

Contemporary African women in theatre: An interview with Warona Seane

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LURD Rebel Army Camp Base, Helena and Bessie, 'wives' of a Commanding Officer sit. It is a dilapidated shelter; it may once have been someone's decent home; it is riddled with bullet holes and black soot and mortar residue. It is a partial indoor enclosure. Piles of used ammunition litter one corner. The enclosure is well organized, however, with obvious areas for cooking, sleeping and bathing. A tattered Liberian flag hangs on the back wall. Bessie is six and a half months pregnant. (Lights up on Helena sitting on a metal tub, styling Bessie's wig; they look offstage).

The opening stage directions of Danai Gurira's *Eclipsed* read as bleak reminders of the horrors of civil war and fore-shadows the defiant sisterhood of survival that is given flesh and voice through the characters of her play. On August 15th 2014, a production of *Eclipsed* opened at the Soweto Theatre in Johannesburg and was directed by Warona Seane, its Artistic Manager. For this special issue on African theatre, I chose to conduct an interview with Warona Seane as a leading black female director in South Africa. This is a category that seems to have surprisingly few qualifiers until one examines the legacy of mainstream theatre making in South Africa, and the gatekeepers who continue to guard their territories. As a Zambian-born theatre maker with migratory roots throughout Southern Africa, my interests also lie in probing the terrain of contemporary African women's voices in theatre. This production can be viewed as an instance of how South Africa engages with the African continent, considering a historical legacy of disassociation and the contentious relationship that South Africa has with the rest of the African continent as evidenced in the waves of xenophobic violence that occur often throughout a country battling with resource distribution, structural inequality and various formal and informal systems of differentiation between South African citizens and foreign nationals. The playwright in this case is Zimbabwean by upbringing and engaging with war-torn Liberia, the director and her all-female cast is from South Africa. The play was produced in Johannesburg, a city notorious for its range of possible intra-continental encounters. The following interview then, seems to map the contours of intra-African female expression in theatre and asks us to consider a diasporic lens which specifically examines the collaborative work of continental Africans.

Warona Seane is a renowned Johannesburg-based theatre and performance director who has worked in television and is an award winning theatre performer herself. She is also an educator at both the Market Theatre Lab and the Drama Division at the Wits School of Arts, and a facilitator of storytelling and poetry workshops. She has been directing theatre professionally since 2000, when she staged a play addressing the realities of female circumcision called *Sacred Thorn* for the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. *Eclipsed* at the Soweto Theatre is Seane's latest directorial credit, having staged an earlier version at the Windybrow Theatre in 2010. She has directed works in many of Johannesburg's professional theatre spaces, besides the venues already mentioned. These include the Civic Theatre (now known as The Joburg Theatre), the Dance Factory, The Market Theatre and Wits School of Arts. She has also directed work that has travelled to Cape Town, Paris and New York and, in 2013, was nominated for a Naledi Award in the category of Best Director for *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall at the Market Theatre.

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Mwenya B. Kabwe: How did you come to *Eclipsed*? Did the script come to you or did **you** go to the script.

Warona Seane: The script came to me. Matjamela Motloun, our producer, who has had a close relationship with the writer, Danai Gurira, received the script from her and passed it on to me to read. I read it and enjoyed how it was written and was intrigued by the characters.

MBK: And what was it that drew you to direct it?

WS: There are a number of reasons why I ended up directing it. The language or dialect it was written in was very intriguing and exciting, so I was immediately drawn to the characters because of how it was written. It was also shortly after the 2008 xenophobic attacks that we worked on the play, and it was with the notion that if South Africans engaged with the challenges that some of our African brothers and sisters have faced, the challenge of xenophobia would lessen. The Pan-African reality of staging it:- a play written by a Zimbabwean writer now living in the States, about the Liberian Civil War interpreted by a South African team. Finally, the need to show the contribution females have in a society at war, the impact that war has on females and the violence suffered by females during times of war, to give otherwise ignored voices an amplified mic to state their realities.

MBK: How did you choose your cast?

WS: When I began reading the play I “heard” the voices of actors I knew in the characters. The Little Girl was definitely to be played by Koketso Mojela who has a child-like quality and yet can access emotions maturely in order to portray the tragic reality inhabited by the fifteen year old character. I also heard Nqobile Sipamla as Bessie, the pregnant third wife of the commanding officer, Ferry Jele as Maima or wife number two and in the original production, Khutjo Green, then Mmola, as the Peace worker that comes into the compound. The first wife, Helena, was a mystery for a long time because, along with accent there was a need for someone who could be older and still childlike but could command respect. One day I was sitting at Wits Theatre re-reading the script and Lerato Sekele was talking to her friends and she put on what has come to be known as a “Nollywood” accent and was performing for her friends. That was, in a way, an informal audition and from there I spoke to her to find out if she would be interested and the last piece in the puzzle was slotted in.

