

“Out of their terrible stories comes beauty and that beauty comes to a world that has once upon the time betrayed them.”

Hope Azeda & Rémi Armand Tchokothe*

Interview with Hope Azeda, founder and director of *Mashirika Performing Art and Media Company* (Kigali), staging director, playwright, curator, teacher, mentor on April 14, 2022 in the premises of *Mashirika*. In this interview that was carried out during my exploratory field research on the role of literary and artistic works in archiving and processing the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda (April 1-17, 2022), Hope speaks about theatre and healing the genocide against the Tutsi, what keeps her going, in-betweenness, home-grown methodologies, sponsorship but also on hope.

Rémi: Hope, thank you again for allocating me some time despite your crazy schedule.

Hope: Yes, it has particularly been crazy especially since the Covid thing.

Rémi: It can only be crazy. You are a director, an actress, a mentor, a teacher, an adviser, a curator etc. How do you handle all these hats?

Hope: (laughter). I am also a mother. I think there is something women are born with called intuition. Whatever I do, I feel everything. I have always thought that life is an encounter, and so is art. So, once I encounter something, it buys a place in my heart. Once it buys a place in my heart, as an artist I am obliged to have a conversation with that particular story. It could be a vision, a dream, an incident on the street, just that woman crossing the street carrying a weight on her back. It could be a dress. My eye catches many details. Sometimes when these things come to me, I am indebted to give them back to the people as a gift because they come to me as a gift as well.

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I have learnt to juggle things around. One minute, you are looking at one thing. Before you digest it, another thing crosses and they are all beautiful layers of life. They are all inter-connected. Whatever I am curating as an event is connected to the story that I am trying to write as a play, to the poem I am trying to do or to the forum, to that conference. So, they are all anchored to that story that I encounter. That is what makes it easy to stitch it together. I also see life as a broken mirror. Broken into pieces. When you come to this country, you pick the pieces and you have to stitch them together so that our broken past becomes the life we have now and the life we will have tomorrow. You have different streams and you are just in-between.

Rémi: In a former interview, you said that when coming to Rwanda you thought you were returning to an imagined 'home' but Rwanda turned out to be a school. What did you mean?

Hope: First of all, life is a school. For all of us now after Covid, it has been a new school of life. How do we go forth? I was born and raised as a refugee in Uganda. My imagination before I came here was different. As a child I heard about beautiful things, beautiful hills. Our parents never told us exactly what had happened but mentioned the beautiful things, which is also beautiful. So, coming back I encountered the history and kept asking myself the question: how could this have been possible? Unimaginable circumstances. Extraordinary human beings that really have the spirit of resilience. Every day I talk to someone, I learn something new. It is that unanswered question: how could this have been possible? How can someone who have lost all their gods wake up one morning and forgive that person that took it all from them? Rwanda is a school of forgiveness, a school of reconciliation. You see women with very difficult backgrounds making very beautiful baskets. Out of their terrible stories comes beauty and beauty comes to a world that has once upon the time betrayed them. How do you live in a chaotic environment but at the same time as a human being you stay connected? It is a school of life. Every day I am learning how to stay focused. How do I stay truthful? How to learn the essence of truth and facts? Like the art we do. There is the fact. There is the truth around it and you have to keep the balance but you have to know the facts. In this country, everyone is like a human library. It is not just a book with a cover. It is collection. There is Hope [Azeda], there is the spirit Hope [Azeda], there is the ordinary Hope [Azeda]

crossing the street. There are different layers. You have to unpack one layer after the other, which makes us better students of life.

Rémi: Back to Mashirika. When setting up Mashirika, theatre as a genre was not very present in the art scene. Are you happy with the impact you have been making?

Hope: Jaaaaa, I think theatre always had a place but in different formats. When I came, I was looking at theatre more in terms of facilities, more in terms of curricula at schools that teach drama. There had always been radio drama. I came as a freshly graduate and I was looking for a space where I could advertise my shows but I had no idea how to go about. That is why I say that Rwanda is a school for me. I have learnt to unpack the structures. I cannot say that there is a theatre here with a running box office but we have done theatre. We have done community-based theatre, theatre performances, television programs. I have had to learn that theatre does not necessarily mean the facilities. Rather, it means the appreciation. It is about the impact. It means forgiveness. Being bold to face difficult conversations, creating safe spaces. For me, that is what theatre is now. Can this piece of theatre that I am going to create evoke beautiful conversations? It no longer matters where it is taking place, whether on a veranda or under a tree. Has it yielded a conversation that the community needs? That is the definition that I have now.

