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# THEATRE & RECONCILIATION

A METHOD FOR THEATER PRACTICE IN CONFLICT ZONES

*Edited by Frédérique Lecomte*

*DIGITAL VERSION*







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# THÉÂTRE & RÉCONCILIATION

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*For Dian Diang, for Lissa, my daughters.*



Ghislaine, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.



Jimmy, Child Soldiers project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

## INTRODUCTION

For the past twenty-five years, Belgian director Frédérique Lecomte has been creating shows with actors from vulnerable communities: populations in conflict zones, marginalised individuals, diasporas, prisoners, victims of torture, drug addicts, patients in therapeutic environments and refugees. In 2005, anxious to have a framework for developing, transmitting and perpetuating her practice, she created the ASBL Théâtre & Réconciliation, whose objective is to bring about changes in and between individuals through theater. The aim is to use theater as a tool in reconciliation and reconstruction processes, both by symbolizing experiences and by focusing on the artistic quality of productions. In the course of her many years of practice, in a wide variety of environments, Frédérique Lecomte has measured the extent to which the work and performance mechanism provides a framework of trust, and how theatrical play can reduce mutual distrust: «It gives a voice to those who are deprived of one. It allows us to understand the other, to share, to calm down. It disenchant minds, soothes fears and heals wounds. It accompanies the reconstruction of consciousness and identities<sup>1</sup>. The method and experience developed by Théâtre & Réconciliation make the theater a place of transformation: actors and spectators cannot leave unchanged. It is this method and this experience that we want to share through this book.

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1. FRÉDÉRIQUE LECOMTE, personal interview, Brussels, 5 February 2015.

This book traces the path, the spirit and the achievements of the project that is Theatre & Reconciliation, in the hope that this practice and its philosophy may interest other practitioners. Based on travel diaries and journals, correspondence and testimonies, Frédérique Lecomte presents the method she has devised and developed to use theatre as a tool for reconciliation in conflict zones, in particular through two projects in Burundi with victims of torture and torturers, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with demobilised child soldiers. In the practice of Theatre & Reconciliation, each person expresses him/herself in his/her own language to tell his/her own story, to reconcile with him/herself and, in a fragile way, with others. Through a joint theatrical creation, enemy populations who ignore each other or who have clashed violently with each other are brought together in a common language. Through a joint theatrical creation, enemy populations who ignore each other or have clashed violently can meet and dialogue, so that a process of mutual recognition and recovery of self-esteem can begin.

### *The origins of Théâtre & Réconciliation*

For Frédérique Lecomte, the genesis of Théâtre & Réconciliation goes back to her first community theater productions. In the early 1990s, she developed and directed *Comment ça se fait que personne ne rit* (1988), *Ma mère m'a mangé, mon père s'est caché* (1993) and *Dans le château de Barbe Bleue* (1994). Built on the basis of improvisations, which work from the personal material brought by the actors, these shows are united by a particular aesthetic and the use of untrained actors.

In 1996, Frédérique Lecomte left for Senegal to run workshops at the University of Dakar. Her wanderings led her to Diembering, a village in Casamance, where she met rebels who were putting up

armed resistance to the Senegalese government. She began working with them in Guinea Bissau, which led to the creation of the show *Bakatébo*, which was presented in Senegal and Belgium. This was the first experience of applying this working method based on the participants' experiences in a country in the throes of armed conflict.

Shortly afterwards, Frédérique Lecomte was given an opportunity to develop this approach. The Belgian NGO RCN (Réseau Citoyen Network) opened a branch in Burundi, a small Central African country that had just emerged from an extremely deadly civil war. It wanted to integrate theater into its activities, which were focused on the reconstruction of justice and peace-building. So Frédérique went to Burundi for the first time in 2002: after a month's work with Burundian artists of various backgrounds, she created *Si Ayo Guhora* (We Can't Keep Quiet), which looks at the country's traumatic history. In 2004, in preparation for a second show, *Habuze Iki* (What's missing?), she began a series of workshops in different settings where she could come into contact with people who had been directly affected by the war situation: rebels in the camps of rebels in the cantonment camps, prisoners sentenced to death and life imprisonment for violence during the war, civilians who have suffered violence and displacement, and orphans. While simultaneously conducting workshops in Gitega prison and in a nearby camp for displaced persons, Frédérique had an intuition: why not try to get these two opposing groups to work together? Having received the agreement of the prison director, she invited the displaced persons to come and meet, through a joint theatrical practice, the murderers who were serving their sentences and who had sometimes been their executioners. It was an extraordinary revelation, a founding moment that formed the basis of what was to become *Theatre & Reconciliation*: through this joint exercise by two groups in conflict, Frédérique Lecomte's method revealed its cathartic power both on the participants and on

the spectators who attended the final performance.

At the end of this experience, Frédérique Lecomte knew what path she wanted to develop next: her non-profit organization «Blue-beard's Castle» became «Theatre & Reconciliation», which, as the name suggests, will aim more specifically to bring together people who are opposed by a conflict and to get them to deal with their contradictory points of view through the theater.

### ***Reconciling through theater in Burundi and Congo***

Even if the principle surprises or worries the partners she approaches, Frédérique Lecomte manages to convince a number of them, who allow her to deepen her experience and refine her method. In 2007, with the support of the American NGO Search for Common Ground, the Unesco Chair and the CGRI, she created Niwanje (C'est chez moi) in Burundi, a show in which she brought together returnees and residents in a conflict over land ownership. The following year, she staged Indirimbo Yababi n'abeza (The song of the good villains), a creation resulting from the joint work of torturers and victims of torture (with the support of Africalia, the UNESCO Chair and the IRGC). This creation, whose daily account is presented in this book, is the result of the joint work of torturers and torture victims (with the support of Africalia, the UNESCO Chair and the IRGC), was the subject of impressive photographs by Véronique Vercheval. The following year, she staged Kubita (Strike) with victims of torture in M'Pimba prison. The method generates surprising effects, transforming minds and bodies. And Frédérique Lecomte began to think about the need to analyze, structure and put on paper the principles that guide her work, so that she could share this experience with others and give it more scope.

In 2012, in view of the establishment of the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission in Burundi, Frédérique Lecomte created *Ukuri (The Truth)*, working in four villages that have experienced massacres since 1965 and where the communities in conflict maintain radially contradictory visions of the region's history. This time, the German NGO EIRENE is supporting the project, which has also resulted in a film by Pascal Capitolin<sup>1</sup>. This second film shows the upheavals that occur in the spectators, who cannot leave the performance space unchanged.

In the meantime, in 2005, Frédérique Lecomte went to the Democratic Republic of Congo for the first time. At the request of the NGO Search For Common Ground, she conducted a theater workshop in Uvira with women victims of sexual violence. Théâtre & Réconciliation is now developing an awareness-raising activity that goes beyond the issue of armed conflict. It is in this perspective that Frédérique Lecomte will conduct similar experiments with albinos in Burundi, or, more recently, develop shows to raise awareness of electoral offenses or to familiarize people with community policing in collaboration with the Belgian Technical Cooperation and the European Union.

In Congo, she began working with the Bureau pour le volontariat au service de l'enfance et de la santé (BVES), a non-profit organization that runs two reintegration centers for demobilized child soldiers in Bukavu in 2011. Frédérique will go there three times, with the support of Wallonie-BruxellesInternational and in partnership with the Université libre de Bruxelles, to conduct month-long workshops with young people who have just been liberated from the hands of armed groups in the east of the country. Workshops are held in parallel with a group of young boys and a group of young girls (who were both comrades-in-arms and sex slaves to the former).

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1. The film can be viewed at the following address : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owy-5FHrbYE>

During the final performances of *Vita siyo muchezo yawatoto* (War is not a child's game), which take place in the open air, in public spaces, in front of thousands of spectators, the two creations come together in a moment of intense emotion. This emotion can be seen in Frédérique Lecomte's second diary, published in this book, as well as in the testimony of Ewout D'Hoore, who was twice the assistant of the project. It is also palpable, in its beauty and violence, through the photographic work of Benjamin Géminel, who accompanies the adventure, his lens in hand.

### *One method, multiple universes*

From 2011 onwards, as part of the project in Bukavu, the collaboration with the Free University of Brussels should help to finalize the drafting of the working method, so that it can be more easily shared and transmitted. This book is the result of this partnership, and in particular of exchanges between Frédérique Lecomte, Karel Vanhaesebrouck, professor of performing arts, and Marie Soleil Frère, who is conducting research on the role of the media in conflicts in Central Africa.

«Unfolding' the working method, describing it in sufficient detail that it can be appropriated by others, but without drying it up, taking away its magic and making it sterile, is a dangerous exercise. After trying out several formats, Frédérique Lecomte finally opted for an epistolary form that would make it possible to answer the main questions raised by her practice, without proposing a recipe that would claim to be mechanically applicable. This method must be constantly reinvented, depending on the context, the communities involved and their specific wounds, and the modes of expression favored in each environment where it is used.

It is this fluidity, this plasticity of the method that allows it to generate both aesthetic and human effects, both in Belgium and in Burundi, with young school dropouts in Brussels or with Hutu and

Tutsi students at the University of Bujumbura. In parallel with her work in Central Africa, Frédérique Lecomte is continuing her activity in Belgium. On the one hand, she continues to create shows with her former fellow travelers, with whom she has conducted her community theater experiments for twenty years: *Le Grand Pestacle*, in 2002, *Buffalo Zottekot*, in 2007, *Kairos*, in 2008, and *Le Grand Sextacle*, in 2014. She is developing her activity with partners in Flanders: *Belga Bordeelo*, in 2010 (Victoria Deluxe, *Maison Folie*), *Het Groot Pistakulair Kakitalistisch Spektakel*, in 2011 (Victoria Deluxe), *Verzilverd*, in 2012 (Théâtre *Antigone*), *Dis-moi wie ik ben*, in 2014; (T'arsenaal) and in Wallonia: *Cette histoire-ci commence là-bas*, in 2008 (*Maison Folie*) and *Tripalium Bordello*, in 2011 (*Maison Folie* and *Centre des Arts scéniques*). On the other hand, Théâtre & Réconciliation is developing its activity with vulnerable and disadvantaged audiences. Workshops are held with newcomers (in partnership with the non-profit organization *Le Piment*), with unaccompanied minors seeking asylum (through the federal public agency *Fédasil*) or with excised women exiled in Flanders. The creative work method is the same, explains Frédérique Lecomte. We work on the basis of improvisations, based on personal experiences. But it is this experience that is different when I work in countries in conflict or in Belgium. In Africa, the experiences are traumatic, marked by war and violence. In a way, we find similar suffering among non-natives in Belgium, who often have a painful past and are faced with problems of integration and discrimination. With the Belgian actors, we work on more internal conflicts, on the ills of our Western society: depression, sexual identity problems, relationships... But there is suffering everywhere, and it is on this basis that we work.<sup>1</sup>»

And sometimes the different worlds meet, as in 2013, when Frédérique Lecomte

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1. FRÉDÉRIQUE LECOMTE, personal interview, Brussels, 5 February 2015.

brought Amakuba to Brussels, Paris, Geneva and Namur, a show consisting of a compilation of scenes from the different creations produced in Burundi. Four up-and-coming actors, whom Frédérique Lecomte met during her various travels in prison and elsewhere, present a summary of their country's traumatic history to a European audience, as well as a reflection on theater and the miracles it can perform.

### ***A book with twelve hands***

In order to situate Frédérique Lecomte's approach, its importance and originality, this book begins with a text by Karel Vanhaesebrouck, which puts the specificities of Frédérique Lecomte's work into perspective. Then, a chapter written by Marie Soleil-Frère presents the conflictual context of Burundi and the DRC, allowing the reader to better understand the environment in which the two experiences described more specifically in this book are unfolding.

Frédérique Lecomte's «Burundi Diary» and «Congo Diary» then reveal the daily life of this complex and exhilarating work, which is sometimes difficult, even discouraging, but always of capital importance for all those who take part in it. The logs of Frédérique Lecomte's diaries show the extent to which empathy and intelligence in the field are essential qualities for the success of this type of project. Like an anthropologist who records her travels in unknown lands and cultures in a notebook, the director uses writing not simply as an outlet for her emotions, but as a compass to keep her focus in moments of tension. These two testimonies, illustrated by the photographic work of Véronique Vercheval (in Burundi) and Benjamin Géminel (in the Congo), frame the methodological part, which is the key to the whole Theatre & Reconciliation edifice. In the form of a series of methodological letters written in response to friends who ask her about her

practice, the author gives us the subterranean part of her journey, the reflective side of her work. For Frédérique Lecomte is not only a director: she is still a sociologist by training who knows that the efforts made in the field are only justified if they lead to the development of a method that can be useful to others.

Finally, the book closes with a text by Ewout D’Hoore, Frédérique Lecomte’s collaborator, who, through his daily account of the project with child soldiers in Bukavu, presents his own view of the work carried out by Théâtre & Réconciliation in this Africa of the Great Lakes.

## **THEATRE & RECONCILIATION : FROM THE BURLESQUE TO HORROR AND BACK ...**

For more than two decades now Frédérique Lecomte and her organisation Théâtre & Réconciliation has been making theatre with and for prisoners in Burundi, with child-soldiers in East Congo (Kivu), but also with a bunch of amateur actors in Brussels (and many other groups). She has steadily been building two communities, two theatrical families, for whom theatre is more than a mere pastime: performing and (sur)viving always go hand in hand with Lecomte, no matter the differences in context. Indeed, Brussels is not Congo, let alone Kivu. The working environment is more complicated, reality is even more precarious. Still, they are two legs attached to the same body, two life lines constituting the beating heart of Théâtre & Réconciliation.

With Théâtre & Réconciliation (T&R) Frédérique Lecomte produces theatre about extremely difficult themes: the shared history of racial hatred among Hutus, Tutsis and Twa in Burundi, the impossible reconciliation of torturers and their victims, the abysmal traumas and violent survival strategies of child soldiers in East Congo, but also the physical and sexual disciplining of modern, Western man.

Her theatre is didactic in the noblest sense of the word (it aims at emancipation), but is never pedantic and does not avoid any taboo.

And yet, her performances are all but dull stuff. On the contrary, again and again she looks for the joy of life in each of her actors, she delves into every life until the spark catches. Time and again she looks for compassion and empathy, even for the biggest bastard, and she manages to reveal the beauty of every body. The theatre of T&R leads us beyond any taboo, not by turning it into a tragedy but by daring to name things in a playful way: humour should enable actor and spectator to handle one's own reality. Irony is wasted on Lecomte. In this book she uses the term "lightness". The frivolous and the abysmal come together in this lightness: everything becomes debatable, really debatable. And this desire to make everything debatable, even things that surpass our imagination, forms the essence of Lecomte's work. However open our globalised society claims to be, we are governed and disciplined by taboos. Yes, we want to see the pain of others, to drink it in, but we refuse to really confront our own pain and the pain of others. "The pornification of pain": that is the cynicism T&R opposes.

### *Performing*

This same lightness not only drives every performance of Lecomte, it is also central in the production process itself. In this book she explains how she does this, how she makes everything possible in a playful way, even things a community anxiously keeps silent about. For Lecomte the actor is first of all a playing child. In *Le jeu et la passe. Identité et théâtre*<sup>1</sup> psychoanalyst Daniel Sibony points at the importance of "play" in our society. "Where is our joy, our desire to play games?" is the simple question he asks his reader. Sibony thinks that there is but very little play in our lives, and precisely this forms the

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1. Daniel Sibony, *Le jeu et la passe. Identité et théâtre*. Paris: Seuil, 1997.

core of our existence: we need to play in order to be able to play the game of life itself. In our hyper efficient meritocracy every frivolous element is suppressed: the homo ludens has become the homo economicus. His market value determines his identity<sup>1</sup>. Still, we need play: it allows us to experiment with identities, with other possible worlds, with other world views.

Playing games also implies humour, and humour is central with T&R. Humour induces a real catharsis not only with the players, but also with the spectators, not the moralizing purging which we find in Aristoteles's Poetica, but a fully-fledged purification which liberates man from every self-censorship. In this context Lecomte uses two different strategies, as she explains<sup>2</sup>. Her theatre allows the spectator to suffer also, to identify himself with the pain of the performer: the suffering is made bearable for the actor and the spectator. In addition Lecomte invariably<sup>3</sup> resorts to absurd humour, and thus one's own reality also becomes absurd. Precisely this absurdity should enable the actors and maybe also the spectators to keep their distance, not only from the game they are playing together ("tout ça n'est que du jeu, évidemment", says Lecomte in the documentary Kubita by Maria Tarantino), but also from the reality with which or in which they are forced to live.

### *Carnavalesque/Burlesque*

Lecomte likes to work with marginal figures. But her performances are never freak shows, they rather function as a mirror. A freak show

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1. In this context, we refer, among others, to the work of PAUL VERHAEGHE, *Le Délire néolibéral, Flexible, efficace et ... dérangé*, Bruxelles, ASP Editions, 2013.

2. FREDERIQUE LECOMTE, « Amakuba. De lichteid van de ellende », in *Rekto :verso*, 55, 2013, p.83-85.

confirms the self-declared normality of the public, Lecomte's productions hold up a mirror to the spectator and make us realize that normality is regulated, or, in other words, that alterity really should be the norm. The theatre of T&R is therefore also carnivalesque in essence. Historically speaking, the carnival was an important moment of collective unruliness when the existing order was turned topsy-turvy: high became low, exalted became physical, the profane became religious and vice versa. Identities were exchanged – men became women, commoners became down-and-outs – and in that moment of social confusion everything was possible for just a little while. In his famous book about Rabelais<sup>1</sup> the Russian philosopher Michail Bakhtin describes how this authentic carnivalesque culture was slowly recuperated by the dominant culture via the official parades. These neutralized and curbed the carnivalesque exuberance of popular culture.

In her theatre Lecomte eagerly uses this carnivalesque reversal: the powerful becomes a fool, the torturer a windbag, the victim an icon. Her productions, in Africa as well as in Brussels, thrive on burlesque humor, not to smooth over the truth but precisely to be able to put it into words, however painfully honest and direct this voice may sound. The personages of Lecomte are always people who talk on behalf of themselves and of a community, via their performance they give themselves and others a voice. Indeed, they are all looking for warmth, fondness, affection.

The humour Lecomte and her accomplices use is not only carnivalesque, but also burlesque. Burlesque humour parodies good taste in a comical-critical manner, deliberately belittles everything that is lofty, with earnestness and especially false seriousness as its

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1. MICHAÏL BAKHTIN, L'oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen-Age et sous la renaissance, Paris, Gallimard, 1970.

most important victim, in order to make the unbearability of life bearable, to confront man with his lightness. The burlesque relativizes the gravity of the situation. Thus the sketches of the Marx Brothers, in their absurdity, apparently deal with nothing. Yet they are meaningful – only, as a spectator, we do not know what to do with them. They literally leave the spectator perplexed. Whatever is this all about? The spectator – flabbergasted, irritated, but also intrigued – can only ask himself this question.

The actor in this game is a farceur, a swindler, a joker, a charlatan. His identity changes are ever so obvious, his attributes superfluous and his sense of timing simply bad; he does not seem to have completely mastered his own *métier*. The burlesque is a form of “crooked” exhibitionism: to dare to unburden one’s imperfect self and to turn it into a dislocating weapon. With her theatre Lecomte wants to understand the absurdity of reality precisely by enlarging that absurdity theatrically. This burlesque humour enables Lecomte not only to represent the abysmal reality of the African continent, but also its boundless vitality, and just as well the lack of physical and sexual freedom in our so-called permissive society. Thus, in her recent production *Le Grand Sextacle*, she reacts against the formatting of our sexual imagination and thus against the pornification of our society.

### *Sex as a format<sup>1</sup>*

Stars persuade us of their beauty with botox, the media glorify a form of authenticity that is just an effect. In *Le Grand Sextacle* Lecomte portrays a society that is obsessed but also completely traumatized by its own sexual perception.

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1. See among other things KAREL VANHAESEBROUCK, « Too hot to handle. Over porno, (Neo) burlesk en lichamelijkheid », in *Rekto :verso*, 60, 2014, p. 71-73.

The public domain is entirely eroticized and precisely because of that there is less and less real, private freedom. The pretended perfection of one person has as its single effect that the other person can only feel mediocre.

Indeed, porn and eroticism are everywhere these days: in art, in advertising, in the press and, especially, in the way in which we consider our own corporality. Not only on the computer screen, but also on stage, as, for instance, the recent neo-burlesque craze teaches us. And again and again we end up with the one key obsession of our time: ‘authenticity’, from the ‘money shot’ in porn (there really is “pleasure”) to the festive corporality of the neo-burlesque (we really do feel good). But neither escapes its own standardization: everything is style.

This greater visibility does not only apply to pornography, but to sex in general. Our (Western) culture seems to become more and more sexual and sex appears to become a more and more important part of our social identity, and especially of the way in which we experience this identity in the public domain. In her introduction to the compilation *Mainstreaming Sex* (2009) Feona Attwood states that this sexualisation is intimately linked to another phenomenon: the demolishing of the borders between the public and the private space. We live in a ‘striptease culture’ in which we continually reveal and show ourselves, a form of public intimacy in which we need reality programs to be ourselves. Sex has become lifestyle, an integral part of our leisure culture, a means to express our identity.

*Le Grand Sextacle* tries to escape from that impasse by showing that this pornification entails a new form of puritanism: sex becomes a ‘format’ aimed at performance instead of pleasure. In this production, between circus and cabaret, the actors of Lecomte each celebrate their own specific corporality and therefore also their personal beauty.

“Être aristocrate de leurs différences”, as Lecomte writes in the accompanying text. In *Le Grand Sextacle* the actors turn sexual morality inside out, they look for real sexual freedom and they show how standardized deviant behaviour can be. Our obsession with boundaries and norms turns us into sexual neurotics obsessed by hedonistic, compulsive behaviour (Harder! Better! Faster!) and prevents us from being really free.

Therefore the theatre of T&R is possibly very closely related to the work of Pasolini, and then especially his *Trilogy of life* (*Decamerone*, 1971; *The Canterbury Tales*, 1972; *Arabian Nights*, 1974). In these films Pasolini outspokenly emphasizes the primitive desirous body which he considered to be a compensation for the restrictive bourgeois morality of the 1960s, early 1970s. Pasolini's films from those days are very critical of the social structure, in spite of their playful tone: the sexual body becomes the last cradle of authenticity in a world which becomes more and more artificial. And this leads us once more to the essence of the work of T&R, namely the regaining of one's own and other people's freedom, the body as a locus of conflict, as an occupied territory that needs to be liberated.

Performing as a form of liberation: that is the core value of T&R. Via this play Lecomte wants to give her actors their dignity back. The stage is a place where you can say what you dare not say: after all, you are a personage, but at the same time also yourself. T&R literally makes debatable what a society suppresses, however difficult this may be. Thus the catharsis becomes a very palpable item for the actor and for the spectator.

That is why the theatre of T&R is essentially “popular”. With modernism art became totally estranged from its own popular essence and the separation between elite, high art and the mass production of commercial kitsch became definitive. This used to be different. Long before art isolated itself there was such a thing as a common,

subversive, carnivalesque, popular tradition. Here the revue and the variety theatre, the physical and sexual, the joke and the humour, the baroque and the burlesque played an important role. Moreover, this popular tradition was dangerous, on a political, social, sexual and aesthetic level and was therefore invariably obliterated.<sup>1</sup> The theatre of Frédérique Lecomte explicitly joins this popular tradition again, searches for the beating heart of a society, “here” in Belgium or “there” in Africa, averse to any form of exotism. Theatre is all about life, however precarious it may be, and needs to live, averse to any artistic pretention. And that is precisely why the Theatre of T&R is art in its most original sense.

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1. Voir POL DEHERT, *The world of the/a Monkey. Naar been anatomie van de baroque. Theatraliteit*, Doctorat es arts, Bruxelles, VUB, 2015, p. 246-250

## **THEATRE IN POST-CONFLICT COUNTRIES: SOME ELEMENTS ON CONFLICT IN BURUNDI AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO**

In post-conflict countries, the attention of the international media is usually focused on institutional peace and reconciliation processes. The establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions, the demobilisation of members of armed groups, the organisation of elections to bring democratically elected leaders to power - all these steps are well known and are part of an often recurring scenario. But there are other types of initiatives, generally less visible, which are part of what Sandrine Lefranc calls 'pacification from below'. These are mechanisms that aim to rehabilitate social cohesion, to reconcile communities that the conflict has set against each other, to deconstruct the prejudices or negative conceptions that the conflict has anchored in antagonistic minds, conflicts which, sometimes, have contributed to the outbreak of war or to its aggravation. From this perspective, « the objective is not to encourage political elites not to resort to political violence, but to change the social fabric and individual representations that have been affected by a culture of war and a process of dehumanisation, in order to restore coexistence.<sup>1</sup> »

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1. SANDRINE LEFRANC, «Du Droit à la paix. La circulation des techniques internationales de pacification par le bas», Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, 2008/4, n° 174, p. 53.

In order to promote a culture of peace and transform the minds of «ordinary people<sup>1</sup>», to open them up to the views of other protagonists of the conflict or to bring people to look at their own history in a different way, a large number of vectors and techniques are used: radio programmes or television dramas highlighting the similarities between groups rather than their differences, sports events bringing together members of communities in conflict, joint summer camps for children from antagonistic groups, etc. It is in these alternative and unconventional conflict-resolution strategies that the highly original practice of Théâtre & Réconciliation can be situated.

Since 2002, Théâtre & Réconciliation has mainly carried out the African part of its activities in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, two countries that have experienced a long civil war and a still fragile peace process. In order to understand the extent of the scope of the issues that Théâtre & Réconciliation is tackling, and to appreciate the boldness and relevance of its approach, it seems important to look back at the conflictual past of these two countries and to highlight the fault lines that divide these societies.

### ***Burundi, a country with multiple fractures***

The origins of the war in Burundi lie in the exclusion of the Hutu majority for several decades, who were discriminated against both in the education sector and in positions of responsibility. Ethnicity, used for political purposes, has played an important role in a long war aimed above all at gaining and maintaining state power. Burundi is a small country (27830 km<sup>2</sup>), landlocked in central Africa, bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania.

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1. SANDRINE LEFRANC, «Convertir le plus grand nombre à la paix. Une ingénierie internationale de pacification», Politix, 2007/4, n° 80, p. 7-29.

It has a population of 10 million, divided roughly between three distinct groups: Hutus (85%), Tutsis (14%) and Twas (1%)<sup>1</sup>.

Initially colonised by Germany, Burundi was placed under Belgian rule after the First World War. To exercise their power, the colonists relied on the existing traditional authority, the Baganwa monarchy (often assimilated to the Tutsi ethnic group). After becoming independent in 1962 as a constitutional monarchy, Burundi experienced a military coup in 1966 that overthrew the king, established a republic and imposed a one-party dictatorship. In the decades that followed, the country was ruled by military presidents, all of whom came from the Tutsi minority, which was dominant in the army's top ranks. The mutual fear between the two groups, Hutus and Tutsis, is exacerbated by the situation in neighbouring Rwanda, which has the same ethnic configuration, but where the Hutu majority has been in power since 1959 and is pursuing a policy of exclusion and violent repression of the Tutsi minority.

In Burundi too, ethnic massacres occur on a recurrent basis: violence perpetrated by the Burundian army against the Hutu population leads to reprisals by Hutu civilians against Tutsi civilians. In 1972, this violence culminated in a large-scale massacre of the Hutu population, about which the notion of genocide was evoked: probably more than 200,000 Hutus were killed, including most of the elite. The army was purged and became almost exclusively Tutsi. However, from 1988 onwards, President Buyoya opened the way to a power-sharing process and in 1991 the regime accepted a multi-party system. Free and democratic elections were organised in 1993, which brought the first Hutu president in the country's history to the head of state: Melchior Ndadaye.

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1. The use of the term 'ethnicity' to refer to these three groups in Burundi, as in Rwanda, remains debated. Indeed, the three groups speak the same language and live on the same territory. However, the history of the two countries has favoured the construction of an identity consciousness as distinct ethnic groups.

However, barely 100 days after his election, President Ndaye was assassinated by members of his presidential guard (then still dominated by Tutsis). This marked the beginning of a cycle of violence between the communities and the country descended into civil war with the emergence of several armed rebel movements<sup>1</sup>.

The former Tutsi military president, Pierre Buyoya, took power in 1996 through a coup d'état, but did not manage to stabilize the country. After seven years of war, resulting in the death of more than 300,000 people and the displacement of 200,000 others, a peace agreement was finally signed in 2000 in Arusha, under the sponsorship of the international community. The agreement paves the way for a transitional period that will allow for the establishment of security forces that include former rebel signatories to the agreement and the adoption of a new constitution, before holding multiparty elections. The Arusha Agreement also provides for a power-sharing formula between the two ethnic groups, requiring political parties and institutions to respect clearly defined ethnic proportions. Thus, all institutions must be composed of 40% Tutsis and 60% Hutus and the army should be shared equally between the two ethnic groups (50-50). A disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme for former combatants officially started in December 2004.

At the end of the transitional period in 2005, the elections were won by the CNDD-FDD (National Council for the Defence of Democracy - Forces for the Defence of Democracy), a former rebel movement. Its leader, Pierre Nkurunziza, became President of the Republic. However, not all Hutu rebel movements have yet laid down their arms and violence continues, mainly around the capital, in the province called Bujumbura Rural.

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1. See JEAN-PIERRE CHRÉTIEN, *Le Défi de l'ethnisme. Rwanda and Burundi: 1990-1996*, Paris, Karthala, 1997; JEAN-PIERRE CHRÉTIEN and MELCHIOR MUKURI (s.l.d.), *Burundi, la fracture identitaire. Logiques de violence et certitudes 'ethniques'* (1993-1996). Paris, Karthala, 2002.

Civilians are the target of recurrent acts of violence perpetrated by the FNL (Front national de libération du Burundi), which is also accused of recruiting child soldiers. It was only in 2009 that the FNL converted into a political party, in order to be able to take part in the new electoral cycle that was being prepared.

In 2010, five new elections were organised: communal, presidential, legislative, senatorial and hill elections, spread over a period of five months. After the first stage of the communal elections, which were won by the ruling CNDD-FDD party, the opposition political parties withdrew from the electoral competition, denouncing multiple frauds and manipulation of the ballot. The international observers acknowledge some weaknesses in the voting process, but maintain that the elections were fair and that the results cannot be broadly contested. Several opposition political leaders went into exile and the FNL threatened to take up arms again. Violent settlements of accounts and targeted assassinations perpetrated by FDD militants against their political opponents increased. Publicised violence replaced the large-scale massacres of the 1990s, but the absence of judicial proceedings and the ineffectiveness of the justice system perpetuated a situation of total impunity<sup>1</sup>.

After the 2010 elections, as after the 2005 elections, hopes for a return to normality, peace and security were once again dashed<sup>2</sup>. Even if violence has decreased since the civil war period, the country is stagnating in an insecure, «neither war nor peace» situation, where reconciliation between communities and the reconstruction of the country are still not possible. However, the areas where the conflict is crystallising have shifted, with confrontations between different Hutu groups (in particular the CNDD-FDD against the FNL)

1. 'You will have no peace while you are living'. The escalation of political violence in Burundi, Human Rights Watch, 2012.

2. STEF VANDEGINSTE, 'Power-Sharing, Conflict and Transition in Burundi: Twenty Years of Trial and Error', in *Africa Spectrum*, volume 44, no. 3, 2009, pp. 63-86.

or between the ruling party and all the political parties in the opposition. Recently, the rise of a CNDD-FDD youth group, called the Imbonerakure, consisting mainly of demobilised former rebels, has led to an increase in violence, mainly against young activists from other parties. Relations between the political authorities, the opposition parties, the private media and civil society in general are extremely tense and marked by growing authoritarian reflexes. The establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission, foreseen by the Arusha agreement, which has been in preparation for years, has not helped to ease tensions. The conflict in Burundi and the current difficulties on the road to peace and democracy are therefore essentially linked to the struggle for political power, through the exacerbation of ethnic antagonisms.

The conflicts in Burundi also overlap with many other regional or, more recently, land-based dissensions. These conflicts have been fostered by a difficult economic context (the country is one of the poorest in the world), poor governance, human rights violations and insecurity. Burundi has often suffered the consequences of problems related to access to land and political unrest in neighbouring countries (DRC and Rwanda).

In addition to this context, initiatives by international non-governmental organisations to promote dialogue between communities, conflict resolution and peace-building ‘from below’ have been numerous over the past ten years, particularly in the news media sector, but also in the entertainment sector.

The work of Theatre & Reconciliation has addressed many aspects of conflict in this troubled country: performances have been created on such crucial issues as ethnic and identity conflicts, plural truths and conflicting memories, land issues, electoral corruption, the role of the ‘righteous’..

The audiences Théâtre & Réconciliation has worked with are key actors in reconciliation: victims of torture in Mpimba prison, prisoners accused of participating in ethnic massacres, members of the police force, peasants and students. Some of these shows, such as Habuze iki (What's missing?) and Si ayo guhora (We can't keep quiet), created in collaboration with the Belgian NGO RCN (Réseau Citoyen Network), toured for two years and were performed on more than two hundred hills in Burundi. This enabled them to reach thousands of people. And the process was not limited to the borders of Burundi, since Théâtre & Réconciliation was soon asked to intervene in the neighbouring country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is also plagued by major and persistent violence.

### ***Violence and impunity in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo***

With more than 2.3 million square kilometres, the Democratic Republic of Congo is now the second largest and most populous country on the African continent, following the break-up of Sudan.

In this country, which is immensely rich in resources, the sources of conflict are different from those of its small neighbour Burundi, and are rooted in the weakness of the state, which is unable to ensure a presence on large parts of the territory, and in the illegal and uncontrolled exploitation of resources.

As an oversized colony of one of the smallest European countries, Belgium, the Congo emancipated itself from this tutelage in 1960. After years of turmoil marked by the assassination of Prime Minister Lumumba, secession attempts and armed rebellions, the country fell under the control of Joseph Mobutu in 1965, who ruled with an iron fist for more than thirty years. His authoritarian and repressive regime is based on a single party, widespread corruption and the doctrine of authenticity

(in the name of which the country was renamed Zaire). From 1990 onwards, however, Mobutu was forced into a mini-male political opening: a multiparty system was introduced and a National Conference was held to discuss the country's future. The National Conference was supposed to bring together all the nation's active forces for a major debate on national issues and the country's future. Mobutu managed to trick and block, through various manoeuvres, the process of democratic opening.

In 1996, an armed rebellion led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila emerged in the east of the country, with the support of Uganda and Rwanda. It advanced rapidly across the country, facing an under-equipped and under-supplied national army. It seized Kinshasa in May 1997, forcing Mobutu to flee. Laurent-Désiré Kabila proclaimed himself president and restored the country's former name, which became the Democratic Republic of Congo<sup>1</sup>. Barely a year later, a new war broke out in the east of the country, following a break between Laurent-Désiré Kabila and his former Rwandan and Ugandan allies. The conflict quickly took on a regional dimension, involving multiple armed movements on Congolese territory and nine countries in the region supporting one side or the other<sup>2</sup>. During six years of war, the country was divided between areas controlled by the government or by one of the armed groups, including Jean-Pierre Bemba's MLC (Mouvement de libération du Congo), supported by Uganda, and Azarias Ruberwa's RCD (Rassemblement Démocratique Congolais), supported by Rwanda.

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1. See COLETTE BRAECKMAN, MARIE-FRANCE CROS, GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, et al, Kabila prend le pouvoir. Les prémices d'une chute, la campagne victorieuse de l'AFDL, le Congo d'aujourd'hui, Brussels, Complexe and GRIP, 1998.

2. The Kabila regime is supported by Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and later by Chad and Sudan.

The different armed groups and their respective allies are developing their own networks for the exploitation of natural and mineral resources, which both justifies and serves to finance the continuation of the conflict. The local population is subjected to massive violence, the two most symbolic of which are the recurrent rapes and the abduction of children forced to become child soldiers.

In January 2001, Laurent-Désiré Kabila was assassinated and succeeded by his son Joseph. More open than his father to dialogue with western countries, he agreed to engage in peace negotiations. South Africa hosted the ‘Inter-Congolese Dialogue’<sup>1</sup> for several weeks, which led to the adoption of the Pretoria Global and Inclusive Agreement in December 2002, providing for the establishment of a transitional mechanism. A new constitution was adopted in 2005 and, in 2006, free and democratic elections were organised, the first since the country gained independence. Joseph Kabila was elected president.

However, local conflicts continue in the east of the country, along ethnic lines, fueled by support from neighbouring countries.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of civilians continue to lose their lives, sexual violence is on the rise and the recruitment of child soldiers continues. Despite the presence of a UN peacekeeping force (MONUC, which became MONUSCO in 2010), comprising nearly 18,000 blue helmets, the Congolese army (FARDC) is unable to restore state autonomy in the east of the country. Worse, it is considered by the population to be responsible for a large part of the violence committed against citizens.

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1. PAULE BOUVIER and FRANCESCA BOMBOKO, ‘Le dialogue intercongolais. Anatomie d’une négociation à la lisière du chaos’, in Musée royal d’Afrique centrale : Cahiers Africains, n° 63- 64, Brussels/Paris, MRAC & L’Harmattan, 2004.

2. OLIVIER LANOTTE, République Démocratique du Congo. Guerres sans frontières, Bruxelles, Complexe & GRIP, 2003.

In March 2009, the government signed a peace agreement with the CNDP (Congrès national pour la défense du peuple), the main armed rebel movement active in the east of the country; a movement mainly composed of Congolese Tutsis (present on the territory for more than a century, but often considered as foreigners coming from Rwanda) who demanded full recognition of their Congolese citizenship. The agreement provides for the integration of CNDP troops into the Congolese army, but following disagreements over the terms of this integration, former CNDP members created the M23 in 2012, which took up arms against the Kinshasa government. The resurgence of the conflict again led to the deaths of hundreds of people, the displacement of thousands more and the intensification of human rights violations with impunity. In November 2013, the M23 agreed to lay down its arms, but the situation in eastern Congo remains unstable.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many other armed groups remain active, asserting their authority over portions of the territory. Some of them challenge the authority of neighbouring governments: the FDLR (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda), a movement originally created by former génocidaires who fled their country in 1994; the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) and the ADF-Nalu (National Army for the Liberation of Uganda), which challenge the government in Kampala. In addition, there are many Congolese armed movements, such as the Maï Maï groups (Yakutumba, Kifuafua, Sheka), which were initially created as self-defence militias and whose exact number is difficult to know today.

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1. See Mid-term report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo, United Nations, 30 July 2013.

The Raya Mutomboki group (initially created to defend Congolese civilians against the FDLR) and the Kata Katanga (or Maï Maï Bakata Katanga), which claim independence for Katanga, are among the latest avatars of these armed groupings described by UN experts as ‘negative forces’<sup>1</sup>. Each of these groups is a heavyweight in the Congolese armed forces. Each of these armed groups control the exploitation of mineral resources and make money from trafficking, poaching and looting local populations. Many of these groups use child soldiers as combatants or for other tasks. Hundreds of girls are abducted to serve as sex slaves in the camps of the various armed groups.

Meanwhile, presidential and legislative elections were held in 2011, which resulted in the re-election of Joseph Kabila, but the results were strongly contested by the political opposition and international observers. Although the elections were surrounded by great tension, they did not lead to the feared mass violence.

The war that ravaged the country between 1998 and 2003, as well as the continuing violence in the East to this day, have left deep scars in the country. More than three million Congolese are believed to have died in recent years from the direct or indirect consequences of war (malnutrition, untreated illnesses). Half a million people are still refugees outside the country, while the DRC also hosts hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring countries (especially Rwanda and Burundi). Rape has become institutionalised as a weapon of war, on such a scale that the United Nations has appointed a special representative to combat sexual violence in conflict.

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1. Three leaders of various movements are currently on trial at the ICC (International Criminal Court) for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by their groups: Thomas Lubanga and Germain Katanga (leaders of two Ituri militias) and Bosco Ntaganda (former leader of the M23).

