

# DRAMATURGING IN RWANDA

The plan was that we would show up, meet Suleimani and Rose – our Rwandan counterparts – and start talking about what kind of play we wanted to make together. We would start with an idyllic brainstorming session, all of our different points of view coming together as equals to make a new play. I had dreams of the amazing piece of theater we would create together, written in English and Kinyarwanda, and designed to reduce the spread of AIDS in Rwanda. Two cultures coming together to change behavior and save lives thru art – it was easy to get excited about. When we landed in Kigali to find instead that Rose and Sulé had already made a play my first thought was, “Oh no, they hate America (as they probably should) and they don’t want to make theater with us.” I found myself in what, at the time, felt like a colonial trap. I was another foreigner coming into Rwanda to “save” the Rwandans. I had raised thousands of dollars and taken time off from work to be here – to help – but I wondered if my American theatrical training was irrelevant and if my help was unwanted. I hoped that my presence in itself was not somehow arrogant and insulting. From the first instant, my month-long trip to Rwanda was not to be what I had planned, and it was in this first moment of artistic planning that I learned that I was not here as I had expected, as a writer, but instead, here as a dramaturg. The experiences that followed convinced me that dramaturges are the keepers of a method of working that is needed in the distribution of domestic and international aid.

I had come to Rwanda with the organization Rwandans and Americans in Partnership Contre le SIDA (RAPSIDA) which uses theater to educate about AIDS and AIDS prevention in Rwanda. I was part of a group, two Americans and three Rwandans, working with high school students in the rural town of Nyagatare in Northeast Rwanda, nearly touching the Ugandan border. My friend, the other American, was to focus on making a documentary film and I was to focus on the creation of a play. Before we arrived, Sulé, Rose and Peter – three Rwandans – held auditions and 13 high school students were selected to work with us for a month. Peter was to be the producer of an AIDS awareness week in Nyagatare – with performances happening outdoors, at community centers, and in local restaurants. Sulé and Rose were Rwandan director/authors who had worked with RAPSIDA for years, knew theater in Rwanda and knew how to talk about AIDS with Rwandan high school students.

The district that houses Nyagatare is Rwanda’s second most populous for people and most populous for cows. Nyagatare itself has one paved road about a quarter mile long that is covered with a surprisingly large number of restaurants, hair salons, and motorcycle-taxi drivers. Despite little running water and regular electricity outages, Nyagatare has a major hospital, nursing school and a growing university. It also has one of the countries highest rates of AIDS.

I volunteered for the trip because I felt that my skills could be useful. I have a history as an actor and a playwright, have worked as a director and have independently produced my own work. I had met Jesse Hawkes, RAPSIDA's founder and leader, via email, when a friend in New York gave me his contact info. I was interested in spending a month outside of America and wanted to benefit the community I was visiting, rather than just order drinks from it. The more information I gathered about RAPSIDA, the more impressed I was, and I became more and more eager to help. Other than it being the hottest month in Rwanda, August seemed to be a natural fit as RAPSIDA was planning an awareness week for late that month. I could come in as rehearsals were beginning, create a piece with the students over a four-week period, participate in the awareness week, and then return home. So, I packed my bags and set off for Rwanda – not because I thought they needed my help, but because I wanted to go and I thought I could be helpful.

I quickly learned that talking about sex in Rwanda can be a problem. As with many African countries, sexual health and AIDS are shadowy topics. AIDS is often associated with death and in Rwanda, and death itself can be an overwhelming topic – the country having lost nearly a million people in the 1994 genocide. Almost everyone lost at least one family member. The executive director of RAPSIDA lost over a hundred members of his extended family. I was nervous to talk about AIDS in Rwanda for a fear that I would unknowingly say something insensitive and that I would quickly become the “white man from America who flew all the way over here to tell us how to have sex with each other.”

To fight the hesitance in discussing sex, RAPSIDA uses a series of theater games where participants must say the names of sexual organs repeatedly and as a group, until it becomes part of the group's accepted vocabulary. Suleimani and Rose had already begun this training with the students and I found that the first time I played with them, I was the one who wanted to snicker when we said, “amabya,” the Rwandan equivalent of “balls.”

After a series of games, introductions and a warm welcoming, the students presented the 45-minute play that they had created with Sulé and Rose. I was surprised to see how much it looked like a play that a high school theater group in America might make to fight AIDS. Mixed in, however, were some moments of Boal-ian Forum Theater, several musical theater-style show tunes and moments of direct address – where an actor asks the audience what he/she should do next. All in all, I was impressed with the play they had built, but felt I had lots of ideas as to what could be done to make the story-telling crisper.

During dinner after the performance Rose and Sulé asked for my critique of the show. *Their* show. I wanted to say, “Your show was great. Let's start talking about *our* show.” I paused though and I think in that pause I learned something about giving aid.

As a dramaturg, I will often mutter to myself, “it's not my play,” to remind myself that no matter how much time and effort I dedicate to a project, it is the writer who writes it. In this moment at dinner, I found a new mantra, “it's not my country,” which helped me to

remember that as excited as I got for our project, it is the Rwandans who really have something on the line. It is the Rwandans who are coming together to stop the spread of AIDS in their country. I'm here only because I know a few ways to reduce the epidemic and because I have experience shaping shows. I can increase their theatrical vocabulary (and they mine) and offer new ways to work, but they are the artists stepping forward to save their countrymen. It is the Partnership (with a capital P) between the two groups that makes the production stronger and a dramaturg is better suited than anybody to know this.

