



# Theatre against genocide

## Mashirika

Mashirika, a Rwandan theatre company, is helping Rwandan communities to unite and international audiences to understand the 1994 genocide through their inspiring production *Africa's Hope* currently on tour in the UK.

The Rwandan genocide in 1994 appeared in the world's media, shocking us with disturbing broadcasts of images of mass murder. We had the opportunity to switch the TV off, or to turn the newspaper page, but the Rwandan people did not. The atrocities were sparked by the death of the Rwandan president, Juvenal Habyarimana, after his plane was shot down above Kigali airport on 6 April 1994. Hours after the attack a campaign of violence spread from the capital, Kigali throughout Rwanda and continued until June. Over a period of three months an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed. The genocide resulted in the complete and bloody destruction of whole communities, decimating families, leading to Rwandans being divided into victims and perpetrators, and having their faith in human relationships destroyed.

Genocide has occurred throughout time and one sentiment that emerged from the Holocaust in World War Two was that we should never forget what happened and more importantly to never allow genocide to happen again. The Holocaust Centre was established in Nottinghamshire by two brothers, James and Stephen Smith, in 1995. The focus of the Centre is to use the trauma of past historical genocides, so that the suffering of the people who were destroyed by violence and genocide are not forgotten. James Smith comments,

"It is not just about stopping genocide, we wanted to show that racism, persecution, prejudice and exclusion are bad enough, but they can lead to huge organised violence against the excluded groups if it is not stopped at an early stage." The failure of the international community to act to prevent the atrocities in Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, acted as a catalyst for James and Stephen to set up the Aegis Trust in 2000.

In 2004 the Aegis Trust was involved in a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary national commemoration of the genocide in Rwanda and they collaborated with the Rwandan youth theatre group, Mashirika, to develop the play *Africa's Hope*, which tells the story of the genocide. *Africa's Hope* was first performed during the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations. "*Africa's Hope* was a powerful performance. It was incredible to see young Rwandans tell the story of the genocide through theatre rather than in a normal didactic way. In performing *Africa's Hope*, Mashirika brought the audience closer to the story and managed to break down some of the fears that young Rwandan people have about blame."

With the support of the Aegis Trust and Ethiopian Airlines, Mashirika has now returned to the UK for the third time for a three month tour of schools and theatres. *Africa's Hope* was written by Mashirika's Artistic Director, Hope Azeda. *Africa's Hope* is inspired

by personal experiences of survivors and refugees of the genocide. The cast combine dynamic Rwandan music with contemporary and traditional Rwandan dance to share their memories and survivor testimonies, which challenge the dangers of racism, discrimination, intolerance in society and how in particular circumstances and over a period of time this can develop into genocide. Azeda comments, "The key character in *Africa's Hope* is a young boy I met while I was researching the piece ten years after the genocide. He was ten-years-old and his mother had been killed in the genocide, but he had survived. When I looked into his eyes I wondered what he felt about the genocide, and all I saw were millions of question marks as there is nothing that explains why somebody is killed because of who they are."

Mashirika consists of people from various backgrounds and cultures who speak a range of languages and come from different countries such as Kenya and Tanzania. Mashirika was formed in 1998 when Azeda moved to Rwanda from Uganda where she studied Music, Dance and Drama at Makerere University in Uganda. Mashirika believe that theatre should be fun, engaging and used as a tool for social transformation and employment. "Since I returned to Rwanda, we have been using theatre as a method of reconstruction. We have been dealing with themes of justice, reconciliation and health exploring issues such as clean water, or fighting Aids. The themes we have been involved in examining are helping society to transform to another level. As we are engaged with the theatre all the time, providing education and entertainment I believe that the actors should be able to earn a living from it."

The engaging nature of *Africa's Hope* resonates from its basis in real life testimonies, making the idea of genocide something that audiences outside of Rwanda can comprehend on an intrinsically human level. "It is fulfilling to work with survivors, as we are creating a voice and a platform for voices that were not heard before.

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Mashirika feels like a family, as we share stories and from this trust and understanding develops. I have worked with one hundred children who are genocide survivors, who saw their parents being killed, so when you are working with them a bond develops. If we don't speak the children's truth, who will?"

The audience's reaction to *Africa's Hope* across the world is strong and in Rwanda, Mashirika attract audiences of young and old people, cutting across the generation divide and getting audiences to connect to the performance and the issues it explores. "We perform the truth in its raw form — we don't want to dramatise what happened to make it beautiful. The challenge is how to take the testimony and make it believable. We have very talented young actors and actresses who perform other people's testimonies and after performances they come and tell the actors and actresses 'thank you for performing my story — that was me'. At Mashirika we don't act — we feel and the audience's emotions resonate with that."

While in the UK, Mashirika will be performing in theatres in Leeds, London, Taunton, Jersey, Nottingham and London as well as giving performing arts workshops to schools, sixth forms and community groups to promote diversity and social cohesion. "I want to write scripts with a purpose and to devote my life to something that is helping the world move forward and to change. I am pleased to be creating work, which reaches international audiences and creates a dialogue."

By utilising real life testimonies Mashirika help to educate UK audiences about what happened in Rwanda and what can happen



when discrimination takes hold and leads to the dehumanisation of one group. "UK audiences have been extremely moved as the material is very emotional, but the end of the play focuses on hope, strength and light with the young people looking forward

to the future. At points during the performance the audience is in tears, but by the end people have huge smiles on their faces. This is real life, which has both sides — the happiness and the sadness."

Since the genocide in 1994, there has been a move towards collective healing in Rwanda. Justice is still being sought against some of the perpetrators of the genocide, but there is a sense that reconciliation is happening. "Anybody who tries to bring up ethnic differences or topics like Hutu and Tutsi is seen as a troublemaker. Young people see these views as outdated and realise that they have caused nothing but problems. Rwanda is moving forward and developing fast."

Mashirika's work is helping Rwandans and the international community come to terms with the implications of the genocide. "When audiences see *Africa's Hope* I want them to realise that the world does not belong to somebody else, it belongs to them, not some president. One little thing can change something. As long as *Africa's Hope* can create dialogue, for example if somebody is driving home from a performance, I want the voices from the play to keep coming back and for people to reflect upon and discuss what they have seen." While exploring the past and the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, Mashirika is focusing on healing communities and looking forward to a hopeful future.

For further information on Mashirika please visit [www.mashirika.org](http://www.mashirika.org), or for details on the Aegis Trust and tour dates for Mashirika's UK performances please see: [www.aegistrust.org](http://www.aegistrust.org).

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