

Emily Mendelsohn

Maria Kizito: New Orleans & Kampala

I wanted to know something about being outside.

I am an American theater director working with artists from Kampala and New Orleans on Erik Ehn's *Maria Kizito*, a play bearing witness to a massacre at a convent during the Rwandan genocide. Sister Maria Kizito and her Mother Superior participated in the murder of 7,000 refugees while maintaining their daily prayer schedule. Ehn's text imagines Maria's prayer life through the events at Sovu, mediated by an American nun who attends their trial in Belgium. Like the mediating character, Theresa, an interest in ethical ways of seeing trauma led me to East Africa. It led me to community. I started traveling, and later began working, with artists from Rwanda, Uganda, and the US. We use the process of developing plays across residencies in different cities/countries to explore joint aesthetic, build relationships, and host conversation on how the play's themes play out in our respective homes.

The performance scenes in New Orleans and in Kampala have a deep concern for place. In Kampala, artists are hybridizing multiple inherited forms to explore contemporary images of (African, Ugandan, individual) identity. Fifty years out from independence, there is a renewal in the optimism and fight for a self-determining Uganda. In New Orleans, ArtSpot Productions and other companies are exploring community and memory with an eye to disappearance of land, language, and culture in a man-made environmental disaster. *Maria Kizito*, also, demands a consideration of place. Rwanda cannot become a metaphor for trauma. We are taking up a consideration of a moment in the world twenty years ago in a southeast province in Rwanda without being sure yet where it will take us.

Colonizers, Germany and then Belgium, racialized and polarized two loose economic groups in Rwanda: Hutu and Tutsi. Hutu extremists planned the 1994 genocide to avoid a

power sharing agreement. In Sovu, and across the country, Tutsi and moderate Hutu turned to churches for sanctuary. And, as in many sites across Rwanda, instead of welcoming the refugees, Mother Superior Gertrude and Sister Maria helped supply the militia with information and tools for the massacre. Much of the killing was intimate, neighbor killing neighbor at close distance with hand tools. The police and militia shot people who ran. They set fire to a garage where others were hiding. An estimated seven thousand people died. The militia left, and Gertrude and Maria called them back to kill the Tutsi Sisters' families, hiding in the convent ceilings. Gertrude and Maria were tried for crimes against humanity in a marble court in Belgium. Belgium itself, and the international community who failed to intervene, were never tried.

What feels most politically salient about our Ugandan/American project is the organic quality of its evolution. It matters for Rwandans to have agency in telling the story of the genocide. Odile Katese's *Book of Life* and Mashirika's Amohoro Stadium performances in Rwanda's official memorial ceremonies are some examples of this work I admire. Erik's travel to Rwanda for *Maria Kizito* research led to a nine year exchange with students, faculty, and artists studying how artistic process can contribute to formation of public memory and social healing in the aftermath of mass violence. A young Ugandan producer from this network had expressed interest in Erik's play and, in 2012, Erik invited him to assemble a team for *Maria Kizito* to bring to *Soulographie*, a joint performance of all seventeen of the plays Erik had written considering 20th Century America through the lens of genocide. I directed a reading of *Maria Kizito* at Uganda's National Theatre. Four artists from this reading, Tonny Muwangala, Esther Tebandeke, Allen Kagusuru and myself traveled to New York and worked with (other) American artists on a performance of *Maria Kizito* for *Soulographie* at La MaMa. Jeff Becker, designer with ArtSpot Productions, traveled with Erik's network in Rwanda and designed the show in New York. Through Jeff, the Ugandan team and I now continue building the show in New Orleans. The play becomes not a definitive declaration on Rwanda, but a site for deepening and expanding a network of relationships.

Our process began with a workshop in Uganda where, at Erik's suggestion, Tonny Muwangala, Esther Tebandeke, Allen Kagusuru and other Kampala-based artists translated some of Erik's text into languages they dream in and set them to music. Uganda has over 40 local languages; our room had four. Later, US-based composer Colin Wambsgans and performers Dana Gourrier, Justine Williams and others wrote the original English back into the song. This text, written by an American, about Rwanda, to an American audience, was appropriated, made to surrender itself to other tongues, other rhythms, and return off-centered, counter-point. But what excites me most about this is something Erik's text invites generally: a carefully wrought journey of the mind that invites many entry points. We enter with the multiplicity of histories, performance practices, and perspectives assembled through our particular lives.

