself out in airlessness.

Identity as a construct, as a willed and conscious imposition, shares features with this history. Genocide, where our best and most natural sensations are set against each other in grim competition rather than cooperating towards our salvation...genocide is the fruit of a world founded on reason. The tragedy of the contemporary age (the genocidal era) is not that we have gone mad, but that at every step, conscious choices are made that deliver us up to the symptoms of madness. Art, when it counters, does so by creating safe spaces for waiting, for witness, for union—spaces that may be approached by but not made by reason. Impossible spaces—the infinite complexity of simultaneity, of an empathy of peers, of metaphor.

Art is made of metaphor. Text and subtext, the second and third dimensions, the narrative and the still, the random and the deliberate, live in inconceivable identification. This unreasonable, volatile, perfectly risky space of metaphor, is peace. In all our outrage and manifesto, contradiction and yearning, peace is the house we occupy and open, like breathing opens, a place where even painful wisdom pushes to possibility, to knowledge past reason and affinity across divides.

One persists through this line of inquiry, this application of art to the task of witnessing to genocide, questioning, continually. I can only put my hands to two practical pieces of advice:

■ Travel. At least—be where you are in a new way. The place where you are is the One World. (We are connected to Okello, for example, who spoke at the AOW conference about Hope North, his project with escapees from the Lord's Army and other young victims of the conflict in northern Uganda. Despite his own harrowing youth

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[or, in fact, out of the distress itself], he has arrived at a dramaturgy of joy—he feels that through music and dance, through live encounter, artists work out a responsibility to cause greater openness—to expand capacity for feeling and speaking against a stunning pressure towards numbness and silence.)

■ Be *with*. Comfort the afflicted. Bury the dead.

Ananda Breed has conducted research in Rwanda, Congo and Burundi regarding justice and reconciliation. Her Ph.D. thesis at the University of Manchester, “Theatre for Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” interrogates the idea of nation-building through the *gaçaca* courts, established theatre and grassroots theatre. These are her words from the Reconciliation Song in the genocide play *Ongera Urebe Ibyaye Mu Rwanda (Once Again See What Happened in Rwanda)*:

People should participate in the  
*gaçaca* Court.  
Work in the morning and then go to  
the *gaçaca*.

People should speak the truth.  
What happened was in the daylight.

You watched it,  
That’s why you must speak the truth.

Rwandan minister of culture Joseph Habineza states how culture was destroyed during the genocide, because a part of Rwandan culture is respect for life. Thus, the arts are being used to recreate identity and to rebuild values that were destroyed. “We cannot erase what happened in the past,” Habineza says, “but we can create a bright future with elements of the past, the genocide experience and with contributions from other countries and cultures. I want to say that we can, from the genocide, find some good things that can help us towards a brighter future. In the Kinyarwanda language, there is a proverb that says, ‘Tragedy doesn’t go away, but it doesn’t remain forever,’ meaning that the experience of tragedy helps to build a new society.”

He goes on to speak of the Rwandan tradition of Kugangahura, in which, if a person is struck by lightning, there is a ceremony to wash away the bad event. He compares the use of arts as a kind of Kugangahura for the geno-

cide: “It is not special to Rwanda, for always in human history, when there is a great event, it could be negative or positive; it is a source of creation. I think genocide has given us very deep emotions and feelings. It could also give many serious ideas, which could inspire many important actions. I don’t know if we should separate ideas and emotions.”

**Erik Ehn is a playwright and dean of the school of theatre at California Institute of the Arts.**



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