MBK: The production that I saw at the Soweto Theatre was the second iteration of the show; can you tell me about the journey of the production so far? And what are some of the major changes between the first and second runs?

WS: With the second run, Khutjo Green was not available and so we needed to find a replacement. I contacted strong actors that I knew and they were not available. We then decided to host auditions and a colleague/friend of mine shared information about Dawn Msomi with me and asked that we consider her for an audition. Dawn was the only person who arrived on the day of the auditions. We went into one of the theatres for the audition and when I asked her to sing she echoed the tones of a song I had listened to the night before as I was preparing for rehearsals. A haunting and somewhat disconnected chant/melody which immediately cast her in the role. With the second run it was very clear for me that I wanted to attempt to address the spiritual implications of war on the women. As

such, live singing would become important in setting the tone for the piece. Exploring the spiritual implications meant going deeper into researching the warlords of the time and we watched documentaries that had warlords as the protagonists and traced their path to the present and sourced any information we can find on them in the present. All this information formed the basis of lead improvisations during the rehearsal process and re-informed and re-membered the rediscovery of the characters by the actors. Also, the designer, Wilhelm Disbergen, came to me with a challenge of placing the auditorium in a U-formation which would give audience members access to each other's responses and provide interesting challenges in the staging of the piece. Of course I said yes to his suggestion and we began attempting to fit the action inside a "box" that made the audience both victims and perpetrators of the violence experienced by the characters in the play. The Windybrow theatre had a door which led outside, and so it was easy to have leave fire every night which provided wonderful moments of realism as the cassava would always be steaming hot, the smell from the smoke of the fire would permeate the space. At Soweto Theatre we had burning wood placed in the space an hour before the show began in order to have that wood-fire smoke and smell present in the auditorium.

MBK: As you have said, this is a production about women in war torn Liberia, written by a Zimbabwean woman and brought to life by a South African cast. Did your process include consciously connecting to these migrations of the work? And if so, how?

WS: The play is written in a particular dialect and with a particular rhythm. Due to the fact that more videos of Liberians by Liberians are now available on the net than when we had done the play the first time we watched these YouTube videos religiously: Liberians at a basketball court; at home talking about their parents; doing hair etc. However, it was important for the actors to locate the characters within the individual stories and not in the accents. Each of the two processes of rehearsal began with a "history lesson" by me with the cast, of Liberia, repatriation of freed slaves, its civil wars and a look at the country presently. This is important in order for the actors to firmly locate themselves within the world of the play. We then had to look at the US and its influence on Liberian politics and popular culture. There are specific references in the text that relate to that view of the world, and Americans in particular, and their hold on Africa and these had to also be explored. For example, Bessie refers to herself as Janet Jackson and as such we looked for a wig that resembled Janet Jackson's hair around 2003 (during the time of the war). Music used in the play, not the theme song, was music that was popular in West Africa during the time of the civil war. The song we chose for the theme song, however, was firmly located in present day South Africa: *Amaxesha* by Mthwakazi. This song speaks of the need for us to hurry, to be vigilant in fixing the spaces where we've had enough. It talks of having a lot of work to do in feeding the starving spirits of a people dispossessed. The war chants were taken straight from video footage of child soldiers in training. The styling of costumes and space was referenced from images taken of Liberia before, during and after the war in order to locate it in a compound in Liberia.

MBK: What was the response of your audience for both runs of the show? And have you had any responses specifically from Africans from outside South Africa?

WS: Audiences responded very well to the show generally, and expressed how they had been ignorant of the war when it was taking place. Some audience members saw the eventuality

of a civil war in South Africa as a reality and questioned how they would survive such an ordeal. Some audience members complained that the play is too long. It runs for 2hrs without an interval. (In the written text there is an interval. The choice was a directorial one as I felt an interval would let the audience off the hook, so to speak, and I was not interested in doing so). There was, however, a complaint that we should have located the play in South Africa. Of course, this we cannot do as it is clearly a story about Liberia. Others were surprised that the actors were South African as their accent work had located them in West Africa. However, some West Africans felt the accent work was too generalized in some instances.

MBK: A reviewer had the following to say about his experience of walking into your pre-set: ‘As you enter the theatre there is heavy smoke in the air. It smells as though firewood is being burned close by. Before you can find a seat you’re immediately immersed into the atmosphere, desperate to breathe clean air. But as for what happens next, there’s a strange void in language that doesn’t allow me to capture truly what I saw’ (Mkila 2014). Do you think South African audiences respond differently to work that is about other parts of the continent? Do you think it resonates differently from other kinds of theatre and performance work that is more commonly seen in South Africa?

WS: Because the “Nollywood accent” is always accompanied by laughter, the audience responds with laughter at the beginning of the piece, but they quickly realize that the actors are not making fun of the accent; they are embodying it and then they start to calm their laughter, somewhat. I think if we continue to locate work within the continent and share it with South African audiences the responses will be strong and positive. We do need to understand that the only regular link, in terms of relating to the continent are Africa Magic television channels which are dedicated to programming that is very rarely positive about African countries, practices and cultures outside of South Africa. Once South African audiences get over their internalized “proper accent for English” prejudice and begin to see themselves, they enter the world and follow one of the women on the journey throughout the piece. After each show there would be people gathering and putting on the accent in an effort to take the play away with them, to hold on to it a while longer.