Rémi: I like this point. How would you call your theatre: theatre for development, theatre for reconciliation, emancipatory theatre etc.?

Hope: That is a very very very [original emphasis] difficult question because to me, theatre has become a mirror of life. It is a congregational space irrespective of the music you are dancing to, the format you come with. For me, it is a congregational space with a soul. A space that is able to bring to life stories of our lives: the hidden truths, the untold stories, the unimaginable experience, a theatre that is bold enough to defend a history.

Rémi: Thank you for this powerful definition.

Hope: (laughter). You know, at the end of the day, the question is why are we doing this? Why do we spend so much time writing a piece of art? I have learnt to search deeper into the essence and the meaning of art in our lives. If it is not helping my soul to feel better, if it does not feed my soul with knowledge, with words of inspiration, with words to carry on, with words to make me the person

that will plant the seed of tomorrow's legacy, to craft me, what would then be the essence of art in humanity?

Rémi: You have done some work on art and healing the genocide against the Tutsi. Would you like to say a few words on this?

Hope: In many areas, on many days when we are mourning the genocide against the Tutsi, there are times we face young survivors. Our first piece of production was called 'Africa's Hope'. 'Africa's Hope' is the story of Rwandan survival. It highlights the stories of people who survived at 13 or 14 at the time of the genocide. When you come face to face to such a person now, their scars have different levels of depth. You find out while dealing for example with Peter's story who was 11 in 1994 that there are thousands Peters behind. I realize that bringing out these stories in the art form will evoke emotions. These stories teach you as a facilitator to invite empathy. These are stories with deep scars, stories that speak volumes of words and at times, as artists, we run short of words.

They are stories that invite silence as a technique and once silence walks in that space you can only wait to discover where it leads you. As you face these stories, they speak to you. They ask you: Are you listening to me? Do you feel me? How do you step into the skin of someone who witnessed the massacre of their relatives? How do you step into their shoes? How do you put these stories onto stage? You have to explore emotions because once a knife is put on your neck, the pain does not distinguish whether you are a 'Tutsi' or a 'Hutu'. Without inviting empathy into that space, it would be hard to connect to the stories. One thing I really pay attention to is whether the space is safe enough. Do we agree that these stories can have an emotional impact on us as artists? Then you find out that during rehearsals people just break down and cry. They break down and cry and you cannot just ask them to hurry up, we are running out of time. You have to let this moment pass. Although we try to bring life to these stories, it is an introspective journey for all of us. It helps us to connect to our inner pains, to connect to the pains of other people. Therefore, by staging let say Beatrice's story, I am also healing myself.

In the end, this space is both a safe and healing space for all of us. It is a space of trust. One thing I have learnt over the years is that when coming here, despite a degree in theatre, I was not equipped with enough tools or techniques because we had done Shakespeare, Greek drama etc. I asked myself: I am done with school. Where can I borrow from? I found that the tools I had were not effective

for a space like this. When asking some survivors during the research how they felt narrating their stories for the first time, some would say to me that they felt like a boiler that had burst. Once it had burst, they felt some relief. I started exploring different ways of carrying the weight and bringing it down to audiences. How do I keep going despite carrying this heavy weight around?

I had to develop different methods of preparing artist/performers with series of exercises that I call 'iron ball', 'resisting the burden', 'thorns and roses', 'childhood memory techniques' etc. I first use them and apply them to the group with which I will work. Once these methods work, the rest mostly follows.

Rémi: This leads to my next question: home-grown methodologies. Should the field generate the methodology or should methodologies come from libraries/schools?