The play seeks to see, in a personal way, Maria's embrace of genocide and its human consequences. Theresa asks her superiors/the audience, "May I watch and discover what our Sister was thinking?" Theresa hopes this will teach her something about what makes an ordinary person, or an ordinary person of faith, commit genocide. In the play, Theresa and Maria meet inside of practice. Maria does not deny a Catholic image of God, the imagery for completion in prayer and in genocide share a broad convergence. Maria was not trying to be evil. She was trying to be done. "Nothing is clearer than nothing. Nothing is clearer than all of them." Theresa is a marker, to acknowledge the point-from-which of the play's seeing. Her witness is both holy and problematic. She achieves acts of perfect compassion. She is also complicit to systems that contributed to the genocide. Her gaze is caught up in racist, colonial histories and continued global political and economic inequalities. There is something sacred here, and it neither justifies nor removes us from a messy, cruel inner or systemed world.

Being outside, here, is being in contingency. We take up this resistance to absolute perspective by playing with interior/surface in our staging, highlighting tensions between the everyday and the mythic, present and memory, subject and object, personal and collective. The play incorporates testimony, and also a surreal poetic consideration of events. A refugee's dialogue with fire. Owls in the ceilings. We are outside this moment of

history (with the material of the massacre), and also asked to enter, consider, compose, hold point of view to the experience of it. The text, likewise, asks performers to switch seamlessly from storytelling to characters within a story. The play is structured as the daily Office of the Hours, a formal prayer, and our visual world is made of frames for conjuring memory: a DJ station that suggests a radio (used in promoting ideology and broadcasting addresses), a Bible of Genocide, and a table with a rotating surface that doubles as a shadow screen. Frames offer the suggestion of revelation, a hidden interior or other world that will come through the peephole. Our frame deconstructs to reveal a smaller frame. A little book. A chair. A quiet, practical radio. The past repeats on everyday scale. And also, the past is never revealed. We see, always, our own seeing.

Between prayers, Maria made lists of her childhood neighbors, sorting who was Hutu and who was Tutsi. Are there ways in my own practice that the ecstasy of prayer or formal aesthetic investigation disconnect me from human seeing? In staging testimony (the play uses text from an African Rights Report on Sovu and transcripts from the trial), our job is not to pity or portray the survivors, but to be spaces for language to become present and personal. Our job is not to turn away. Through crafting music, gesture, breath, and stage image, text becomes an event in our bodies; our making real happens together with an audience. There is an intimacy in this activity that does not transcend the economic, political, aesthetic, cultural, racial, gender difference in our room. It lives along side it.

At the end of the play's day in prayer, a chorus of nuns watching and telling Maria's story attempts a summary and asks what redeems us from genocide. In the nuns' prayer, redemption does not remove us from sin, it exists contiguous to the falling. The prayer begins with an image that places the genocidal impulse in both biblical and immediate times:

*Gaza is a shaved head
A skeleton reduced to silence,
Ashdod the remnant of their strength,
How long will you gash yourself?*

Genocide feels big. Bigger than time. I want to be outside. Outside of genocide. And I am. Rwanda now is a beautiful, complicated, success story. The country boasts national health care, gender parity in leadership, tight accountability, and investment in infrastructure. Not all tied up neatly. There are many challenges with trauma from colonization and long effects of genocide, and innovative efforts to meet those challenges continue to come forward. Twenty years later, the memory of genocide is present differently. I am in New Orleans, learning how the roads connect, drinking coffee in a vintage chair, and watching the news about racism and force coming to the foreground in my own country. The same tear gas canisters in Gaza and Ferguson. Not genocide, but capable of becoming. Sometimes I want to be outside completely.

What does the smallness of a performance, or a life, have to offer as resistance to so much force? Peacebuilder Jean Paul Lederach talks about the intersection of conflict transformation and creative process in a muscle he names the moral imagination. I'm particularly interested right now in one aspect he describes as vocation, the will to live out a change in the process of its imagining. The smallness, and the attendance to it, *is* resistance. Not to be the force. To be outside and with it. Our own human selves at the door. Strange and unknown, and waiting to be invited in.

Emily Mendelsohn is a theater director. With an exchange of artists from East Africa and the US, she has directed: *Maria Kizito* (reading at Uganda's National Theatre, *Soulographie* NYC) and Deborah Asimwe's *Cooking Oil* (Kigali, Kampala, and Los Angeles). She has directed and dramaturged international exchange projects in the US, Lithuania, Rwanda, Uganda and South Africa. She participated for 5 years in an arts and social change exchange in Rwanda and Uganda led by Erik Ehn. She was a Fulbright Fellow in Uganda and holds an MFA from California Institute of the Arts.