Very few people will confidently offer you a definition of the word "dramaturg." My understanding is that dramaturges bring three great gifts to the rehearsal process. First and foremost, they keep their eyes on the prize, pushing the writers, directors, designers and actors to come up with creative solutions to make a stronger production. Second, they bring context. A dramaturg (with time to prepare) can be counted on to know what happened anywhere at anytime. And, they can tell you what meanings people have attributed to events throughout history. Third, a dramaturg has opinions of what would make the show stronger, but these opinions are formulated in such a way that they compliment the writer's path. A good dramaturg recognizes that it is the playwright's definition of a "good play" that must be followed. Most importantly, a dramaturg supports the creative agency of the artists involved.

To my mind, working in the worlds of international aid can be frustrating in the same way (though at a very different magnitude) as working in a major American union theater. Often, a light bulb on the set needs changing and even though you have the light bulb and know how to change it, you absolutely must not change it unless you are a union stagehand. Things that can seem simple are often enormously complex, full of intricate histories and passions. There are often dividing lines that newcomers miss. So, how do you get the lights on?

I thought of a conversation between a dramaturg and a playwright – meeting for the first time as they head into the rehearsal room together – that I once overheard. The dramaturg had done the homework and knew the play inside out. She was eager to offer suggestions and critiques, when the playwright reminded her of the first step in the process.

DRAMATURG: It's a real pleasure to meet you.

PLAYWRIGHT: Yes, nice to meet you.

DRAMATURG: I'm excited to get to work on the show.

PLAYWRIGHT: Yes. Welcome. You like the show?

DRAMATURG: (pause) Yes.

PLAYWRIGHT: yeah?

DRAMATURG: Yes.

In this case, I think the playwright expertly reminded the dramaturg that if she didn't like the play, the comments were not welcome. Too often, aid workers spring into action ready to save the day, ready to fix the problems without considering the native groups

already in place working to find solutions. It becomes an investment of the worker's ego, an altruistic impulse turned into an opportunity at the moral gold of saving an impoverished country. They can forget the first step: you must believe in the country, you must be impressed.

The recent Tsunami in South East Asia created a lot of hungry people and a great deal of international aid. After the boats with foodstuffs are loaded up and travel to the area, how is the food distributed? Do big USAID boats pull up to the beach and just start unloading? Do they distribute food thru religious and social organizations already in place in the area? If so, which ones? These decisions have a huge ripple effect throughout the area. Negotiating the stance of the distribution is work fit for a dramaturg. Too often aid is distributed to the world as if the aid-giver is allowing the aid-receiver to drink from the mighty teat of the aid-giving organization. We breathe life into them. This produces testimonials that begin, "I don't want to think of where I'd be if it weren't for [insert Aid Organization's name here]...." Whether there's any truth to it or not, what's the advantage of taking this stance? It props up the aid-giver's ego, but diminishes the aid. It undermines the aid-receiver's strength. It undermines the efforts already taking place amongst the population to distribute food. A dramaturg has the skills to form partnerships with members of the community in such a way that it empowers them. There are intelligent people in South East Asia who know of smart ways to distribute food throughout their community. We must work in partnership with these people. Their infrastructure was destroyed and they should be the ones to rebuild it, with our help.

But, this is silly, right? Am I suggesting that we parachute a small, well-trained army of dramaturges into Darfur? While it may not be the literal solution, I think that the lessons are the same. Imagine what a dramaturg could do to help with the rebuilding of New Orleans. A dramaturg would not just help the citizens get food, clothing and shelter, not just help rebuild their homes, but also see to it that aid was distributed in such a way that it enables the intelligence and participation of the people who's homes were destroyed. A dramaturg could help the citizens of New Orleans write their own story of what happened and what's being done about it, rather than absorb FEMA's narrative. Dramaturges, at their best, create a respectful air in the rehearsal room, bring a knowledgeable context to the topics at hand and offer solutions through partnerships – allowing all parties to feel strongly about their work as part of a greater whole.

Suleimani and Rose later confided that they were nervous when the Americans showed up. Nervous that we would not think their work was good, that we would not understand it, that we would dismiss it. They were defensive too - what right had we to judge and evaluate work produced for an audience we didn't know? We could only share our opinions and our efforts, and the truth in this case was that they wanted them, as long as the opinions didn't come with condescension. I found that dramaturgically, one of the most useful things I could do was to remind the students why I came. After our performances, the kids would often be in post-performance, applause-absorbed, actor bliss. "Yes, David," they would say, "we were fantastic today!" "Yes?" I'd ask. "You think we saved any lives?"

When I first arrived and Sulè and Rose looked at me with a play in their hands, asking what I wanted to do, I had a moment of fear. I had come to Rwanda to make a new play with two Rwandan artists and instead found myself working on a show that already existed. In learning to say, “I’m happy to work on whatever play you want to work on. I’m just here to help. What kind of feedback are you looking for?” I learned the first of Rwanda’s many lessons for me – respect your creative partners.

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