Hope: This is a real problem. Remember the tools I came with as a graduate from the University of Makerere, Uganda. This is a problem, which I face when I am involved in international cooperation. They expect me to give them answers. I tell them that I do not have answers. We should feel the energy. Let the energy in the space direct us. I see myself as a facilitator, not an expert. I have had to create home-grown methodologies. My home-grown method is called 'scars of soul'. It is a collection of exercises we do in order to deal with pain.

Rémi. One central aim of the course I teach at the University of Vienna on the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda is that what happened to Rwanda should speak to the world the way what is happening in Ukraine is speaking to the world.

Hope: Exactly. Pain is pain. It has no colour.

Rémi: On your website, one point caught my attention: 'disability is not inability'. Could you say more about you involving people with a 'disability' in your performances?

Hope: To me, there is more to life than this meat called the body. To me, air stands for what life is. Saying that someone is disable does not make sense because one cannot touch thinking. It is not a thumb, it is not meat. One of my aims in visuals is to create awareness. The first time I performed in this country was for free in order to collect money for blind people. I try to promote the idea that there is more to human beings than just their bodies. There are many more

functionalities that our communities need to see. We have to include people we call disabled. There is no reason to feel ashamed about our people or to hide them because they have a disability. By including them in our performances, I want to show that disability is not inability.

Rémi: Some time back you were asked to describe yourself in three words. You chose hope, sunshine and do you remember the third word?

Hope: (laughter) No, I do not remember.

Rémi: Darkness was the third word. Would you keep this description of yourself?

Hope: Oh yes, because we are a collective force of nature. Nature has a thorn. Nature has light and it has darkness. Regarding my methods, the first exercise I do is to ask people to tell me one thorn, one rose and one thing they are expecting. One thorn is anything that has pricked on their lives. It could be now, yesterday or ten years back. Your mother could be your own thorn. It could be a cancer. Nonetheless, there is always beauty if there is the will to look for it in the midst of horror. Darkness completes light. It is hope that helps you see the light in darkness.

Rémi: How do you sponsor all your initiatives at Mashirika, the festival etc.?

Hope: First of all, we sponsor with our intellect. I do not push money to become the reason I create because I believe the kind of art we create has no price tag. It is priceless. For me, art is a talent, a God-given gift for our soul. I do not know a shop of gifts of the soul. My partner and I are the first contributors to our work. We are graduates from the same university but he is more into radio and community outreach programs but honestly, where we are now depends on different projects. We do commissioned works, which means that we see tenders in newspapers and we compete. We submit proposals. We also do cooperate work that means that we are sometimes hired to do cooperate events like the World Economic Forum, Smart Africa. Then we have embassies because our festivals are more about cultural diplomacy. Therefore, we invite embassies to join the conversation by inviting artists from their countries. We also have many friends who contribute because they share our vision.

Rémi: What is your biggest worry regarding Mashirika?

Hope: To be honest, I am true definition of hope. I do not worry much. I play like a child. I face darkness like a child looking for butterflies. I make people around me very nervous because I do not worry much. My only worry is that tomorrow is like an unwritten book and what I do today will affect tomorrow. So, I am very cautious about what I am doing today. The future is so uncertain that you have to keep going. That is my nature and something I learnt as a spiritual person from my mother. She constantly reminded us that we are on this earth to plant seeds of hope, peace and comfort. I keep asking myself whether I have planted enough seeds because our hearts are gardens. What you plant in the world is exactly what you plant in your heart. I try to stick to a moral compass, not to fight battles I cannot win and not to worry much.

Rémi: **Is your art the garden of your heart or your heart the garden of your art?**

Hope: (Laughter). I like this question. It is both. Especially because in this country hate was taught. People became tools of hate. I think that the same energy that was put in teaching hate can be put in teaching love.

Rémi: **It reminds me of Nelson Mandela who once said that ‘if people can learn to hate, they can be taught to love.’**

Hope: Exactly!

Rémi: **Hope, Murakeza neza [Thank you in Kinyarwanda] for these words of hope.**

Hope: Thank you too and please come back in July for the festival. [Ubumuntu Arts Festival, Africa’s premier performing arts for social change, July 14-17 2022, Kigali].



Figure 1: Interview with Hope. Copyrights. Hope Azeda and Rémi Tchokothe