There are several causes of the persistent instability. First, there is the weakness of the Congolese state, which is incapable of ensuring direct administration of the territory. In addition there is the pronounced nature of bad governance and the endemic corruption. However, the main cause of the persistent instability is the existence of ethnic tensions. These are often manipulated for political ends, in land conflicts or linked to the illegal exploitation of mineral resources by armed movements that benefit from the insecurity. The presence of multiple armed groups, both Congolese and foreign, integrated into solid networks of trafficking and prebends, when combined with the lack of credibility of the Congolese army and the reluctance of MONUSCO (which has been strongly criticised for its lack of real commitment to protecting the population)<sup>1</sup> create conditions preventing the restoration of government authority in the area. The consequences are many and heavy. The population of Eastern Congo has been living for more than 20 years in chronic fear and violence, in an area where small arms have proliferated and where impunity reigns.

In this context, Théâtre & Réconciliation has worked to address several of the traumas linked to the endemic violence, in particular that of women victims of sexual violence and demobilised child soldiers. In Bukavu, Théâtre & Réconciliation has carried out several collaborations with BVES (Bureau pour le volontariat au service de l'enfance et de la sécurité), which runs a transitional centre that aims to return released children to a school environment and provide them with training, while conducting searches to find their families<sup>2</sup>.

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1. See SÉVERINE AUTESSERRE, *The Trouble with the Congo*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

2. Initially created to help disadvantaged children, in particular street children, BVES then directed its action towards the care and reintegration of child soldiers. (<http://www.bves-rdc.org>)

The BVES team is involved from the stage of negotiating with the armed movements to secure the release of the children, to accompanying the children to the families they find. The children, both girls and boys, generally spend three months in the centre, but their stay may be extended when no relatives have been found to take them in and there are difficulties in reintegrating them into civilian life. By 2010, the BVES had already contributed to the release and reintegration of nearly 5,000 child soldiers, including more than 200 girls. During the years of integration of elements of armed groups into the national army, thousands of children under the age of 18 were released. However, with the resurgence of the conflict in 2012-2013, massive (and often forced) recruitment resumed, in spite of the fact that in October 2012, the Congolese government and the United Nations signed an Action Plan to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

The intervention of Theatre & Reconciliation in the BVES centres, conducted with the support of WBI, aims to contribute to the re-socialisation and the psychological reconstruction of these demobilised child soldiers through cultural practice, in particular theatrical therapy. This is a fundamental issue to ensure the eventual return of peace to a region that has been ravaged for more than two decades.

### ***Conclusion***

The conflicts in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, along with those in Rwanda, were among the most deadly African conflicts of the last two decades. The historical perspective proposed here allows us to reconsider the protagonists and the stakes of these wars, which are too often hastily presented as ‘barbaric’ modes of dispute resolution specific to Africa, or as an inveterate

race for natural resources. The identity dimensions present in a number of episodes or sequences of these conflicts, as well as the need to build citizenship in contexts of poor governance and instability, make a ‘bottom-up’ approach to peacebuilding relevant.

To break out of the cycles of violence, impunity and lawlessness, it is not enough to disarm the arms that carry out the work, but also to disarm the minds. By working with vulnerable audiences, by bringing victims and perpetrators face to face, and by encouraging each person to look at themselves and society anew through the medium of theatre, Théâtre & Réconciliation is making its own small contribution to the complex and long-term task of consolidating peace not only in terms of weapons but also in terms of minds and hearts in the Great Lakes region.

*Frédérique Lecomte*

**JOURNAL OF BURUNDI<sup>1</sup>  
WORKING WITH TORTURERS AND VICTIMS OF TORTURE  
THEATRE & RECONCILIATION  
(APRIL-MAY 2008)**

**April 27**

I'm leaving for Burundi, for maybe the twentieth time.

My daughter, Dian Diang, cries at the airport: five weeks, for a child of ten years old is a long time. Lissa, the youngest, didn't want to come.

Yesterday I wrote my will. Not that I want to exaggerate the risk: the risk of dying in Burundi is as big as the risk of getting eaten by a lion in the zoo of Antwerp.

This time, I'll be working where it matters. I will work with torturers and victims of torture. I could not find greater extremities, I believe. I'm sublimating the stories and my own strange relationship with blood and violence. I'm creating based on the difficulty of putting people together who would normally hate, kill, suspect and consider the other as being part of an inferior humanity. That's where I intervene, I put things together, I mix things up. That's where I manage to play around the limits of fear, the fear of the other, the fear of yourself.

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1. Extracts from this diary appeared in the book JEAN-LUC BRACKELAIRE, MARCELA CORNEJO et JEAN-MARC KINABLE (s.l.d.), *Violence politique et traumatisme - processus d'élaboration et de création*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia-L'Harmattan, 2013, p. 85-101.

April 28

A day without disorientation.

Meeting up this morning with Laurent Gahungu, director of the Association in Defense of Prisoners, the partner in Burundi that I've been working with for a couple of years. It's thanks to him that I've been able to set up a theatre workshop in Mpimba with prisoners that had been sentenced to death. He is the one that provided me with the sample (an awful word, but part of the vocabulary here) of torturers and victims of torture. Amongst the victims, those prisoners who used to be on death row, all of them political prisoners that have recently been set free. And also victims of torture that have not been in prison. The torturers are military in function. Repented? They say so. But I don't understand why they come here and expose themselves to theatre: money?

I went to buy cotton sheets, a mosquito net, candles and a mosquito trap.

There's rumours. The NFL (National Front of Liberation) is going to attack tonight, like they have been doing for more than a week now.

I change my stash of dollars on the black market. In the back of the car we are counting money. We close the windows and we lay out the bundles of cash. We try to avoid too much attention. I also bought a modem to have an internet connection on my computer.

The police are stopping us to check our vehicle, and pat down Prosper to see if he's armed. They don't pat me down. We listen to a song on the radio:

Prosper, «youp la boum, he's the king of the tarmac»

Who is out on the sidewalk?

Who is playing the whore?

Who is the king of the tarmac?

## April 30

Today is the 30 of April 2008. It is on this day, in 1972, that tutsis started lynching hutus. Prosper timidly brings up his dad, murdered during that period. He tells me he doesn't feel hate. The everyday life in Burundi is made up of suspicion, violence, incomprehension, badly written stories or not written at all.

I remember meeting with a man named 'Pie' on the subject of the Popular Consultations. He wants to implicate the population in setting up the mechanisms for justice in transition in Burundi, preparation for the Truth and Reconciliation commissions. It doesn't seem to get anywhere. What is at the source of this resistance that makes it impossible for things to move and happen?

## May 1

It's Labour Day. The people of Burundi will have a parade with flags.

It would be funny if Theatre & Reconciliation had a flag and would join the parade.

Every group would have a banner.

The managers up front: Prosper, Laurent and me.

The torturers and the victims of torture, next.

And at the rear we would have the formerly condemned to death, the executioners who have become victims, with a sign that has two sides: victim/executioner that they could turn around whenever they like.

There could be signs like this:

*Ex-convicted torturer, tortured*

*The biter bit*

*Winner of the competition of victims*  
*Repented Executioner, looking for forgiveness*  
*Non repented executioner, looking for work*  
*Victim up front, executioner in the back*  
*Winner of the competition of suffering*  
*Recycled bad guy*  
*Tearful good guy*  
*Weep for my fate*  
*Tomorrow, I'll stop torturing*  
*Forgive the torturers*  
*No mercy for the torturers*  
*Give us victims*  
*Unemployed Torturers*  
*Job Opportunities for Torturers now!*  
*Torturers of all Nations, unite ...*

## **May 2**

Visiting Sururu yesterday.

We talked about his work as a psychologist and an observer for Theatre and Reconciliation.

We have to organise pre- and post-tests to measure the change in attitudes provoked by theatre. I'm asking him to help me out with my working method, which I hope to have written down by the end of my stay. Starting from real examples, I want him to observe what I manage to accomplish on conflict management. Those observations should be able to document the techniques that come into play during the workshop and enable me to create tools that can be transmitted.



Prosper and Frédérique, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008.  
Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

I'm listening on my computer to the songs of Jean-Claude Minani, the actor and singer who played in *HABUZE IKI* and *SI AYO GUHORA* that I wrote and directed in 2005. I'm looking for him. He must be somewhere within the territory of Burundi. And I want him to join our project. Jean-Claude always has his *Ikembe* with him. It's a little wooden box with metal pieces that you make it vibrate with your thumbs. He keeps the *Ikembe* against his belly. When I need a song it's as if I'd push the play button and he starts singing, in *kirundi*, of course. I rectify the content of those songs by successive corrections, to find the right connection with the content of the show. He reminds me of Bonga or Tom Waits. A deep and tragic voice. I'm listening to "Waratabagaye Burundi" (You have gone to hell Burundi)

He's laughing while he's singing. It's a scene from SI AYO GUHORA (We can not remain silent). You have gone to hell, Burundi is unacceptable for a burundesi audience. In the show two actors are forcing him to leave the stage. When you put the punishment on stage, you are permitted to say everything. It's a technique that I use a lot in conflict zones where you are walking on eggshells.

### **May 3**

I was scared yesterday, scared to hear about the atrocities I'll be confronted with in the next four weeks. I have been working with the victims of torture before, but now I'll be confronted directly with the torturers. I'm afraid to hear too many details about the horrors. I'm afraid to be afraid and to circumvent the subject. I'm afraid to be too emotional and to make too much drama out of it. I'm afraid to get stuck at the fringe of the problem.

How to escape the sentimental, the voyeuristic, the melodrama?  
How to avoid the well intended preaching about the good guys and the bad guys?

I decided to read about torture. I contented myself with what I could find on Wikipedia and I didn't read the report of Amnesty International that I found at the library of the French Cultural Centre in Bujumbura. Wikipedia was enough to get my heart pounding. I remember the first improvisations in 2002. I got out of the rehearsal space barely able to breathe. The Burundese gave me funny looks, as if everything that had happened to them was normal. And then, after a while, you get used to it.



Jean-Claude and his ikembe, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

## May 4

Sunday in Bujumbura, at the border of lake Kivu, I'm thinking about incentives for the improvisations of tomorrow's rehearsal. This is what I come up with:

*They pushed me*

*How do you want to be remembered?*

*Write your own tombstone?*

*The happiest/saddest day in your life*

*How do you resist?*

*How do you protect yourself?*

*Make somebody do something*

*Deny something*

*Get angry*

*Carry your load*

*Free yourself from your shackles*

*Sell a torturer on the market*

*Sell a victim of torture on the market*

*The day of your humiliation*

*The day you humiliated somebody*

*An absurd/comical scene between a victim and a torturer*

*The dance of torture*

*Show your wounds, your scars*

*Teach injustice*

*Preach human rights and violate them*

*A clowning act between a torturer and a victim*

*Explain to somebody in detail what you will do to him*

*Are you hurt somewhere?*

*Do you have invisible wounds?*

*Do you have visible wounds?`*

*Teach somebody how to manage injustice*



Warming up, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

**May 5**

***First rehearsal***

I'm meeting up, after two years and a half, the convicted prisoners of Mpimba who have been freed: Jean Berchmans, Gerard, Bernard, Floride, Jacqueline. Others also that I don't know: victims of torture that have not gone through the state prisons: Bosco, Leonidas, Espérance.

Jean-Claude, the musician we managed to retrieve, arrives with a little plastic bag with his Ikembe in it, that's all. No spare clothing, no toothbrush, nothing.

They all got there together, the torturers and the victims of torture. That was not what I asked for. I thought there would only be the victims on the first day. I have to think fast.



Warming up, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

Do I want to separate them or keep them together? I decided to separate them, like I always do in the beginning. I asked the group of torturers to come back the next day. They got up as if crucified. The bad guys left and the good guys stayed.

Adolphe Sururu, the psychologist, did an individual pre-test to see what kind of changes in attitudes theatre could bring. He tells me one of the torturers doesn't want to be seen or perform in the prison of Mpimba. We have to watch out to not compromise the performers. How can a torturer present himself at the prison where the victims of torture he inflicted might be incarcerated ?

### ***First group: the victims***

I hear Jean-Claude playing the ikembe in the garden.  
He makes a song that goes like this:

*Let's not think in terms of regions, ethnical groups or gender  
Let's not think in terms of what divides us but in terms of  
what unites us*

*If you go to the police station or to the tribunal  
let them not judge us by being a Hutu or a Tutsi  
let them not judge us by what divides us  
but by what unites us  
We are the same  
We are so similar*

*Let's not think in terms of regions, ethnical groups or gender  
Let's not think in terms of what divides us but in terms of  
what unites us*

I won't keep it. Songs like this appear during the first rehearsals.  
It's well meaning propaganda meant to reassure us.

The second song is written by the ex-convicted to death, who've been in prison for ten to twelve years and now meet again.

*My dear friends,  
  
the children of my mother  
let us be cheerful  
we shared the best and the worst  
let us be cheerful to meet again  
in difficult moments  
we shared the little we had*

*we never thought we would meet again*

*In difficult moments  
we shared the little we had*

*let us be cheerful to meet again*

Jean-Claude is sleeping in the enormous house. The one who arrived with only his Ikembe, sleeps in the marble palace. Ironically the lock of his bedroom door is stuck. He finds himself locked in. We hand him a beer through the bars and take apart the mosquito nets. We've been evoking his years in prison when he was a kid and now he finds himself incarcerated in a golden cage.

**May 6**

***Second group: the torturers***

I try to be very diplomatic before we start. I tell them that that all human beings are the same; that there isn't the torturers on one side and the victims of torture on the other; that I understand their unease to play in a prison where they might meet people that they have tortured in their military function.

They are scared and tense during the warming up. They are so stressed out that even tiny little tasks are like enormous mountains. Winking at somebody is like a dangerous operation. Explaining any simple exercise is problematic. I'm working with them on trust. Little exercises where one of them is wearing a blindfold, leading each other, keeping close, helping each other by holding hands. I don't

think of the blood on their hands anymore.

An improvisation where I ask to teach somebody something he won't be able to accomplish. Edouard is playing the one who represents human rights and teaches a neighbourhood chief how to respect the rules during an arrest.

We work together on list of things to say:

*It's forbidden to arrest somebody during the night*

*It's forbidden to enter someone's house without a warrant*

*The presumed guilty has to make up his statement in his mother tongue*

*It's forbidden to torture to collect confessions*

*It's forbidden to conduct a search outside legal hours*

*The legal hours are from 7h till 17h*

*It's forbidden to keep somebody in a cell full of water*

*It's forbidden to arrest somebody without convoking him three times*

*It's forbidden to deprive somebody of food and water*

*The one who is accusing is responsible to feed the presumed guilty for seven days*

*It's forbidden to deprive the presumed guilty of sleep*

*It's forbidden to hit the presumed guilty during interrogation*

*It's forbidden to have sexual relations with the presumed guilty*

I showed them the rules of the Khmers Rouges.

I read, Prosper translates. They react with heavy sighs.

I didn't ask them if they had rules.

To get to something else I ask them to write their own tombs-

tone

“How do you want to be remembered after your death?”

They do not have a positive self image.

This exercise will put some balm on their hearts.

It's a strategy that's openly sentimental but necessary.

The tombstone of Jean Claude, sung by himself :

*Jean-Claude, farewell Jean-Claude  
we are grateful that you played the ikembe  
we remember how you used to sing “Habuze iki”  
we remember your voice  
Farewell Jean-Claude  
We pray for you and you who are up there pray for us  
Yo Yo Yo*

*We remember your good heart  
everybody can think of you  
you chatted with everybody  
you laughed with everybody  
you were not bad  
you sided up with everyone without discrimination  
you shared a glass with anyone  
when we remember you the tears are flowing  
So, rest in peace Jean-Claude  
we will never forget you*

*Yo Yo Yo  
We remember you for many things  
you were easy with people  
you didn't boast*

*even when the kids came by, they asked you for money  
and you made the little ones laugh  
Farewell Jean-Claude  
You will have to pray for us who stay here on earth*

The tombstones of the others (former torturers) sung by Jean-Claude:

*Edouard, Edouard  
You have been a just man  
Goodbye Edouard  
You have been just  
And above all  
you have done no harm to anybody,  
even though you were in a difficult position  
you were responsible for security  
and you were against thieves and other criminals  
Goodbye Edouard  
You have done good things for people  
And we remember what you did  
We'll never forget you  
even though you worked in times of crisis  
In heavy situations*

*Yo Yo Yo  
Edouard, you have seen many disasters  
you saw a lot of trouble  
We remember your words,  
how you laughed with the others  
We remember the good things you did for people  
We will remember you*

*You have been responsible for difficult things,  
you have given yourself  
I'm telling myself we will never forget you  
Yo Yo  
Edouard, we are behind you  
and we who will stay here on this world we will remember  
you*

*Gerard, you Gerard  
We will remember you  
You helped a lot of people in difficult situations  
you helped people without making the distinction based on  
their ethnic backgrounds  
you have been hiding people, you kept them safe  
Go Gerard, that God may keep you, you have done well  
Gerard  
You kept people who were not of the same ethnical back  
ground or region  
You have given yourself to help  
Without making the distinction between hutus and tutsis  
You have been able to keep everybody, protect everybody  
Farewell Gerard, we will remember you  
You have done good, Gerard  
You have protected people who didn't share your ethnic  
background  
that God may help you  
Oh Gerard, farewell Gerard  
I hope that God may keep you*

*You Marc, goodbye Marc goodbye Marc  
You were a disciplined soldier  
And you protected the people  
you loved the people and the people loved you  
you protected people in difficult situations  
We will remember you  
What didn't you witness when you were a soldier?  
We will remember you  
Because you protected the people on many occasions  
That's why people say you are a good man  
you have done good deeds on this world, you have left your  
mark*

*Yo Marc, whom I love*

*Marc whom I love  
You are an unforgettable soldier  
You did good things for people  
Marco, the heart of love  
In difficult situations you showed your good heart  
towards people of different ethnicities  
I will die without forgetting you*

We spent the whole afternoon praising each other.

We only honour people when they win an Oscar. Or when they're dead.

We should write one's epitaph each time we don't feel well.

Moments like this are rare.

We are in the middle of the technique that I use for Theatre & Reconciliation, in the order of self representation, but not in the order

of representation in itself. Tombstones are missing theatricality, or at least they are right now.

**May 7**

*The second day: the victims*

Warming up: I call it “the torture session”. They are struggling with physical exercise.

First improv: Remembering in detail of a fortunate or unfortunate event. Tell it to somebody who will tell it to me as if it’s his own story. I don’t have to know what is made up or not. The exercise will help them to listen to each other.

I think it will grant me access to some stories without making the testimonies too hard to listen to.

The incentives that come to me: Talk to your assassin. Talk to your torturer

I continue to work on the improvisations that we started on Monday: something that begins well and ends bad. I get a scene of pillage that I transform into a “dance of pillage”

The rehearsal is hard only because of the heat of the sun. The bodies are relaxed.

Everything feels simple, but we’ll have to talk about torture.

I ask them to make a scene where they talk about their anger.

They are concentrating, but not in connection with themselves, it all stays superficial. It’s very indecent to show your anger, it’s like showing your weakness.



Warming up, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

Jean-Claude takes the stage  
He soon starts crying.

*I'm angry.  
I lost two children in the same week.  
I have nothing left.  
I sold everything.  
I gave everything away.  
I sold the bricks of my house.  
I'm angry.  
I have no friends.  
I have no parents.  
I have no shoes.*

I asked them to sell a torturer at the market.”Take into account all his capabilities, his specific qualities and his special good old torturer benefits (atouts). I get a very funny and very subversive scene.

The qualities of a good torturer:

*Serving your country*

*Lying*

*Manipulating*

*Playing nice*

*Extorquer des aveux*

*Being in the possession of very sturdy pieces of string*

*Having water and if modern having electricity*

*Being able to torture at night, above all*

*Having no pity*

*Not being afraid of having sexual relationships or touching the sexual organs of the victims*

*Having no regrets*

*Accepting money to stop the torturing but continuing no netheless*

*Never ask for forgiveness*

*Never admit to have tortured*

*Refute the evidence when being exposed on the spot*

*Thinking they have never done anything wrong in their life*

*Having no conscience*

*Considering human beings as animals*

*Having no love to give*

*Being able to influence a magistrate*

*Being able to corrupt the judge*

*Wanting to avenge the bad treatment that he has suffered himself*



Jérôme, Gérard, Jean Berchmans, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

*Being able to torture during twenty minutes without making the victim faint*

*Being in the possession of the following: Nails, iron bar, plastic bag, string, fire, water, excrements, fully functional sexual organ, whip, cell of 50 cm on 50 cm, paper and and pen for the confession, hidden and even smaller cell, beer capsules for the victim to kneel down on.*

After this we are able to talk about the torture that we suffered. We finally got there.

*I met my torturer. He asked me to forgive him, and I have forgiven him, he asked me in front of all my friends. I have forgiven him. I spent four years and four months in prison under his custody. I was thirteen years old.*

## May 8

Discussion with Prosper about the victims and the executioners.

He doesn't believe that the people we are working with could possibly have been torturers.

Although Laurent Gahungu confirmed the dates and the locations. From the moment we befriend a human being we can not imagine the terrible things they might have done.

The ones I have known as executioners: the condemned to death from Mpimba are now victims of torture in our "sample". The executioner of President Ndadaye, dead after having been tortured, passed from being a torturer to being a victim.

The historical cycle and alternation of the crimes in Burundi make the question confusing. I'm in the presence of convicted to death (for crimes that I ignore) who during the course of their detention, have been tortured, and are thus in this instance, victims. I have victims who during their detention, have become torturers, paid by the penitentiary institution. I have simple victims, if I may say so, who have simply been victims and I have perpetrators who before becoming perpetrators have been victims of the genocide or of the bad treatments by their parents.

I try to see the human being and not the beast.

Rehearsal with the group of torturers: "selling something on the market that is usually not sold, something very special" I do not dare, like with the victim group to ask them to sell a torturer. I'm trying to be careful, even though Laurent tells me to go for it.

Here is the scene we got to in the end. Upgraded, but not very far from the original. Jean-Claude is carrying a bag of water, we'll have to fill it up with red paint that leaks out of it.

*Here we go ladies and gentlemen, something extraordinary, something you have never seen on the market. There is gold in this, a conscience, love, compassion, dignity, redemption, intelligence, ideas, honesty (adds one of the torturers), a sense of justice.*

*Come closer, come closer, you have never seen such a precious thing.*

*What do I have in my hand, ladies and gentlemen?*

*It is a head, yes, a human head.*

*(he stops, silence)*

*But since it's chopped off, ladies and gentleman, it's worthless*

*(he throws it away)*

Laurent will tell me later that the FNL had displayed, last week, chopped off heads from the military with the berets on.

I will not keep this scene. I can not make a parody of the FNL. They are always willing to fight but not always forgiving. The second scene was equally surprising.

*Marc, a young man from the group of torturers is showing us something he keeps in his hat.*

*Marc: In this object there is a great amount of things included: beans, meat, gas, water. It's a wonderful thing. If you possess it your miserable days are over.*

*Edouard: Gas, water, meat, beans, all that! It's extraordinary. What is it?*

*Marc: A breast*

*Edouard: A what?*

*Marc: Very simple: a breast*

*Edouard: Yo my god, is it the breast of a cow or a goat?*

*Marc: No, from a woman*

*Edouard: Yo, from a woman? Living or dead?*

*Marc: Living*

*Edouard: Oh my god, men have become savages.*

*Marc: I had a revelation. Our sad days are over, there's plenty of breasts here. We simply have to cut them off (he comes running towards me to cut off my breasts)*

*(Edouard falls to the earth crying out in desperation)*

*Marc (still smiling): There's plenty of them, we simply have to cut them off. (running towards potential spectators)*

We laugh like mad men, really.

And the day is not over. I ask them for a scene in which the phrase "they pushed me" has to come up.

*Jean-Claude is pushing Marc:*

*Who told you to kill people?*

*They pushed me*

*Who told you to torture people?*

*They pushed me*

*Who told you to slaughter babies?*

*They pushed me*

I stop them. In those two scenes, the role of the torturer is held by Marc who has the characteristics of a tutsi. I explain that we can not keep this scene when somebody with the body type of a Tutsi (Marc) is being accused by somebody with a Hutu body type (Jean Claude). We have to alternate.

*“I’m not the only one, you did it too” And they change roles  
Marc: Who told you to torture people?  
Jean Claude: They pushed me*

We talk about everything that has happened. I also talk about my visit in 2005 with the CNDD rebels that had not been disarmed yet. It was from them that I heard that the spectators kept count of how many hutus and how many tutsis appeared in the shows. In reality, it’s hard to say. The national sport can be a tough gamble. I understood the importance of body types, totally independent of the ethnic background. It’s important to put words on what is never said. And that’s why I want to talk to them in such a direct way.

I want to be in the position of the mediator. I want to generate trust. I want to make the barriers go down. I want to not judge.  
By the end of the day I feel totally spent.

## **May 9**

How to resist the attempt to destroy the link that exists between all of us?

With Theatre and Reconciliation I try bring our common link back to the surface in a way we can cry and put ourselves in a positive vulnerability. Crying cleans the heart. It develops and reinforces our resilience and gives us the energy to bring about change.

I should set up crying workshops in Burundi.

I asked them to touch an object with their eyes closed, to recollect a very precise memory.

And then the testimonies about torture came:

*Jean-Claude:*

*This tree reminds me of my sisters who wait to bring me food.*

*They are in the shadow of this tree.*

*They think I'm in prison.*

*I am naked in a bag, I can not move.*

*Somebody is next to me.*

*They will throw me into a mass grave alive.*

*I'm scared.*

*It's Doi Doi who comes to my aid.*

*He wants to know what's inside that garbage bag.*

*He wants them to open it up.*

*This tree is bringing back a lot of memories.*

*Bernard:*

*This gutter reminds me of the day I tried to escape prison.*

*We are six. It's a trap.*

*Four of us get killed.*

*I'm unconscious in the gutter.*

*I learned that the one who wants you to escape is the one who wants you dead.*

*Florida:*

*I hide. The attackers are chasing me. I hide. They pass by. They  
I'm in a cell. don't see me. They've gone. They didn't see me.  
I'm saved.*

*Bosco:*

*I try to lie down, to stretch. These stones make me think of  
what I used to touch when I tried to stretch. I can't move the  
stones. I turn, I try with the other arm, but I can't.  
They come for me. They lay me on the ground, and it's cool*

*Leonidas:*

*I'm in a cell.  
It's a toilet.  
I'm looking for a way out.  
I press against the wall. It's dirty.  
It's dark.  
I'm looking for a way out.  
It's narrow.  
It's a tiny little space.  
I ask myself how the wall could disappear.  
I'm tired.  
I don't know how to get out of here.  
The wall is too high.  
If only the wall could fall just by itself.*

*Jacqueline:*

*I'm in prison.*

*It's dark.*

*And very narrow.*

*I can barely move.*

*I'm sleeping next to somebody who's dead.*

*I'm still alive but there's a corpse next to me.*

*Will I become a corpse as well?*

*Gerard:*

*Save me*

*Save me*

*I'm miserable*

*Let me out*

*I'm hungry*

*Let me out*

*I'm thirsty*

*Nobody cares about my fate*

*I can't move*

*Pity me*

*Jean Berchmans:*

*Five years, six months and thirteen days. In the dark.*

I don't always work on testimonies that are that hard. Most of the time we laugh. Even when it's not appropriate to laugh. That's how we can change a crushing reality into something we can appreciate on a theatrical level.

People always ask me how I can make theatre based on the suffering of others, why I try to get to the point that hurts. It's specifically that

And through this transformation the person concerned can recreate her/himself. Becoming more coherent. Finding a new balance between life and the image of it.

How does one become a torturer? Make a scene in which you teach somebody to become a torturer. A school of torturers. And then there's a comical scene in which Jean Berchmans tries to rip out the golden tooth of Esperance, a woman from the group of victims. It's mother's day.

## **May 12**

Today's the first day that I mix up the two groups.

Everything seems to be on a roll.

How to keep the rehearsal organic?

Everything needs to be fluid. There shouldn't be a clash or a complicated passage from the beginning of the warming up to the improvisations. Everything needs to be supple and elastic when the two groups come together. The actors seem to be unaware of the changes that take place inside and between them. As if they do not see how much progress they are making on a theatrical level, on the level of mutual cooperation and dealing with conflict.

This morning, we did *the waking up at the waterfront* exercise. They did it before, separately. Now they are together. They look at each other as if they had never seen other human beings before. The first level of togetherness is the common background they have. I worked with both groups using the same tools, the same structure. They are on equal terms. They understand and adopt the same conventions. They forget their differences.



Frédérique, Édouard, Léonidas, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

The way they are looking at each other now is very touching. It's the result of two weeks of work.

Theatre is giving them the basic symbolic rules on top of which they will construct their relationship. It makes it possible to talk about taboo subjects: theatre will permit them to put words on things where before there only used to be rumours, suspicion and doubt. The most important work is over. The detonator has been taken out of the bomb.

I can only work on opening up the position of victim and torturer and making them come together. At the end of the process the spectator shouldn't be able to tell them apart.

Veronique got there, we worked together around the table. She shows me the pictures she has taken today. I see the pleasure in the work, in being together and trusting each other.

I see the picture of the scene with eyes closed. I see that she sees what I'm doing. She sees her own 'points', they are close to mine.

A touching chorus.

There's a lot of talking chorus scenes in the shows I make. During rehearsals I make them walk, eyes closed, in a state of inner concentration. Then, I ask them a question. For example: "talk to a dead person who's close to you, what do you tell her. See her and talk to her."

First very silently, I can't hear what they say, they talk in confidence with themselves, and then, little by little, I ask them to amplify the sound of their voice, and I hear what they say, they are still talking to themselves. They are all talking at the same time, so create some space to be able to hear what they say. And then I let them take turns, one person is speaking and then somebody else takes over and then somebody else. In the end I let them come together, open their eyes and speak in a clear voice, taking turns.

I make at least a chorus a day like that. I address subjects like:

*Talk to a dead person*

*I regret*

*I want to follow your example*

*I saw (the war)*

*I'm afraid of*

*I forgive*

*Talk to a chick about rape*

Those choruses are always the expression of the collective unconsciousness. The spectators that are listening can always add their own reflections.

She will ask herself “and me, what am I afraid of?” or “And me, who do I forgive?”

What to say and what not? In a situation of conflict or post conflict, every word, every sentence counts. Don't let them say “I accuse you of...” but instead “I forgive you...”. The syntax is very important too. And the translation. You have to be vigilant that the translator isn't betraying your thoughts. More than a good translator, I need somebody who is not aggressive, not intrusive and not partial.

I asked them to work on their humiliation.

*I felt humiliated the day...:*

*I felt humiliated the day they spit me in the face*

*I felt humiliated the day they ripped apart my clothes*

*I felt humiliated the day they put me in prison*

*I felt humiliated the day they let me sleep next to a corpse*

*I felt humiliated the day they undressed me in front of my mother in law*

*I felt humiliated the day they slapped me in public*

*I felt humiliated the day they paraded me naked on the market*

*I felt humiliated the day they pierced me with a bayonet all over my body I was naked*

*I felt humiliated the day they took my belongings*

*I felt humiliated the day the police bound me*

*I felt humiliated the day they made me walk with hot water on my head*

*I felt humiliated the day they locked me into the toilet*

*I felt humiliated the day they refused to listen to me*

*I felt humiliated the day they slapped me in front of my children*

*I felt humiliated the day they put me in a garbage bag*

I talk to them about their responsibility as actors, about the image they project. I tell them that I can not control everything, that they are responsible for what they say.

I met Jerome, an old convict, in the city centre. “It’s Jerome, it’s Jerome” he cried out, knocking on the window of the car. Jerome will be with us tomorrow. I’m very happy. Marie-Josée will be there as well. Also an old convict. Veronique will train her to make pictures of the last week when we will play the show.

### **May 13**

What are the “anchor points” ? How to create a “context” in which everybody can feel safe, can come closer, can become somebody to confide in or even a friend, a context in which everybody should be able to limit their fears and ask for help.

We talk about Edouard who keeps his distance, probably very hurt. It would be much easier to tell him to go, but we have to **EVE-RYTHING** to accomplish the work, specifically with the least responsive, the most fragile. He is reserved, but he wants to participate. This difficulty is an anchor point, a fight you need to win against what’s easy. What matters is the process and the person. She can never be sacrificed on the altar of results.

“If you do not get the suffering out of your heart it can even keep you from sleeping. As if you would have thistles roaming in your chest. If the spectator cries, it’s like he’s cleaning his heart out to become better” says Adolphe, the psychologist who has been following the work for the last couple of weeks. We start with the rehearsal.



Jean Berchmans and Florida, «Victims of Torture and Torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

They improvise on the notion of “ the school for torture”.

I ask them questions about the political implications of what they come up with. “If it’s a Tutsi body type doing the torturing, can we play it like this?”

This gives me the opportunity to have an open discussion about the ethnicity of the torturers, quite important in Burundi. They have to be aware of what we are putting on stage.

We also talk about “how to become a torturer?” A long discussion follows. I put forward the idea that it all starts with the bad treatment of children, a very western position. I get attacked from all sides. They tell me that this is the way they raise their children. Correct them and train them.

Adolphe comes to my aid.

The question is what do you call torture.

If you beat your wife, do you call it torture?  
If you beat your children, do you call it torture?  
It might resurface later, when we talk about limits.

To open up the talk about conflict, I'm asking a couple of questions that refer to what I saw or thought I could see during the improvisations.

What do I say to de-escalate the conflict?

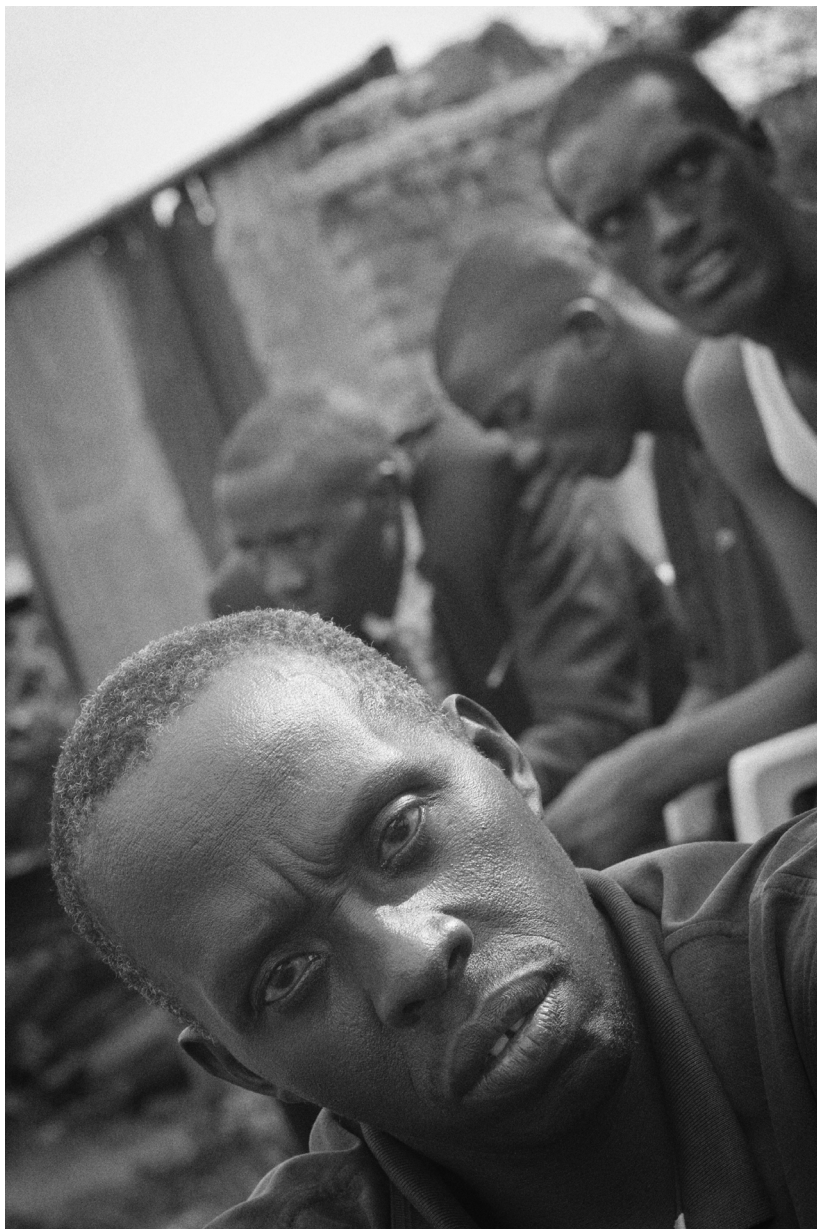
*Did it happen like this?*  
*If I understand well, you are afraid?*  
*Did you experience this first hand?*  
*How do situations like this develop usually?*  
*Are the people aggressive just like this?*  
*What does really happen?*

I can ask them questions but I'm not supposed to know what really happens. It takes two different stages. During the first stage we make theatre based on the conflict, later we can talk about the conflict in itself. After a couple of questions to make sure I know what's at stake, I rework the scene, taking care not to stigmatise anybody on stage as "good" or "bad".

A last stage would be to let them play the perspective of their enemies, to let them express their doubts, their fears.

I do not make a strategic calculation. What I really want is to understand and through theatre, create the possibility of a different reality, a reorganisation of the chaos.

In the work of directing, I put things at the intersection, between the expression of the conflict and theatre. Theatre is the mediator, the terrain of mutual understanding, the space where things can be said in a common language.



Bernard, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

What do we decide to say in public, what discourse, what image do we want to project of the others? And we will decide this together. Since we will not create a piece of propaganda.

Questions I'm asking:

*Do you agree to play this scene?*

*Do you agree with my interpretation of this scene?*

*Is this too hard to play?*

*Is this a scene that can be watched by both sides?*

*Do you understand the importance of this scene?*

*What do you take away from this scene?*

Don't let me say just anything on stage. Think about your own security.

The fact that I underline the importance of a scene puts the actors in a position where they have to take responsibility for what they are doing on stage.

They have a mission now. As if they could see this from above. As if they can understand reality and intervene. In theatre you can say aloud what everybody was secretly thinking, or in this case, what nobody was thinking yet.

It's the afternoon. The sun is turning us all into a gigantic barbecue. I get them concentrated for an improvisation that's going to be decisive.

It's a talking chorus that starts with sentences like "I started feeling inhuman the moment I...". Everybody joins in, torturers and victims. At this stage the barrier between both has become blurred.



Florida and Beatrice, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

*I started feeling inhuman the moment I order somebody to get killed*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I lied to the tribunal*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I tortured somebody*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I slept in the gutter*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I beat my wife un conscious*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I insulted my mother*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I beat my children*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I stopped praying*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I stole money in a bank*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I beat up a policeman*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I broke with my parents*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I killed a child*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I put fire to a house*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I abandoned my child*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I beat up an old woman*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I insulted somebody who had the age of my father*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I shot my friend in combat*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment they took my gun away*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment people saw that I was in prison*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I put on the clothes of a prisoner*  
*I started feeling inhuman the moment I broke my brother's teeth in*

*I started feeling inhuman the moment I stole food from  
somebody who needed it more than I did  
I started feeling inhuman the moment I insulted a  
handicapped man  
I started feeling inhuman the moment I tortured my friend  
I started feeling inhuman the moment I denied my sister  
forgiveness*

I thank them for their confidence. I make sure they agree to say this in public.

They tell me that it depends on where we play, that they can not say everything, that they have a duty of confidentiality.

## **14 may**

Marie-Josee joins us. Feisty little woman. She integrates easily within the group. Veronique tells me that she's been taking good pictures, from day one.

I start with the rehearsal guns blazing. I ask them to stand in a line, in the order of suffering. The first one, being the one who suffered most. I see them arguing, changing places, pushing others away. Esperance doesn't want to give away his first position to Edouard.