MBK: In a way you are ‘insiders’ bringing ‘outsiders’ into being. In light of the anti-African-foreigners sentiment that is common in South Africa, was this important to you?

WS: Yes, [it is] extremely important. [It is a] constant affirmation of our place on the continent, and how we need to make a positive contribution to remembering that we are African. There is a lot of ignorance in South Africa about Africa and it was important for us to approach this play with sincerity and to honour the experiences and the lives of our sisters.

MBK: Are there any characters in *Eclipsed* that particularly resonate with you? If so, which one(s) and why do you think that is?

WS: As an ensemble piece of theatre I had to find resonance with all the characters in order to be able to assist all the actors fairly and without bias. So I will state qualities in each character that I feel resonate with me:

Wife # 1: Helena; The martyr-matriarch- she has been tossed from rebel movement to rebel movement but still finds within herself the space to protect and nurture other young women who find themselves on the compound.

Wife # 2: Maima: The survivor- realizing that there is another way for women to exist in a warzone than simply being the wife of the commanding officer, she joins the rebel forces to fight in an attempt to create equality for herself with the men.

Wife # 3: Bessie: The escapist- she holds on to the ideal of a happy family and normalcy in order to make sense of the harsh reality she finds herself in.

Wife #4: The Little Girl: she represents all the women during their innocence and after joining the rebel forces. She makes no decisions for herself; instead, the circumstances choose who she should become. We see her lose herself in the play until she manages, at the end, to relocate the focus of her dreams.

Peace Woman: Rita- [An] educated and well-read woman who comes as saviour and realizes that her need to rescue these girls is based on the fact that she was not able to do the same for her own daughter. She is someone who profited from the war until the violence came inside her home and redirected her focus.

All the women's hopes and desires have been eclipsed by the war and they each struggle to find ways to reclaim their light.

MBK: For me, the production provided an important encounter between the local and the foreign, in this case the local being South Africa and the foreign, being Liberia, and indirectly, Zimbabwe. What was it like to orchestrate this encounter as the director of the show(s)?

WS: It was really important for me to constantly state to the team that we are South African actors interpreting a story about Liberia written by a Zimbabwean currently living in the US. This meant we had to school ourselves about Liberia and understand the history and attempt to understand how the civil wars came about and who stood to benefit. I think, however, the fact that we are African was very important to us and it was a way to state and claim our place in the telling of our sisters' stories. We also drew parallels or found examples of the characters in the women and relationships with those whom we have encountered throughout our lives.

MBK: Even though it was fictionalized, the perspective of an African civil war from the experiences of African women was hugely significant for me, particularly in that the play is ultimately about survival. Can you say something about this?

WS: Women's voices are usually silenced when speaking about war. [It is] almost as though we do not contribute in any way. Liberian women were very instrumental in brokering peace in Liberia, thus the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to the presidency. The strength of women is usually reserved for idioms and rarely engaged with, particularly African women, and it was important to state, through dramatization, the varied aspects and perspectives that women have of a war situation.

MBK: What were you hoping to communicate with *Eclipsed*?

WS: That war is unnecessary and that women and children are usually the first casualties. That we never really know the reasons why we fight or wage wars and that the general populous is usually left to the devices of despots and criminals disguised as heroes. That, although we have not had a civil war in South Africa, our reality is not that far removed from the realities faced by Liberian women during a civil war. That Africa continues to bleed for the interests of rich non-Africans.

MBK: Can you describe some magical moments in working on the productions of *Eclipsed*?

WS: The actors' trust in the process and their surrendering to the characters. I find it magical because they do not allow themselves to settle. There is constant interrogation and engagement with the world. Their ability to understand that performance is ever-evolving to afford themselves moments of exploration in performance.

MBK: What do you think are some of the biggest challenges faced by African women theatre makers today?

WS: Recognition of African Women Theatre-Makers' voices is a great challenge. There seems to be a knee-jerk disregard of work done by African Women in theatre to the extent that people ask questions like "Who are the black female theatre directors who can challenge pound for pound their white female counterparts?" It's that hierarchy that exists in all spheres of life: white males; white females; black males; black females. As we speak there is a particular theatre in the country that has published their programming for the year and they have not included black female directors in their line-up. Instead we must be relegated to festivals in August.

Of course there are many reasons as to why the females do not stay the test of time, as well, in theatre. Children- with the rise of absent fathers when a woman falls pregnant they have to consider their child's future and our industry provides no labour benefits and so, women tend to leave theatre in search of job security elsewhere. Reviewers do not engage with work produced by black female theatre makers and as such the works slips through the cracks and is not noticed.

References

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