I appoint Gerard as the master of ceremony. Everybody is fighting over the order. Gerard ends the fighting and armed with a corn cub, measures the suffering. He doesn't stop changing the order. Everybody is cheating and pushing each other. Gerard is losing it. He gives up. Nobody will be winning the medal, apart from Edouard maybe, whom I put resolutely in front, defending the others to overtake him.

Victims or torturers? Who cares?

## May 15

We start the rehearsal.

I have to think about their safety. If a testimony is hard for them to deliver in public, we can let somebody else do it in their place. I have a trick: I let Jean-Claude intervene. He says: Ladies and gentlemen, this is only theatre, do not imagine that we are telling the truth. This provokes a little short circuit within the head of the audience, who is reminded that we are supposed to look at fiction. It's a condition sine qua non for representations in conflict zones. The spectators are traumatised and can easily forget the theatrical dimension of what they see. Therefore it's important to remind people of the convention and prevent fiction from getting confused with reality.

I would like to come closer to a humanity that seems far away from common mortals.

The crime is something we read about in the papers, but here it's possible to put a face on it. I overheard spectators who came to watch the show in Mpimba two years ago. They were terrified to go inside the prison, but afterwards they said:

All things said and done, in the end they are just like us.

I start with the next improvisation: From which point do we talk about torture, what is the turning point?

A very emotional scene comes to life, step by step.

It is Marc, again, who does the trick.

*I'm unhappy, I lost my mother  
I was raised by the new wife of my father  
They send me into the fields  
I have to get water  
The other kids go to school  
My father does not care about me  
I work in the kitchen  
I work all day  
I barely sleep  
All the work that needs to be done  
I do it  
Nobody helps me  
I'm all alone  
What did I do to displease the lord  
We are with ten kids in the family and I'm the only one working*

Then Jean-Claude intervenes with his *ikembe*.

*Isn't this torture?  
A child growing up with a cold heart  
You heard this orphan  
It touches your heart  
The wife of his father is not his mother  
He was born to suffer  
But you, you are still submissive  
Even when you would want to get married  
Isn't this torture?  
He grew up with a heart full of needles  
How to live with all those thorns in your heart?*

*But what can you do, Marc?  
Isn't it torture that touches your heart?  
I see people crying  
But we didn't come here to cry  
I ask you to support this child  
Everyone who tortures like this we have to let them  
understand how much this child is only a child, so his heart  
can become peaceful again*

## **May 16**

They are keeping a journal for the rehearsals.

From the day before they all remember: “How to express the truth without compromising the actors, why put someone’s words in someone else’s mouth?”

They start reading from their journals with a thousand precautions: “I didn’t have much time; there was no electricity; I had to write with candle light; this is the first time I’m writing in french; I don’t know if I understood it well”, they say.

Again, I talk about nobody being good or bad. That I know that, amongst them, even though they have been put in the group of the victims, there are people who tortured. I look at Bernard, who confirms, I look at Jerome who laughs. I go for it, “But tell me, Jerome, how do you feel, before, during and after” He answers me: “before and during you feel strong, you can even feel pleasure, but after, you regret.

This sentence will haunt me the whole day long.

I start the rehearsal with “denying the evidence”. They are all presenting scenes to me about people who get put on the spot, about destroying somebody’s house, about beating their wife, about committing adultery or about committing torture. They all deny the evidence, the accused, but also the victims.

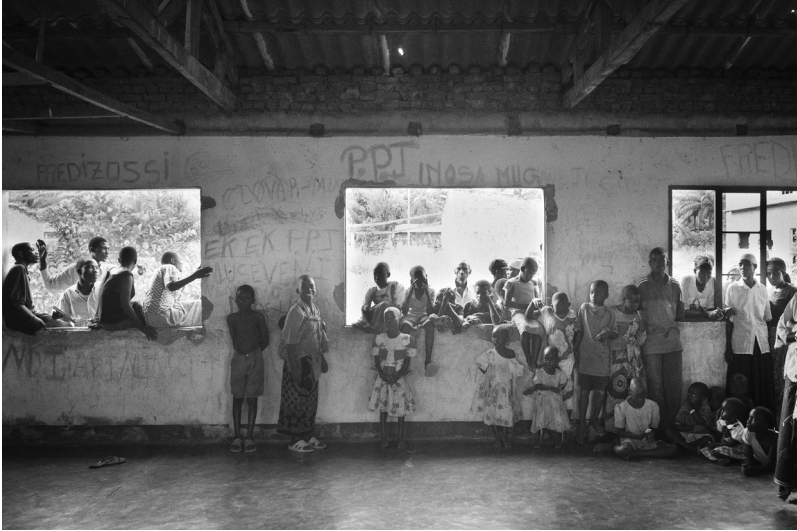
I ask them if this is typical for Burundi. They tell me it is. Everybody is afraid to get the law involved, so everybody keeps silent.

Then comes the pivotal point of the first two weeks. I really go for it. Based on what Jerome told me earlier.

After a concentration exercise they work in groups of two. They exchange recollections of torture, applied or received. Then they talk about the other’s experiences and then I ask them to talk about it as if they would have been the one who tortured. Certain testimonies are hard to listen to. I will take one testimony and have everybody deliver it together. It will make the burden less heavy and share the pain. And it will make it impossible for the spectator to identify the torturer on stage. But he will have to identify the torturer within himself. The vibrations in the air are the same now than the first time. It took me two weeks. In the meantime

Veronique and Marie-Josée get there and take pictures.

*When I go torture somebody my heart feels rotten  
When I have my hands on him I have to break him to pieces  
And then I get him in prison  
When he’s in prison I’m satisfied  
Even when I’m happy I know the other has suffered  
When I go to sleep, it works my heart  
I see his face*



Rumonge, visit of the theater group. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

*I see the blood  
I destroyed his life and it stays in my heart  
When I see him later, I see the image again and I get upset  
Because I thought I killed him  
For me, when I tortured him, I killed him  
He tells me: they say mountains never meet, but humans do.  
You dug a whole in the ground for me  
And it works my heart  
It drives me crazy and I lose conscience*

When I take up the improvisation again I ask them to complete a testimony with their eyes closed. Only Marc keeps them open. Did he misunderstand or does he refuse to close his eyes?



Rumonge, Philémon, visit of the theater company. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

*I saw him weeping and it hurt my heart  
torturing him I didn't show mercy  
I heard his cries and I thought he would die  
when I saw him I hid to have a good look at his wounds  
I would like to ask him for forgiveness but I'm afraid  
I think he wants revenge through me or through my children*

And then Jerome is talking, alone, about his own case.

*I was a prisoner. It was a difficult place.*

*To get on a good page with the authority of the prison and to obtain permission to leave sometimes I tortured somebody who got in trouble, a fight. I had to hit him hard, as hard as I could so that everybody would respect me. I had to hit him hard enough so he would be terrified of me.*

But when the director of the prison changed  
They appointed the one I tortured to become responsible for security  
and he tortured me in his turn  
It was hard (he laughs)  
When the tortured becomes general you have a big problem  
As a prisoner I was acting as a security general during three years

## May 17

They read me their diaries. Here is an excerpt from Prosper's.

*How does it feel to torture someone? Not only physically but also psychologically. This was Frederique's question. One had to tell the other how they felt before, during and after torturing someone. One told the other's story as if he had lived it. I noticed a feeling of listening to the other person to understand what he said: his reaction, his attention, his emotion...*

*Frédérique tries to transform in a theatrical way what was played, she asks us to stand up.*

*After having listened to everyone, Frederique grasps what was said by Marc. It is thus the punctum. It is Jean-Claude who was in Marc's place and who said his testimony. It was very hard and very moving. All the actors were paying attention.*

*Then, grouped together, as a block, as Frédérique said, each identified with the torturers and said how they felt before, during and after the torture, one by one and in turn, taking turns to say the same things. One by one, and in turn, by repeating parts of Marc's testimony.*

*Everyone could identify. Frédérique asked them to see*

*the image before saying the sentence.*

*I was completely moved because it made me think of the torture that my father underwent just before his death. I listened to the torturers as they spoke with regret and emotion. My heart, like that of the spectator, is affected.*

Prosper cries.

Around noon, we left for Rumonge, Véronique, Prosper, Jean-Claude, Floride and me. The road is not safe. The army is chasing the FNL in the area we have to cross.

In Rumonge, the people with whom I had done a Theater & Reconciliation workshop six months ago are waiting for me. They are in the ruins of a school. No windows, no roofs, no doors. The vegetation invades everything. The premises are occupied. You can hear people singing in another classroom, children playing footsie on a sandy field. It is beautiful. It's like being in the Jungle Book.

When the car stops they come and meet me, dancing and singing. I dance with them. They put me up in a chair and presented to me their new association, emanation of the Union of the Repatriated Burundesi: Artists Association for Reconciliation. Within six months they have established themselves and put in balance the ethnicities and the sexes. I congratulate them. I sit down again, they are doing a very dynamic warming up, just like we used to do together and I see that their bodies are active and awake. It gives me goosebumps. They show me a scene that they invented, not bad, but it doesn't show the perspective of the residents. I'll tell them later, with a beer in my hand. Even if they changed roles (Tutsi body type playing the role of the repatriated Hutus, it's not enough: they present the repatriated like the 'good' and the residents like the 'bad'.



Choir, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

The leaders in the group are putting forward a message and the others get taken hostage. I tell the 'residents' that their perspective needs to be included or it will be THEATRE and DISAGREEMENT.

I strike the pose for the photo shoot. My head bent slightly forward, the arms not crossed, but next to the body, legs together, smiling. It feels unnatural, but I secretly hope the picture will be nice.

Veronique and I agree to try and get this group to Africalia: they are dynamic, autonomous, they are eager. They play in other provinces and would like to play all over Burundi. They want more formation, they already opened up the group to others. For the moment, they work with their own means: they pay for transport with their own money.

The consequences of my work with them, six months ago, have been beneficial on many levels, they say. Three repatriated families have obtained a house now. It's 'my home', they say. The certificate of participation with Theatre and Reconciliation has opened doors for them they say. They want to become professionals.

## **May 18**

I think about the costumes. I look at people on the street. I look at the red clothes. Red pants, red african dresses, red shirts, I see the world in red. I thought about using green prisoner's costumes, but it's too limited, as if torturers and victims would all be prisoners, which isn't true.

We all went to the second hand clothes market of Rumonge. The club of five: Floride, Jean-Claude, Prosper, Veronique and me. We try to find red clothes, we're finding a lot of them. Prosper is negotiating

the price.

We leave for the 'Mauss Castle' to go swimming. Six months ago, I spent five weeks there, with Prosper.

We'll spend a couple of hours at the castle, a big mansion of the fifties. The beach is beautiful. We're alone. Veronique and I are sunbathing, everybody else stays in the shadows. We all go swimming. We laugh a lot. We are having a good time. We eat avocados, tomatoes, bananas and chikwangu. And then we take the road again, full of apprehension.

When we get back we try out the red costumes, again we laugh a lot. Especially when Prosper tries on some pants that are too tight for him and make him look like a strong man in the circus.

Two nice days in Rumonge.

Looking at the pictures we made at the beach, Veronique smiles and says: a Twa, a Hutu, a Tutsi and a Belgian.

## May 19

I decide to write this text based on their testimonies about what the torturer and the victim of torture feels. And I hand it over to them. They correct me, ask me to add certain things.

The tortured

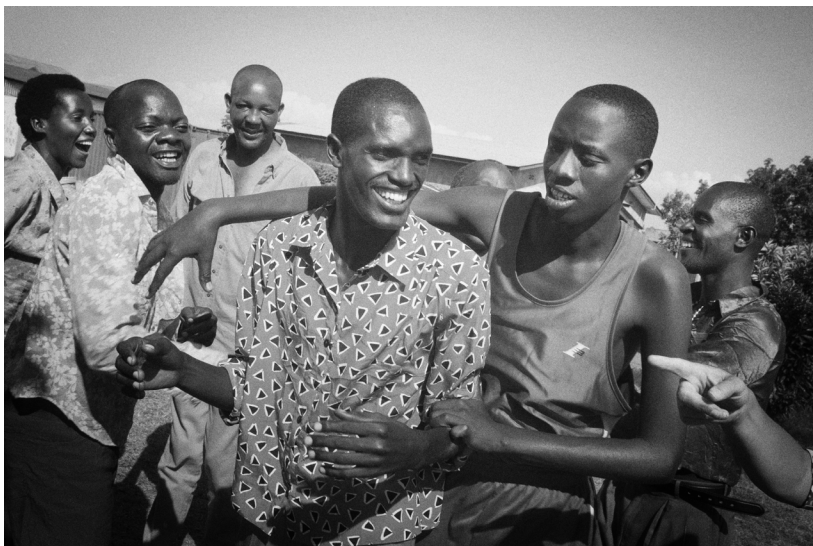
*I would like you to tell me  
why did you not listen to me when I begged you  
I would like you to tell me  
why did you continue to hurt me when I begged you  
why were you not responding to my cries*

*I would like you to tell me  
why you didn't react to my tears  
what kind of heart do you have to humiliate me like this  
how did you get your heart filled up with hatred like this  
where did you go get the horrible things that came out of  
your mouth*

*Tell me how this has been beneficial to you  
You broke my bones but not my spirit  
I hope you broke my bones but not your spirit*

### The torturer

*When I go torture somebody  
I go there with a rotten heart  
When I got him I have to break him into pieces  
I take him to prison  
I take him elsewhere  
to a secret place  
Once he's back at the prison  
I'm satisfied  
Even when I feel happy I know the other has suffered  
I torture him for things I think he has done  
but sometimes I imagine things, but I don't know  
I torture him to obtain information  
I torture him because they paid me to  
I torture him because they ordered me to  
I torture him to subdue him  
I torture him to scare others  
I torture him so that people fear me*



Marc and Édouard, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

*I torture him to please the authority  
I torture because I might get out of prison for a day or two  
and if I do  
my heart is full of hate thanks to the torture I suffered myself  
This is all nothing to me thanks to the hate I have in my heart  
This all nothing to me my heart is cold  
Later, when I go to sleep, it works my heart  
I see the images  
I see his face  
I see the blood  
In this case I destroy his life and it stays in my heart  
If I happen to see him again later  
I see the images again and it terrifies me  
because I thought I killed him  
When you torture the body of the other is already dead*



Jean-Claude, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

*he's not alive to me anymore  
I torture him because I consider him to be my enemy and I  
want him to confess  
I saw him crying and it pained my heart  
Torturing him, I didn't show mercy  
I heard him cry and I thought he would die  
When I saw him again I concealed myself to look at his  
wounds  
and then I went into hiding  
I would like to ask him for forgiveness but I'm scared  
I think he wants to have his revenge on me or my children*

*Later he tells me  
"You nearly buried me, they say mountains never meet, but  
people do. You dug a whole in the ground for me"  
so I break down and lose consciousness.*

This scene will be the key to the vault of the show.

## May 20

Everything is ready for us, in the nine days of rehearsals that we have left, to give the scenes that we have come up with so far a distinct shape and order in the show.

We spent the whole morning translating the text I wrote based on their testimonies from French to Kirundi. Three translators: Prosper, Jean Berchmans, Marie Josee. It's hard work. We hand out the lines to the actors. Each of them will have to remember about six lines. It's an important text that puts everybody on the same page. I constantly check if what they want to communicate is also what an audience would take away from it.

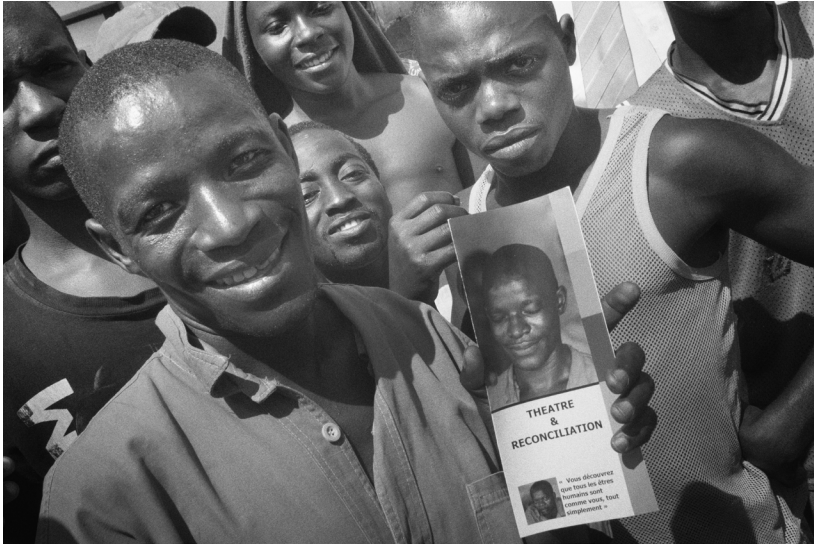
Laurent Gahungu arrives at the right moment. I read him the text. He adds two things: «I torture so that he will side with me», «I torture to buy my safety.»

His presence is reassuring everybody. Laurent, whatever his ethnic background may be, whatever the conditions of his arrest were, whatever he did, defends the prisoners and the victims of torture. In this way we've come together on a lot of points. He notices that the faces of the actors opened up. He tells them.

So we spend the morning translating and distributing the text. They memorize it together.

In the afternoon, I'll stage it, adding the echo of a song by Jean-Claude.

The text gets said in the wrong order. The lines get lost, people talk together. The actors don't know at what moment to talk. They have to be attentive to each other.



Amissi prisoner who did the first workshop in 2005, «Victims of Torture and Torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

After solving this I'll begin with putting some scenes together to explain how it works.

Theatre, only theatre. The reconciliation passes second in line. We will now make a show. The best possible, in twenty days time, within a difficult context.

Telephone communication with my friend Christine Moberg, scenographer, my friend for so long. She saw the pictures, she commented on them. The red costumes will be the everyday costumes, just like the ones they will be able to wear.

## May 21

Long discussion this morning. Edouard doesn't want to play in prison: he works there as a policeman. We'll replace him that day. The structure of the show is made to be adaptable to these kinds of scenarios. I can transfer the material to somebody else. The actors have understood what's at stake for Edouard. We take up old scenes, we make them better. At the end of the day we put six scenes in succession (I have forty of them). It takes about seventeen minutes. I'll be able to throw some stuff out and take it down to the essence. I was happy with what I did. I managed to invent, and the actors are starting to understand where I want to go. The most difficult thing is to maintain concentration. The link between us is there. I notice that I address them as 'the actors' and not 'victims of torture' or 'torturers': the stigmatisation is over. We passed to the next level.

The end is near. Everything is converging towards the objective. We have gotten past the good and the bad. Everybody is tired, but in a good way. In a way that relaxes the body. (I let them work on something together and in the meantime I try to work on something else.) We're exhausted not only in a physical way but also on a psychological level: the agony, the violence invoked in the subjects we address, the tension and the concentration. We're certainly taking the bull by the horns. I listen to horror stories the whole day long and I wonder in which part of my brain to put it. And I rely on theatre to do the trick. I'm counting on it to enable me to transpose, to symbolise and to put some distance between us and the horrors we're addressing. It's my way to deal with it. And I think something of a miracle does happen here. The actors seem able to take distance and get transported through a fireworks of symbols. They seem to get cleansed of their suffering and their fear.

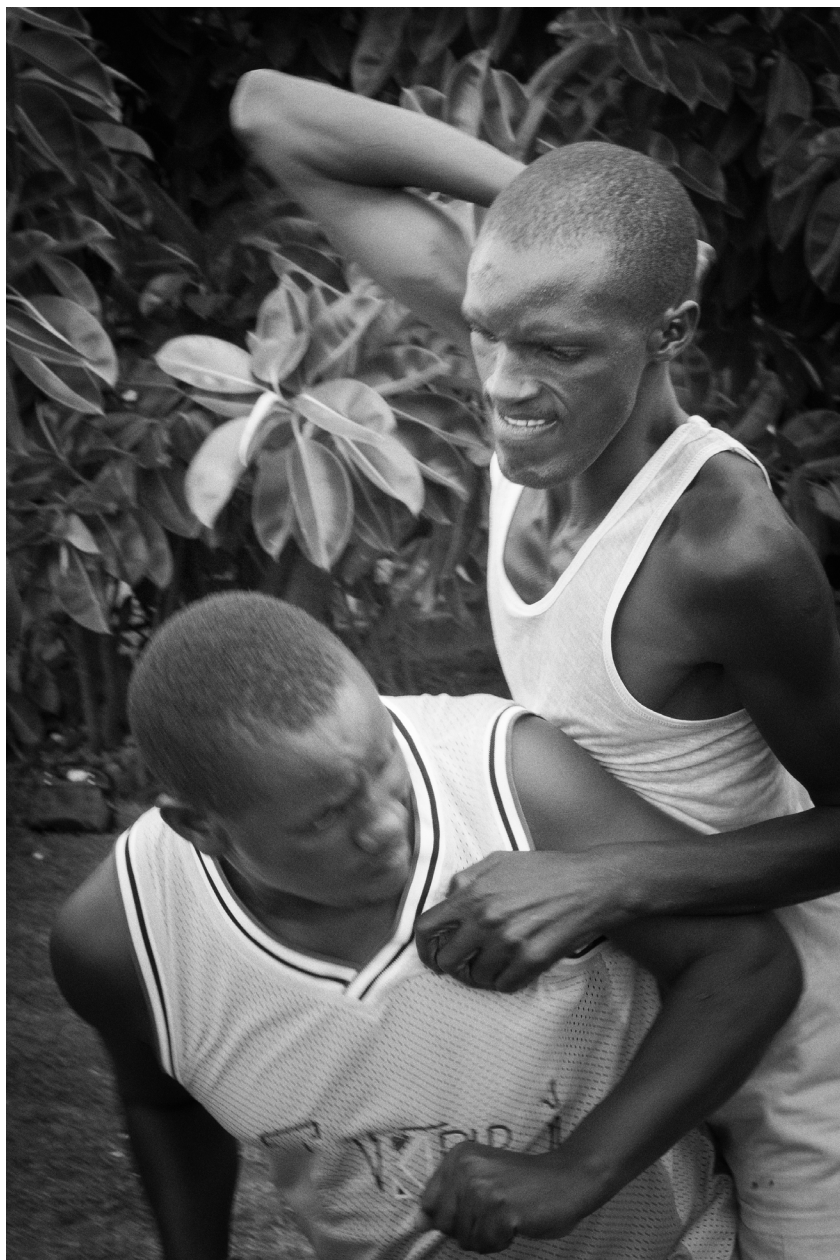
It's the theatrical context that makes it possible to access the authentic and the essential this fast. It's fiction that leads the game and structures the testimony. You could record stories from different sides and broadcast them one next to the other on the radio.

The contradicting viewpoints would be heard, but not shared. In the Theatre et Reconciliation method they are shared, and this is the crucial point, by the opposite sides themselves. The testimonies are not played out by hired comedians but are enacted by the people that are facing those problems themselves. The spectators think that the actors are speaking of things they lived through themselves. The cathartic effect is reinforced. When children want to express something, they sometimes make use of a story: Mom, I had a dream, and in that dream...: and then comes the story about the thing that preoccupies them. Theatre has the same function, saying things that could not be said in direct testimonies. Theatre dresses up in truthfulness that would otherwise be hard to reveal. Theatre has been part of the social fabric of life for a couple of thousand years. It brings together conflicting opinions in a public space. That's at the heart of it. There is no theatre without tension.

## **May 22**

“We even tend to forget it's hard”, Veronique tells me. The working conditions with torturers and victims are difficult, but after the joyful rehearsals, the evenings with those that stay are warm and relaxed.

This morning we are looking for the title of the show. In the beginning, it was Abakondane, which means “the people who have a file with the justice department”. But a large part of the actors have never been condemned. We tried Who didn't suffer, who didn't



Marc and Jérôme, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véro-  
nique Vercheval.

make anybody suffer? Too reductive. Are they good, are they bad? Too pedagogical.

Gerard suggests: When was it? I jumped up. It's a very provocative title. Talking about dates in Burundi automatically leads to questioning history and the cycles of violence between Hutus and Tutsi that have been taking place since 1965. I explain that we are not here to settle the score.

We agree on Indirimbo y'ababi n'abeza which means the song of the good bad guys.

We start the rehearsal with "the song of the good bad guys".

*There's people who change  
Good people can become bad  
Bad people can become good  
But more often they are both  
Part of me is good, part of me is (maybe) bad*

I take up little sections of the show.

Jacqueline is a young and discreet woman, former prisoner and victim of torture, that I met in Mpimba. She takes care of her baby during the rehearsals, washing her clothes in the morning, taking the opportunity of having running water and soap around. She surprises us with the violence of her anger.

*I'm angry because I don't have clothes on and the others do.  
I'm angry because I sleep outside and the others have houses.  
I'm angry because I don't have shoes  
I'm angry because I don't have land  
I'm angry because I have no soap to wash myself and my child with*

*I'm angry because I don't have family  
I'm angry because they have all been killed.*

We have a discussion about a scene of torture and the words we use there. They want to replace “Tell me the truth!” by “Confess!”. I’m dealing with experts and I trust their judgement.

A very moving scene: Marc, the tortured boy, supported by Jean-Claude who is singing the words on his gravestone

Marc :  
*I'm unhappy. My mother in law is beating me.  
I have to do everything in the household.  
go get water at four o'clock in the morning.  
It's war. I'm scared.*

Jean Claude :  
*Marc, oh you Marc  
we will remember you Marc,  
you have done a lot in your life, Marc  
you kept people safe.  
we will remember you.*

Marc :  
*She poured boiling water on me  
she sent me to get water with a hole in the container  
I cried on the way  
nobody could help me*

Jean Claude

*You Marc, when you went to torture somebody  
you went there with a rotten heart  
you have a heart covered with needles  
you have been tortured since you were very small  
so you said: "I'll take a stick and I'll strike"  
I want to break all his bones  
I'll break him in pieces  
when I look at somebody I see him as an animal  
I don't see a person*

Marc

*The miles I walked to get water*

Jean Claude

*Me too, I torture  
me too  
but when I sleep at night  
I see his face  
I see the blood running down  
it causes me a lot of pain*

Marc

*I cry the whole way home with the hole in my container  
I cry and there is nobody to help me out  
nobody to console me*

Jean Claude

*I feel guilty  
I see him in a nightmare*



Jacqueline and Florida, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

Marc

*Nobody comes to console me*

Jean Claude

*When I see that person again I hide  
One part of my heart is happy  
but another part of my heart feels guilty  
I do not have a heart full of love  
I did not get any love in my childhood  
My heart is rotten*

Marc

*I know now for tomorrow and after that  
there is no reason to eat*

## May 23

Yesterday we visited the prison with the general director of penitentiary affairs: he is the superior of the director of the prison. I want to find the actors that I used to work with years ago. There's two left: Amysi and Marc, with whom I worked in the prison of Gitega. A lot of unwillingness. I'm growling. I wanted to see the prisoner's market where you can eat brochettes and hoped Veronique would have been able to take pictures. Too bad. Laurent arrives late, he's negotiating for us to have access to the courtyard, but only to see Marc and Amysi. The whole thing is getting complicated, they tell us to put up the camera and take pictures of where the prisoners meet their family. We all feel awkward, obscene, but there's no way back. We suggest showing them the pictures. Tomorrow, says the director. The reunion with Marc and Amysi is overwhelming. Veronique shows me the pictures, there's nothing obscene about them.

I gave some money to Prosper for the prisoners, he gets molested by the guards. It's violent. I should have protected him more and not have given him such a shitty job. It's the first time he's back at the prison.

## May 24

Three different ways to put the material together, two directed by Gerard and Jean Berchmans. They did better than me.

The problem of the show is to connect torture with peripheral themes that came up during the rehearsals: money, corruption, poverty, theft. How can we make everything come together?

My montage was pretty chaotic. The show made no sense: was it a show about poverty or about torture?

I asked Jean Berchmans to put everything together focussing on torture and Gerard to do the same with poverty. I saw what I had to do. I like to ask other people to cut and paste with the material. It makes everything richer.

The rehearsal was really nice and exhausting. They all had a party with their monthly wages. They barely slept. Jean-Claude was there at seven, without any sleep. But he didn't flinch. Six hours of hard work, under a very hot sun.

Today I have integrated the irony of the catastrophe in the show. It comes with the figure of a journalist who finds everything extraordinary: the torturers, the prison, the poverty, the rape, the torture. It was present the whole time but now it's really clear.

We bought shoes and a megaphone. And we went swimming at the beach.

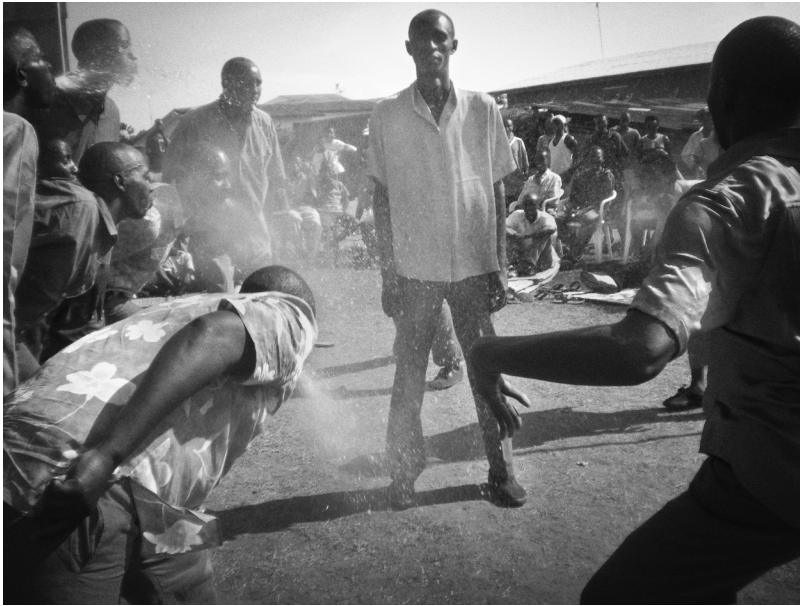
We talk about life, about money. I tell Jean-Claude the fable of the grasshopper and the ant. Prosper translates. We laugh because Jean-Claude lives like a grasshopper. I ask him what he will do when I'm gone : 'Et bien. Dansez maintenant !» Ndt Refers to the last line of the fable.

It's Veronique's last day. We went to the restaurant to eat something other than beans. Floride, whom I know from prison and who has been lacking everything, is sitting at the table of a very fancy restaurant...

We talk about life, about money. I tell Jean-Claude the fable of the grasshopper and the ant. Prosper translates. We laugh because Jean-Claude lives like a grasshopper. I ask him what he will do when I'm gone : «Well, dance now.»

**May 25**

I'm having trouble with the show. The whole thing seems rather murky. It's not clear what the stakes are. As if torture could not be addressed partially. We probably need a more structural approach. We start working. I try to use Jean Claude to keep the message in line. Again and again he points out what the show is about and gives an ironical perspective on things.



Performance in the garden, Victims of Torture and Torturers project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Marie-Josée Gahugu.

But I don't really know how to make it all work. The whole thing seems way too chaotic to me. I'm going to bed. The night will bring counsel. I'm depleted.

## May 26

Today is my daughter's tenth birthday and I'm far away. I remember her head with tousled hair on the day she was born. I remember saying "welcome on earth".

Today something else is born as well: a first run through of the material that is successful.

Yesterday I didn't find any coherence. Today, I got it: the show is comical, accessible, but very hard. Isabelle came to see in the afternoon and was crying. She tells me it's the most significant thing I made so far. Hugues Dumont, professor and specialised in human rights tells me he would want to see the representation of a soldier convinced that torture is necessary and he would also like to see a scene where you see what the extent of torture can be. Where does torture start and how far does it go? The actors are thinking on their feet. They come with improvisations that will become this:

Jerome is putting everybody in line. They are making an improbable military salute. He's crying orders:

*Are you ready to suffer for your country?*

*Yes*

*Are you ready to let other people suffer for your country?*

*Yes*

*Are you ready to do everything in order to obtain information?*

*Yes*

*Are you considering torture as an indispensable means to maintain public order?*

*Yes*

*Are you ready to lose your humanity in order to do what your superiors are asking from you?*

*Yes*

*Are you ready to betray your parents, your children?*

*Yes*

*Are you ready to torture them?*

*Yes*

*Are you ready to exterminate everybody?*

*Yes*

*Are you ready to destroy humanity?*

*Yes*

The scene about the extent of torture is less interesting. I have yet to find an interesting way to address it.

## **May 27**

I'm continuing to add new scenes to the show. The one about the extent of torture is still not sitting well with me. I changed it. It becomes one of the key scenes in the show.

Gerard is taking Bosco hostage and humiliates him in front of the audience, he forces him to behave like an idiot, to walk on all fours, he spits on him in the face and asks the other actors to do the same. In the end everybody is simply beating him to dust. And with every step down the road the audience is asked: Is this torture?

Yes, now we are only making theatre. The problems on the level of reconciliation are bygone, the torturers, the victims and the torturers-become-victims have all found their place. Everything is mixed. Isabelle is telling me that if you can't make the distinction any more, you lose your point of reference. In our dramaturgical reunion from this morning I asked Jerome if he could torture again. "It depends on my economical situation. I don't know. The question is difficult, I can not give you an answer." This clearly illustrates the problem of what is possible. How can we know how we would act if our life or the lives of our children would depend on it?

## May 28

I have in my team people who have been accused of crimes that we do not address. Do they know that I know? Do they know that I'm trying not to judge, that I'm trying to understand why and how the human soul can be pushed that far? How to explain without defending the indefensible? I don't want to fall into the trap of pleading like a lawyer. It's not the place to do it. It is more like a human gesture within the creative process, to make theatre without being blind. Those torturers, are they sincere in their attempt for reconciliation? I'm not asking myself the question. If I don't try to understand them, how could I enable them to regain their humanity? I'm not concerned with now, I see human acts inscribed in a very chaotic bundle that escapes me, where every act by one person is affecting the whole of humanity.

Three more nights and I will be with my loved ones...

## May 29

First representation in the garden. I am very happy. A lot of laughing and a lot of emotions.

It's becoming a very good show, I think. It's looking into the problematics of torture with a ravenous humour. Tomorrow we will go to the prison of Mpimba. "It's going to be explosive", two prisoners told me who got the permission to get out to see the show.

All the prisoners and ex prisoners are coming together to share their prison memories. "I spent years with Jean Berchmans, we slept in the same bed." one of them says. "The whole society is represented in this prison: former presidents of the republic, former prison directors, university professors, workers, even a preacher, even a priest. It's a society within the society.

But this is not how the day ends.

The following is a significant anecdote of the post-conflict context in which we are working: the owner of the property rented out the house for the leaders of the FNL who are coming to negotiate a peace treaty. He shows me the contract. I have to go immediately. I get angry...”you are doing a work of reconciliation but it’s impossible to negotiate with you” the arguments are heating up. I’m calling in Laurent and Isabelle to back me up. They tell me the stakes are too high, that I have to be prudent. Isabelle is adding, they could easily throw a grenade into the garden, just to scare me away.

The stone pot against the iron pot. I leave my castle. I found another house for the remaining three days. I won’t be camping in my anger.

And so it is that the president of the FNL will enter a house that has lost its good vibrations.

## **May 31**

Epic day that is the climax of the whole period. Six o’clock in the morning: forced to move out of my house.

Laurent has a flat tire on his way to the prison, he has all the technical material. He gets there one hour late. I don’t manage to accept the fact that we are late. We get to the prison with our tarps and our red costumes. The prison generals, prisoners themselves, are responsible for our safety. I’m used to it, but still. The long passageways with the mattresses hanging, people sleeping on the floor. A man looks up to me: “I’m hungry, miss”.

We get to the football field. I tell everybody to put the tarps down to form a circle. And I still have the same emotion I had the first time. I’m reading my journal from 2002

*The circle of the first time is the one I see here,  
the one I see working its magic.*

*Melchiade and I are putting tarps in a circle. It's not the first time, but it's the first time I look at it. People are making space, quietly, as the circle is being established, as they can witness the stage being put up, they fade away. The space where something will happen, the space where something has happened. The picture is in my head. There will be no other. The sacred circle of the first time.*

Some of the prisoners are setting up their chairs, some of them are standing. In total there must be more than two thousand people. The actors are changing into their costumes behind a screen of tarps in a corner of the courtyard. Little introduction by me and after that the actors are coming on stage singing. The circle is too big, ten metres in diameter instead of eight. There's a lot of noise, the actors' voices are not carrying very well. Luckily we have the character of the journalist who's taking his megaphone wherever he goes. Prosper tells me that people are hearing ok, they understand what's happening. The audience is paying attention, their faces are troubled. A mad man starts to holler. There's a lot of women that are staying in prison with their kids. There's a fight erupting amidst the audience. It's soon over, there's about twenty three people assuring security. People who came to the prison to see the show are getting nervous, mostly the Burundi. White people seem to be more confident. People from our team are laughing a lot around the stage. Jean Claude, always singing, is constantly asking people to pay attention, to concentrate on what's happening. Most of the show has a visual focus, but there's about four scenes where the words are pretty important: "I lost my humanity the day I...", "I felt humiliated the day I...",



Choir: Gérard, Floride, Jean-Claude, Marc, Gérard, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.

the scene about Marc's tortured childhood and the confrontation between the torturers and the victims. The actors are really going for it, they play magnificently. Edouard didn't want to play in prison, but he's here with us.

After the show we stayed with the prisoners. They want to talk. An old actor, still in prison, is paying a photographer to take a picture of him and me. They hand me application letters, addresses, telephone numbers. I try to listen to everybody. They write on little bits of paper that they managed to steal away from the audience. Sururu is making a focus group and holding a reunion with prisoners/spectators of which I doubt I will ever see the results.

And then we take off to play at Buterere, close to Bujumbura. When we get to the college, they tell us there is another activity planned for the teenagers. We went to the village centre instead. The local administrator is receiving us kindly and gives us permission to play.



Rehearsals, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.



Frederique and the little girls, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

It's starting to rain a bit, but I know it will pass. We set up the stage, and we made a circle of eight metres in diameter. The sound is better. In the beginning there's about a hundred people watching, by the end there's more than a thousand.

We laugh a lot, even me. The actors are inventing new stuff, they are relaxed and really engage with the audience. There's a lot of kids. I can see the visual impact of most scenes.

The audience is all excited. There's a woman next to me who has to laugh so much that I'm distracted. And later she will cry. I hear her say: "No, you can not sell a torturer on the village market!" Jean Claude is asking the audience if it's all a dream. They answer: "no, it's not a dream!" In this show, the audience is caught by the emotion when they were not expecting it. I ask them afterwards: "should we abolish the hardest scenes that are painful to watch?" "No" they say "it's cleaning out our hearts". Beautiful expression for the cathartic process.

He's laughing, crying, it's running amok. The show is light in its form, joyous and impudent in its content. The message is getting across by little tidbits. It's not a didactic show against torture, it's a show that questions the circumstances in which torture is taking place. The audience is going home with a lot of questions. The show is going against their convictions. It's not reassuring, it's unsettling, questioning.

What is interesting to me is the way the actors are playing, the truthfulness of their interpretation, their vulnerability, sensibility, their capacity to touch the audience. Suffering on stage is from such a different order than suffering in life.

One of the spectators that answered the "what is torture" question "right" is asking me to pay him for his good answer. The spectator who answered "yes" to every question.

“Was it you who killed my father? Yes.

What about you who ordered the killings? Yes....” is asking me for the medallion that was promised to her at the beginning of the scene. I tell her that her special prize is to go to prison since she confessed to everything. She’s laughing and I pay her a Fanta, the generic name for every drink with sugar. We all get back into the van. The general mood is very good. We all headed home to my new house to prepare a little party.

We take a shower. We are dirty like pigs, the costumes are drenched in sweat and dust, our voices are broken, our bodies empty and the adrenaline is pumping. All the symptoms are present.

I talk to them about the black hole that will come afterwards, when the adrenaline makes place for a certain sadness and feeling of emptiness.

I talk to them about the black hole that will come afterwards, when the adrenaline makes place for a certain sadness and feeling of emptiness.

In the evening we dance without end even though our DJ only has only two records with him... Beers and brochettes, everybody is joyous. We re-enact parts of the show with the big thrilling moments. Laurent is coming to join us with Adolphe.

The end of the evening, when everybody’s gone, is more sad: the girlfriend of Jerome is asking me for help. She’s in tears. She just had a baby. He’s cheating on her and beats her. I function as a go between.

Torture on a daily base, especially against woman seems to be a never ending story.

## June 1

In the airplane. I'm sad to leave. They came with me to say goodbye. They were planning to get me a gift but it never got there.

It's the first time that people want to buy me a present. And the first time people want to pay their share of the goat we bought for yesterday's party.

I spent the morning buying presents. And in the afternoon I'm sad and sunbathing at the side of the lake. Prosper is telling me he didn't sleep well. He's keeping his head down.

Floride is worrying. Tomorrow, everybody will head home again. She tells me she will rent a house and get a little business started with the money she earned. She's going to sell beans, sugar, tea and palm oil.

Prosper is still the chauffeur. He's probably going to lead a little theatre company. I heard him talk about starting a driving school with Charles, the husband of Isabelle.

Jean Claude went to get groceries. He got 4 dresses for his wife and he didn't drink this morning.

I didn't get the promised report from Sururu. So Prosper owes me a box of strawberries.

On the road to the airport: Marc and his big eyes, Bosco and his smile, Jean Claude the alley cat and Floride, my friend we all sing together:

“Prosper Youp la Boum, he's the sweetheart of his ladies”

An American lady is taking her dog on the plane. Bosco is asking me if she's paying for the dog. I say yes.

The dog is going and I have to stay here!

Jean Claude tells him:

“Get yourself on all fours and start barking.”

*Frédérique Lecomte*

## **METHOD OF WORK**

*My dear,*

*Now is the time to respond to all the questions you've kept asking me for all these years. Therefore, I'm going to buckle down and get to it systematically.*

*You know, I was in the jungle all the time, with Tarzan. I didn't have internet.*

*My methodology, since that's what this is about, is not like a document which couldn't be shared and transferred: more than anything it's a manual which must serve, and not just you as if it were an internal document, but anyone who would like to check it out.*

## **Reconciliation, where does it come from ?**

*My dear,*

*You ask me where this reconciliation that I often speak of comes from?*

*I should perhaps go back to the question of why I do theatre, don't you think?*

*I began at age 11, at the Louviere Conservatory. Theatre, in the uncommon person of Madame Lienard, whom I still think of, allowed me to put some distance between my parents and me, to grow up, to develop some independence.*

*It was a shock. A real revelation.*

*So theatre definitely reconciled me with myself, and also with my parents. It was the instrument of change. At the time, I was acting. For me, doing theatre meant being an actor.*

*I started directing after finishing university, at age 22. And there, what had been good for me became good for others, along the lines of a second revelation.*

*And that's how I explain myself.*

*Coming to the field of reconciliation and conflict management happened by chance through experiences, but when you rewind the film, the shift or rather the contamination of experiences into larger spheres followed by itself.*

*It's as if I wanted others to benefit from the wild experiences that I had lived.*

Signed: yours who has been saved by a miracle

## **Keeping things under control**

*My dear,*

*You ask me how I was led to design this methodology:*

*At first, it was to keep things under control.*

*I no longer wanted to be dependent on absent actors, on actors who blackmailed. I didn't want to have to ask anything, or to plead anymore, no more crises, no more threats, no more yelling.*

*I wanted to find a system in which I could replace actors at any moment. Too bad, we know what hangs from the noses of those who are absent! It's not very nice, I must admit.*

*But I encountered all of that.*

*So I needed a system where there wasn't a script to memorize, where I could easily replace someone, a system in which improvisation was the key.*

*In the end I became, thanks to that, so relaxed in the rehearsals that the actors miraculously became always agreeable, it became easy, full of laughter; not stressful, I didn't get annoyed (well, almost never). What I had seen as a method of control became a method of permission.*

*These permissions which I gave non-stop in rehearsals de-stressed the entire creative process, the actors, and me. All the structures I worked with softened. The rehearsal space was liberated.*

*And then, that allowed me to work with vulnerable people who couldn't be stressed. That led me to work in a therapeutic environment. And then, in war zones with people who are traumatized. That allowed me to always say, and I still say: It doesn't matter if you don't come. It doesn't matter if you are sick. It doesn't matter if you faint during the performance. It doesn't matter because everything must be able to be improvised in the moment itself.*

*My dear, in the end, the worst leads to the best.*

*I fell in a hole that I dug myself.*

*But a hole full of sweets.*

Signed: Lacan

## **Warm-ups**

*My dear,*

*You ask me to describe the warm-ups, their purpose, whether I always do them.*

*Well, my dear, I will not describe them for you. You can find all you need to know in the many books on the subject. There is of course Augusto Boal, there are also books about warm-ups and exercises in methodological books for doing theatre with children or adolescents. In general it's well-explained, and unpretentious. Look for it.*

*Generally, there are warm-ups that get the body going, and others that address concentration, and still others which build teams. It's important to work on the three levels. The objective is that the actors feel comfortable with the theatre, with each other and with me.*

*The warm-ups are very important: I never start a rehearsal without dancing, moving, playing games, concentrating.*

*I choose this or that warm-up according to the improvisations I will later request. It goes without saying that warm-ups are done according to the physical abilities of the participants.*

*Warm-ups help me too. At the first session, they help me to settle in, to feel out the group, to round it up.*

*The go'rounds: a crazy round of introductions to remember first names, but without ever asking for a person's curriculum vitae, nor why they are there, nor what they expect, nor what their job is, their ethnic group, their disease, why they are in prison.....just to link their name to a gesture that everyone then repeats.*

*Games of cat or mouse, always very funny, of gymnastics, games in pairs, in threes, touching each other, singing together, close your eyes, walk. And concentration exercises.*

*You should see people have a good time, laugh, move, touch each other. In these difficult contexts, it's always delightful.*

*It's a playful beginning which will fade during the process.*

*Signed: your warmed-up one.*

## **Participants' motivation**

*Dear,*

*You ask me about the participants' motivation, how they are chosen, what is the hardest thing.*

*Generally speaking, people in Africa don't come to do theatre. Let's be real. They come because they will be fed, for the per diem (daily payment), or to have a space of freedom. After a day or two the motivation changes.*

*As far as the choice of participants goes, in Africa, the sample must be representative: different age groups, education levels, sexes, ethnicities.*

*Or, according to the theme, it'll be a specific target population: albinos, prisoners, victims, newcomers, asylum-seekers, women who have been cut, torture victims, people living with HIV/AIDS, female victims of sexual violence, people who have been repatriated, orphans, war victims, people who are handicapped, child soldiers.*

*Sometimes there are auditions and I choose the people who are most available or gifted. But there are no prerequisites.*

*Sometimes people are required to do theatre, in a school for example, then it can be hell. I don't do that anymore.*

*Finally, there are those who pay for an internship. I don't do that anymore either.*

Signed: always ready!

## ***Stimulum stimuli stimolorum stimulis***

*Dear,*

*You ask me how I begin the rehearsals?*

*I give the actors a stimulus. The stimulus, it's a statement which launches an improvisation. This statement is inspired by different things: an image, a newspaper article, a scene in a movie, a word, a theoretical concept...*

*I'll give you a little recipe for how to invent one. They are created before the rehearsals and according to the target group (prisoners, first-generation immigrants, victims, professional actors, the unemployed).*

*In the case of the show with the child soldiers, for example, these stimuli were at the intersection of a global frame (the goals of resocializing child soldiers), the social-political climate (the war), the target population (child soldiers and young female victims of sexual violence) and the themes (freedom, re-acclimatization, removal of things which alienate people).*

*Stimuli emerge based on the circumstances of the moment, an improvisation, a context, or a risk. Then, there is a reflection to lead on how to create them, and on what the actor does with them.*

*The context.*

*It is clear that the context stimulates. You have to know how to translate the circumstances into stimuli. There are two types of stimuli: those which lead to an action, and those which lead to a chorus.*

## **Stimuli with child soldiers.**

### **For the boys:**

I remember my friend....  
How they took me by force  
The white people arrive  
A military gathering  
Characterizations of ethnic groups  
Distribution of money

### **For the girls:**

Learning to say no  
Manipulation of young girls  
Gifts  
Domestic servitude  
Bullet bait

### **In prison in Burundi**

Trying to sleep in a matchbox  
Making someone tell the truth  
Sell something which doesn't belong to you  
Make a joke in bad taste...

### **And for the choruses in prison...**

I've given up....  
I haven't given up...  
I've seen things I shouldn't see...  
I dreamt...

### **In a refugee camp in Burundi**

Escape

Show that you have suffered more than the other guy

### **The Neighborhood Police in Burundi**

Teach a police officer that can't stop torturing in the commissaries not to torture

Teach a police officer that can't stop being corrupted to avoid corruption

Teach a police officer not to use police services for the personal interests of politicians

### **With new immigrants in Belgium**

In a school with students who are first- and second-generation immigrants.

### **With newcomers in Belgium (in a school with students from the first and second generations of immigration)**

A departure scene....

A scene of good-bye

Play your father or your mother who arrives at the airport or at the train station for the first time in Europe; what does he or she think, what does he or she see...

Throw off your chains.

And for the choruses

I felt different the day when...

### **With addicts in after-care**

Teach someone to manage injustice

Try to leave

Try to come back

Do a characterization of yourself with the help of an improvised marionette

Invent a big lie, but give me the impression that it's true

### **Chorus**

In my life, I've seen.....

My father told me....

### **In Belgium**

Where does your money come from?

Where does it go?

Anticapitalist slogans

A didactic song about debt

Where is your money? Where do you believe it is?

A burlesque number with a found object.

*There isn't necessarily a basic theme, the stimulus can also come by chance. A word in the dictionary, a sentence I overheard, an image...*

*You have to pay attention to the syntax. In prison, I would never make someone say I regret...but instead I gave up....*

*For the actions, you need stimuli that get things going to give people the opportunity to play.*

*The sentence should be short, so it can be integrated immediately – in the sense both of included and used. The stimuli should be immediately understood.*

*What the actor does with the stimulus.*

*Either we put the actor in motion and immediately give him the stimulus, or we ask him to prepare a scene with his peers. That yields improvisations of very different quality, depending on whether or not there is time for preparation.*

*That being said, I often give the actors preparation time by saying You have 5 minutes, working in groups of 2, 5, or 10, to respond to this stimulus.*

*The result is often crude, but it enables me to understand a culture that is not my own.*

*It allows me, through the theater, to approach a reality which is foreign to me. Regardless of the stimulus, the actors always respond out of their reality. The improvisations they give me are an essential ingredient which allows me to understand the context, the problems, the tensions. It's at exactly that moment that the specific techniques of T & R come into play.*

*These preparations are often built on clichés, on sayings which are as old as the world, on familiar phrases, which can only be met by general approval.*

*At the same time, however poor and insignificant, these preparations are part of what is essential and they lend their modest contribution to the basic rule: EVERYTHING IS GRIST FOR THE MILL.*

*My dear, I must go, you make me work and put words to concepts that I use every day. Thank you for that, I send you a kiss.*

Signed: your stimulated one, your stimulant

## **The punctum**

*Dear,*

*You ask me what I do with the improvisations that are done for me.*

*You know that the improvisations are the raw material I work from. I pick a moment that interests me, I see a challenge, and I direct this moment (the punctum). I play around with the material to make a theatrical scene out of it.*

*In essence, what I'm looking for is to find a moment to focus on, or to which I connect all the information that I've collected from all sides.*

*The choice of the punctum is connected to me, to the actor, to the society in which I find myself at the moment.*

*I'm going to try to explain it to you clearly.*

*A moment, or more like a point: the punctum.*

*As far as the punctum goes, I found this little word in a work of Roland Barthes called La Chambre Claire. It can clarify the reading since, as underscored by people who attend the work: Finding the punctum is difficult. Not impossible.*

*Here is what Roland Barthes writes:*

*Punctum is: sting, speck, cut, little hole - and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).*

*Its existence (its «adventure») derived from the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world (no need to proceed to the point of contrast)*

*Perhaps I am the only one who sees it*

*In this habitually unary space, occasionally (but alas all too rarely) a « detail » attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This « detail » is the punctum.*

*Certain details may «prick» me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally.[...]*

*Hence the detail which interests me is not, or at least not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; it occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful; it does not necessarily attest to the photographer's art; it says only that the photographer was there, or else, still more simply, that he could not not photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object. [...] The Photographer's "second sight" does not consist in "seeing" but in being there.*

*How do i spot the punctum ?*

*The punctum, in photography, at first we don't see it, then, our eye is drawn by the sign, like a magnet. It's what gives quality to photography. When I see the improvisations, there is something which strikes me.*

*The punctum will serve as the basis for all the work of directing the play.*

*I have to find at least one per scene, it's an obligation.*

*Obligation to work on the punctum.*

*Why is it an obligation, you'll ask me?*

*In the entirety of the process, I can't imagine seeing an improvisation without finding an anchor point on which I can rebound and create a scene. It's a recognition of what the actors just produced in front of me. If the actors are vulnerable, as they are called in the jargon, finding a point on which I can work on the scene is a challenge which I always require myself to take on, simply because I can't imagine myself saying: There isn't anything interesting in your scene. We're throwing it out....It is very rare that I can't find a punctum on which to rebound. When it does happen it's often due to fatigue, and always at the end of the rehearsal.*

*This obligation I give myself has several advantages: it increases the self-esteem of the actors be they amateurs or professionals. Also it forces me to invent, regardless of what the actors presented by way of improvisation. It's an obligation to rebound, an obligation to be available, to listen well, to be attentive, to be interested in what is actually happening.*

*As for me, I broaden the meaning of the punctum*

*It can be something one finds interesting, vibrant, or funny in the content. It has nothing to do with being well done. The punctum is at the intersection of many things. But I'm not going to work on just any punctum. It's the sticking point, the little stitch in the knitting that I am going to use. That stitch there, I'm going to re-work it.*

*How I choose the punctum ?*

*The more the punctum is at the intersection of several signs, the more interesting and rich it will be. It can be something that is important for the actor. Or maybe it's a detail that is obvious, that shows through the scene and seems to me to be unavoidable.*

*This punctum is the point I have to look for.*

*It's the little detail that is unspoken, that is sometimes hidden and then reveals itself. A shadow I think I see but that remains a shadow. It's very difficult to give an example, but do the exercise of trying to find an element in a scene which seems interesting to you – or let's say, actually: vibrant.*

*The punctum can be, for example, an image, a sentence, a funny moment, a moving moment, a moment the actor doesn't notice, a performance by an actor, a moment of awareness.*

*The actor isn't always aware of what is striking*

*This unspoken expression, which escapes the actor, to find it, that's one thing: what I mean to say is....My dear, I can't find the words, but I'm working on it.*

*There are three stages with this type of punctum which show us different parts of the actor:*

*There is the part of the actors, who don't realize what they are showing.*

*There is the part of the director, who doesn't speak what they sees but puts it on the stage*

*There is the part of the director who says what they see.*

*To say it or not to say it, that is the question!*

*You have to show the actor the image he produces, and which he doesn't necessarily realize he did. It's very important, because by default, the director uses, to his own ends, the alienation of the actor to create something artistic. As far as I'm concerned, it's about using a punctum which the actor is unaware of to make a theatre scene which will act on the actor, the way a developer in photography does. A situation will be brought forward by a process of amplification of this hidden image. This amplification will make it noticeable. The director has to enlarge the punctum, develop it, have the actors work with it. Then, I echo what I see to the actor, the images they reflect, the scenes they are acting and what I understand from the scenes. It's a crucial moment both for them and for me.*

*I don't tell the actor what I see.*

*It is however appropriate to talk with the actor about the scene. Talking about issues in support of a scene is a defining element of Theatre and Reconciliation. The principle is the same in a war zone: the issue is explored through a theater scene; it's what I call "from the arena to the stage".*

*But it isn't particularly those punctums that I am looking for.*

*It is however appropriate to talk about them, because when I give art therapy courses the students always want to find the punctums which have escaped the actor – no doubt they think it's part of their job. There are lots of punctums to find, and that type is rare and delicate. But it would seem that people who want to use the art of theater for therapeutic purposes are particularly interested in searching for those punctums, which frankly is not a good idea.*

*I'll come back to that when I talk about theatre and its connection to painful subject matter.*

*In summary, the punctum, the point on which I will work, is at the intersection of several things which are understandable by the greatest number of people. It makes sense, it has an impact on the audience, it impacts the actor, it has a cathartic effect, it highlights a mystery, it liberates.*

*There you go my dear, once again, don't get discouraged.*

Signed, your stricken unsalaried one

### **Knead, remove from reality, add tension**

*My dear,*

*You ask me how I work with the punctum, what do I do to put it on stage.*

*I return to the raw material from the improvisation and ask that it be redone, giving specific instructions that develop it, refine it, modify it. I use several technical tools that I will review.*

*When you stage things, you always have to build a dramatic tension, a conflict on the stage.*

*Esthetic tension*

*Rhythmic tension*

*Vocal tension*

*Musical tension*

*Social tension*

*Political tension*

*I always begin with finding the form, before adding the content to it. It seems like a very important step in my process. I never forget that theater is a visual art. I always keep in mind an audience of children. Or people who are deaf. I always look for images, rhythms, tensions, speeches that are easy to understand, even naïve. For me, there always has to be something to look at. I work as if I had to deal with a noisy and distracted audience.*

*And so first I stage a theatrical form, and then I insert the content into it.*

*If you want to fill a bag with stones, you first have to start with the big stones and then add the little ones. For me, the big stones are the visual aspects, while the little stones are the content. That certainly doesn't mean that the content is less important! But I believe that if the visual aspect and the overall scene aren't immediately understood the text won't be understood either. It's definitely the image that is more important than the text.*

*And then, I take it out of reality. To take it out of reality, that means to remove all traces of everyday conversation and context: Neither Hello, how are you, want to meet for a drink? Nor You're coming from school, did you work hard?*

*We are always in the here and now in a theatre space, and in front of the audience.*

*I remove the everyday conversations.*

*I remove the everyday context.*

*I remove words that refer too much to place or to time, no dates, no places.*

*I remove the narrative structure of the scene to reduce it to its simplest expression.*

*I place it in the here and now and in so doing, the message is made universal.*

*The message reaches beyond the concrete setting that holds it. For example, if I say 1994, the storm surges in Burundi, it's not the same thing as when Jean-Claude says: Oh time, the time before, storm, you blew on my country. It's particularly important in conflict zones, where either party to the conflict can hijack an event by putting a date on it.*

*The meaning doesn't just become universal, but also symbolic.*

*I'm going to give you an example of a scene written in Burundi, which was improvised based on a play by Shakespeare, The Tempest.*

*The scene has become one which refers to different crises that Burundi has faced.*

We are on a trip in a boat.

I walk in the dark.

I am on the edge of a pit

I am on the edge of death.

No-one is coming.

I only see black clouds.

I see many people before me.

They are people of the sea.

Why are they coming toward me?

I begin to be afraid.

I just passed them.

But I am in the dark.

Lightning, thunder. The hurricane is coming.

It might destroy my boat.

I can't take any more.

These trees ahead of me, I don't understand

This light which goes on, a black light.

They are fish.

I navigate on the back of death.

I don't know if I will cross in peace.

What pretty houses are walking!  
The fog is thick.  
The big rock ahead of me!  
What misfortune, it's death ahead of me which is there, hi  
ding.  
Come my ancestors.  
I am exhausted.  
Look at me! The water is turning red.  
Where is that girl, who was like an angel?  
There are waves.  
Perhaps that girl came out of a fish's mouth.  
This lightning, this thunder.  
I row on the back of death.  
Me, I don't know the sea of my children  
Who are you the mother of my children?  
Pay attention my children, you are cursed, because you don't  
know your mother.  
I move forward in the dark.  
What is this type of big rock that I ran into?  
A monster! I just ran into a monster.  
I hear birds singing on the other side, it's very far.  
I don't know if I'm going to get there.  
They sing zwi, zwi, zwi.  
I don't know if I am going to cross.

*We can think of this scene as universal, it can be performed anywhere, in any context of war or something else, everyone can identify with this journey in the fog. It would have sufficed to add a date: 1993 or 1972 and a place: Bujumbura, Lake Tanganyika, and the message would have lost its universality and its symbolism.*

*There, dear, in this case, the text is made more precise with clear rules and forbidden words.*

Signed: your author

## **The toolbox**

*My dear,*

*You ask me to open my toolbox.*

*The 4th wall*

*Playing with the 4th wall is part of a technique of stage direction.*

*The 4th wall is a fictional wall which separates the stage from the performance hall. If the scene takes place and the audience member watches the play as if watching through a keyhole, there is a fourth wall. On the other hand, at the circus where the clown speaks directly with the audience there is not a fourth wall.*

*There are different thicknesses of the 4th wall, and I constantly play with those thicknesses, but most of the time, in my performances, it doesn't exist.*

*That is due to my doing theatre in Africa, and to the fact that we play outside in the round, which implies that we always have a connection with the audience.*

*On the other hand, when I use a chorus, at the beginning there is always a 4th wall, it's like an internal dialogue.*

*To summarize the 4th wall:*

*When I ignore the presence of the audience, there is a 4th wall.*

*When I address the public directly, I break down the 4th wall.*

*The look: in relationship with the absence of the 4th wall, I ask the actors to look the audience directly in the eyes. It's not about looking above the audience members, but really looking at them.*

*Professional actors have a tendency to look offstage into the wings and amateur actors are shy. It's really a challenge, to force someone to look the audience in the eyes, not ignore their presence, not pretend they aren't there.*

*In Africa, women really have a hard time maintaining eye contact, I teach them to do it for the purposes of the theater, and if they get additional benefit out of it for other things, so much the better!*

*In my toolbox, to contaminate is to multiply things. If an actor does an action it is repeated by the others. Or inversely, if something was done by several people I isolate one person among them.*

*Contamination allows me to underscore images, themes, to make them stronger.*

*Isolation, on the other hand, allows me to add a climax, to highlight a more sensitive point.*

*Amplification.*

*There can be amplification:*

*Of the voice*

*Of muscles: I mean of the tension in one's muscles and amplification of the energy that there is on the stage*

*Of conflict: increasing the number of actors who say or do something amplifies the conflict and generalizes it to the whole of the cast and of society.*

*Of content: the amplification of conflict echoes the content which is revealed in its enormity. If a single child soldier does a military salute, it doesn't have the same meaning as if 80 child soldiers do it. The multiplication of it reveals the dysfunction.*

*I explore different tones of action, experiment.*

*I play with different types of action which I sometimes juxtapose in the same scene.*

*I experiment with performance forms: the clown, the circus, musical comedies, Bollywood cinema.*

*I look to theatre and to dance: tragedy, comedy, Brechtian Distancing, Shakespeare, Pina Bausch.*

*I also look to styles of film: silent films, musical comedies, different authors; Fellini, Almodovar, Bergman, Chaplin, Cassavetes...*

*Briefly, I try different tones, I experiment with genres, I play with the material.*

*I want to electrify the audience.*

*Electrify the audience.*

*It's about surprising the audience member by stinging him with something he doesn't expect. In general, it's switching from*

*laughing to crying, or the reverse. The audience member is stung and no longer knows which leg to stand on.*

*I play with catharsis. The most cathartic shows I've done are those in Africa, during a time of conflict. The audience is very sensitive, and the actors also. When a crime scene is replayed, if it is universalized, the cathartic effect on the audience members is immediate.*

*At the time, in Burundi, I was able to note the testimonies of some audience members. Here is one which is very meaningful :*

*At the beginning it displeased me and revolted me, since I saw the same anger and the same suffering that I had to endure in fleeing and in hiding with one of my children, while powerlessly seeing how people were decapitated. In that moment, if someone could've given me a stick, I would've beat the actor who played that, because it reminded me of very painful things; the last straw of the misery was when they started to pound on a child. I couldn't take it anymore.*

*But afterwards they spent some time saying it was necessary to ask for forgiveness, and I started to calm down. I told myself that actually I can't bring back those who are dead, and so it is better to let justice work, otherwise there is nothing else to do. This is how I gradually became calm again, but to be honest everything they acted gave me the shivers and made my heart and my body tremble.*

*I work a lot with music. Sometimes against it, sometimes with it. Occasionally it happens by chance. I always use music in Europe. In Africa, I always have a musician with me.*

*There you go, my dear. You have a glimpse of the tools I use.*

## **Just one thing is enough**

*My dear,*

*You ask me how I make a scene clear.*

*It's an art! When I see others giving it a try in trainings, it seems to be difficult. That's the game, you have to search for the treasure!*

*Let's go in order:*

*The actors do an improvisation, in which I identify the punctum. In general this improvisation is very messy, but also very chaotic, meaning it touches on several messages. In pulling out the punctum, the first organizing step is taken.*

*It's one single little moment, and not a whole scene with a beginning, middle and an end. I only take this little moment, and I'm going to work with it.*

*It's like cutting the branch of a tree and making a plant start out of it...with seeds of stage direction I hatch this start and make it take a clear direction with the help of different supports.*

*I get rid of everything which could trouble the clarity of the scene.*

*You have to want to say just one thing; preferably the idea should be simple and the image strong. For example, if you want to talk about corruption, you have to see an image of corruption right away, money passing on the sly from one hand to another. If the punctum was children who die in rows in combat, it doesn't do any good to show them taking up their arms, or fighting, you have to reduce the image to its simplest expression: walk, fall, step over the dead, fall. You mustn't try to say too much in a scene. One single thing is enough. Its meaning will be fleshed out in the staging.*

*I think it's really difficult. But you've got to stick with it.*

*Besides, once the punctum is chosen, it's easier to work on that one point than to work on the entire scene.*

*If however you want to work on an entire scene, you have to cut it into different parts and nourish each one of them.*

*Ultimately, it's like in life: if you have a big task to accomplish, you have to divide it into little tasks and take up each little task: otherwise you are drowned by the sheer volume of the work.*

*My dear, it's a little bit what happens to me as I explain how I work to you. I see you before me, and I take one piece at a time.*

Signed, your directed one

## **Choruses**

*My dear,*

*You ask me what the choruses are which I talk about so much.*

*The idea came to me after seeing the Wim Wenders film, *The wings of desire*. Angels heard the thoughts of people, in the subway, in the library, in the street....I was very moved. I asked myself how I could do that with theatre. How can a thought be audible like in a cartoon, a cloud with little bubbles leading to it....*

*First I created the conditions to hear the thought inside one's head, that's where the school of fish came from, a warm-up where everyone walks together in the same direction without any leader of the fish. Once the actors were in a state of concentration the words, like an audible thought, could come through.*

*The first choruses that I did were very moving, and still today I do them with the same emotion.*

*For me, the things said by the choruses echo the collective consciousness: everyone can add in their own thoughts, amidst the silences of the actors. It also makes me think of the historical chorus, of the voice of the people, meaning that of wisdom. It is proven that, in Burundi, in war-time, the chorus would bet on the human community....*

*I'm going to give you an example of a chorus, in a prison.*

I'm waiting (chorus, prison, Gitega)

**Protais :**

I'm waiting with hopelessness.

I'm waiting without knowing the end of days. There are bad thoughts.

8 years, without anyone coming to see me.

I await my trial.

I wait without hope.

My life is spent in prison. I await my journey. May Jesus Christ not leave me!

Do I know God? Because men have abandoned me.

**Marc :**

I'm waiting for impossible things.

Will I be judged after my death? After I hang myself? I can only wait. What? Wait.

**Firmin :**

I wait and I will wait for things that won't come and that don't have limits, things, like flying birds. How long will I wait? Await the impossible. Strange things. But things

get turned around.

Those who wait for the impossible, it's Jesus Christ that gives me everything. I don't have to wait for those negotiations. Until when? Until where? Until I'm old and grey? I am in the desert.

**Denise :**

I'm waiting for the trial. I will be judged. Years that I won't be able to finish. No more pain that I won't be able to get rid of. We are waiting like dead people. We are at the end.

*Sentences should be short, without poetry, without philosophy. It isn't necessary to write the sentence in one's head before saying it, it's just important to see the image.*

*The actor is never obligated to speak and, if they speak, they don't have to speak the truth: but I must believe them.*

*My dear, the choruses are the most personal parts of my shows. They are where one really feels that the actors are speaking about themselves.*

Signed: your Coryphaeus

**Different forms of text**

*My dear,*

*You ask me how different forms of text in the shows are created.*

*There are clownish interludes in each show. They are always in the style of catastrophic irony.*

*For example in Burundi, in a scene where one actor teaches another to cut necks with a machete, or there is a competition for who has suffered more, or it's how to become a torturer, or how to learn not to torture in the police stations....In a post-conflict context, these scenes help me a lot, as they allow us to address dysfunction in a humorous fashion. It's helpful and it allows me to escape censure.*

*I also add songs. Two musicians work with me, a guitar player, Ekoma, in the Congo and in Burundi Jean-Claude who plays the Ikembe. They both create songs on the spot to go along with the improvisations. These songs summarize in simple words the emotion or the dialogue contained in a scene. They support the dramatic or the rhythmic action.*

### **The song of the trial beneath the stars by Jean Claude**

Sun, moon  
Come bring light to this stage  
Come bring light to these men  
Today is the big day  
We're going to see scenes we've never seen in our lives  
Where the truth will be spoken  
Where judgment will be delivered  
Where justice will be fair

Sun, moon  
Bring light to these men  
Today on this stage  
All the world will have a chance to speak  
Fighters, widows, orphans

Sun, moon  
Come bring light to this stage  
Come bring light to these men

*Posters. I only introduce them in Europe. In the Grand Pestacle, I had asked the actors what they would write if they were giving to charity. A short sentence, related to their personality or their history.*

I would like people to find me beautiful  
Looking for a Belgian husband, I am docile, flexible, inexpensive and cut  
I am dead, bring me back to life  
I don't want children, help me  
I am very funny, you will love me  
Disqualified boss

*Or posters which announce scenes as in Amakuba:*

“the big scene of criminal techniques”.

*And then there are also personal histories.*

*There are many of them. They are not left in their raw state. They are re-worked syntactically and symbolically starting from the personal story so that the actors can, through the rehearsal and the instructions given about acting, syntax and actions, move away, distance themselves, symbolize their personal histories.*

*For example, in Burundi, in Habuze Iki, a woman who is looking for her children.*

*It's the story of Therese, when she flees, during the war: in the confusion, she lost her children. During an improvisation she delivers this testimony.*

*I take it up, I give her directions on the text: short sentences, say Yooooooh before the sentences, as in Greek tragedies. For the acting, I ask her to look for her children, to move as she would in moments of panic and fright.*

*Little by little over the course of the rehearsals the text becomes this:*

**Thérèse :**

Yoooo, yooooh! My heart jumps, I am afraid

I was with my children,

But I can't find them

Where did they go?

Salvator, yoooh! Salvator! Oh!

Calinie! Hey! Calinie! Yoooh!

My children, where could they be? (she cries)

Oh! My dear children who were still with me. My oldest and my youngest.

Where am I going to go?

Where will I go?

I just lost them without even being able to bury their bodies

Yoooooooooooooooooooooh.

*Sometimes I also use quotes taken from newspapers or interviews: sometimes also from slogans*

*Often I put a presenter in a scene.*

*They link the different pieces of the show.*

*Sometimes they play the role of director on stage.*

*They give an external point of view, taking some distance from what happens on stage. They do a commentary.*

*It's really a role that ties the show together, that puts it at a distance, also that explains the threads of the show.*

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
you will see a scene of theatrical anthropology from the 1960s, a little table, a cup of coffee, a cookie, we are in Lise's bedroom. Here, there is a fourth wall, we look at Lise through the keyhole. She doesn't see us.

*My dear, that's it for the texts,*

Signed: Sophocles



Warm-up, «Child Soldiers» project, right, Chendeko, DRC, 2014. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.



François, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2014. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel

## **Presence to oneself**

*My dear,*

*You ask me or you even worry about knowing at what point this methodology is directive? What is the space for creative freedom of the participants?*

*Perhaps you imagine that as soon as there is a methodology, the boundaries are closed so tightly that there is little space left for creativity?*

*The actors have room for creative invention on several different levels:*

*- What they give me as improvisation, their manner of seeing things, their worries. My work is based entirely on that. Therefore the starting point for the work on a scene is the improvisation itself.*

*- The punctum: even if it's I who choose it, it is always in direct relationship with the actors.*

*- The work on the improvisation and the direction of the scene itself are mine, I use my techniques, my tools, my obsessions, my vision.*

*- Within each scene itself, the actors are free to improvise within the boundaries I gave them.*

*Compared with other play directors, the freedom which I give to the actors is huge. I think there are few directors who are as hands-off as I am.*

*It's strange, because, evidently, I give the opposite impression. Hence your question. You should ask the actors.*

*My dear, you also ask me what I expect of the actors, what I ask of them, what I emphasize.*



Bosco, «Victims of Torture and Torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véronique Vercheval.



Julie and Jean-Marie, the assistant presenter-translator, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2014. Photo Benjamin Géminel.

*No performance.*

*I don't ask them to perform. I don't ask them to show me that they act well, to know how to dance or to deliver lines, or even to study, to know how to read or write. I ask them to be present themselves.*

*I work so that they find the right energy to say what they have to say or to do what they have to do. That particular energy, they have to be able to reproduce it.*

*Often, when one asks an actor to reproduce what they have just done, it rings false. The actor has a tendency to go directly toward what worked well in the improvised scene. That is very difficult to reproduce.*

*Consequently, I don't ask them to re-do, or to re-state, or to have the same rhythm or the same phrasing. I ask them to find the same energy which allowed them to do the first improvisation. I frame the scene, of course, it doesn't stay as an improvisation. But inside the frame, things move, the actors can invent whatever they want, within the boundaries.*

*Sometimes I am asked if everything is improvised. No, in fact it's fixed, but not with the exact words.*

*I'm going to give you an old example, that of Christine, because it's thanks to her that I put my finger on the process.*

*In le Grand Peste, she played a scene of a knife-thrower, a bloody handkerchief covering her eyes, in which she began with "he can't aim".*

*She made us roar with laughter. Afterwards, when she did it again and re-stated the sentences which made us laugh at first, it no longer worked. Something had disappeared.*

*What had disappeared? The presence to herself, the right rhythm, the surprise, the invention, the tension. Only the envelope was left, the rest was empty. I often have that impression at the theatre when actors use tricks of the trade. Only the envelope is left: the soul has disappeared.*

*So, to find what had disappeared, I asked that she invent, every night, new images with her incompetent knife thrower. From then on, the other actors were stretched by the new inventions that Christine was giving us. And the scene worked again.*

*So, the frame, it's what is left: she began by "He can't aim", I asked her to see the images of someone who throws knives, how he was dressed, what he was like physically, what her interactions with him were, what she blamed him for, if that was going to continue for a long time...*

*That, that's the frame. Inside of it, she could say whatever she wanted. So, she invented incredible things every night.*

*She told me that she practiced in her kitchen, not the words, but the state of being open, the moment of throwing herself into the void to let the images come to her. They were always right, and, with good timing and good rhythm during the performance, they would work for us.*

*If, sometimes, she didn't find the presence to herself during the performance, she had a tendency to fill the void. So I told her that she mustn't be afraid of the void, not to fill it all up – neither the time, nor the silence. She has to wait until the presence to herself returns and trust the abyss which opens in front of her.*

*I ask the actors to trust the moment. The method and the theatrical writing lend themselves to that, since the text isn't written in stone.*

*The actors who are able to do it love it: to be able to rebound off each situation, to be able to open his awareness to all the sensations.*

*It's about figuring out how to make the text permanently alive. This presence to oneself is a magical thing anchored in the present, a sort of state of meditation, of being lost in the moment, in what happens. You have to let yourself go and see what happens.*

*I'm not looking for perfection. I never work on the perfection of a gesture, or of a word. Perfection in that sense for me is synonymous with repression.*

*It's not about creating wise monkeys, but giving people the ability in the theatre, and undoubtedly also in life, to rebound off the unexpected and to get something out of every situation.*

*My work is based on surprise, on encouraging vulnerability, on preserving spontaneity.*

*I always try to give the actors good energy, to allow them to invent with as much freedom as possible.*

*It's about re-creating in the redoing. The boundaries are set but shifts within them are welcome. The chaos is organized, but never choreographed.*

*Unexpected things are desired and sought after.*

*Everything is put in place so that they can come.*

*I bet on energy and invention.*

*I try to find the same energy from the first time, which allowed for the breakthrough of the punctum. I don't try to have the actor redo the complicated part which enabled the scene, but to find the magic moment, by finding again the right energy that was within it. For that, you have to let yourself go, and especially not be afraid of getting lost: that's often when the scene comes back to life.*

*The moment of the action begins in the loss, in taking a risk.*

*It's the lived moment which makes the scene come alive.  
Everything is put in place so that the lived experience emerges*

*Don't stop the motor. The actors in the midst of improvising are entirely involved both in mind and in body. They are put in a state of self-abandon during the warm-up. Once the stimulus is given, they mustn't slow down the machine, they must pump this energy and never stop the motor.*

*You learn how to do it, it's a particularly difficult challenge among young people who have a tendency to laugh at themselves when they do it (which stops the motor), or to judge (the motor stops), or to not dare to abandon themselves to the universe without shame (the motor stops), to have definitively lost the possibility of playing like a child (the motor stops).*

*You have to constantly ride the actors' backs to keep the motor warm and always running.*

*Several elements make it possible to have this spontaneity and to maintain peoples' concentration; that's why we never take breaks. We leave lots of room for that which is unexpected. I always encourage. I maintain the rhythm. Nothing slows it down, there is no room for doubt nor for states of the soul. The spirit of the group is the priority.*

*There you go my dear, you just have to throw yourself into it and the wings grow.*

Signed: the unexpected one

## **Live stage production**

*My dear,*

*You ask me what live stage production is and how I do it.*

*I sometimes use live stage production during the show, but also in putting it together. The scenes are worked on during the rehearsals. But the actual editing of the show can be done in front of the audience and according to the circumstances of the moment, to the presence or the absence of specific actors. It's very practical with fragile actors. I take as much stress as I can on myself to leave the actor to his concentration, to his creativity and to the joy of the performance.*

*The actors produced a number of scenes which have been prepared.*

*I enter them succinctly into a spreadsheet. The scenes are organized by themes, and by names of the actors, and colors indicate their intensity. The goal is to immediately see things clearly on the list.*

*Then with the actors I establish a silent code to specify through a gesture what scene will be played. The code designates the person or people who need to be on the stage, also the scene that they need to play. This code also allows me to tell the actors to stop a scene, as well as to change different qualities like the volume of the sound, the rhythm, the level of the action, ...*

*It's very basic: I do a little gesture, in agreement with the actors, which clearly shows them what scene I mean.*

*Through this code, I communicate the order of the scenes to the actors as we gradually work through the performance. It's a canvas in real-time.*

*The content of each scene is fixed; on the other hand the order is yet to be determined.*

*So I play the role of an orchestra conductor, and organize the performance according to its rhythm, theoretical structures, and the audience members' reactions.*

*I do the stage direction in front of the audience, and not only in the rehearsals. The staging is done rhythmically, alternating happy scenes with calmer scenes. It's built more like a musical score than a story.*

*All the participants must appear. Everyone has and will have their place.*

*Everyone is at the same level, there are no starring roles, supporting roles, etc. The method facilitates the performance, even if someone is absent. Quite simply, if a scene is removed, no one notices. In certain situations live staging isn't possible, for example in a country at war, where the commanders want to have the right to preview what will be played. Live staging allows for the presentation of certain juxtapositions of scenes before the test-audience.*

*Advantages of live staging:*

*The actors are on alert, they are at full attention during the entire performance.*

*The actors are under the effect of surprise and rediscovery of their scene as each time they begin it having been in another energy, with another sensitivity.*

*The audience member has the sense each time of attending something unique.*

*If live staging carries a risk, it is compensated for by the excitement of the risk.*

*In rehearsals, I often turn things over to one of the actors who can give live staging a try. I can tell you they love that! It allows me to see another world on the stage, and also to put my finger on what doesn't work.*

*Managing the worries of fragile participants: all situations which might compromise the actual achievement of the performance are carefully set aside. There are no scripts to memorize, the director is always there, puts the show together live, and therefore adapts it according to the circumstances of the moment which can change at the last minute: the absence of an actor, the refusal of another to go on, the departure of an actor during a performance, abandoning the night before the show... the entire structure is designed to allow the performance to take place in spite of everything, without being waylaid by setbacks of any kind.*

*After a staging attempt it's necessary to spend time organizing everything.*

*A certain number of criteria are used. First I separate the play into three parts:*

*- A presentation phase, more or less a quarter of the duration of the play, started by a scene which will determine the color of everything which follows. The theme is discovered, and the characters, and the building phase leads us to the body of the performance.*

*- The body of the staging, more or less half of the total duration, which includes the unfolding of the composition and its contents. It needs to lead to a climax. All of the characters and the content unfold until a sort of hinge event takes place. It is here more a question of rhythm, of conflict, of tension than of a playwright event in and of itself.*

*- The conclusion, which is more or less a quarter of the performance, brings together the contents in replaying the strong*

*images that illustrate the theme. We will work on the strong, sensitive material.*

*Classifications to make sense of it?*

*I use filtered tables.*

*I filter scenes by theme, by name of the actors, and that's what I use to do the staging: it allows me to bring the actors on without forgetting anyone, and make sure everyone is seen in the first part of the performance, but also to see the personal evolution of the character. This evolution must be analyzed for each one of the characters.*

*Then I overlay an intensity filter which to me, is the most important. It's what will determine the order of the scenes: strong, fast, funny or moving...*

*For the first attempt at putting the scenes together live I rely on the sheet organized by names. The colors help me see the intensity of the scenes right away and I build, alternating them rhythmically. At the same time as I do the staging I add the music. I continue working this way by trial and error, I keep the collages of the scenes that work.*

*Once that is done, I decide to put together an edited version on paper, which will especially focus on the content of the show. I will have a tendency, in that case, to group the scenes with a similar theme.*

*Finally, in looking for and in changing the order of the scenes, one gets a different story. I make my choice to go with one version, but it will be open to change at the last minute.*

*I am always present at the performances, but only in Belgium. In Africa, the shows go on without me, with an assistant.*

Signed: your organized one.

## **The red thread**

*Dear,*

*You ask me how I give meaning to the show?*

*The red thread of the performance.*

*You have to find a guiding thread and for each show ask yourself the following questions about the characters who are on the stage:*

*Who are they?*

*Where are they?*

*What are they doing?*

*What theme are they addressing?*

*How do they feel?*

*What are they looking for?*

*What game are they playing?*

*Why are they doing it?*

*What do they want to say?*

*What will be the benefit for them?*

*What will be the benefit for the audience?*

*There is also the red thread of the actors.*

*The different improvisations of an actor end up creating pieces, which will link themselves together. It's about finding an anchor point in the person who will become a person/a character: I call this the personal red thread. There needs to be a coherence within the person through the different scenes they play, a thread that ties them all together. It is also important to build different facets of the character, to see the person from different angles, through different scenes. The more complete and visible the portrait is, the more the person/character will be present.*

Signed: your tightrope walker

## The performance

*My dear,*

*You ask me if I always do a performance*

*Whether it's a small format presented to 2 or 3 people or something more ambitious before a large number of spectators, I always do a performance. A type of final bouquet.*

*Very often I work with people who don't have a long-term perspective in the context of their lives. The goal of the final perspective, the performance or the performances, is to show them a way of working which leads to something. Performing in front of an audience is one way of affirming oneself toward the outside, of putting the action in front of people.*

*In a conflict zone, putting actors on stage who are protagonists in the conflict makes immediately visible, and in the most concrete way, that doing something together is possible. Through the public performance there is a vision of coming together; hearing the same talk. Working together is shown to be do-able.*

*Through the public performance, there is a change in pre-conceptions of the other; things are put into question, one can visualize the integration which is taking place (if they can do it, why not me?). The audience member receives intimate stories of people that are usually very distant from them.*

*The public performance is an example of in-depth decompartmentalization, a bypassing of clichés and preconceptions where a process of relating to the other is begun.*

*So, my dear, performing is a necessary step. To create theater that would not be seen, that would no longer be actual theater.*

*It would be therapy or psychodrama. And it's because I do theater and I take it through to the performance that the collateral effects (reconciliation, therapeutic effects) also can be included within the goal of the performance.*

Signed: your collateral effect

## **And it deteriorates**

*My dear,*

*You ask me if I easily let go of the performance once it's finished.*

*Alas, I have to let it go. I make myself. In Africa, there are performances which continued without me for more than a year. With disastrous consequences. Each day the performance was worse. The level of quality diminished irreparably. It was a catastrophe.*

*How can I explain to the non-governmental organizations that hire me and that finance my work that the performances need the oversight, the support of a professional? How can I explain that it's the artistic quality that allows the catharsis to happen?*

*If the quality isn't there, the message won't be communicated and the catharsis won't happen either. It's impossible to explain that to the organizations! They want quantitative results: number of spectators, measures of changes in attitude, figures, graphs, columns. I can't fight against that. The whole system doesn't work. I don't even talk to them about it. I get hired for specific goals, I make myself flexible to deal with the obligations. When the show is created it is at its best. But if it is allowed to fall into the hands of only the actors....*

*I think about the show about the Neighborhood Police in Burundi, which ran for more than a year all by itself. My professional actors were there to guarantee the quality. I saw it a year later. There was a sound system that didn't work, the actors overplayed. And the worst thing was that they thought that it was good!*

*It falls apart quickly. It becomes similar to a photocopy of a photocopy, you can't see anything anymore. The actors and the spectators are easily satisfied, they think it's enough to have the actors, the costumes, to perform the play, and that that is enough. But no! The thread on which the quality of the performance rests is thin, it's like a thread stretched thin. If an attentive professional isn't there, the thread relaxes. The soul of the play disappears. It lacks a tension. It lacks a fire. And then, you can't warm up again at the performance. The light goes out.*

*Even more serious, when they are political subjects, in a conflict situation, the degradation becomes dangerous. In Africa, we had several brushes with catastrophe: if the actors are afraid to play a scene, they remove it, and it's often the most interesting scene. And I tell them: If you don't want to do theatre, play soccer, that way everyone will get along.*

Signed: your frustrated one

## **Popular**

*My dear,*

*You tell me my theater is popular.*

*I use popular aesthetics, referencing the culture of the masses: cabaret, clowns, musical comedies, familiar songs, Bollywood, popular (or unpopular) movie references.*

*The music that I use in Belgium is also popular, as in well-known or immediately recognizable.*

*But I turn aside, I trick the spectator, I give him a sugar apple: but I put pepper in the apple. And it starts from the beginning: the bodies which are presented to the spectatore are not in fashion or made to be attractive (in other words, they have lived) the places where we play are often slums (or in any case rarely institutional places), which introduces a stimulating precariousness, a constructive destabilization: you have to taste the pepper to appreciate the apple....*

*I have a subversive relationship with the audience. I put them in a situation where they feel comfortable, where they laugh, where they are in an environment that is kind of kitsch and sweet. And then, I chase them out of heaven. In telling them: what you see and hear is not what you think it is!*

*There are clowns that speak of torture, songs about rape: in one song on poverty, we try to get the spectators to give money to the unhappy singer. We teach someone to torture or not to torture, to sell a piece of their body. The spectator doesn't know whether to laugh or cry, they are shaken up.*

*That all seems very childish, but it has the irony of the catastrophe.*

*Consequently, my popular expands, and thus becomes different: that is to say that the meaning of the word is changed and transformed. The performance is always operating in several dimensions, things move and change, there are no unequivocal thoughts.*

*But it's true, I want to do popular shows. That comes to me from Africa, where the theater is in the naiveté of its first days. It's a rhythm, a direct connection with the audience, without the 4th wall.*

*I don't see, in a context like this, how I could do otherwise than to be popular. Theater must be accessible to as many people as possible. Although that doesn't mean that it's simple or basic. The questions put to the audience, the story the performance tells, the interrogations, the tensions of the performance deserve to be explored.*

*The popular is more in the form than in the content. The performance has the appearance of a popular performance, but it is built in layers, and the pile of layers is popular in another way.*

Signed: your pop.

## **Here and there**

*My dear,*

*You ask me if I work the same way in Africa as in Europe.*

*I don't work on the same weaknesses.*

*As much as I work on the weakness of the person in Europe, I work on the visible wound in Africa.*

*The weakness that I see in Europe is narcissistic.*

*The wound that I see in Africa is political and traumatic.*

*I have a hard time seeing myself, in Burundi, where you can hear gunfire in the background, working on narcissistic wounds. I see war wounds, intellectual and human constructions so as not to sink into the barbarity...*

*In Africa, I always find that the show echoes something universal, whereas, in Europe, I find it constantly refers to boredom, to speed, to a daily life where the only questioning is between the person and himself.*

*I get more out of it in Africa. I understand why I do theatre when I am there, not when I am here.*

*When I am here, my presence to myself is threatened. It is threatened by social recognition, by recognition as a director by my peers, by being nice to people, by transporting them someplace else, creating a show which is funny and moving while talking about contemporary society.*

*On the other hand, in Africa, I have every latitude: yell the pain, play in the round because that's how the audience members spontaneously arrange themselves. There isn't any press, no television: just the performance, in the midst of hills between the universal and the specific, between tragedy and the defamiliarisation effect. The strength of words and of powerful cries. The voice that emerges is not limited to the confidential: it's about shouting out loud.*

*And the context? Is it the number? Is it the nature? Is it the place? In Africa, I have the feeling that the performance leads toward the universal, toward the fundamental questioning between a person and the world.*

*You can see, there, an attack of lyricism, my dear.*

*Truthfully, I always feel that the theatre space is a ritual space. Particularly in Africa.*

*Everything happens as if one puts the rituals of democracy, of justice, of memory, of the burial of the dead on stage.*

*Often, theatre does what reality doesn't do.*

*Create a ritual of commemoration, a ritual of peace, a ritual of listening. Symbolically make exist that which doesn't (yet) exist in reality. That's what I attach myself to.*

*This ritual space, I saw it create itself before my eyes in 2002, when I saw the circle for the first time: when the audience members gathered by the thousands around us.*

*It seemed to me we had found traces of ritual theater in the night of time.*

Signed: your lyrical mystic

**Native language**

*My dear,*

*You ask me how I work in languages I don't understand. And how that works in a practical sense.*

*Native language.*

*I work primarily in the native language of the actors. In Africa, I always have a translator. In Belgium, I get by in Flemish – and then the Flemish speakers speak French....If I work with non-Europeans and I don't have a translator, then I find solutions.*

*I always encourage participants to work in their native language, it's important from the point of view of the work of Theater and Reconciliation. When they are in Belgium and they come from elsewhere, making an actor work in their native language brings a piece of there, here.*

*One might think that the slow pace of a rehearsal which requires translation has many disadvantages. To the contrary! Because the time which is devoted to understanding is time spent in understanding each other. The energy spent in doing that is very important for the work of Theater and Reconciliation.*

*It takes time, it's true, but this time, in the decompartmentalization of communities that it creates, improves the group's cohesion, as we have to keep working to try to understand each other.*

*Concretely, it's rather simple, when the actors improvise, the translator translates everything for me. When I give instructions, they also translate everything.*

*But the biggest difficulty, it's not the words: but to understand what happens in the culture of the other, which is what the actors try to explain to me in the improvisations they do for me. The clarifications related to what they wanted to show me, tell me or explain to me form the basis of the work.*

*Another advantage is it develops my capacity to work on strong images which are immediately understandable, without having the need to hear or to understand all the words.*

*Directing someone in a language I'm unfamiliar with is rather unusual, it allows me to hear if the person sounds right, noting only the intonations and his presence to himself. It makes me receptive to all the visible language peripheral to the words. The actor is in fact much easier to direct.*

*It's not always necessary to understand all the words. In Fedasil, with miners requesting asylum, Ali tells of his journey from Afghanistan in Dari, his native language. A difficult journey, with dead bodies strewn about. Ali is immersed in his memories. I allow him to tell it, then to tell it again, to respect its repetitive nature. It isn't crucial to understand the words, to understand the content, it is important that he can speak his grief, his suffering, his anger....to an attentive witness who understands beyond the words and connects it to what he lives. During all the rehearsals and during the performance Ali will tell and re-tell the story of his trip, and will evoke terrible scenes that he has seen. It isn't necessary to understand the content in detail. The feelings and the felt experiences are clear to me and then to the audience. Each one speaks his language, unknown to the other, but each one knows that he is understood beyond the words and their content. And, of course, that creates theater which speaks directly to the heart.*

*And when I don't have a translator....I've worked with Afghans and other young people of different nationalities who only spoke Farsi. I had to be very creative to figure out how to do something together.*

*The biggest difficulty isn't language, it's culture. My dear, there are things that I can only tell you in French, for you to understand everything.*

Signed: your unknowing polyglot

### **Staging conflict**

*My dear,*

*You're anxious to know how, setting aside the problem of language, I understand others' problems and manage conflicts through the theater. You ask me how to do mediation with groups in conflict.*

*Here is a good example. I worked in Rumonge, a small city in Burundi with many conflicts over land ownership. I worked with residents and with repatriated people who came back to their land sometimes after 30 years of exile in Tanzania. The conflict was this: the residents are owners of lands from which the repatriated people had been expelled.*

*They do a few scenes improvised on that theme for me. From these, I understand this:*

*- These are repatriated people who left in 1972, hunted by the Tutsi militaries. Once they left, their lands were redistributed to the Tutsis by the authorities or by individual people.*

*- Secondly, these lands were sold.*

*- It's not only Tutsis who live on these re-purchased parcels, it could also be Hutus. It's not a question of ethnicity, they tell me.*

*The first step, I have to understand what happened. In this case, my work will be to build trust, to make hesitations fall away, to not have preconceptions, to be curious about the other's point of view, to restate what was just said in the improvisation to make sure I have accurately understood. I then find myself in the role of a mediator.*

*Second step: work with the groups separately. I'm working with the people who have been repatriated. The stimulus: a scene of suspicion.*

*Here is a summary of the scene they did for me: Someone sees a criminal and accuses them: «You're the one who killed my people.»*

*To unpack the conflict, I ask a series of questions about what I saw or thought I saw in the improvisations they did.*

*Did it happen like that?*

*If I understand correctly, you are afraid?*

*Have you seen that?*

*How does this type of situation end?*

*Are people aggressive?*

*Third step: talk about the conflict.*

*What happens when we actually talk about the subject of the conflict?*

*They explain what happened to me because I don't know the details. At first we talk only about the improvisation we just saw, secondly they talk to me about the conflict itself.*

*After having asked questions to ensure that I've accurately understood the stakes, I redo the scene in pieces, being careful not to separate the conflicting parties into good and bad.*

*A final step will be to have them play the roles of their enemies, to express the others' suspicions.*

*In doing all these things, I try, through the theater, to reorganize the chaos to see within it another reality, to have it become something else.*

*Then, in the work of staging itself, I replace things at the intersection between the resolution of the conflict and the theater.*

*Not the resolution of the conflict, but more so the expression of the conflict!*

*In this case, it's the theater that becomes the mediator. It is itself the ground of understanding. It is the place where things can be said in a common language:*

*What do we decide together to say in public? What exchanges do you want to see acted, played out, in front of the others?*

*This discussion is important because it's the place where, thanks to the theater, one will be able to decide what one will say. And we will decide it together, starting from the assumption that we will not deliver propaganda for one side or for the other.*

*And it's there, my dear, that the mediation takes place: stage the points of view of actors from all sides.*

*I say: If I understand correctly, those who bought land have reason to not want to return it, but those to which the land belonged have reason to claim it.*

*I say: It's a difficult situation on each side, I can't resolve it, and I wonder how you are going to resolve it, it's very complicated.*

*The goal is to find a theatrical solution which allows the actors to unpack the conflict, and to be ready for mediation. But note, the goal is not the mediation, the goal is to create theatre. Mediation comes as an addition.*

*There is a kind of mix between theatre and mediation techniques. There is a constant coming-and-going between the two.*

*The scene of the hat: I ask the residents to do a scene, of a musical chair where a person always takes the place of someone else. They can use any symbol they want for the earth.*

*They choose a hat as a symbol of the earth: the hat passes from head to head, each one pretending it is his or hers.*

*I repeat the scene and transform it : I ask Alois to explain that he has the hat of his father and his grandfather, through the generations, that he is proud of his hat.*

*I ask him to explain it clearly to the audience so they are convinced that the hat belongs to him.*

*I introduce a narrator who is going to show the audience that the hat really belongs to Alois.*

*I add a flight scene, where the hat is left on the ground (recalling the crisis of 1972).*

*The narrator asks the audience about the flight.*

*Claudine takes advantage of the flight to take the hat.*

*The narrator interrogates the audience, asking if that is the way things happen.*

*Claudine sells the hat.*

*The buyer, Catherine, is proud of her acquisition, and shows the spectators that she is the new owner.*

*The narrator asks the audience what will happen next.*

*Alois returns and recognizes his hat on Catherine's head, he keeps a watchful eye on his hat.*

*The two owners argue.*

*The narrator takes the hat, and asks the audience what he should do.*

*The questions I ask:*

*Is it comfortable for you to act this scene?*

*Do you share my opinion and the interpretation that I suggest?*

*Is it too hard to act?*

*Is it a scene that can be seen by the two parties?*

*To all these questions, they respond that there are no problems, they explain that the hat is symbolic of the earth.*

*I always say: It's an important scene, it must be done seriously so that it represents a fiction which is attached to reality.*

*The fact of insisting on the importance of the scene puts the actors in a position of responsibility for what they say. All of a sudden, they are invested in a mission, as if they see things from above: as if they could control reality and understand it better.*

*In the theatre, one can say out loud what one thinks inside. Or, in this case, what one no longer thinks. The fact that, together, the group decides not to show things one way or another, constitutes a common reflection on a problem, its extent, and the responsibilities one has, both as director and as an actor. The fact of reflecting together is an important step in the mediation process.*

*The theatre is what one sees: but there are many things happening underneath.*

*Before, the residents gave me just terse talk, no-one wanted to yield an inch of ground, putting the honesty of the repatriated people in doubt. They were stuck in guardedness and suspicion.*

*At the beginning of that day, and especially after that scene with the hat, their point of view changed: they are ready to understand the other's point of view. It's also that day that I propose we get the two groups together. They were mute. I specify that, fundamentally, I don't see how to resolve their problem.*

*The fact that these lands were sold by the State with the political goal of never having the Hutus return to these lands seems to me an important starting point that must not be overlooked.*

*Repatriated people, 4th rehearsal : I go back to the repatriated people and I give them the same improvisation, meaning the musical chairs.*

*They do it with a telephone that passes from hand to hand.*

*I change the instruction, and I ask them to fight to get a chair, there is always one chair missing.*

*With the help of the narrator Leopold, they do a sort of chair dance. It's funny and theatrical.*

*Finally, I ask the question: who do you decide to put on the chair first: someone who looks like a Hutu or someone who looks like a Tutsi?*

*Silence and consternation, embarrassed looks.*

*I explain: if I put someone who looks Tutsi there, does it mean that he is on the chair and the Hutu wants to push him off? Or should we put someone who looks Hutu on it first, so it means that someone who looks Tutsi wants to push him off? Or should we alternate?*

*I talk about the vocabulary that I use: the appearance of being Hutu and the appearance of being Tutsi – and not Hutu and Tutsi. Why? The stigmatization of physical appearance as belonging to an ethnic group doesn't correspond to anything. On the other hand, it sticks in the imagination: the Tutsi is tall and thin, the Hutu is smaller and husky. The audience members immediately classify the actors according to their ethnic appearances. We have to be vigilant about the choice of which physical appearance to use in this scene. They finally understand, they are relaxed.*

*That means that I will be able to talk about that (meaning the distinctive characteristic) in front of the two groups together, without that causing them any problems; and therefore, together, we will be able to decide what we want to show.*

*They ask me why we haven't talked about that before.*

*It was unthinkable that I speak of it from the first days: the trust would have been broken. That type of discussion could only happen after a few days, here the fourth.*

*I give you all these details so you understand that we work on a thread. It's lace. The people are very suspicious. I walk on eggshells all the time. I have to make the questions emerge, create rules.*

*Do you understand what is at stake?*

*How do you analyze this scene?*

*Don't let me say just anything on stage, think about your security.*

*Think also about the fact that the performance must be seen by all the parties in the conflict.*

*And then, I bring them together. I remember, they are all very well dressed. Especially the repatriated ones, they make a specific effort to present themselves correctly.*

*At the beginning, they don't yet mix together. Me, I am totally comfortable.*

*We do a warm-up, and Ernest leads it.*

*It's already easy.*

*Then, I ask them to create a song, by separate groups, on the bad things they accuse the other group of, and the stereotypes they use. I instruct them to be respectful and listen to the other in order to avoid conflicts.*

**The repatriated people say :**

We the repatriated we are in good health

You the residents you have fleas

You the residents you are thin, you have worms, you don't eat, you spread lice

We, the repatriated, we haven't been to school but we work.

You occupy the property of our fathers.

**The residents say :**

I am surprised to see how, you the repatriated, you have gotten fat

**The repatriateds:**

We use our strengths.

But you residents, since you want our things you disguise yourselves as repatriateds to get the help of non-governmental organizations. You aren't going to teach us to be poor. The help you receive will decrease. You are going to return our land to us.

*Then, I try to analyze out loud what I understood from the scene which was sung:*

*- The group of residents is poorer, the repatriated people are richer due to the help they receive and because they have managed to work things out thus far, they used their money to earn money.*

*- The repatriateds were making fun of the bad health of the residents.*

*- The residents accuse the repatriateds of having emptied the cash registers of the state in their absence*

*- The repatriateds accuse the residents of having occupied the lands.*

*My question: is it true that the repatriateds have more money than the residents? Eliasare, a repatriated person tells me that, among the repatriateds, there are both rich and poor: for example, those who work for NGOs in Tanzania.*

*But as a whole, the residents have more means than the repatriateds.*

*It's significant that they proposed a scene where the relationship of strength is reversed. One would say big wild animals who sniff each other to reassure themselves.*

*I ask the residents if they agree with this economic statement. Among the residents, there are those who have means and those who have nothing.*

*I repeat what Leocadie says: There are the poor and the well-to-do on both sides. I ask: Is that what you think? Do you have the impression that the residents have more money than the repatriateds?*

*I ask the members of each group if they think they are representative of their interest group.*

*They say that the radical elements are missing. Then I ask the question to see if they think the other group is representative.*

*No, the radical elements of both sides aren't there.*

*We're working with a group of moderates. Those who aren't moderate wouldn't come do theatre.*

*I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, but that's what I have to work with.*

*The more I think about it and the more I tell myself it isn't by chance: the majority, in my opinion, is flexible, but the hard-liners are those that make the most noise. If I inherited flexible ones, it's that they are the ones who must pull the rest along.*

*My dear, you also have to pay attention to what is said.*

*Together, we have to agree on what is ok to say or not.*

*For example, with the repatriateds, should we say you are fleeing, or we are fleeing, or we are being attacked?*

*These three phrases refer to different moments in history. The discussion of the vocabulary we should use seems to me to be indicative of their state of open-mindedness.*

*It's the usage of vocabulary and how it is used at the theatrical level that will allow for opinions to be expressed. We're dealing with supporting a discussion which is sometimes symbolic, as with the hat, sometimes direct, as with we are fleeing.*

*The goal here was to discuss a theatrical principle, but in getting to the bottom of things.*

*I also remember that it was a very beautiful day. At the beginning of the rehearsal, while waiting for the meal, the actors imitated each other in their roles, it was very funny. Very relaxed.*

*Somewhere, that's success, they are happy, they laugh, even Leocadie, who was always very tense, laughs.*

*The actors are trusting, and especially their perception of the future is changed. One feels that they are more active.*

*Now, I focus only on the theatrical goal, and I concentrate (like the actors) on the theatrical production. Even if it is always present between the lines, the goal of reconciliation comes second. But there is a permanent switching back and forth between the goals. Everything happens as if, at present, the goal of reconciliation was fully included in the performance.*

*That also, is a success. I don't even have to explain anymore, it happens by itself.*

*My dear, I went into detail, hoping not to have been too theoretical. It's important to explain why it's called Theatre and Reconciliation, I find....*

Signed: the angel of reconciliation

## Orders

*My dear,*

*You ask me: what is an order, how does it work.*

*I am going to tell you about orders in Africa, because the ones I am given in Belgium aren't the same. In Belgium, I'm given a theme: money, capitalism, work. Afterwards I am free to do what I want.*

*In Africa, on the other hand, I am given clear directives and a notebook of assignments. Not for every performance, but at least for some.*

*Let's take some examples.*

*For the neighborhood police, I had to create a performance of sensitization to reinforce dialogue between the police and the population. The performance was directed toward the police officers themselves and to the public at large.*

*I had about ten slogans to stage. I was briefed by the Belgian police officers, who trained the Burundian police and I was controlled by the headquarters of the Burundian police.*

*The stimuli for the police of proximity, Burundi*

*The stimuli were:*

*Get women to join the police*

*The police should not be used for personal gains of politicians*

*How to work with a person who is a victim of rape*

*Corruption kills many people for the benefit of a few*

*Neighborhood police don't deal with land conflicts*

*Torture is prohibited*



Ekoma, composer and musician, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.



Child Soldiers Project, DRC, 2014. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

*Police officer, drive carefully*  
*Citizen, do not carry out justice yourself*  
*Security is everybody's business*

*Electoral conflicts, Burundi.*

*The goal of the activity was to promote electoral campaign ethics.*

*It was less directive. In this case, I ask the commanders for about 20 phrases or infractions, which seem to them to be important to work with theatrically.*

*Women should vote and be elected*

*It is forbidden to use violence to force someone to vote*

*Be vigilant about politicians' promises*

*It is forbidden to corrupt the population so that it joins one side*

*Corruption kills democracy, justice, and security*

*It is forbidden to steal someone's election card, and one must keep one's card so one is not deprived of the vote*

*It is forbidden to raise the insignia of the parties at the time of the vote*

*It is forbidden to manipulate a person into voting for your party*

*It is forbidden to ask someone whom they voted for*

*Carrying unused election ballots is forbidden*

*Stuffing the ballot box is forbidden*

*It is forbidden to declare victory before the end of the count*

*Different steps of voting*

*Here are the orders that I had to respect for land rights in the DRC*

*The rules of inheritance*

*The disputes following an inheritance*

*Girls and inheritance*

*The rights of girls*

*The attitude of fathers toward their daughters*

*The rights of widows*

*What to do with cows which graze on cultivated land?*

*What will happen to you if you don't register your lands?*

*How can you get registration papers?*

*Do you think that customary law is enough?*

*Seek help from associations in getting your papers*

*If you don't do that, rich people will take the land from you*

*And finally, the multiple truths in Burundi.*

*It's not the same type of performance. This was cathartic, while the first two were clearly performances of sensitization. The difference, my dear, speaks for itself.*

*We are in the fog, we navigate in obscurity because the truths are not spoken*

*Where do the truths hide?*

*The ways in which history has been told to us*

*Who suffered the most?*

*When did we lose our parents: the big dates of the massacres*

*Traumatic consequences*

*The doctor who tried without success to forget*

*Tell me the truth so my heart may be appeased*

*The game of those who want to speak the truth and those who prefer not to*

*The manipulated Twas*

*Let's not generalize, let's not accuse an entire ethnicity for the crime of just one of its members*

*In 1972, grieving for the dead was against the law*

*Massacre, machete and retaliations  
Prevent someone from telling the truth  
No one has yet to write history without being partisan  
The dead return, what do they want?  
We can't keep quiet  
Building a collective burial marker*

Signed: your theatrical consultant

### **Censure - connections with institutions**

*Hello dear,*

*You ask me about censure. I suppose you are thinking of censure in Africa. It's an unending mild fight.*

*There are different kinds of censure. One is by actors who push not to do this or that scene. In that case, you have to weigh conformity, fear, and risk. If you listen too much, you risk creating a show which makes everyone happy, which is not the goal.*

*There also is censure by commanders, who always want to be presented at their best. Police, for example, didn't want us to speak of torture in the police stations.*

*NGOs censure, they want moralizing and well-meaning speeches from the stage.*

*And then, there's self-censure, which is the most pernicious because it's the most difficult to detect.*

*Censure is an element you have to play with. You have to have the strength to impose your point of view, with flexibility. Once, with the police, I had to redo the show about the neighborhood police. The first version would not have been able to be performed.*



Marc and Jérôme, «Victims of torture and torturers» project, Burundi, 2008. Photograph by Véro-  
nique Vercheval.



Pascal, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

*I just found an email I wrote in 2010, it was a project between the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda. I'll copy an excerpt for you here. You'll understand a little about the bags of knots one is sometimes confronted with:*

*The things I heard about the final performance confirmed my apprehensions:*

- 11 of 18 scenes were censored by officials from organizations THAT DID NOT ATTEND THE PREPARATION.*
- The censure came from Rwandan and Burundian officials, although the performance took place in the Congo.*
- They threatened the actors, the assistant director, the choreographer and the musicians just three minutes before the performance and the audience was already in place. That's obviously unacceptable. That means that everything which unfolded during the preparation in T & R was negated in a few moments. If theatre can't talk about societal dysfunction then it ought not to be done, we'd get better value doing a football workshop which would have let everyone agree.*
- I consider it to be a failure, the likes of which I have not been confronted with in 8 years of working in conflict zones.*

*Therefore I would make the following recommendations :*

- The officials of associations don't have the right to interfere with the artistic process if they haven't participated in the entire preparation.*
- On the subject of censure: invite highly-placed officials: representatives of the police, the army, high functionaries, ministries, governors, but never Little Bosses.*

*You have to get the opinion of the higher echelons during the rehearsal and see with them if the subject matter is too sensitive and if it is too sensitive see how you can discuss it anyway, and in what form.*

*- Carefully choose the participating associations and control the recruitment of participants.*

*- Only perform outdoors and do not change the theatrical design.*

*- Don't absolutely require a performance in Rwanda, don't resist and do run away.*

*- Leave Jean-Marie, the assistant, in charge for the entire duration of the project and support him.*

*From a more personal point of view, if the formula could be reproduced and if the budget allows, it would be interesting if I could be present during each performance in order to support the director in the face of censure.*

*You see, my dear, that it isn't so simple and that, once I turn my back, they help themselves to their hearts' content.*

*This brings me, while I'm at it, to the relationship with institutions. Why? Because that question is linked, in my mind, to this question, since each time you have to know the limitations and to face them. So I believe it's necessary to explain that aspect of the question to you, insofar as, largely, the limitations all come back to the same thing. I have to navigate and know how to work with the obstacles I encounter: knowing that in one case they are explicit, and in another more underground.*

*On the whole, the connection with institutions isn't bad. Obviously I always have to put myself through contortions as an artist to meet their objectives. But that's normal.*

*What matters is to adapt. The rules of institutions, of NGOs, of funders, of one country or another aren't the same.*

*Nevertheless there are points that must be agreed upon before beginning the activity:*

*You have to ask yourself the following questions:*

*What is the notebook of instructions?*

*Who pays me?*

*How many hours will I work?*

*Am I invited to the personnel meetings?*

*Am I invited to the meetings of the group?*

*Should I be informed about the background records of the participants?*

*Will someone from the institution attend the workshops?*

*What type of contract is it?*

*What am I hired to do?*

*What is the goal of the institution and of the NGO?*

*How can I align myself with their goals?*

*How is my work reported or written?*

*What will be done with the creation once this has ended?*

*What commentary will be given on this work?*

*What commentary is given on the creation?*

*What connections will the actors have with the institution?*

*Are they reimbursed by it, and how?*

*But also, for yourself, you also have to ask yourself the following questions:*

*What is my relationship to the goals of the institution?*

*What do I want?  
What am I looking for?  
What do I do?  
Why do I do it?*

*What is also important, is to present myself as director (but what else am I?)*

*One could say that in “Theatre and Reconciliation there is “Theatre” and “Reconciliation” so, should I present myself as a reconciler?*

*Certainly not.  
As an art therapist?  
Even less.  
As a sensitizer?  
A mediator?  
No, director, that’s all.*

*The rest, the indirect benefits of the theatre come as an additional bonus, as the Freudians say!*

*But all these limitations don’t mean that one isn’t creative. On the contrary, you have to adapt, to find other ways, to invent, to work around. In the end, contrary to what artists could think about artistic freedom, I never feel as free as when I am under constraints. And then, there is a dialogue with the commanders, I am not alone. Specialists help me: lawyers, police officers, sociologists. It’s a collaborative effort.*

Signed: your bureaucrat

## Limits

*My dear,*

*You ask me if I have limits.*

*Do you really have the impression that I don't have limits?*

*You have a very strange impression of me!*

*There are many limits, some which are placed on me and others I place on myself.*

*There are psychological limits: I will never do anything that would hurt the actors.*

*There are limits of censure: I cannot, in a country at war, say things which would be dangerous for my life and for the lives of the actors.*

*There are limits of boredom: I am not going to work for hours on a scene which doesn't inspire anyone, neither the actors nor myself.*

*There are limits to perfection. I am not going to rework it again and again, constraining the overall stage production to reach perfection. I don't exhaust myself in the "redoing".*

*I also have limits of fatigue: I am not going to push the actors or myself to the very end, the rehearsals must be joyous, I am not going to the limits of exhaustion.*

*And then I also have limits of provocation. Political limits in Africa and limits of another kind in Europe. I like to bother people, but not too much, not as much as I would like to overall.*

*In the end, I am too polite.*

*One might think that I don't have limits to my risk-taking – that's perhaps what you were thinking of in asking me the question. I don't often feel in danger. I don't take uncalculated risks either. I think of my children.*



The circle of spectators, «Child Soldiers», DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

*That said, the situations that I've lived that are farthest out of bounds are those that have brought me the most. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. You have to take risks in life. And I am not afraid.*

*That will be my signature today.*

**Levity<sup>1</sup>**

*My dear,*

*You're talking to me about humor and levity in rehearsals.*

*I'm talking to you about catastrophic irony.*

*I recopied a little text from a performance of Amakuba, which came to Belgium last year with the 4 Burundian actors.*

*Gerard, with a big smile, as if he were talking to his children, links gestures to his words. He is imitated by the three others.*

*The Hutus have their techniques: they take a mortar (you know, the object used to pillage), they put a little Tutsi child in it, they take a pestle and « Wham wham wham », « Thwap thwap thwap ». And the baby cries « Mommy, mommy, mommy ».*

*The Tutsis, they also have their techniques: They take a Hutu, they get a tire, put it around the neck of the Hutu, and pour the gas « Glug Glug glug » They light it on fire and the Hutu shouts « OW OW OW ». That's called the small chain technique.*

*You will ask me: how far to go or not to go?*

*Is it frivolous? Is having levity funny, or not funny at all?*

*Or, on the contrary, does the levity make it possible to approach the cruelty from a distance? Cruelty to get rid of cruelty, to look at it in its absurd enormity?*

*Levity in the process, the only outlet I've found.*

*To have levity in the work, it's having the courage to speak about things that no-one talks about, in being careful not to add ANYTHING to the pornography of suffering. So we act, like children, but with seriousness, because it's serious. And hearts loosen, because you can't not have levity when you work together in such troubled zones, with such fragile participants: that's the only outlet that I was able to find.*

*The rehearsals are done in a climate of trust and of shared testimonies. Together, we decide what is ok to talk about, how far one can take it. Me, I guide with the stage direction. When it's too heavy and too cruel, I have two options. Either I reinforce catharsis, and I do a scene the potential spectator will identify with and that will make them cry. Those tears, among the actors, are jubilant, because suffering in the theatre is a whole other thing than what exists in real life.*

*Or, I take a light approach and I push the scene so far that it becomes absurd.*

*Traumatized actors keep the levity as they share their traumas of war or of other things: they don't identify with them. It's always something that can be played on stage. Suffering is made available to the public in the sharing of experience. The public can identify with it, but the actor, himself, is removed from it. It's the levity in the rehearsals that allows the actors to put some distance between it and themselves.*

*There is the stage direction, but also my personal attitude and that of my team: we are light, happy, and present to ourselves. This presence to oneself is a magical thing anchored in the moment, a kind of a state of meditation, of abandon into the now. It's a state wherein one is totally absorbed by what one is in the midst of doing. Things seem to work out without any effort. The notion of time disappears. The activity is satisfying in and of itself, one is neither happy nor unhappy, nor in the midst of having a good time or of moping. The feeling of satisfaction comes later, when one sees the finished product.*

*Faces relax, hearts shake off their thorns. We fly together like feathers in a devastated countryside. I can only be light, not the levity of being carefree and of consumption, but that of the irony of catastrophe. It's the process. It's on this foundation that the words will be spoken and understood. Without this levity there will be no breakthrough.*

*I also do tragic scenes: the audience cries, because the catharsis arrives without warning.*

*But I never leave the spectator without levity. He is shaken between laughter and tears. It's an artistic strategy, it's a strategy for life, it's a magical strategy and I readily see the results. Scenes treated lightly ease broken hearts. The distance established between that which is horrible, and the way the actors and myself require ourselves to see this horrible thing, is like medicine for the actor and the spectator.*

*Levity is not synonymous with irresponsibility, it's the opposite. Levity is not a sickness, in this case, it's the remedy. The relationship with suffering is symbolic and ironic. Suffering represented symbolically, that's the medicine.*

*Should I create anguish? Anguish is serious, modern, avant-garde. Sometimes, I am tempted to take it on, and to say with all the seriousness in the world: everything is going badly. But how could I do that in Burundi and in Congo, in a context like that? We perform before audiences of 5,000 people, many are children, many are people who have been traumatized. I put magical acts on stage. Sometimes they are cathartic, sometimes they are light, but they are always like an antidote. It's like making laughter explode in the middle of absolute seriousness.*

*The more time goes by, and the more it becomes light, paradoxically the more the shows are hard. We play music with torture scenes, it's a horrible levity, a courteous disaster. Someone is taught how to torture, a clown rapes someone, there is a competition to see who has suffered the most. When people see my shows in Africa, they tell me they don't know whether to laugh or to cry.*

*My dear, don't cry, it's only theatre, after all. And even if all that seems horrible at first glance, it isn't. In any case, during the rehearsals I swear to you (therefore, believe it) that everyone has a good time.*





## Staging emotions

*My dear,*

*You ask me how I stage a (too) big emotion that shows up in the improvisation.*

*It's a question that I am often asked. I think it's because people who do the same type of work I do, for example in therapeutic contexts, are afraid....*

*Working with sad/painful material allows the actors to create a distance from their lived experience. That allows them to sublimate his grief, and more often than not to get rid of it (catharsis). In any case, when a sad testimony comes out one has to work with it, if not people sink, the actor is uncomfortable, the group is uncomfortable, and this discomfort will not go away.*

*Even if it's scary, even if it's uncomfortable, I am obligated to work on the scene. To not do it would mean that I am indifferent to it, that I feel it doesn't matter. Creating theater requires me to listen and to use my own tools to take it from another point of view. In the opposite case, I would leave the actors abandoned with their testimony. Therefore I take care of it with theatre. Or actually, it's the theatre which takes care of it through me. All directions given are only theatrical, acting techniques. I use music to change the atmosphere, I change the direction of the glance, I give the actors supportive techniques which they will cling to.*

*The actors feel recognized and validated. They feel heard, valued, taken care of. Eventually they take on another point of view. They take a step back, see himself from above.*

*The perspective I have is a second coherence, but the one the actors take on themselves WHILE ACTING is also a second coherence. It creates characters who resemble the original ones, insofar as they can without actually being it. At the same time, this character who isn't the original one will have influence over the original one.*

*And if, unfortunately, we didn't work with the testimony?*

*The actor is left with the burden that they shared and with which one does nothing. They abandoned.*

*They leave crying, the situation gets tense and devolves.*

*If a director is afraid of working with it, they must say so and at least speak back to the person what they heard. But NEVER PRETEND NOTHING HAPPENED.*

*This testimony is like a wake-up call. It must be brought into the light. In my case, into the light of theater.*

*I have to come back to the difficult thing to make something of it, and therefore immediately stage the testimony, guiding the actors between the threads of their sadness to help them through it. It's an obligation! There is nothing obscene or voyeuristic about it. It's simply recognizing the other in what they live and witnessing it, using the techniques that are familiar to me, those of the theatre. That's all. And in this case, to get the person out of a too-big emotion. It's rather simple, I have to guide them, give them a branch to hold on to. I have to make them redo the scene, they have to keep a hold of the branches. I tell them for example: look in that direction, put your hands in this place, you have a smile on your lips, say that line again but sing it...*

*The skills necessary to direct sad testimonies*

*- Empathy: it's the mechanism that allows you to represent the actor's feelings and emotions. It's sharing their emotion without it becoming confused with your own emotion.*

- *Congruence, it's an exact correspondence between an experience and the awareness of it. It's a relationship which is established between the director and the actor: warm, authentic, conscious, positive, distinct, encouraging and especially it supports the development of both parties.*

*You also have to verify if the actor is in agreement with what they play, by asking them and by reassuring them.*

*If they don't want to play it again, I slide the testimony onto another actor. These are the techniques of Playback Theater. The actor must cut the cord from their first offering, let themselves go with the new material created from what they proposed. I keep the punctum in the theme and stage it.*

*The goal is to open a perspective above a defeatist situation so that the person moves beyond their negative identity. It's about bringing out again and highlighting a point which, often, escapes the actor. The actor isn't always conscious of the effect that they produce. I do it so that they are always conscious, because then they can act out the effect that one sees.*

*I explain to them what interests me or what is moving or funny. Be careful, the person must never feel judged. I make sure everyone stays kind, and I refuse to allow anyone to critique the others.*

*Often the effect produced on the actors and their stories is very positive, and generates a new coherence.*

*I insist on the fact that the person comes before the theater. It's not about creating a moving scene on the back of a personally difficult story, but making the theatre build, starting from the testimony, another way of seeing oneself and of seeing the trauma.*

*And of course, the stage direction of this moment will become universal, I've already spoken of that. It's not going to be something along the lines of a documentary.*

*That's a second step.*

*My dear, there, in summary, is an answer to a question which is often asked.*

*Which is scary, I think.*

*But you have to face it. And I respond to your question on the place of the actors' biography, the place of their testimonies and my role in that.*

*Yes, there are autobiographical testimonies. But they are always echoed esthetically. They are never left in their raw state on stage as in a documentary. There is therefore always an esthetic treatment, symbolic of the personal testimony.*

*I have several ways of working with testimony:*

*I make a chorus: all the actors speak one at a time about what they have seen, usually in their native language, They are short sentences. There is no order. Each one speaks when he wants to. There are silences. These choruses are the expression of the collective unconscious. The spectator can slide in his own phrases in his own mind. The articulation of the voice of the choruses is particular: it's like a thought which is audible (as in *The Wings of Desire*), or I make the voice heard almost as if in what one could imagine a tragedy would sound like. A very theatrical sound.*

*I can also keep the testimony more in a documentary style. In this case, I'm going to add something that puts it in perspective. For example, in *Amakuba*, Gerard was telling the story of his years in prison. During this time, Jean Claude sang Gerard's phrases one by one. The rhythm of the phrases is therefore absolutely different from what it would normally be.*

*The songs that Jean Claude Minani in *Burundi* and Ekoma Isenga in the *Congo* compose universalize what is said. They take it out of reality, and put reality at a distance.*

*I never put an everyday image in a show (sweeping, reading the newspaper, working in the fields...) and if I do, I multiply the occurrence: everyone sweeps, in the same direction, like a choreography, everyone reads the newspaper at the same time, everyone works the fields at the same time) in this case, it's no longer "I'm sweeping here and now" but it's the concept of sweeping or of working in the fields that is put forth.*

*It could be that I isolate sweeping: but to universalize it, I slow it down or I put it to music....I take it out of reality.*

*All that makes the theme universal.*

*So in some ways it's my show: the stimulus that I suggest, the punctum that I find, the stage direction I give from this punctum, the images I propose, the structure of the show and its general meaning. In some ways it's the actors' show: the improvisations at the base of it come from them, the issues are theirs, it's their story, they agree to do it. The text is improvised inside the structure.*

*There my dear, that's how I do things in the shows where I make others speak of themselves.*

Signed, your better-spoken

### **Advice for directors**

*My dear,*

*You ask me what qualities are needed to do Theatre and Reconciliation*

*I've already spoken a lot about them. I'll give you the main themes again and finish by what I haven't already mentioned :*

*Encourage creativity*

*Give concrete directions*

*Be patient*

*Feel the rhythm*

*Everyone must feel part of the action: Pay attention so that everyone is working more or less equitably, both every day and in the work overall*

*Put everyone in the action. Make sure everyone has a place, that there is a role for each person.*

*See the invisible ones, give everyone a role to play. It is important to go get the participants that you see the least or who are the most resistant to the work. There are always people who hide, who one sees less....you have to pick them out and be sure to put them in the scenes where they will be seen.*

*Know how to deal with boredom*

*Don't be intrusive*

*Teach the actors to throw themselves into the void*

*Prevent comments from other participants*

*Have empathy*

*Pull people together*

*Be joyful*

*Maintain your charisma*

*Do not be afraid*

*Do not lose yourself in the details*

*Know how to stop the scenes*

*Avoid the prettiness trap. Be wary of the tendency to want to make things pretty. What is interesting is when what happens on stage is uplifted, but certainly not made pretty.*

*Set the boundaries and maintain them*

*Mark your position: be firm, surrounding, reassuring.*

*Always be kind*

*Never de-brief! Because then, you go right into psychological considerations, which slide dangerously toward therapy. The participants then feel analyzed and they lose their sense of freedom. Everything needs to be worked out on stage when creating theater, and the directors must keep the director's hat on their heads.*

*Recognize the other in who they are, their culture and their history.*

*Prioritize the artistic quality of the productions over every thing.*

*Really look at the actor. With beginners, it is better to work on each scene, so that each one feels seen. Don't abandon one person to focus on another (and especially not fragile people). It is preferable to say "I've seen everything, if I don't say anything specific it's that nothing came to mind (and not that they acted poorly). It's with what you received from the person that you give them something else. The director has the power of seeing, people give it to them and they give it back, they don't steal the content, they put it back together. It's about taking the participant under your wing, accompanying them, making them "beautiful", seeing them, making them "vibrate".*

*Respect people as they are*

*Don't judge*

*Know how to bring things back and re-establish boundaries if people go too far with the improvisation*

*Know how to correct the parasitic elements: grimaces, sighs, scratching, fingers that twist must be forbidden. Laughter that is out of place (often, in the beginning, the participants laugh) is a sign of discomfort and that makes people stop acting. In the same way, in other moments the participants*

*want to laugh to create a distraction from something difficult and that prevents the work. You have to avoid private jokes, meaning comments that the general audience wouldn't understand.*

*Keep your head and lead the participants to the final goal.*

*The rule of confidentiality. I always insist that everything that is said or done during the rehearsals stays between us. I recommend that participants not talk to anyone (friends, family, or otherwise) about what happens. Myself, I avoid talking about it, reporting on testimonies that I received.*

*Obviously it's worse in prison, insofar as knowing certain things (for example, confessions or testimonies that could be politically dangerous) can lead to certain consequences. Therefore I ask for absolute confidentiality from all those who attend the rehearsals.*

*If serious or intimate things are shared, we tell all the participants that that information must not leave the workshop, and to firmly respect that line of conduct.*

*In the same way, no one must ask if what the person has revealed is true or not. After all, and even before it all, we are at the theatre.*

Signed: your inspector

*Catharsis, sensitization, sociology, psychology, and performance.*

*My dear,*

*You ask me if I do theatre of sensitization.*

*It's a question that bothers me. Before, I wasn't ready to accept doing theatre of sensitization.*

*It seemed to me to correspond to a certain era and a political practice that I considered to be out-of-date. It seemed to me to be a form of theatre that no longer held any interest, because it was too didactic, and especially because it was not sufficiently open to allow for intimacy.*

*Theatre work based on a theme has evolved continuously. I have passed from political themes, with the tyranny of a playwright and the major influence of a sociologist, to shows more oriented toward psychology. Then, there were performance styles, which, in my practice, were departure points: the circus, the burlesque, the clown.*

*In Africa, I only work by request: cathartic requests or sensitization requests by NGOs or particular target groups: courts, police, the detained, albinos, torturers, victims, and even elections: I have all the misery of the world to put on stage.*

*In Belgium, I am also contracted by request: to address money, work, capitalism. Without a doubt I must be on the left.*

*Little by little, I began to create more instinctively, making collages of meaning, leaving the audience the leisure of making their own way, and their own interpretations of the meaning in the performance. And then, in Africa, I worked in a language which wasn't my own. It was the beginning, it was Kwatai, the language of my ex-husband. I had to mix the useful with the agreeable, no?*

*But there are also cathartic orders, it's worth underlining, because it's not easy to find NGOs which think that catharsis provoked in the actor or in the spectator can change things. Catharsis is difficult to explain, the results aren't visible, the results can make people afraid – people often say to me: aren't you afraid that re-traumatizes them? That makes me angry!*

*Why does it make me angry? It's very indicative of the attitude of NGOs, which lean on the "vulnerable populations" as psychologists lean on their patients or priests on their faithful. As if on top of everything else one had to deprive the "vulnerable ones" of their emotions.*

*So yes, I did cathartic shows in Burundi, and I still do them. These shows awakened in me the desire to make friends with tragedy. It was extraordinary, and it still is: millions of spectators quivering like a stormy sea. I am still rocked by the emotions of the first time.*

*At the time, in Burundi, I saw several shows of sensitization on different themes: land conflicts, repatriation....Those shows seemed to me to be a thousand leagues from what I was doing. The ones I saw were black and white with good and bad people, they were mouth-pieces for the NGOs, it seemed to me to be propaganda, almost a sort of high-mass. At the time, I thought poorly of theatre of sensitization, I was saying it doesn't allow reflection, it's black and white. I was saying also that my shows had to ask questions, make people think and not give answers.*

*I avoid staging good and bad people. And particularly in a context where the bad are in the audience, and may compromise the security of the actors. In addition to this physical risk, that of an unequivocal thought bothers me. I avoid ready-made solutions like the plague. I'm always asking myself about the "why" of things, why the drunk drinks, why the criminal kills, why a man sells the lands of his sister. I try to understand peoples' suffering through the improvisations.*

*Having attained this principle, I avoid the obstacle of ready-made speeches.*

*I don't do shows containing a monolithic message, moralizing, of information, of sensitization. More than sensitize, my shows shake peoples' convictions. They split, they interrogate. No solution, no advice at all. The content is always set in a theatrical context, where the esthetic, cathartic and comic aspects are essential. The trap for me is to want to transmit a message, an idea, a solution to a problem or to an interrogation. I look more for meaning in the juxtaposition, in the suggestion.*

*The show is handled with touches, with impressions or suggestions. It's about showing without demonstrating.*

*Now, I'm no longer ashamed of sensitization! Complete turnaround! It comes from the orders of the NGOs: a message to communicate, clear, framed, verifiable with indicators. But it's not staging good people and bad people.*

*Upon reflection, the role of theater of sensitization is to reach the most remote populations that don't have access to media: no electricity, no radio, no television, not knowing how to read or write. It's not nothing! Theater will reach those people who are the most vulnerable. It will show them that something else exists beyond their local strangled reality, and will give them the possibility of seeing their existence in another way.*

*My dear, I am no longer ashamed, and I mix emotion, beauty, and dreams into these messages of sensitization. I mix it all together. The performances become richer for it and everyone is happy: the NGOs, the audience, the actors, the funders.*

Signed: your de-complexed cathartic sensitizer

**Subversion, socio-artistic war :  
playing in the institution of theater**

*My dear,*

*You ask me about the relationship I have with the theater of intervention, or community theatre, or even the socio-artistic practice.*

*It's difficult to respond, as there are as many methods as there are companies.*

*What draws me in:*

- Working with vulnerable populations*
- Analyzing alienations*

*What pushes me away (but not systematically)*

- I don't make any demands*
- My work is based less on the intervention than on the show and its esthetic*

*I have a subversive relationship with the public, which menaces, provokes, or overturns the established order. For example:*

*When I trap the spectators in a well-known aesthetic by waking them up with cruel moments that make them shiver.*

*When I make them believe that what we say is true, that what we say is a documented truth.*

*When I make everything ironic: revolution, sex, death, torture, police, rape.*

*When I ask the spectators to give money to Theatre and Reconciliation.*

*When I electrify the spectators, leading them on a different path than the one they think they are taking.*

*When I make them cry, when they believe they are laughing.  
When I make them laugh, when they believe they are crying.*

*I think that covers theatre action. But I add my grain of pepper to go further.*

*My dear, you ask me if my social artistic method is a war.*

*Here is a text that I wrote for a socio-artistic institution's magazine: Victoria de Luxe a Gand<sup>1</sup>.*

*And even if it's called Theatre and Reconciliation, it's grounded in conflict.*

*This war, it's the one I lead against prejudices, inequalities, depressions, injustices, social, political aesthetic and economic crises, and well-meaningness.*

*There are declared wars and cold wars. The cold war which art and socio-artistic practice were engaged in neither found its battlefield nor the wall behind which to dig in. The combat is blurry, the arena is in the fog, you can't see the enemies., They are disguised, the boxing gloves are rubber, with little flowers and little hearts. The ring is full of good intentions, of heads tilted toward the side in condescension.*

*Yes, the wall is hazy, the border isn't marked. There are works with non-professionals who are on scene, museums, well-established cinemas. There are works with non-professionals who see the day in official places. So, what is the difference?*

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<sup>1</sup> Article appeared in "10 JAAR Victoria Deluxe, p 201-202, Gent, 2012

*For me, what makes the difference is not who plays: professionals, amateurs, particular target groups. Neither is it the places: in a theatre hall, in places where target groups live: school, prison, camps for displaced persons, in the festivals, squats, museums, outside. It isn't about asking oneself who is paid and who is not: the actors, the directors, the writers, the technicians, the social assistants. Neither is it whether the contents speak of the participants' problems or not.*

*What makes the difference, for me, is the tension between the connection with the participants (is the method a factor of implication, of well-being, of socialization?) and the artistic goal, (how the socio artistic institution is implicated in the creation) and this creation., Is its priority artistic quality or the quality of social integration?*

*Working in a socio-artistic context is a contortion. According to the institution, the contortion is hard or soft. I must, at the same time, propose a theatrical work with the highest possible quality, but, I must also do things so that the actors feel good and attain the objectives beyond the theatre itself: well-being, freedom, self-confidence....*

*To leave room for the battle, the tension, is to assume that the creation will allow things which are generally hidden to be seen. Come out of hiding, make the fog dissipate and highlight what is blurry, hidden. That's the war that I lead. It is fought as much in the heads of the actors as in my own and in that of the institution.*

*Seeing the actors present themselves in the strength of their conviction, in the brutality of their presence, in their wild and combative energy, that's what the social artistic method allows.*

*It's never simple but one must stay in the ring and never run from the contradictions of the socio-artistic method. Because it's in the tension that resistance is created."*

*You see that I can use revolutionary language sometimes!*

*As for your question: "And if you had to perform in an institution?"*

*In a theatrical institution, you mean?*

*In Africa, there is a part of me that works in and with the institution, but not a theatrical one.*

*In Belgium, another part of me often works outside the institution and sometimes within.*

*I am not stubborn, but I couldn't find myself inside of one.*

*All the work that I've done since 1994 situated me squarely outside the Belgian theatrical institution.*

*If it were definitely a disadvantage from a financial perspective (no working subsidy, little or no representation in the theatrical mainstream) on the other hand, the invention of Theater and Reconciliation couldn't have happened if I had been in the institution. I wouldn't have been in Africa and my path would have been very different.*

*Is it I who doesn't want the institution or is it the institution which doesn't want me?*

*It's difficult to say, I lean more toward the former, but perhaps it's the voice of frustration talking.*

*I would also say that it's the institution that has problems because if I am outside of it, that also says something, doesn't it?*

*Whatever it is, I actually have worked for the theatrical institution: in Mons and in Flanders – more in Flanders than elsewhere. The Flemish institution appreciates my work more than the French-speakers.*

*Doubtless it's because of my style of directing the actors, and aesthetic questioning.*

*When I work inside an institution (so in Africa for NGOs), I'm able to impose my conditions, and the things I have people say on stage aren't necessarily the one the NGOs expect.*

*I really have the feeling that my shows in Belgium don't belong inside the institution. I have the impression of always being the eye on the potato. It's bothersome. That's also why I like to play in the slums. There, I stay unclassified and unclassifiable. For my shows I like to invest in the squats in Belgium: apartments, squats and alternative cafes, house.....more than in traditional settings.*

*In any case, those are the only places where we can perform.*

*The show can nonetheless emerge in institutional structures, if the heart tells it to, then the work will consist in keeping the aesthetic underground.*

*Would it be necessary?*

*It's in these alternative settings that the shows I do in Belgium take on their fullness, have more of an echo and a more coherent dramatic composition.*

*If not, they always seem out of sync if I do them in institutionalized settings. Even if I don't think of making the shows more bland to make them fit in.*

*Why does it work in those places?*

*There is a tension between the quality of the show and the place in which it is seen.*

*Everything happens as if the spectators have the impression of participating in an event that they are the only ones to have found. They have the impression of having been chosen and being privile-*

*ged to have been able to attend something that few people see. The alternative setting is a place that must be earned, that must be sought out and therefore the pleasure that the show provides (theoretically) is accentuated by the exceptional character of the performance.*

### *Aesthetic conflict*

*I like aesthetic conflict between:*

*The beauty one sees and the hidden place in which one sees it  
The shamelessness of the actors and the nonconforming  
bodies of the actors*

*The naiveté of the characters and their rudeness*

*The strip-tease of the soup and the strip-tease of the body*

*Political discourse and the sexy form*

*And then, in Africa, we perform outside, in a big circle. There it's not underground but on the land of rituals.*

*And there are more commonalities than we think.*

*My dear, this embarrassing question ended up allowing me to see things a bit more clearly.*

Signed: Don Quichotte (his wife)

### **The journey<sup>1</sup>**

*My dear,*

*You ask me if Theatre and Reconciliation is a crossing.*

*Theater & Reconciliation: it's an undertaking of a journey in levity.*

*I've already spoken of levity.*

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<sup>1</sup> Article published in The Journal of Culture and Democracy, June 2013, p 8-9.

*I will tell you about the journey: journey between here and elsewhere, between the past and the present, between communities, between languages. It is a journey of memory, from one spirit to another, a journey of storytelling.*

*The improvisations are done in the native language, as I've said. If we don't understand everything, we try very hard. They and I, and between them.*

*This effort and this time which we take to understand each other constitute a first passage: the language of roots and of identities.*

*Journey of history.*

*The improvisations, which are one of the anchor points of the workshops, refer to the personal story of the actors: what happened to them, what is their trajectory both symbolic and real, what have they left behind, what lies ahead, what are their dreams, their regrets?*

*Working on staging those stories, whether they are sad or happy, tragic or comic, will allow the actors to take another look at what they have lived. Staging a slice of life, transposing it into a theatrical scene, will give them distance from it: that is to say that the scene will make them look at their story from a distant point of view, from outside, as if they were watching their life from above. It's through the eye of the director that it plays out: the director also makes the link, they will be a bridge, create a passage, recognize and validate the actor.*

*The symbolization, which belongs to the theatre work that I do, will allow one to act and to make light of one's personal history to make it funny or tragic, in all cases theatrical, in the eyes of others: actors at first, and then audience members. It's therefore a journey of history which goes through the person, but also a journey of history for those that hear it.*

*I have often seen or heard of a refusal to talk, to evoke, to remember traumatic or painful episodes of one's history. Forgetting, or at least a discouraged attempt to do that, grows like thorns in the heart. The attempt to forget – sometimes ordered by the state: prohibition against crying for the dead, remembering them or looking for the corpses – feeds a tormented spirit which is never appeased.*

*Theater, thanks to a symbolic approach, can create on stage a monument to the dead, as I did recently in Burundi. The effect is immediate: there where the reality cannot have taken place, the theater can create a monument for all the dead, of all ethnicities, of all the earth, from all the wars, on the stage. It isn't dangerous, it doesn't bother anyone, it's only theatre. However the emotional charge is very real, and the prayer which accompanies this ceremony, even if it's a prayer of theater, will soothe the broken hearts.*

*Theatre helps with grief, for those who weren't able to do it. Theater can build a bridge to confront these unsolvable regrets. Journey between communities: the theatre will put different communities and different identities in contact, be they communities in conflict (Hutus/Tutsis) or communities that live together (Belgians and foreigners).*

*Theatre will reduce the distance between these communities, it will make the connections more fluid, it will reduce the clichés or prejudices of one another.*

*It is the techniques of Theater and Reconciliation, applied in conflict zones, in countries at war, which will allow this journey.*

*Theatrical performance acts like a revealer for those who are onstage and who act, and who belong to these different communities, or even, in the case of the work I do in Burundi, those who never met before the theater workshop. The show about decompartmentalizing communities is like an example of what could happen in real life and, as an audience member already told me: If they could do it, if they could yell so loudly, then we can do it too!*

*Journey of storytelling: just listening to what others have to say, but really.*

*Listening to a story which may be being told for the first time, and saying I heard you. But with that, I'm going to make theatre. That listening, not like in a psychologist's office, but in the levity of theatrical work, with the mask of fiction of theatrical work, that listening shared with other actors is such powerful medicine.*

*Passage between the past and the present: bringing back the past to build the present. The workshops of Theatre and Reconciliation will create the link, the thread that connects the history of the persons, of their family, of their country, to their present.*

*I will finally be able to tell my history to my children, not just what happened to me, but what happened to the others also, and that will help my child to grow up with the understanding that all of us, we have all lost in this war.*

*The theater allows the possibility of saying things which haven't yet been spoken in public.*

*Theater is a communal space par excellence. What we practice, by putting people from different communities on stage in front of audiences from different communities, will make all the connections more fluid.*

*The diversity of people involved in the process is the priority: people meet others whom – without the intervention of theatre and the closeness it generates – they would never have been able to meet. People listen to each other, talk simply, exchange, identify with each other, and sometimes even get married.*

*The usefulness of my practice is based on the conviction that art, creation, and artistic practice allow us to reconnect with that which is most wild in men and women. In this case, artistic*

*creation is the most liberating method and the most revitalizing to regain something one thought one had lost. It's also, therefore, a way of finding the strength to initiate change.*

Signed: your wild journeyer

### **What purpose does it serve ?**

*My dear,*

*You want to know the impact that the shows have on the actors, and on the audience. I will have you read some of the accounts of the actors.*

“We don't know what you're going to keep from the improvisations. So we feel free to improvise whatever we want since, as you say, “Everything is grist for my mill”. It's difficult to try to please you, because we don't know what pleases you, so we do what pleases us.

The fact that you only give us a few minutes to prepare an improvisation is beneficial: it relieves us from the worry of “doing it well”. At first, we want to prepare too much, and then we understand that you are attached to the unexpected punctums, therefore we are freed from the result. So we are light like air and we act like children.

We don't have to produce a scene at any cost and we can let ourselves go.

As an actor, normally, you don't want to make a fool of yourself on stage. Here, we are free from the anxiety of doing it right.”

“There is a speed of action which makes the actor dive in, throw himself into it. Everything goes fast, is created in continuous action that doesn’t take the time to stop itself.

We discover things the actors do in spite of themselves. There is no room for introspection. No break, Frederique doesn’t let boiling water cool down.”

*If someone is afraid of throwing himself into the void : “There is also the creation of a solidarity, of a very important cohesiveness in the creative process. This solidarity is always encouraging, it pushes people to take risks, to go beyond what they think they can do.”*

*Impacts on the actors in Africa: reconciliation with self :*

“What happens here is tolerable because it’s theatre, otherwise, in reality, it’s intolerable.”

“The acting can’t put me in danger, because I’m playing a character.”

“I am restored: before I couldn’t get myself to say my evening prayer, I would cry. Now, since the workshop, I understand that I am not the only one to have these problems, that all humans have problems.”

“The exercises showed me how to combat them and how to resolve them. They gave me the strength to not let myself be overcome.”

“The fact of exchanging with other people allowed me to see that everyone has internal wounds. Before, I believed I was the only one.”

“I am less stuck to my problem, I see it from farther away.”

“My problems are getting farther away from me. I have opened myself up.”

“When I remember, I cry, when I cry, afterwards I smile.”

*Impacts on the actors in Africa: reconciliation with others.*

“When I came here, I had a heart full of hatred. I gave up hatred even though I am in prison unfairly. Thank god. I was saying I would seek revenge, I forgave the person who brought me here.”

“We have to overcome that which can traumatize us, that which weighs on our hearts.

Here, we are learning to be human, to respect the human person, to respect each other, to live together as a family, to share the good, the bad, the worse, to give each other advice and to find the way out together.”

“We want to become a living letter that one can read and transmit the message.

If I have to give an example of myself, I had ideas that scared me based on the events I’ve lived. I am beginning to live because I see that people will change and it’s here that I’ve learned everything.”

“When I come here, I feel like a chick which hides in its mother’s wings because I have a serene life or I feel free to say everything I want to. Here, we get along very well and I feel that the truth is there.

But when I leave, I live in another world which is the opposite of this world I live here and I am always impatient for the new day, to come back under the wings of the hen.

So, when I sleep, I ask myself when will the little chicks grow up and with what will they grow up.

I’m eager to see that because on the outside, I am always in conflict with other people where we don’t get along like we do here.

This room holds many of my secrets because here I say everything I want to.

I am overwhelmed by this community that we have just created. We ought to look for an open letter that can be read to the audience and become the mirror of others; our acts should agree with what we say, and inversely, and this place, which is in us, must not be exposed because it holds many secrets.”

“We are like seeds of a tree that should be planted everywhere in Burundi.”

“It’s like a miracle. Before, life scared me. Since I’ve done theatre, I see things differently. I can laugh at what usually made me cry.

I see the spectators laugh and then cry and I tell myself that those tears are not the same as those which are in my heart. It’s both sad and fun to make people cry.”

“I felt capable, just capable of doing something, telling what I’ve lived and sharing it with people who don’t know me. I saw them laugh and cry and that gave me confidence.”

“Now, I’m confident. I know that I can always find a solution. I just have to tell myself “Think about the theatre”.

I felt connected with myself. I affirmed where I came from and what I have lived.

In the beginning, it was difficult and then it has become like a balm on the heart that heals wounds.”

*My dear, and if you ask me again “What purpose does it serve”, here’s how I’d answer even if your request would annoy me a little.*

*In any case, it’s often the first question that people ask me, particularly the NGOs for which I work.*

*It serves the collective memory: theatre will put on stage the victims who have not been listened to, the forgotten people from history, the untold stories.*

*It serves as a symbolic monument: theatre puts a monument to the dead on stage, for the dead who haven’t had a burial place.*

*It serves as an arena of reconciliation: theatre puts the conflict on stage, it brings it into the light, saying out loud that which everyone thinks quietly. Theatre puts the different points of view in a conflict on a stage. People will speak of multiple truths.*

*Theatre minimizes suspicions, it changes minds, it allows people to understand others.*

*It serves as purification: theater provokes a catharsis in the actor and in the spectator, they will identify with the suffering of the other.*

*It serves transitional justice: theatre will be a form of symbolic reparation for the victims.*

*It will be therapeutic: for the actors who will replay their trauma to distance themselves from it,. They take hold of their history, symbolizing it to confront it. Theatre will reconnect them. They will transform their story through acting, laughter, fun. They will even sometimes make fun of themselves. And if in the end his story moves others, they will feel relieved to see that they stirred up pity, fear or empathy in others. They will be happy to produce pleasure there where normally one would only find fear and suffering. The terror they stir up will put the spectator’s joy and relief to the test. And it’s magic.*

*It serves to order chaos; theatre will create order in the midst of disorder.*

*And that's not all...*

*It serves to integrate people in a community: it gives the word to those who don't have the right to the chapter.*

*Theatre builds confidence.*

*The actors will take back their self-confidence, will feel heard, will dare to tell their part of the Story in front of a large audience.*

*And then, it also sensitizes on themes, you have already seen this: police, capitalism, money, elections, minority rights....*

*I see it also, people who do theatre with me are not the same afterwards. I see them become energized, open their voices, dare to speak, to laugh, to sing. Making theater is a real revolution.*

*And then, the audience, to see them moved and to see them speaking up, to see their thrill. That also, s a revolution.*

*My dear, I have no doubt !*

Signed: your irritated one.

**And for me**

*Dear,*

*You are still asking me these questions:*

*What is Theatre and Reconciliation for me?*

*What do I love best and what do I hate the most in this method?*

*How do I see the future? In 10 years? In 20 years....*

*I'll be brief.*

*Theater & Reconciliation saved me, it really can save others. I feel others' pain as if my own flesh were being torn out. I try to understand the world of those outside the law. Theatre allows me to act as quickly as possible to put an end to torture. I am doing something.*

*What I like most in the methodology, it's when I myself am so present that I find the punctum, that I put it on stage and that it enlightens the people who are in front of me and who are acting. That it enlightens them on the social, political and individual problems they are living.*

*What I like the least, it's when people ask me (don't take offense...) what the purpose is, when I get angry because I want a result, when someone doesn't look me in the eyes, when I am not attentive, when I hurt someone and when I lose confidence.*

*The future of the method. In 10 years, 5 people will be able to use it, in 20 years, 125. In 10 years, I cover all the continents, I have the money to do it and in 20 years, Theater & Reconciliation exports itself into another galaxy, peace rules on earth, I have no more work because it's no longer necessary, and I receive the Nobel Peace Prize.*

*As far as the method goes, each person can put their own spin on it, ultimately the director doesn't matter much, it's just a question of finding the heart that goes with it.*

Signed: Theatrus Reconciliatus Sanctus



Chendeko, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

*Frédérique Lecomte*

**JOURNAL OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO.  
CHILD SOLDIER AND GIRLS THAT HAVE BEEN  
VICTIM OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
(JULI 2013)**

**July 2  
Play**

Chendeko.

It's the second year he has participated in the theatre workshop. He must be 16 or 17 years old. He started at the BVES centre more than a year ago. They don't speak about reintegrating him with his family. Maybe he doesn't have a family anymore? I don't know

He has a strong personality. Last year he played the narrator in the show. He knew more than the others, on stage and off stage.

I chose this picture because the kids are playing war. Even when in their case, they know it's not a game for kids.

I'm at Bukavu for the second consecutive year. Making theatre with the kids that came out of the armed forces and the girls that have been victim of sexual abuse and managed to get out of the armed forces. I'm not alone. Ewout D'Hoore is with me, director, friend and accomplice. Ekoma Isenga, the genius musician, Jean-Marie Kasongo, assistant director, both of them congolese. Jan Standaert, lover and head of logistics. Far away, Christine Mobergs is doing the scenography through texting. And Benjamin Geminel, a Parisian photographer. We look at the pictures he made the first day and I pick one.



Ushindi, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2014. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

The boys are preparing a scene. There are more than forty. They choose to show us a scene about the enlisting of school children into the army. The group is divided in two groups: one in class (you can see them in the back) and one attacking. The two kids on the side have fabricated an arm with a stick. The one in front is on the lookout.

Far in the back a second group is preparing another scene.

They play. And that's what matters. They are very serious too. Re-enacting the horror they lived through. The violence that was inflicted on them and also by them. Playing is putting a distance between them and their biography. That's what I like about this picture. It's violent, but also vulnerable. That is the spirit of the work. Vulnerability in a violent context.

Where I don't do what i should do

I can't stop to think about the little boy.

He must be ten years old. I ask them how they got to be with the armed forces. If they have been enlisted by force. The little boy speaks up and says that he killed somebody and was sent to the armed forces. He cries.

There, I committed a grave error. One of the counsellors of the BVES interferes, telling me we shouldn't talk about it. And unfortunately, I listen. It's as if I abandoned the little boy with his crime. Without hesitation I should have made a scene about it. Since he openly talked about it, there is an obligation to listen, to act, to transform and to take distance from what he just told us, with tears in his eyes. If he's ok with it, of course!

The difficulty is that this kind of testimony scares us. We would love to hide our heads in the sand. It's precisely at those moments that there is a need to act, but we do not always find the courage or the clarity in our head to do so. I deeply regret it. This little boy could be my son.

### **Juli 3**

#### **The war of the sexes**

Within the mission of Theatre & Reconciliation (which is enacting miracles of course), I find it important to give incentives to uplift people's self esteem, to stimulate feminism, to give people the tools to fight, to take a stand. The young girls, exploited by the military, cannon fodder, domestic slaves, raped by their husbands, teachers, warlords, I teach them to say "no", and more specifically in this scene to say: "girls, wake up" - en swahili: "Mabinti, amukeni"

This is the first rehearsal, they are less dejected and more competitive than last year. I don't know if I'm settling my differences with men, but, in any case I try to give them the energy they need to stop taking everything lying down. In this case, the scene in itself becomes like a battle cry.

An exercise to learn to stand up for themselves. It's a drill, not a military drill, but a drill nonetheless. I'm counting on the fact that the energy that I breathe into them to make the bottle pop, to make them resist, will train them for their life. They become like FEMEN, but without the bare breasts. If they're able to do it on stage, maybe one day, they will be able to do it in real life too.

It's still theatre, but also much more than that. Liberating and exhilarating.

The men seen by the women. Simple and typical: they smoke weed, they look tough, they abandon their children, they beat up their kids, their wives, they abandon everybody, they don't take any responsibility.

Julie is pregnant with her second child. She has been a child soldier, she has been in combat. The families are dislocated, where are her parents? Dead, disappeared? She is alone.

In the centre she takes lessons. She has been doing theatre with me since last year. She's exploding with energy. In the proposals she comes up with it's often about the men and their machismo behaviour.

A long discussion with the following questions:

*Have you been with the armed forces? Yes*

*Have you been wearing arms? Yes*





Ghislaine and the girls struggle, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

*Did you know what you were fighting for? No, we didn't, they abducted us, we had to do what they told us*

*Did you fight in the first lines? Yes*

*Did you have the feeling you were taking more risks than the others? Yes*

*Were you put to work in the mines to get minerals, gold, coltan? No*

*Were you put to use at the mines? Yes*

*What did you do? We were sent there to steal gold*

*Did you see the gold? Yes, but we could not keep any of it*

*Are you lucky to be still alive? Yes*

We make a scene about cannon fodder. They cross the stage on the rhythm of Ekoma playing his guitar, row by row of girls. They slowly cross the stage, they fall, another line of girls steps over them and one by one they stumble, another row of girls advances, they step over the previous line and then they fall. In the end all of them are dead, they are 33.

You need a lot of energy. Energy to transmit and love. And to know how to listen and then make theatre out of it. That's all.

## **July 4**

### **Joyful**

Even if it's serious, even when everything may seem terrible in the eyes of a european. Even when they say: "It must be really hard", theatre is always a pleasure. We are always in a good mood and it's in a joyful way that horrible themes get addressed.



Cannon fodder, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

I saw movies and shows about child soldiers and regardless of the quality, I seemed to only have seen one thing: the horror, the madness and the inability for any kind of resilience. The trauma and the impossibility to transcend it.

Me, I see them playing, laughing, being joyful, dynamic, filled with power, life, and kindness.

I have the feeling that the European perspective on the child soldiers can be nothing but filled with squalor. There is not much else except the fundamental categorisation “forever excluded from humanity”.

But who benefits from this perspective?

The journalist, looking for the pornography of the suffering? To the NGOs looking for good intentions? To the sponsor, looking for miraculous results?



Children with their wooden weapons, «Child Soldiers» Project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

If I make good use of the same financial networks with all the contradictions it implies, the mood of the rehearsals, the shows and the attitude of everybody taking part in the process... everything is joyful, and I am too.

The ones you see on television, it's them.

They have been fighting in the armies, but above all they have been guarding the mines and they have been digging, digging, digging.

Their movements are capable, they know what to do, how to sift for gold, how to look for diamonds.

They are experts.

But they do not know where the minerals are going. They disappear.

The warlords take them and pass them on to the white men.

They know more or less that they are fighting for mining territories.

And then this gold is coming to us, and then after several handshakes and handovers within the global economy, we come back there, in the form and shape of NGOs teaching them about peace and democracy, good governance, human rights and theatre.

One of them tells me "You are very intelligent"

So I bring in the flag of Theatre and Reconciliation (which enables miracles to happen) and after they went through the pockets of the dead they sing:

*Dig, dig, to the bottom we dig  
We take the risks and you take the profits  
If we have to die then die we will  
If we have to fall sick than fall sick we must  
If we have to got to war then we'll take up the arms  
If we have to fight then fight we must  
If we have to kill then kill each other we will  
Our minerals get stolen by people far away  
We don't even know what color they are  
And when they come back with NGOs  
They tranquilise the population  
They fool us with peace  
With survival kits  
It's our own money they feed to us and we eat*

But where are the fathers? They drink, they smoke weed, they beat their kids and their wives (but I already said so) They don't take home any money.

So, in the improvisation the kids kill their dad.

But since I can't have this on stage, we'll have to find something less bloody. Either the mom and the kids leave the house or they throw out the dad.

They choose to throw out the dad.

Ewout is shocked, he's a new dad, he would like to find a more humane solution. But, I tell him, you just have to throw them out. No time to fix up everybody.

They made their machine guns from what they could find in the garden.

They still play wargames, fight and die.

And they have the right moves, not the fake Hollywood ones.

## **July 5**

### **The place**

Never stamp your feet if the rehearsal space is not good enough. I can rehearse in the wild, in a prison, with five hundred people around who are looking and making noise, in a place that's pitch black or really dirty... I'm always happy.

Here, in Bukavu, the heat is killing us. There is a big metal swing in the middle of the stage. We are in the open sun. We have to go down a couple hundred steps before getting here, we stay here the whole day long and we work.

I'm not difficult about the rehearsal space, because if I start getting annoyed it gets everybody in a bad mood.

What I find the hardest work condition is to work with the absence of daylight, most of all when it's in a belgian theatre where they fill up the room with horrible neon light. It gets me down and the shows I make under these circumstances are really coloured by it. Which is not the case here, all colours are out and shining. Misery is less hard to bear in the sunlight.

## **Juli 6**

### **The remorse**

This afternoon, Jean-Marie and Ewout are working with the boys. I'm there when they need help.

Jean-Marie's group is working under the tree. They make a scene where they are drinking, smoking weed, flirting with the prostitutes.

And again the movements betray experience, even with the little kids. The starting point of the scene is happiness.

I ask them :

*Is this happiness? Yes*

*Can life go on like this? No*

*Did you take on projects for a longer term? No*

*Did you think you were going to die tomorrow? Yes, we were like dead*

*Is this why you threw your money out of the window? Yes*

*Where did the money come from? From stealing, from killing, from the warlords*

*Did you feel guilty? Not at all*

*Why? They told us that men are less than ants, that our Kalashnikov was our mother, our father, our food, our happiness. Nothing was important*

*And once you got out of the army? Yes, I regret. I understand now, but God has forgiven me.*

*I didn't have a future, only the present. Alcohol, drugs, prostitutes.*

I let Jean-Marie work with them. I tell him it's with this sense of culpability that they should work.



The military salute, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2014. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

He will make a brilliant scene in which the kids first throw the money out of the window and then will say I didn't think about

*I didn't think about helping my family  
I didn't think about studying  
I didn't think about contracting something  
I didn't think about buying clothes  
I didn't think about putting some money aside  
I didn't think about living as a family  
I didn't think about seeing my life as something precious  
I didn't think about visiting my parents  
I didn't think about preparing my life for tomorrow  
I didn't think about understanding life  
I didn't think about studying  
I only thought about stealing*

*I only thought about destroying*  
*I only thought about harming others*  
*I only thought about getting drunk*  
*I only thought about damaging people's houses*  
*I only thought about not living like a family*  
*I only thought about killing*  
*I only thought about spending money*  
*I only thought about raping women*  
*I only thought about hitting people*  
*I only thought about smoking weed*  
*I only thought about seeing prostitutes*  
*I only thought about drinking every day*  
*I only thought about dying*

## **The punctum**

Jean-Marie is asking me how I pick out the thing to work on. Sometimes I work from an improvisation made up by the actors and I work on something that jumps out, but sometimes I start from the discussion we have afterwards.

I give the example of a scene I made with the girls. It was an improvisation on the subject of children during the war, when they confess being in the first lines.

The punctum on which I will work is at the intersection of several elements:

- It has to be possible to direct it immediately and comprehensively with a large audience of children.
- It has to be connected to the issue at hand, in this case, child soldiering.

- The way this is made performative must have a direct impact on the spectators and on the way they understand the issue.

- The way this is made performative must help the actors understand the issues they are dealing with themselves.

- The best case scenario is when playing this scene has a cathartic effect on the actors.

- And it should even put into perspective an alienation, a mystery that concerns the actor but up until then has always been ignored.

- It has to emancipate the spectator.

- It has to emancipate the actor.

If a punctum comes up at the intersection of all of this, you have to work on it.

For this example, there are also visions or references to other shows, movies or paintings that could play a role. In this case, a painting of the first row of soldiers in a war by Napoleon combined with the image of a show by Castellucci where people fall and get up again and fall and get up again.

So consequently, after making sure that the girls had been used as cannon fodder, I create the image: one line of girls advances slowly, falls. Another line of girls steps over them and falls.

The image works as a symbol for the manipulation they have been subjected to.

Above that, they are recognised in what they have lived through, since I include that in the show. Finally, thousands of spectators will be able to see it. The actors who have been trapped in their traumas will be supported and recognised. It's a scene that helps everybody advance. It's an emancipatory scene.



Chendeko, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

## Chendeko

He is the most charismatic, the best actor, the most powerful, the biggest mouth, the leader of the gang. He gave me the grade of general, he took for himself the rank of colonel.

He was there last year, he was carrying the show. He has limitless energy. I adore him. I lean on him. He's a real tough guy. He's sixteen years old. He stayed with the armed forces for a couple of years.

This morning, Ewout is in trouble with a narrative structure. He is working based on the improvisation of the boys. It tells the story of a conflict between the rich and the poor. The rich have burned the school so that poor kids won't get schooling anymore. The government has opened up money to reconstruct the school, but the money has ended up in somebody's pockets, the well-to-do are corrupted, there will never be a new school.

Ewout tries to combine too many elements and gets in trouble. I intervened. This scene is talking about poverty, about the conflict between the rich and the poor, about corruption. It's not possible to keep everything. It's important to work on things separately.

So first, I make an image of corruption. I take a scene that I used before in many shows with police men, elections, conflicts about territory... I don't think twice about using a scene that I already created for a previous show, at least concerning the form, I can adapt the content easily. The speed with which I have to work forces me to use scenes that already have proven to function well.

And next, I ask an actor to tell the audience about his poverty.

And then I combine the two scenes, the one cutting into the other. Everything is made clear without underlining it or explaining too much.

## **July 8**

### **Choosing randomly**

You have to trust fate. There are no good or bad improvisations. You have to go with the things that come up. And then there is always the possibility that reality is so powerful that whatever you come up with, what comes out will simply get you back to the biography of the actors. Sometimes I even take a random word out of a dictionary and use that as a prompt for an improvisation.

And then, choosing a punctum results in fate as well. The basic thing is to be there and open up your senses, dreams, memories. Fate will become a crossroads of coincidences and help you out. The accumulation of all this random input will enrich your theatrical work layer by layer, your theatrical work.

I see Jean-Marie directing a chorus: “When I look out of the window”. He must have thought a chorus scene would be easy to set up but: there’s plenty of pitfalls: technical pitfalls: talking loud enough, thinking what you are talking about, seeing the images, not moving, keeping the arms on the side of the body. In this chorus the girls talk about the following:

*When I look out of the window I see the thieves*  
*When I look out of the window I see the dead*  
*When I look out of the window I see kids playing*  
*When I look out of the window I see the witches*  
*When I look out of the window I see street kids*  
*When I look out of the window I see children kissing their mothers*  
*When I look out of the window I see a child falling*  
*When I look out of the window I see people in the churches lamenting the dead*  
*When I look out of the window I see the prostitutes*  
*When I look out of the window I see people entering the church*  
*When I look out of the window I see white people*  
*When I look out of the window I see the dead*  
*When I look out of the window I see the soldiers at war*  
*When I look out of the window I see street kids becoming chiefs*  
*When I look out of the window I see white people filming black people*  
*When I look out of the window I see a thief getting caught*  
*When I look out of the window I see people singing at the church*  
*When I look out of the window I see the the fallen ones*

*When I look out of the window I see the people in mourning  
When I look out of the window I see the soldiers killing people  
When I look out of the window I see the rain coming down on  
little kids  
When I look out of the window I see people running away  
When I look out of the window I see people getting married*

Jean-Marie asks them only to keep the bad/sad things.

I don't agree.

Catastrophic movies or stories that only show the negative are critical but do not offer any escape hatch to the actors.

It also comes from the idea that to be taken seriously only the negative will do. I think it's part of an unhealthy perspective that is voyeuristic and perverse. But it's also understandable, since all the money coming in through the NGO's is based on highlighting the disasters.

Coming back to the scene, what really works for me is the mix of positive and negative images, everyday images of life during war and peace.

It's not beneficial to focus only on the disaster. Even when it's important to address the problems, it's important to breathe and think about a possible future that is filled with luminous thoughts.

The work on a scene therefore needs to be focussed on opening up a new space, being positive and imaginative. We work in societies that are so damaged that I see it as my duty to bring the spark, to open up the headspace to positive thinking and not get bogged down in total depression. I want the actors and the spectators to get inspired and regain their confidence and power to exist and to act.

Ewout asks me: “But then what about the scene I made with the boys, where I ask them to think about the friends they have lost in battle, it is kind of a disaster scene, no? A scene of the catastrophe, a painful scene?”

*I think about Mathieu, he died before my eyes.*

*I think about Marc, he was my friend, I don't know where he is now.*

*I think about Chikourou, we were always together.*

If this scene is cathartic and brings to the surface a touching memory, it might do the same for the audience. It brings back the memory of those who are not with us today. In this way it serves as a public prayer.

Thinking of the dead and the ones that disappeared is giving time to commemorate. It's giving time to the construction of one's personal history that echoes the collective history. Everybody lost plenty in this war.

Taking time on stage to think about the dead or the ones who disappeared creates a ritual to deal with this on a symbolic level; it gives people the opportunity to praise and bury the ones that didn't get to have a proper funeral. Thinking about the dead is creating one's personal identity, it's refusing to forget, it's constructing one's memory. This is not sad, it's not disastrous, it's life itself.

It's a scene that serves the living and the dead.

Every day there should be a fairy visiting the rehearsals. She can even be physically present, you only need to see her.

She helps to understand what's happening, she gives courage to let the truth come to the surface, she can provide the courage and the power to rebuild ourselves, she can be discreet, she can open up

the imagination of the actors and the director, she can give joy or pause. She can help to clean out damaged hearts, she can give force and permission. She can help not to judge the good or the bad, she can help us to be just. She permits us to forge us an identity outside the catastrophe.

When the fairy is there, everything becomes simple. When the fairy is there everything becomes filled with light. We pray for the fairy to be there all the time. If she isn't the director, the actors, the rehearsals and the whole institution becomes obscured by darkness and the weight of the disaster.

It's hard to think about all those things.

It's not a question of applying rules, it's a question of letting your intuition work and most of all your heart. If you'd want to master everything that comes into play you would imprison yourself in a very complicated composition. You would try to do your best and focus on technical aspects of the theatrical performance and lose sight of the most essential things.

You have to trust your humanity and your capacity to feel empathy, the rest comes later.

## **July 9**

### **It's delicate**

Tribalism, what a dirty word!

*How many tribes do you have? 450*

*Do they all speak the same language? No*

*Do they have the same eating customs? More or less, there are some forbidden things that vary, some don't eat bats, others don't eat fish*

*Do you live in the same geographical regions? Yes, every tribe is sticking to a certain region.*

*Are the chiefs of the army belonging to the same tribe? Yes*

*Do the armies enlist people from other tribes? Yes*

*Those other tribes do not have the same status than the one tribe from the chiefs? No*

*Did you know the tribal background of your companions? No*

*Can you recognise the tribal characteristics of the others?*

*Yes*

*How? The way they talk, walk, dance or engage.*

*Are there conflicts between you because of your tribal differences? No, we have to leave all that behind when we arrive at the centre.*

With this information I go ahead full speed. I ask them to make three groups and with those groups make 5 impersonations of tribal cliches.

They present some very funny stuff. Banyamulenge who walks like cows with their teeth all out, Bashi who loves to carry stuff, Batembo who talks loud and all the time and Babembe who peddle.

The scene is presented by Chendeko who is explaining that in the BVES every tribe is welcomed.

It's a caricature and it's well intended, I know. I didn't find any other way that was more subtle. In Burundi, when I made a similar scene about hutus and tutsis; and in the show I made it for a belgian audience. The message was that cliches are not corresponding to reality and that you couldn't put everybody in the same boat.

Here, the message is different, it just serves to say that, independent of their tribal heritage, they are all welcomed at the BVES.

It's a delicate scene, it's conjuring the reality of tribal differences that get exploited to start or intensify a territorial conflict.

*The white people are coming!*  
*They bring us democracy, internet, peace, reconciliation,*  
*theatre, art, corruption (HUSH), good governance, arms*  
*(HUSH), chocolate, candy.*  
*Let's dance for the white people!*

It's a scene that I took from *Amakuba*, that was taken from another show I made with displaced people in Burundi in 2008.

I have to go fast. I don't think twice about taking a vehicle I used before and filling it with a new content.

We are working on "the white people are coming" A little boy is telling me we need a translator.

The scene is very comical with one of them talking some kind of gibberish that gets translated into Swahili. He says more or less this: he loves Congo, he doesn't have any money to offer, that Congo is in his heart....

And that he admires the white people working here under those terrible circumstances.

He gets his picture taken, they film him and he leaves the way he came, with the drums and a whole little orchestra playing an anthem.

## **July 10**

### **The rape scene**

The teachers rape their students. It surfaces constantly during the rehearsals.

We work on the scene, again : The little kids are singing  $2+2=4$ ,  $4+4=8$ ,... "Two plus two, four, four plus four, eight"

Carole, who is playing the teacher, is holding one of the



Sifa and Neema, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

smallest kids on her knees. The little girl is trying to get away, the other girls continue to sing “Two plus two, four, four plus four, eight”

The little girl must be eleven years old or younger. I make sure that she agrees to play the scene. And I also make sure that she and all the other girls understand we are talking about rape, that it’s forbidden, that people go to jail for that. That they have to speak to somebody they trust when confronted with this.

They didn’t know it was forbidden.

They are all listening very closely. This scene is really important and hard to look at. It will provoke a lot of reactions.

## July 11

### Le president

A scene where the future president makes surrealistic electoral promises: the kids are booing him.

The scene doesn't work. On a theatrical level it's not very clear and on a content level it's dangerous, it critiques the sitting or future president in his own territory: it's displaced.

And is this scene really important? We should try and connect it with the troubles of child soldiers.

You always have to make sure that the scene will not make the spectators violent. We play before 3000 people, playing with the emotions of such a crowd is not without risk. You always have to make sure not to go against the audience. It would not serve the cause of the child soldiers who are trying to reintegrate within society. I think it could turn out really bad.

I often work with irony and a second layer, but you have to be sure that the audience is not taking things like things at its face value. In the example of the president:

*The citizen: I'm a frontier worker, do I have to pay taxes?*

*The candidate: When I will be president I will abolish all frontiers!*

*The citizen: how will you stop sexual violence?*

*The candidate: I will abolish all men when president!*

It's not easy to understand the second layer of meaning here, so better abort. The spectator can truly believe that these things will happen. In Burundi, to steer clear of any confusion when one actor was playing a criminal, there was always another actor who reminded the audience

about the fictionality of the scene saying: « This is only theatre and not reality, this only a game.»

But I also understand something else, the scene has been made by Ewout and it's relying on a set of European codes that do not work here.

I am impatient. Things never go fast enough for me. Jean Marie and Ewout are complaining that I push them to make more and more scenes.. And the moment I put them in charge I start dancing around with impatience. They are right. I'm afraid the kids would get bored too. I'm constantly trying to keep in mind the rhythm of the rehearsal. Getting stuck in a technical aspect of a scene for too long is killing the fun.

To fill a bag with stones you start with the big stones, then the little ones and then the sand.

To give indications to the actors, you have to start with the global structure and then look again at what is precisely said and then work on the acting and then work on presence, voice...

Big stones first.

Zairata, last year, was pretty lost. He was glued to Jan the whole time. And he barely played. Today, he started to play a lot, and got better and better. He's growing.

I keep a scene with him that doesn't interest me that much. But protecting an actor that needs it is more important.

The boy is not the same anymore. He needs confidence, he's seen differently by the others. We have to do everything we can to make a good scene out of it.

In this sense, the effect on the actor is more important than the scene in itself.



Bernadette, the angel passes, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

**July 12**

**The angel is passing**

“No no no the word of God will never pass” : I understand it as “God will never come here”, the door is locked? It’s a song that we sing during the warming up with the girls.

The angel is coming from a paradise-on-earth scene where Olive is playing the angel. The angel is now played by Bernadette.

We made a veil, several meters long. But what will happen with the angel when God will not pass?

## July 14

### Scenography by texting

Dialogue with Christine Moberg, scenographer:

*Do we need new T-shirts or old ones?*

*No new ones and no white ones*

*Should we print: saved by theatre & reconciliation in industrial printing style or more improvised?*

*Improvised, done by the children themselves*

*Do we need long jeans or short or ribbed jeans?*

*I prefer short but not ribbed, that's too much "street kids"*

## July 15

### Logic

Ewout says : «are we not making a show that's too logical?»

On the one hand, everything needs to make sense and be clear. We can't have connections that are too impressionistic, or the spectator will get lost. But on the other hand, if it all becomes too narrative, the show will be trapped into a lesson that's understood by the brain, but not by the heart.

The rhythm and the succession of the scenes isn't quite there yet. The show has to breathe like a symphony, with accelerations, soft moments and little jumps.

When you have the right succession of scenes and right rhythm, the quality of the show depends on the very small things you add in the end and that change everything. Often it's the choir in the back that

echoes whatever is taking place on stage, or it's a reminder of an image from before, like for example the image of the girls with their hands tied up above their heads.

## **July 16**

### **White people first**

Ewout did a brilliant run-through with a new succession of scenes. But...and this is the object of our discussion.

Ewout started the show with the scene where the white people arrive and bring us democracy, weapons (hush)... followed by the scene where the white people, played by the kids, are making a nonsensical speech about money and aid, translated by Jimmy.

After this Ewout makes the delegates of white people stay on stage and assist to the following scenes:

*The scene that explains the different ethnicities (450, but today we will show you only 5 and the rest is for tomorrow)*

*(Applause by the delegation of white people)*

*The scene showing the tribal conflicts between the 'leaves' and the 'trees'*

*(Applause by the delegation of white people)*

*The scene about how child soldiers get manipulated and everybody dies*

*(Applause by the delegation of white people), they smile and leave silently, putting their thumbs up to the narrator*

Jean Marie asks us if beginning the show like this has any logic for an African audience.

It's true that we are far away from the NGO-paid-for sensitization theatre that people are used to. I never did and never will see a perspective that is so critical of the peace industry. I normally work with a list of things people want me to address: the police, the truth, land conflicts, refugees...

But in this case, with the BVES I don't have any directives except making theatre with the child soldiers.

My objective is that the kids and the audience have a better understanding of the pitfalls concerning child soldiering and what causes it in the first place. We are talking about making them more conscious, and everything is permitted to do so, or maybe not...

It's really a gift to be able to work so freely and to be able to say things that normally could not be brought to the table. It's IMPOSSIBLE to see scenes like this within the context of an NGO, even though the people working there are no idiots and they see the traps and pitfalls of the system better than anybody else. Taking such a critical approach has never been done.

What is weird and contradictory is that I'm used to working on truth and different versions of it, but never before have I been implicating the international community of white people, which is weird. We seem to love it when other people are confessing their crimes, but we act as if we are saints.

## **Juli 17**

### **Different run throughs**

Ewout is not happy about the first run through that Jean-Marie did (I'm very satisfied).

The negatives: no climax, no change at the heart of the show, no dramatic tension, no conflict resolution, no notable difference between the beginning and the end, no theatre, no silence, no breaks, no breath. It's all very clear and polite.

Ghislaine's outbursts and the "Wake up" calls don't make much sense; they make everything even more flat.

On the positive side: the show is clear for everyone and it's energetic.

I didn't see all that, I was blinded.

Ewout is giving it another try.

He puts everything upside down.

The positive: a more dynamic approach where piling up the disasters makes the actors understand it's time for a change.

The articulation is good. The narrative structure is lifting up the actors.

The negative: too impressionistic for me, and not understandable enough for an audience that's not used to the accumulation of signifiers without clear explanation.

I'm waking up though, thanks to Ewout, I had been falling asleep on my tire and I had been looking at Jean-Marie's run through with too much innocence.

So, I prepare for another run through that I will lead myself. The actors are exhausted, me too. The sun is up high, Julie fainted, but there's work to be done.

I'm applying the structure of a lesson plan: we will teach you how to wake up, both actors and spectators. It's like a vision of their past to which they say "NO".

What we need to explain to Jean-Marie, who is not there because he's too exhausted, is the statute of the 'real'. The relationship we establish towards reality, the need for action. The run through of Jean Marie was based on a narrative, not on the presence of the actors. Ewout tells me that it's only possible to reach and touch the spectator through the reality of the actor and I agree with him.

It's there where spectators and actors are going to identify with each other without going through a narrative.

This sensation that the spectator needs to have should be addressed in the beginning of the show.

Ewout suggests putting the real and the narrative into tension.

Ghislaine says: «Is this how men are behaving themselves? Is this how teachers are behaving?»

It's really a very explanatory text.

But if she says:

*Do you want more? More prostitutes, badly behaving men,  
teachers, soldiers, more*

*horrors, more violence, do you want to hear more?*

*Bad things happening every day nearby?*

*You want to have more and more?*

*I think you haven't understood where we want to go with this,*

*I think we need to show you again what we are talking about*

A narrative structure, yes but.

It's not the narrative structure that forms the basics of the show, but the presence of the actor that can create a change in the viewer.

When you have only narrative, it's not enough: The narrative structure is not going to emancipate, it's going to tell a story about

emancipation. It will tell you how to think, but it will not change people.

The narrative structure is putting you to sleep and masking everything that's underneath that's theatrical, touching and interesting.

It reinforces the dominant perspective.

And we are clearly not included. So, we have to break open the narrative and reveal what's underneath.

It's with the emotion that we are working.

## **July 18**

### **The little stones**

The big stones are there, now it's time for the little stones: concentration, energy, little details within the scenes, the passage from one scene to the other, little extras; the things that will color the whole show.

I'm going crazy today, but in a good way. I try to communicate my energy, I don't drop the ball once and I scream like hell. I'm not always proud of the screaming. I really want them to understand not to talk in between different scenes, to avoid movements that distract the audience. I'm extremely demanding, for an audience of this size it will be really hard not to get distracted. So I train them to be a thousand times more focussed to compensate ahead of time. It's not easy. After the little stones, I'll put in the sand, but that's for Saturday.

Chendeko, again.

He gets the job done.

He presents the whole thing and keeps it together.

He's always ready to go, he understands things very fast.

We work like this:

*Ladies and gentlemen, there have been a lot of dead people so far, you want to have more?*

*More corpses. It never ends. You want to continue anyway?*

Jean-Marie plays the scene in Swahili and Chendeko immediately takes over. It's quite easy. Everything can be transmitted from French into their mother tongue. The kids don't speak a lot of French.

Jean-Marie is non stop translating in both directions. It takes time, but it's not lost. It's what it takes to understand each other.

The narrator establishes the link between all scenes. He's the one who asks questions to the audience, he's the one who comments on the catastrophes that we're addressing. He's the one that knows more than the audience or the others.

And Chendeko gets the job done, and even better.





The fighter, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

**19 july**

**I don't want to play the dead**

Julie, who lost consciousness during yesterday's rehearsal, tells me that she prefers not to play in the scene with the dead, because it brings back bad memories. She's eight months pregnant.

Rose, who is the director at the women's center, asks me to intervene and to explain the process.

So I talk about the impossibility of forgetting. And I explain that since we can't forget we have to overcome the past. There's different ways to do this: dreams and nightmares are a way for the unconscious to treat trauma, but we can also talk. Talk with people about what happened. And theatre is a way to talk and to be understood. Not by one but by thousands of other people. In this way it's possible to understand what we go through and what has happened. And it can be an affirmation of our identity. And we can be publicly recognised for who we are. A firm and strong voice can clean the heart. Your own and the one of the audience. It cleans, but it doesn't repair everything. It makes it possible to move on. It's what I see every day when I make theatre.

The explosion of energy can be like a miracle.

Those little girls or young girls, all closed up, discreet and submissive, I see them lifting off. They are literally unchained now.

I hope more than anything that this energy will infect their lives.

They are standing up during the whole show. I had forgotten that this is the only way to have them keep their concentration. It makes them responsible for everything that's going on.

From experience, I know that when the crowd gathers around us, it is like a stormy sea. The boat has to be stable and everything has to be organized in order not to sink. If the actors are inattentive and distracted by the ambient disorder, the whole performance sinks.

**July 20**

**Fritters, bananas, sardines and democracy**

Endless discussion with the boys:

*No sardines: OH*

*Avocados: OH*

*Bananas: AH*

*Sardines at the end of the show: AH*

*Juice: AH*

*Water: OH*

*A can of fanta at the end: AH*

*THE BOYS: We want fritters, because avocado's is for girls and we get diarrhea from avocados and how can we play with diarrhea? We want fritters.*

*AH*

*me: you want fritters?*

*YES*

*me: Ok for fritters*

*THE BOYS: we have to get them through Emmanuel.*

*No. We have to make them ourselves.*

...

One hour later

...

*Chendeko: you have to decide for us, or we will talk about this for hours and everybody will always want something else.*

*Everybody: yes. decide for us!*

*APPLAUSE*

*me : it would be easier for me to say: everybody three bananas, no discussion.*

*But would it not be the same as with the warlords telling you: get up, get down, attack, relax, die?*

*Them: YES*

*me : So, you have to learn how to agree on this. These things take time, but it's not wasted. Back in Belgium we are specialists of compromise.*

The run through standing up.

We then proceed to do two run throughs. They are beginning to concentrate.

There's more energy but it's all pretty technical and soulless. It will be much better once there will be an audience.

The pressure of thousands of spectators will give them a shot of adrenaline.

I'm only half satisfied. Something's missing. I don't know what.

## **July 21**

### **Working on something artistic, yes but**

We are working on something artistic. But if it's only that, it doesn't work. We are not working within an artistic context; and the reality is so hard, that the artistic is at risk of becoming secondary.

But, I'm only making theatre, the whole day long.



Julie and her little Frederic, Child Soldiers project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

Only theatre? Yes and no. There's a lot of talking, adjusting, listening, explaining and most of all creating a strange passageway out of this show for the kids to go through, some kind of initiation.

No, it's not an instrument in the sense that therapists could use it for therapeutic means.

But theatre alone is not enough.

The work must have an artistic quality, a pedagogical quality and an initiatory quality for the actors, but also for the audience.

The process must illuminate the path. The theatre will also serve this purpose and all the discussions that take place serve to put us on this path.

The focus is not the theatre, the focus is the people. Theatre is not an instrument, it is a profession. It is mine and it allows me to bring out the truth.

## **July 22**

### **Julie had her baby**

Julie had her baby. She won't play. A little boy, we will go visit her tomorrow.

We replaced Julie.

It's easy to replace in this kind of process, because everybody has been present the whole time. It will be pretty easy for somebody else to take over the scenes in which Julie is playing. No text to memorise, only a context to respect. The context is set, but the words to install it can be different.

Although it's necessary to be more precise when looking at what Chendeko and Ghislaine are saying. Ghislaine has to go crazy to empower the whole group. And she's commenting on what happens on stage. We'll have to be as precise as possible. Today Ewout wrote down everything that should be changed. I don't have the time to write anything down. I have to command the army.

Being precise about what gets said is putting in the sand and the little stones. We are at the end of the process. We're adding little things, we're fine tuning and decorating with lace.

The big stones: the structure of the scene, the action on stage.

The little stones: the energy, the concentration

The sand: fine tuning what gets said, ideas about transitions and little details that complete the whole.

## **July 23**

### **In the hospital**

I don't remember anything about today except the hospital.

Ewout and Benjamin are picking out a present for Julie.

We arrive at the hospital, she's there, numb. She didn't have anything to eat, the baby hadn't been changed or washed. She has no clothes, she has no milk, the baby is numb too.

The ladies sharing her room tell me to do something. It's horrible, I cry, I try to suppress it, but I don't manage.

Julie, who's so dynamic on stage, is not saying a word. The other mothers are telling me she hasn't said a word, she didn't even tell them her name. She doesn't have medicine, she needs antibiotics, clothes for the baby.

We are taking her to the kitchen to eat. She eats and after a while her milk comes up, she will be able to feed her baby. We go to the market to buy clothes for her and the baby and bedsheets and diapers, towels, soap, oil for the baby. She has nothing.

But what are all those NGOs doing in Bukavu? What is the Red Cross doing? What is the BVES doing?

What would have happened if we hadn't visited? They would have died? Possibly.

What is this? Who is responsible? What is happening here?

I don't understand, I'm filled with horror and rage.

I asked her for the baby's name. She tells me: you choose.

His name will be Frederic. It's the second time I'm becoming a grandmother this month.

## **July 24**

### **Everything is going great**

That's what I tell them to say to make sure everybody stays positive. But we have to accept it's not going well at all.

I'm besides myself, I'm a raging dragon, I have been screaming the whole day.

What is happening?

Yesterday, Julie was at the hospital, without care, medicine, food, without visits from the Red Cross or the BVES. What the hell are all those NGOs doing here? Writing stupid files.

I'm getting yelled at for inviting UNICEF to come and see the show. "What will they say: we expose those kids in public space". It all seems disproportionate to me, obscene.

Today we have seventy kids present for the run-through, the assistants DO NOTHING. They take no initiative and manage to fail at the simplest tasks, like writing the girls' names on their costumes, not in the interior of the back of the trousers but on the leg of their jeans with a big fat marker... Rose who disappears to do "exams".

I'm nearly losing it.

And Jan who's taking care of two hundred seventy bananas, sandwiches, samosas, juice, money and bills that are not specified or absent.

Everything is vague and I wonder why.

Nobody tells the kids what to do except me. My team is taking care of everything. It's horrible. And tomorrow we go out of the city to play two times at different locations, with ninety people. I'm afraid the time table will not be respected. In that case we won't play the second show.

It will be horrible.

The run-through with everybody standing. It's not that bad. The two shows are good. Though it's hard to determine.

There is such a confusion, noise everywhere, seventy kids and teenagers totally hysterical and me too. The lack of concentration and the noise. It's maddening.

But it works, yes it works.

The show is touching and funny and didactic. I should write down a description of all the scenes, but I don't have the time. I have to think of everything, my head is exploding.

**July 25**

**First presentation**

I wasn't sure about the logistics: five cars, meals and water for ninety people, a mobile sound system, two presentations and very uncertain roads.

But everything goes well. An hour and a half of delay that risks putting the afternoon representation in jeopardy. More screaming and barking, punishments "this infraction merits a sanction", since you were an hour and a half late you will be paid 12 percent less than was agreed upon (I calculate fast in those moments). They panic and despair.

If the logistics are not in place, everything else falters. The entourage from the BVES doesn't help ("they didn't tell me I had to hand out those bananas/we didn't know that we needed gas for the cars/I handed out the water, but the others were not there")

I exploded. I called one of the educators an empty water can, which is kind of horrible when there is no water around.

Jan should get most of the credits for the success. He has been running in all directions -to the market, dealing with the drivers, getting the food, negotiating with merchants, with me, with the big chief of the BVES, thinking of a back up plan. Without him we wouldn't even have left the city.

Sunday, I'm heading home to Bujumbura. He's staying here. If not, then there would probably be no presentations.

In the end we nearly played the first show on time and the second we played an hour in advance.

It's very hot and we all get sunburnt.

The actors exploded during the presentations. It's a very good show taking about an hour and a half.

Three thousand spectators, a very interested audience.  
Fabrice from the WBI came from Kinshasa to see the show.

Nobody is afraid when playing in my shows: no stage fright, no text to be memorised in advance, only being in the right frame of mind and with the right kind of energy.

Everything comes down to feeling free to play. The numerous spectators are like a trampoline the actors are bouncing on to jump even higher, and the more the show progresses the higher they jump.

I wouldn't imagine that the actors could have stage fright. You have to give them a maximum of confidence in order for them to take flight. Today, both girls and boys have taken off.

Specific scenes that I thought were brilliant are not with the presence of the audience and others that I thought to be weak are suddenly becoming strong.

The show is like a display of bravery for the actors, a tournament for daredevils, a sporting event for athletes on a very high level with participants falling, crying, playing and pushing their boundaries in order to win. The energy is there and it's necessary, for the boys and for the girls.

During a discussion with Ewout tonight we are talking about the speed with which we made the show. In less than ten days most of the show was there.

The urgency is needed to keep the teenagers alive. It's necessary to say YES or NO in an instant, to decide, deal with issues and direct in the most immediate way possible.

Ewout, who is in Africa for the very first time, had to adapt fast, and maybe too fast. He hasn't been able to show his full creative muscle during the process. And it's pretty normal, a first time in Africa and



Ghislaine, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

this is where he arrives, in Bukavu. You couldn't imagine a more painful introduction.

And we talk about the opera we want to make. With Ekoma, Jean Claude, Prosper, Jean Berchmans and the child soldiers.

An opera sounds better than a musical comedy.

I'm certain it will become reality.

And we will have an international tour.

The first African opera.

The opera of the miracle of Theatre and Reconciliation it will be called.

**July 26**  
**Ghislaine**

I listened to the whole translation today. Ghislaine is extraordinary. I didn't write down what she said, but what she says about women's conditions makes exactly the right point. She's the one who's leading the girls, she's telling their story and she's interacting with the audience. She has a crazy and violent energy. She knows what she's talking about when she's addressing submission, sexual exploitation, prostitution. I adore her. If all girls could take her example...

**July 27**  
**In the morning**

6:30 everybody arrives. I call in Chendeko, Jimmy and Ghislaine. Claude and Pappy are there and Benjamin, Ewout and Jan.

We have breakfast together.

I put them in charge.

If they have to play without me, and when Jean-Marie is not around, Jimmy and Chendeko will be directing the boys, and Ghislaine will be responsible for the girls. I tell them:

- Do not abuse of your power
- Do not get even in respect of ethnic conflicts
- Do not cuddle up with your friends
- Consider first the most vulnerable and defend them
- Be sure you support everybody

Chendeko, Jimmy and Ghislaine are taking over. The sustaining of the project has begun.

Discussion with Rose, the “head mistress” of the girls.

*How will we finish our formation?*

*Never*

Directing is like cooking. When you read a book about cooking it’s not going to make you a chef. A chef will cook, invent, mix, and taste. You will not learn everything from a book.

So you have to be part of T & R, and live it from the inside out. Rose, Claude and Papy haven’t been part of the process. They have simply been observing, and not even carefully. But observing is not enough. Last year I exhausted myself by explaining to them how I work, evening after evening. Why? Simply to let them believe I was forming people. But the ones I’m really forming are Jean-Marie, Ekoma, Ghislaine, Chendeko and Jimmy.

So I explain to Rose that in order to learn you have to practice. To practice, you have to rehearse, experiment with directing... none of which they did.

The only way would be to have a week or ten days dedicated solely to training people, but the budget doesn’t allow that.

And even if the budget would be available, I would not use it to train them.

The people I’m looking for to train should have a certain personality structure and a very precise one. I need leaders: Chendeko, Ghislaine, Jean-Marie. I need people who understand the process: Jimmy. All the people who work for T&R need to have experimented with the method themselves and have seen the benefits.

So, Jimmy has done the montage with me at his side.

He studied the succession and the way to cut and paste different scenes together, he asked me to repeat the hand symbol again and again. And when I hand over the conductor sticks to him, he totally brings it home. From here he can only grow. It would be great if he could have an apprenticeship with Jean-Marie in Belgium.

Ghislaine totally went for it too. She's unchained in the sense of having set herself free.

**July 29**

**The most beautiful scene**

The one that Ewout made with the boys: the friends they lost in battle.

*I remember my friend Benjamin, he's dead, I will not see him again.*

*I remember my friend Francois, I don't know what became of him.*

*I remember Jean, we laughed together; and now he's dead.*

It's a very moving scene and every time I have a precise translation, I cry.

I would not have dared to ask the actors a question like this, out of respect.

But Ewout did and he was right to do so.

You have to be respectful, but you also have to go for it.

We went back to Bujumbura ; Jan is staying behind to secure the organisation of the last four presentations.

We went swimming in the Tanganyika lake on the way to the airport. A real touristic luxury after so much violence and chaos; the luxury of a beach and a four star hotel.

I see Ewout and Benjamin, finally relaxing. It must have been hard on them, most of all for Ewout. He has been worried.

Jean Berchmans and Prosper, the Burundese actors who came with us and came to see the show in Bukavu tell me about the reactions of the audience during the show. Most notably the scene where “the white people are coming”. The audience was asking them if they weren’t afraid to show this in front of white people. To which they replied that it were those very same white people who created those scenes.

It’s done, Benjamin and Ewout have left.

On the telephone, Jan is telling me that Ekoma was late for one of the shows. When the cat is gone...

I’m starting a dreaded task, looking for new projects in Bujumbura.

I’m here for a week. Jean Berchmans arranged some meetings for me. Sigh...

I’m sad to have left all those kids: Chendeko, Jimmy, Francois, Master Black, Pascal, Ghislaine, Julie, Zavouadi, Florence...

I’ll be back next year, I think.



Ewout, warm-up, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photo by Benjamin Géminel.



Ewout with the little ones, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

*Ewout D'Hoore*

**SAVED BY THEATRE & RECONCILIATION**

**A CORRESPONDANCE ON WORKING WITH EX-CHILD SOLDIERS**

1. Hi love, I'm on the train to the airport again. Three days ago I put you and our little sprout on the plane to Canada. But this time I am going and the destination is Africa. It sounds ominous and glorious and I've always been terrified to go. I'm afraid to feel responsible without being able to help, afraid the gap is too big to bridge, afraid to have no internet, no decent coffee for a month. During the last weeks I noticed how African people struggled to fit in on the European continent, taking up too much space, scrambling to look dignified and successful in a world dictated by white people. But now it's my turn to try and occupy a legitimate space in Africa.

*Eigen volk eerst* (your own tribe first)

One of the slogans that appear on the clothes of a big group of *skinheads* that are taking the same train

2. My love, I'm drinking coffee at the airport. The lead singer from the White Stripes is teaching a black kid how to howl like a real rock star. I meet up with F and Jan, her lover. He will be in charge of the practical aspects of the project. They are in the company of Benjamin, a French photographer who worked for the presidential campaign of Francois Hollande. He met Frédérique years ago on a beautiful beach in Tanzania. It's not clear what he will do but hearing of it he couldn't resist Frédérique's invitation to follow the project. I talk with him on the plane, about Africa, about how desperate and beautiful it is.

He's been in Senegal and other countries in the west of Africa and he's excited to go back although he confesses to me that Congo has always terrified him, especially the east where we are going. We talk about Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty*, about the responsibility of the artist, the photographer, the journalist. About the public getting tired of hearing the same stories about Africa. About paying seven dollars a month to UNICEF for the right to forget about it. We talk about how monstrously exotic child soldiers are to people in the west, how rape is suddenly becoming a sexy international topic. And after forty five minutes we politely turn to our private viewings of Mila Jovovich, Roger Moore and Daniel Craig...

When we touch ground in Bujumbura it smells big and spacious and exotic. The traffic is crazy, people are warm but I have trouble recognising their lives as something I can identify with or this gathering of people, houses and streets as a city. I could have arrived on a far away planet in a distant galaxy and felt at home as much as here... the Burundi actors I shared the stage with in Belgium pick us up, we have old friends in this place. We go eat at the side of a dust road. French fries and brochette with a cold Amstel beer. I manage to relax a bit, I'm already tempted to forget that I'm white... when we get back to the "maison de passage" I discover a giant cockroach on the wall of my bedroom, strangely enough I don't mind, he will be my buddy for tonight. I feel less comfortable with the neon lights and the mosquito net... I hope the Canadian prairies are keeping you safe.

*Aha ! Bienvenue au coeur de l'Afrique* (welcome to the heart of Africa)

Jean-Berchmans, one of F's actors in Burundi

3. Hi sweet pea, I woke up with the sound of a strange bird painted white and black making deep bullfrog sounds. I got up and said hi to my cockroach buddy and then to the guard that comes with every house in Africa-I did have the feeling somebody was watching over me last night... we will go to Bukavu today by taxi. We will take the long way around through Rwanda to avoid ambushes in the region of the border between Burundi and Congo. But first we go and visit Johan, a Belgian friend of Frédérique. He lives in the rich neighbourhood, with a nice garden. He is very sympathetic. Frédérique and he talk about a new project around the upcoming elections. He wishes us luck with the checkpoints at the border... half an hour later we are heading out of the city in a locomotive frenzy that looks like a finish line in the Tour de France in two directions at the same time. There are mini busses loaded with more than forty people, cars that appear to be held together only by a miracle, bicycles loaded with fifteen or more giant containers of water or towers of rice bags, no traffic lights and barely any discernible rules. I try to resist the urge to close my eyes or to begin an endless scream and I grip the car seat in front of me, hoping it will keep me safe...

After half an hour the city makes way for green and lush plains with giant holes in the road. For the next hour we are going more sideways than straight ahead. The road gets better but dustier and green open plains slowly make way for a drier land between low hills. We reach the border with Rwanda and after extensive border controls we find ourselves on roads that are as good and mountainous as in Switzerland. Everything also looks cleaner, people seem more disciplined and better dressed. Frédérique tells me «Ici on ne rigole pas» and indeed the people we can see at the side of the road are not smiling. They look a bit forlorn and there is a guarded hostility in their eyes. Is it due to the recent genocide? Or to the rigid rules of the new administration?

Frédérique says it would be impossible for her to work in Rwanda... After meandering up and down for about an hour we cross a bridge that takes us into Congo. The road is changing to a blurry line of holes and mud.

We are welcomed by the border police with a big smile and open arms. I feel like a big fat rat welcomed by a hungry cat. They gather our passports, one of them starts to sing an old French love song to Frédérique. He first mimics playing the flute for a crazy eternity and then sings «Vous les femmes...» (Oh, you women) I can't tell if it's meant to be sweet, intimidating or a dangerous mix of both. Kalashnikovs are hanging around the waist of the teenagers around him, which isn't helping. He regales us with stories about his past life in Belgium; how he grew up there, was a terrific tennis player, got a lot of gifts but when the civil war was officially over his dad took him back to Congo. He seems to regret it a lot. In the meantime our driver is taken into a wooden shed... twenty minutes later he is back and we can advance for twenty five more meters down the road. Now it's our turn to get out. We have to wait outside a small and shabby hut. When I go in, the light is dim. I can barely discern the people inside. They are wearing a mix of civilian clothes and official tokens. They look more like magicians than officials. The floor is hardened dirt.

One by one they try to sniff me out and see if they can find any irregularities they can capitalise on. The big lady in the corner discovers that I do not have a proof of my vaccinations-although my visa is ok. She clearly doesn't want to let me go without giving me the needle here and now. I'm beginning to panic. Frédérique steps in «Well it must still be at the embassy but i know the ambassador i'll call him and they will send it to us» In the meantime twenty dollars change hands outside. They tell me to make an effort, a real and genuine effort to get my shit together, I tell them I'd be happy to make any kind of effort and they let us pass the border.

The big fat mouse is now inside catville... a little later our car is climbing an anthill of garbage and broken fragments of civilization that is called the city of Bukavu. And suddenly I'm grateful not to be able to fit in, I'm grateful to be white. I could never be mistaken for one of those poor souls carrying two times their own weight on their head living in the gutter at the end of the world.

The city of Bukavu looks like a post-apocalyptic madhouse but people are smiling. Jan and Frédérique who have been here last year desperately try to explain to the cabdriver where he should go. In the end we manage to find help from people working for an American NGO. The good Americans lead the way and we finally arrive at the offices of the organisation who invited us. We pick up the keys to our house at the boys' centre. They don't look like doomed zombies, they are very excited to see Jan and Frédérique and they think Benjamin and me are funny. I manage to conceal my fear of them. We will start to work with them early tomorrow morning... at the end of the day we get to the house where we will stay for the next month. It looks gloomy, barbed wire all around, but there is electricity and a little garden. It's dark outside, the traffic around the house is slowly calming down. I have now been in Africa for 24 hours and I feel totally destabilised. It feels like we made it safely to the lion's den and our bunker is secure but now what? There seems to be danger all around but it is impossible to understand when, where and in what the danger could lie. People are already telling us not to go on the street after dark, not to take a motorbike cab, not to eat the food they serve at the restaurants around, never ever to take a back street etc. So every Congolese person becomes a threat, every movement is suspect and potentially hostile... I'm trying to imagine you or our son Holden, but I'm not able to connect it to the reality that surrounds me. (I seem to have no access to the idea of a world outside this crazy city) I lock the door of my room and climb into bed.

*The international community is really only a handful of people representing a very small number of western countries and let's get real, here in africa they only want to talk to white people.*

Johan, back in a far away garden in Bujumbura

4. My love, I had a bad night, no surprise. At five am I woke up from the chanting of hundreds of people, I thought a riot had started during the night and they would set ablaze all the houses with white people in it. I decided to be wrong about it, to ignore the signs of my impending doom and go back to sleep... at the breakfast table I found out that I was indeed wrong and that all the noise was originating from the church next door where they have a morning service at five am which is apparently well attended... we start to work at eight o'clock with the boys. Most of them are living close by at the boys center of the BVES-the organisation who invited us. For as much as I understand of it, BVES tries to negotiate with rebel groups or armed forces when they hear they have underage children in their armies. When they manage to get the kids out they offer them a bed, food and safety for three months. Most kids stay longer. If possible, they are reunited with their families. Some kids finish school, others get back into the armies. We will be working with them for a month and give them the opportunity to construct a meaningful theatrical patchwork out of their collective and individual experiences. In total we will have ten days of rehearsals with the boys, ten days of rehearsals with the girls and one day to put it all together. At the end we hope to play the show ten times for an audience of about a thousand people...

It's eight o'clock in the morning and we have about fifty enthusiastic boys who are between the age of ten and seventeen flooding the garden. They are eager to begin. F introduces everybody and starts with a warm-up activity... half an hour later two of Frédérique's long

time Congolese collaborators arrive. Since nobody had been able to reach them it's a small miracle they are here at all. The first one is Jean-Marie, actor/assistant/translator, extremely kind and disciplined and the second one Ekoma, a passionate musician/guitar player with a golden voice. They immediately join the rehearsal, Jean-Marie even takes over the warm-up. After warming up Frédérique begins to work on improvisations and Ekoma invents a couple of new songs that work as a chorus or a backdrop for the freshly created scenes. It's nine o'clock and it feels like we are fully operational... between improvisations Frédérique asks the boys how they ended up in the armed forces. A little boy with the name of Exaucé tells us he has killed somebody and after that went to the army. Frédérique wants to know more, but one of the boys' assistants intervenes «It's very sensitive we better talk about it later». We let it pass. Later F and I will curse ourselves for complying and not immediately making a scene about it. When things like that come up, you can't be timid, you have to help. And the best way to help is to make a scene where the trauma is addressed...

Three minutes later Exaucé tries to be close to me. I hug him and keep him at my side, he stays like glued to me for the rest of the day and asks me his innocent questions If you are director how come i never saw any of you films ? Why are you wearing earrings ? Are you a girl ?» We work outside, in the garden, without too much shade. The work is hard and emotional, but very gratifying. Today I'm simply observing. Tomorrow we will go work with the girls. They tell me it's hell there. I don't have internet access. I hope you guys are well and throwing a party with the coyotes!

*The advantage with the boys is that they don't mind reenacting the war where as the girls will probably not look forward to reenact rape.*

Benjamin, the French photographer

5. Hi love, this morning we go to the other side of the city where the girls are. Bukavu looks to me like a city ripped open and dropped randomly into the jungle... it's past nine and we are sitting at the playground of a makeshift school, waiting for the girls to get here. Little boys and girls are screaming, running around, peeing in the gutter, showering themselves, each other. Although most of the girls we will work with have seen violence, not all of them have been in the armed forces. Some come out of child prostitution, or they have been hiding in the jungle after their village got raided or burned down. Most of the girls older than twelve have been raped, about one in three has kids. We warm up, we sing, we dance, cheek to cheek, ass to ass and belly to belly, of course everybody laughs when I dance belly to belly with a girl. They seem shy, slow and insecure, but curious...we begin to work in the same way as we did with the boys. Divided in five groups they each have to come up with five themes. They sit and wait and look at us and keep looking at us. five minutes of this F gets mad and tells them the ideas won't come to them staring at us. They slowly start talking with each other...

I try to come up with ideas to work on with the boys the next day. I have agreed to work with them, but I still have to figure out on what. So I make a little list for myself :

- *What kind of life do they dream of ?*
- *If they could be anyone who would they want to be ?*
- *How do they see their city / their country in a hundred years ?*
- *If they had superpowers what would they try to accomplish ?*
- *If they imagine a life for their kids what would it look like ?*
- *Invent a weapon that's not destructive but constructive*
- *And maybe a story from their life before the war ? Or a song ?*

In the meantime the girls have resumed their staring at us in silence; they are ready. The list of what they want to work on is extensive and what's on it is not your typical teenagers' stuff. They want to work on war, violence, stealing, living without parents, forcing women to make love with each other (for the pleasure of men), sexual violence, children's rights, lack of good clothing, bad city drainage, street kids, armed forces, exploitation of kids, selling people, domestic violence, the position of a girl in the family, sexual abuse, life in the army, selling children, living in bad conditions, poverty, stealing, marriage, lack of education, sexual abuse in schools and witchcraft.

We choose 5 themes out of those to work on for the rest of the day. The first group comes up with a scene about homosexuality. It seems to be in favour of gay marriage (because they think that's what we want to hear?), but when we ask them about it, they actually seem to believe that open homosexuality somehow leads to sexual violence or at the very least to the first signs of an impending apocalypse. Frédérique points out that she could not possibly agree with that perspective. She explains that since she doesn't share their point of view they cannot work on a scene like that. That in this process we can only make things together that we can find a consensus about and in this case it's missing.

The second group made a scene about prostitution that seems to put the blame on the women. Again, Frédérique asks them if that's what they really think. Apparently no they know that people prostitute themselves because they have no choice. We make a scene where they play the prostitutes dancing, selling their bodies, the audience is laughing but then one of the girls steps out of the group and asks the audience :

«Do you really think we like this? That we do this because we want to? That we take pleasure in degrading ourselves? That this is how we like to see ourselves?»

Ekoma comes up with a simple song «It's time to wake up women wake up» all the other girls join in, they are chanting «All women wake up» and it suddenly feels like a tiny little spark set the whole forest on fire, it sounds like they could believe in this and maybe stop being a silent group of victims. Even though we know we are only making theatre, it feels like something just opened up, something that was kept hidden is now out, something essential has been expressed and everybody immediately recognises it for what it is...

In the next improvisation one of the girls, Julianne, is playing a man, very funny. She's a dad who is not taking care of the kids. Frédérique let's them walk like a line of cowboys : «We are the men, we are strong the women are afraid of us we go where we want we leave our children behind and make new children somewhere else.» After the banana break we 3 work on a scene about little girls being taken into the army. When we ask them about it, most of them say they have been in that position. We let the little ones run around while they are being chased by a girl playing a commanding soldier she yells at them and orders them to «Lie down, get up, clean the floor, lie down, clear out, come back, lie down, head in the dirt, get up...» The girl who plays the commanding soldier turns to the audience «Do you see this is what you have done to us do you see now ?»

The next scene is about teachers sexually abusing little girls in exchange for grades. Hard to watch, Frédérique makes clear she wants to work on it, but it doesn't immediately materialise into a solid scene. We'll figure out later what to make of it...

There's also an improvisation about life in the army, F asks them :

*Have most of you been in the army ? Yes*

*Where you sent into combat ? Yes*

*Was it you who were sent into the first line ? Yes*

*Was it you dying first ? Yes*

*Was it you attacking the mines ? Yes*  
*Was it you stealing ? Yes*  
*Was it you cleaning and cooking ? Yes*  
*Did you know fot xho or what you were fighting fort ? No*

We make line after line of girls crossing the stage dying slowly, somehow the image conveys most of the dialogue above.

*Amukeni, amukeni, amukeni, amukeni, amukeni (repeat forever)*  
The girls singing/screaming «Wake up»

6. Hi love, give my love to your mom and dad, I hope you are all enjoying summertime. Today is the second day we work with the boys. We split up the swarm of boys into three different groups. I take one, F takes one and JM takes one. And Ekoma the musician will have to run from one group to another... I ask the boys in my group if they have seen any movies recently : *Yes superman, Rambo, Conan the barbarian*. I ask them to think of a scene in that context. I emphasise the fact that it doesn't have to be realistic; that they can have superpowers; that it can all take place in another time; on another planet... When they present their improvisation to me they play an armed force in the border area. They get attacked by another armed group. Some of them get captured by the enemy and the ones left behind regroup and ask themselves what to do now. In the end they decide to be heroic and even though their numbers are against them they attack the enemy base and miraculously manage to free their friends. I ask them :

*Do you all have friends you lost in battle ? Yes*  
*You don't know where they are ? No*  
*You don't know if they are still alive ? No*

*Some of them died at your side ? Yes*  
*All of those friends could be with you today but they are not.*  
*Yes*  
*You are the lucky ones. Yes*  
*You are the ones that got out, you are the ones that are able to*  
*testify about their existence. Yes*  
*Do you want to do that ? Yes*

I work with them on making a chorus where one by one they come on stage to remember their friends who are not with them anymore.

*I remember Pepe Calé 15 years old he got taken by the enemy*  
*I remember christian 16 years old he died*  
*I remember Chewbaka 13 years old i have no news of him*  
*for 5 years...*

Even the smallest kids seem to have an endless list of friends they lost. And suddenly we are not only with the kids around us, but all of them seem to be present, the ones that died, the ones that are still in the armies, the ones that got captured and the ones of whom nobody ever will know what happened to them. And we testify simply that we knew them, that there is a living record of their existence and that they are, one by one, remembered.

I set out to take them away from their heavy past, to escape in a Hollywood fantasy but soon enough our collective need for redemption got us to deal with reality and to make peace with the dead. And I thought I wouldn't be able to understand or to help...

*But for all our differences we are not so different at all we all*  
*understand and answer to the same essential human needs,*  
*we are more than anything the same*

Frédérique, on the day I met her back in 2007

7. We get to the girls' place, day two. They are dressed up, some with lipstick, some with wigs. Maybe to seduce Jan or me or maybe because Benjamin is taking photos, or maybe because they take the work seriously or simply because it is fun. We warm up, we play at laughing with each other, and crying. I permit myself to exaggerate a lot and everybody laughs. The atmosphere is much more relaxed and dynamic than last time. The themes for today's improvisations :

- the position of the woman in the household;
- living without parents;
- a fairy tale;
- the solution to everything;
- selling something that is impossible to sell.

The first improvisation is about a housewife that is taking in another woman who has a difficult time. Her husband agrees to take her. Tells her he loves her. He will buy her shoes. Take her as a second wife but asks her to keep it a secret. She agrees and conspires with a friend to dethrone the first wife. Frédérique asks them :

*Do you think it is possible to not be dependant of the men ?*

*Yes.*

*But not in reality ? We want something else.*

*Is it possible ? We want it but poverty makes it difficult.*

So again we make a theatrical scene where they overthrow the men. But is it ever going to be a reality...

The next scene is a fairy tale. There is a crocodile accusing a rooster of insulting him. He asks the judges to forbid the rooster to crow. They are in fear of the crocodile so they make a judgment against the rooster. He ceases to crow and nobody ever wakes up again. The tyranny of the powerful against the wellbeing of the rest. We make a scene with a rooster that is very funny, but we'll have to mix it with something else. (to be continued)...

The scene about selling something that can't be sold. They decided to make a scene about selling a child.

*Does it happen ? Yes*

*What happens with the child ? They take the blood*

*The kids die ? Yes*

The assistant of the girls' center says it's not frequent but what happens is that they let a child die in the jungle with a rope attached to it's neck, the rope becomes magical and they sell the rope and leave the corpse in the jungle.

*Should we ask them if it happened to them ? No.*

*Imagine if they say yes !*

*We can ask them if they know anybody it happened to, but in this case it's probably a horror story.*

I'm a little confused by this nightmarish cloud of stories. It sounds too horrible to believe, but I'm sure that most of what those kids have been through is quite impossible to believe. Frédérique decides to make a scene where one of the little girls asks the audience if they want to buy them, they can clean and work, for a good price.

We also take up a scene from last year about them being little chicks, birds for the cat, but all sung and danced with a lot of fun and joy... next improvisation is about life without parents. They show a scene where kids without parents have a miserable life. «Are they whuthout parents ?» Nearly all of them say yes. Some are found in the armed forces, some of them in the jungle, left alone, some are found in prostitution. Frédérique asks one of the girls to speak for everybody:



Zavouadi, «Child Soldiers» project, DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

*I'm a kid without parents living on the street nobody cares my  
parents are already dead i'm an orphan nobody is there to  
protect me i don't know where to go i have nobody to give me  
food or clothes i don't know what to do, uruma uruma, life is  
hard nobody wants to have me around i dont know where to  
sleep my family doesn't want me around i get beaten i get sent  
away nobody wants me around there is nobody to love me no  
body to protect me*

Zavouadi on stage

8. Hi love, I'm working with one group of boys today while Jean-Marie takes the other half. The way we work is to let them invent a scene about a specific theme. When they present the scene there's always something we call a 'punctum' that appears and that we use to work with. What is this mysterious 'punctum'?

Roland Barthes introduces the word in *Camera Obscura* when he tries to understand photography. He discerns something he calls 'studium' which stands for everything that is intentionally constructed by the photographer -composition, context, contrast etc. Next to this 'studium' there is something else that interests him. Something that escapes the intention of the photographer (and/or the intention of the subject). Something that touches him on an emotional level. It's a notion that is dear to me and to my great surprise when I met F, something she had been working with for years. Her idea about it is quite simple. When people invent an improvisation, something important that might not have much to do with the improvisation itself will be revealed. Sometimes it's so inherent that people forget to conceal it or something that is so apparent that people can't hide it. Or it shows up afterwards when some questions come up about the improvisation. Her work is about creating more space for this thing that we have tried not to look at. Sometimes it's simply the color of people's skin, sometimes it's a submissive attitude or an obsession to do good or to talk. Sometimes it's the trauma of sexual abuse or war. Sometimes it's a taboo that's keeping a whole community hostage. The mission is to simply open up space for that which has been there, but concealed and never talked about, to let it come out; not in a therapeutic way but in a theatrical way, a way to make it possible to play with it, to take the fear away, to be transparent about who we are...

After the rehearsal I'm sitting together with Frédérique and Jean-Marie to analyse the work. Jean-Marie asks Frédérique about those 'punctums'. Where do you start? Frédérique answers that anything that is at the intersection of the three following things is okay. The first is a theatrical image that works, the second something that opens up the emotional understanding of the situation and the third something that permits the actor to deal with their emotional burden, deal with their alienation.

The scene I made with the boys testifying about the friends they lost in the war does all three for example. It's a theatrical image that works, it gives them the opportunity to deal with the past and it shows the audience that the group of victims is much bigger than the kids we see on stage...

In the evening we go to a party in the honour of the minister of foreign development and relationships who is visiting Bukavu. We would never have been invited in Belgium, but somehow the prestige of every white person multiplies by at least a hundred here in Africa. So we act like we are perfectly at home in the luxurious Hotel Orchids. We drink, we eat, we talk with other important people, we listen to the minister, we talk with the ambassador, with the governor of south Kivu and we tell people about our work. Frédérique already wants to run away after half an hour of excellent white wine but we tell her to calm down and very much in the fashion of ladies at the court we try to make first contact with people around and if they seem interesting enough we get them to the queen bee. The whole game is hilarious and everybody plays. When the free food and the drinks are exhausted, we head home, just like all the other important people.

*Vive le roi et Vive le prince*

(Long live the king and long live the prince)

The Belgian ambassador toasting on the old king and the soon to be king

9. Day three at the girls place. We dance, we warm up. Jean-Marie is leading the first improvisation, he lets them work on what they see when they look out of the window. They make a scene where they are standing on a line, each taking turns in saying what they see. Positive things mixed with negative, past mixed with present.

Jean-Marie develops the chorus with a great song from Ekoma at the end.

I take the next scene. I ask them to work on imagining a better life for their daughters. I have to confess that I already have a back up scene in my head: a chorus where each describes the life of their daughter without the misfortunes they had to go through. (If I have a daughter she will be free, if I have a daughter she will not know the war, if I have a daughter she will not be raped, if I have a daughter she will not have a kid at 13 years old) But since Jean Marie already made a chorus and I already have this idea in my head, I'm hoping something else will show up. Maybe we will find something they are ready to fight for or a way to implicate the audience in the scene. They come up with a somewhat confused scene about the right to have schooling, where the mom and the dad are discussing whether a house is more important or schooling. It doesn't really seem to connect with what they have lived through or to what they could wish for their daughters. I ask them :

*Is it true that you all had a difficult life ? Yes*

*And you wish your daughters could grow up without those troubles ? Yes*

*Is it possible ? Yes*

*But to make it possible things need to change ? Yes*

*What are the things that need to change ?*

In the meantime I figured out what I want to work on.

We construct a scene where one of them is addressing the audience :

*We all had a difficult life a life nobody wishes to anybody a life no mother would wish for her daughter but one day we will have daughters and if we want them to have a better life,*

*we need to change the conditions women are living in so what are the things we should change according to you ?*

She asks the girls. One by one they come with a suggestion like :

*My daughter should be able to grow up at home, to be spared of rape, to have an education to be spared of war to be equal to men to have the opportunity to discuss things with me to not have children before she turns sixteen years old.*

After every suggestion the presentator asks the audience : «Do you agree with this ?» And she asks the girls «Are you ready to fight for this ?» The girls are shouting «Yes» She asks the audience «Are you ready to fight for this ?» The audience says «Yes». It doesn't even feel like propaganda or like political theatre it just feels like they really need this to survive to believe that another reality might be possible one fine day.

*On peut tout analyser mais c'est quand-meme le cœur qui marche comme moteur (you can analyse everything but it's still the heart that works as the engine)*

Frédérique

10. Day eight, i got too much sun and too little sleep. we are working on tribal differences, Frédérique is inspired but i have to drop out before twelve o'clock and go horizontal. In the afternoon we are invited to a little village just outside the city. An american friend of Frédérique started a program there for the children ten years ago and now she is revisiting. People welcome us, read letters in our honour, the kids play drums, dance, play little theatrical scenes, sing songs. it never seems to end. they hope she/we can help and that help never has to stop.

I feel the desperation. Nobody talks about it, everybody is happy, our american friend joins them on stage and leads them in a weird exercise recalling everything bad that has happened to them. I can barely refrain from throwing up. Benjamin, the photographer already escaped an hour ago. I make a dash for the door where i get ambushed by a zillion of kids, suddenly i'm in trouble again, i don't want to pretend everything is ok, i have no idea what this charade has to prove, what to tell those kids what to tell myself... In the evening we all get chauffeured back into the city. I feel horrible.

*In the great honor of the special honoured guest that to our great joy honors us with great honor and that has given us so much and we hope that our honoured guest will give us more and that our honouring never has to stop just like the giving of our honoured guest and it is with great respect that we ask for more*

The old people of the village

11. Hi buddy, i feel much better today ! We go to the girls' place, day four. We decide to look again at scenes that already exist. Jean-Marie takes one, i take the next one and f intervenes at the end. The day progresses nicely and the work advances well. one of the scenes we are working on is a scene of sexual abuse by teachers from last week. The scene is hard to look at, probably because we feel that most girls around us have been or might become the victim of such practices. Frédérique stops and asks them :

*Do you know what the scene is about ? Yes.  
Do you know it is wrong ? We are not sure.  
You have to understand it is wrong. Ok.*

*Nobody is permitted to do this, not a soldier, not a priest, not a teacher, not a family member. Ok.*

*You have to understand that you have to say no. Ok.*

*You have to understand that if people ask you to keep it secret you should talk about it to people you trust, if those people ask you to keep it secret you should stop trusting those people and talk to somebody else. Ok.*

*If they tell you that there is nothing bad about it you should know it is very damaging for the adults too.*

We take up the scene again. The school children are singing, the victim is trying to get away, screaming. The narrator asks the audience :

*Do you see what is happening ? Do you know how horrible this is ?*

Ekoma, the musician gets everybody on their feet singing/chanting/screaming :

*Do you know it is wrong ? Yes.*

*Do you know you have to say no ? Yes.*

*Do you know you shouldn't keep it secret ? Yes.*

*Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up.*

Again I have the feeling that we are creating a space that could not exist before, a space where people can claim some new freedom, change the rules of the game. And somehow theatre seems better equipped to create this space than anything else.

*Je préfère leur mettre un petard dans le cul que de pleurer*  
(I'd rather give them a kick in the ass than weep)

Frédérique

12. Hey love, the sun is killing me today. F doesn't care. Not that she's a superhero, it's just that she has this idea in her head that nothing will keep her from doing what she has planned to do. She tells me an old story about being in a war zone in Africa years ago. Missiles are coming down nearby, but she put on a candle and starts reading her book thinking «This is not what's going to keep me from reading» (forgetting that by putting on a candle she made an easy target of herself). It's an attitude that comes in handy though. The people she's working with have been/are living in difficult conditions, thinking that nothing is going to keep her from doing this work is probably the first condition to enable this work to take place.

What do you need to work well ? First skip breakfast.

Second believe that you are capable

Jean-Marie

13. Hi love, rehearsals are going very well, we nearly have all the material we need. After the rehearsal we have a discussion with Jean-Marie and Frédérique and me to question the work. Jean-Marie asks Frédérique why she excluded some boys during the rehearsal. Frédérique tells him it's simply her way to let them know she's serious about the work, that every director conveys this in his/her own way. It sounds hard but I have the same experience. Maybe it's about showing people where your limits are or maybe it's about making clear who's in command? I usually explode only once or twice during the rehearsal period and after that everybody calms down. Frédérique considers if she gets angry more in Africa, but no, she raises her voice just as much in Europe. And maybe it's more about this, raising your voice, letting it out, encouraging people to jump and be pulled into the emotional vortex you are all creating together.

I know from playing in her shows that I really don't mind being at her disposition, willing to be instrumental for whatever purpose she will need me during the show. It calms me down, I will simply give everything I have to contribute.

Theater is not very democratic... Congo isn't either. We made a scene this morning about campaign promises. The boys really want to believe that with somebody else in power everything will be better. I tried to make a scene about it, but it didn't work... At the end of the day I get back from a walk through the city on my own, with every step it felt more like the ground under my feet could crumble and take me down into the bottomless pit this city represents for me. But we have to give those kids hope, they badly need to believe that life could be okay. Jean Marie asks if we could do something for them, set up an educational program -maybe not only theater, but more. Frédérique and I look at each other. It is a legitimate question. We hope to continue the work and put Jean Marie in charge when we are back in Europe. And after a couple more years we hope we can transmit some knowledge to one or more of those kids and put them in charge of continuing the work. But other than that ? Other than theater ? Other than give them a symbolic kick in the ass? Maybe we are limited to the symbolic order of things. And yes, maybe it's not enough considering their needs. But we refuse to feel guilty.

*Tu es devenu chocolat.* (You have become chocolat)

Street kids of Bukavu commenting on the color my skin has by now

14. Today Frédérique wants to get really mad at the girls, she says she wants to kill them. She asks me to take over and do the ‘mise en scene en direct’. We have 14 scenes, now I have to orchestrate some kind of mix. The girls are sitting at the other side of the scene, distracted. Every scene corresponds to a very simple sign I can make with my hands. I hope they will know what needs to happen. If it works well you mould layers of emotion and meaning into something that didn’t exist before and maybe never will again, if it doesn’t work well it shows you what badly needs to be fixed. It demands a lot of concentration but it’s immensely satisfying.

Some scenes work out well, some not. There seem to be two big clusters, one about the war and one trying to emancipate the girls. I randomly begin with the emancipation, hoping to give them a kick in the ass and at the end I’m left with the scenes of war.

Because of this the whole mix has a pessimistic turn, as if the war makes everything impossible. It’s clear we should turn it around and look for a better perspective. Other than that the mix works well and opens up a lot of possibilities.

In the meantime Benjamin, the photographer has been making interviews with the girls, he reports endless stories of rape, murder, war, witchcraft and rejection. After the rehearsal, two assistants are talking with Frédérique. She asks them if it’s common for girls to have been raped by big groups of men. «Yes a lot.» And girls who have AIDS ? «A lot yes.» And most have been involved in prostitution ? «Yes.» So most of them are HIV positive ? «Yes yes.» And people despise them because of that ? «Yes.»

Strangely enough it’s simply information to me, more clarity about the context. It doesn’t change anything anymore as to how I look at the girls. By now I have the feeling I know them on a more direct level; they trust Frédérique, they trust me. I am not one of them, but I am with them inside the telling of their story. I talk with Benjamin about the project in prison I did years ago when I met Frédérique.

As in this project we were not interested in hearing what had brought people into there, in most cases we were surprised to hear some of the prisoner's stories more than a year later when a documentary about the project aired on television. Sometimes it's best not to know too much when you begin working with people. Whatever you need to know will come up during the rehearsals when you can do something with it. Back in prison Frédérique forbid us to listen without taking action, especially when what comes out has a traumatic nature. And here again, surrounded by an endless amount of unlucky biographies it becomes clear that only listening is not an option.

*C'est épouvantable, vraiment.* (It's horrible, really)

Frédérique who has just finished 'Tess of the Durbervilles'

15. Hi love, I did something wrong with my back showing one of the boys how to get beaten up without somebody touching you. I had a sore back for a couple of days but yesterday on our day off we went to the lake side and after a couple of hours I could barely get up again. We went on an odyssey to find a Chinese medicine center and after a couple of hours and a good amount of cabdrivers promising us special delivery to nowhere we got to the medics of the Chinese armed forces who are part of the UN peace keeping forces. A Chinese gynaecologist put me on a bed and wired me up. I had a brief fantasy about torture chambers but the electricity only gave me a pleasant sensation on my back. We chatted about China and Belgium, she badly envied Belgians for having big and beautiful gardens. On our way out we said hello to some Pakistani patients. The soldiers are said to import busloads of Burundese girls over the border for the weekend and rape them all. I'll spend the day tomorrow on my back hoping the medicine will bring relief.

*Nou ja zeg twee Hollandse meiden gewoon aan het zwemmen in Lake Kivu zeg ongelooflijk. (Well have you ever, two Dutch girls, simply swimming in Lake Kivu, unbelievable.)*

Two adventurous white girls swimming at the private beach of the prestigious Orchids hotel

16. Hi sweetness, today feels like a good day. I'm in much better shape. F seems lost with all the material we made with the boys, dissatisfied with the scenes and with the run through she makes. I jump in and try a different structure. Not that I know what I'm going to do. I turn everything upside down and it explodes in the best possible way. I put a very funny scene that F made before at the beginning. It shows a delegation of white people who are welcomed in Congo. The white spokesman explains that they don't have any more money to spend in Europe. Everybody applauds and smiles. After that the delegation stays on stage and witnesses a scene about the clichés of tribal differences, now it is the white men who applaud and smile. They stay on stage and look at the next scene, a violent demonstration of how tribes can be set up to kill each other, the whites applaud again, smiles, thumbs up. They stay. Next is a scene about how people in power can set up everybody against everybody and again a massacre. The whites are still watching, they applaud, this time silently and leave quietly, thumbs up to the actor/general. After that comes the chorus of those who died and the scene about mining ending in another massacre. When everybody is dead the white spokesman from the beginning comes back indicating to the audience to stay silent, he comes and picks up the bucket of diamonds that everybody killed each other for...

The show with the boys is suddenly very critical of the position of the 'whites'. And it's also funny! The whites are not coming off as the innocent benefactors they are mostly portrayed here...



Dead Children, performance, «Child Soldiers project», DRC, 2013. Photograph by Benjamin Géminel.

I manage to end with their position in society, with their regrets and the formidable task of making a peaceful future for themselves. The kids totally get it, they play really well. Now it's just a question of letting the show breathe, maybe add two more scenes and clarifying some transitions. Hurray for being two at the helm in a creative process! Especially in such a daunting context ...

In the afternoon we start filming little scenes with the help of Benjamin. We are making plans for a show with the child soldiers in Europe, maybe an opera or a musical. In the evening we start fooling around with ideas on fake publicity T-shirts for Theatre & Reconciliation. we begin with: «Saved by Theatre & Reconciliation» and we end with: «Problemes d'erection? Theatre & Reconciliation!» ; «You don't like hutus? Theatre & Reconciliation!» ; «Tired of prison? Theatre & Reconciliation!». And a ton more that i leave out because they were even more dumb but we all had a very liberating laugh about it.

*Ces enfants ont vus des choses qu'ils n'auraient jamais du voir et ils ont fait des choses qu'ils n'auraient jamais du faire*  
(these kids have seen things they should never have seen and they have done things they should never have done)

Frédérique before the party started

17. Hi sweetness, we have a run through at the girls place that annoys me a lot. The whole thing is clean, comprehensible and dynamic, but i have the feeling it's flat like a pancake. the narrative seems to tell me we should wake up horrible thing are happening everybody knows but we are waking up it's okay we are making a show about it and you can all applaud. Most of all I'm dissatisfied with the fact that no real change is happening on the stage. The whole thing begins and ends with an optimistic note and somewhere in the middle the atrocities are represented in some kind of happy, boy scout way that doesn't feel genuine. A kind of well intended and harmless theatre animation about 'bad things', not doing anything for anybody. It's as if we made up a list with all the things we should talk about and know that we have a scene about each of them we can pat ourselves on the shoulder like good Jesuits. Maybe it's simply a question of too much 'studium' and not enough *punctum*.

I take up the next run through, I know I can't fix it, but at least I want to show Frédérique what I think is missing. So I put all the terrible scenes in the beginning, a big and endless pile of misfortunes; rape, child pregnancy, orphans, war, hunger, sexual abuse by teachers etc. Only at the end I turn to the theme of saying no and a call to arms to wake up. I throw everything in the pressure cooker; the girls look a bit scattered, one of them faints during the demanding run but F gets my point. She immediately follows with her own mix, with more explanations and a better dynamic, but with more or less the same order of scenes. I'm relieved. I would hate to do this laborious work and in the end have to make myself believe that it mattered when it didn't.

I know we are restricted to the symbolic order, but even on the symbolical order there is a very important distinction to be made between something that is communicated through a strictly cognitive construction and something that affects us on a more direct and emotional level that I like to think of as more real.

*Non, Non, Non jamais ne passera la parole de dieu jamais ne passera.* (no no no never will it pass, the word of the Lord will never pass)

Children song

18. My love, I was so happy to hear your voice today. I can only hope that one day we will manage to get to the end of this work and I will be back in a place where we can see each other again. It is hard not to feel like I'm in purgatory here... we are sitting together with the boys to discuss what happened in the last rehearsal. Do they agree with the mix we made? They say it's hard to see the whites laugh when everybody is dead, they say that not all whites are bad. Others say that whenever the international community moves in, other people take over afterwards creating new reasons for conflict. They say that they mostly see that white people are good, even in the villages. When white people show up it usually means things will be getting better. They say that they have seen the UN peacekeeping forces coming in with weapons and trading them for diamonds, gold or other minerals. They say that since the white people don't have diamonds or gold it's logical they come and get it here, but they never see the white people that come for the diamonds or the gold. They say that there is a fierce competition between the French and the Americans, that they both try hard to sabotage each others' work and they choose different sides. That they don't know if the Americans are bad or good, because they know really bad Americans, but also good ones, but they don't know what to believe anymore.

Some of them say that things can only get better after the whites move out and stay away, others say that they follow the news and they think that countries who throw the whites out are really stupid and things go bad there... in the end they agree with us that things are complicated and not clear but they support making a show that points this out. We warm up and start another run through, I have to make some space for Frédérique. She has to take over, the boys have to surrender to her, to be totally ready and to understand what needs to happen even when she's not looking at them with her killer eyes. She takes her time in the first run through - explaining, putting people where she wants them, setting the standard higher and higher, threatening to throw them out if they don't concentrate. It's hot, the boys are no easy listeners. She immediately follows with another run through, staying in their midst while they are playing, screaming with them, shouting texts in French that are immediately translated in Swahili by Jean Marie and taken up by the actors in question. By the end of the day she manages to get them under her spell, taking cues in any which way possible to understand where she needs to have them, what color the scene needs to have... at the end of the rehearsal the boys burst out into song and dance, the words of the song saying that the work that Frédérique asked us to do is now done. We have two more rehearsals before the performance to get the quality up, but most of the work indeed seems to be accomplished. Big thumbs up for her.

*Il y aura un changement peut-être mieux et peut-être pire.* (there will be change, maybe for the better, maybe for the worse)

The cautious answer of Jean-Marie when I ask him if he thinks the situation in Bukavu will get better

19. We are at the girls place, I'm writing this with swarms of kids hanging over my shoulder, pulling my beard, hoping that something magical will appear on this little screen.

The driver didn't show up, again, so we are late, again. The sun is burning through the day, we don't have much time before it will exhaust us and the girls too. We begin to explain to them that we only have two more days to work and that the drill for the days we will perform is hard. They will be picked up at 6:15, leaving together with the boys at 6:45. Arriving on the first location before 8:30 setting everything up, playing at 9:30, breaking up again by 11:30 traveling towards the second location, setting everything up again by 13:00, playing again at 14:00 until 16:00. And If everything goes well we will all be back home by 18:00.

*Do they think they can do it ? Yes.*

*We will not be able to move around without them taking responsibility for what needs to happen. Is that okay ? Yes.*

*We won't be able to wash your costumes and they will be really dirty and you will be wearing them with pride. Yes*

One of the girls assistants is asking what the girls will do during the break between the two shows, will they be able to get back to the centre? Apparently they didn't follow, there is no break, at all. One of them objects : «My dad will not let me go that early, that long. You have to understand, i have a bad dad» «Tell him *toka!* (out! in swahili). No seriously ! We are in the process of asking all the rents and foster parents for their permission.»

Julienne, eight months pregnant, says she can't play the scene where everybody is dead, it's too painful. Frédérique asks them if most of them are traumatised by the death of people close to them ? Yes. «People say they want to forget, but do they think it's possible to forget ? No. So it's impossible to forget ? Yes. Since it's impossible to forget you have to do something with the atrocities that happened. There is one thing that happens automatically : dreams, nightmares. They clean the heart. Do you have nightmares ? Yes. The second thing is something we can do ourselves to clean the heart, That is talking about what happened to friends family. Who talks about those things ?»

Nobody responds. «Who doesn't ?» Again, nobody responds. «A third way to clean the heart is to troubles from the past and sharing it with an audience. It can also clean your heart so Julianne if you are able to play the scene, it will clean your heart but it's only up to you to decide if you can...»

We warm up, Frédérique goes through the hand symbols. I sharpen my pencils ready to write down some kind of graphical mess of arrows, names and scenes enabling us to remember what i hope will be a brilliant run through. Frédérique is going into it full throttle. The girls are accessible, the whole thing turns out to be pretty simple to open up. In the introduction, there are three scenes. The girls are entering the stage in a line «We are little chicks.» With a lighthearted and dynamic song. After that there is another dance, this time they are singing.

*Buy me i'll do anything you want get bossed around get raped by the master of the house take care of your children you don't even have to pay me or school me i'll sleep on the floor and when you want to get rid of me you can sell me to the armed forces.*

Everything in a super bollywood style song and dance with their arms tied above their heads like exotic slaves. And after that a scene where everybody joins in teaching one of the girls to say «no». It's a dynamic resumé of the show.

After that come smaller scenes that are a bit harder to watch, like a scene with little girls at a school, singing their cheerful song while one of them is called to see the teacher and gets abused.

Another where one of the girls is posing and dancing like a prostitute, crying while girls playing men are shouting at her, encouraging her, calling her a «Dirty slut».

After that a scene of gorilla men talking tough. A scene where little girls are drilled hard into obeying an army superior. A scene where a girl plays the papa lion luring in a little girl with promises about candy, a telephone or fancy clothes. And a collective song about uncles, family members raping little girls.

Those scenes are interrupted by choruses of saying «no» and the lead song of «Wake up girls! Wake up! Now!» And Ghislaine asking the audience «Do you want more? Things like that happen every day just around the corner do you understand the life we have been living ?»

After this first cluster of scenes an angel crosses the stage talking about a paradise on earth, education, good parents, no rape, no war. Everybody else is filling the stage with the image of a massacre in slow motion, the angel continues when everybody is dead but after a while she/he gets shot by the army superior.

One of the girls stands up and laments her own fate, two other girls get up and tell the audience they are pregnant again. One of them is Julienne, pregnant of her second baby- and they don't know what to do, what future they can give their kids.

In the meantime Ekoma is changing from a sad tune into a more hopeful one. The girls get up, one of them is saying what she can see when she looks out of the window. Ghislaine is telling the audience that their lives have been filled with all the misery the audience has seen before, but that they all wish something else for their daughters, she let's the girls on the side come up with suggestions, every time she screams : «Do you all agree ? Yes. Are you prepared to fight for this ? Yes. After this maybe there could be a make over of the Bollywood song saying : «We are not for sale, our future is ours, we will raise our own kids to a better future, we are saying no.» Turning into a last call to arms to «Wake up girls, women wake up and fight for a better future or something !» The show is there, now it's a question to do what we can to make it fly.

*On va te tuer. (we will kill you)*

An ambush of little boys between the age of two and four jumping, pulling and pushing, trying to get me lower to the ground so they can pull my beard.

20. Today is the last day at the girls place and I'm starting to feel a bit useless. On our way there the streets are littered with mainly NGO's (Let Afrika Live, Women for Women, Child Focus, War Child, Unicef, Monusco, UN, Women Plus, The City of Joy, Save the Children, Oxfam, Doctors without Fron Tiers) and churches, an endless flock of churches. Security agencies and street vendors seem to fill up the rest. Somewhere in between must be the houses of tolerance where men can pay for girls of about any age. There must be a whole layer of illegal practices in this city keeping the traffic of arms, diamonds, child soldiers and prostitutes alive. Sometimes it feels like this city of NGO's is built directly on top of an illegal city flourishing thanks to corruption on all levels. No wonder the locals go wash away their sins from 5:30 onwards. The cost of living is strangely high here, a concert ticket (yes it exists) is thirty euros and rents are high. Maybe it is thanks to some kind of weird NGO based gentrification or maybe because everything except bananas gets imported. So people are scrambling to keep themselves and their families fed, any opportunity is a means for survival. In that context, who cares about morals? Especially when the NGO's are already taking up that responsibility? When we get to the girls' place we hear that Julienne gave birth to her baby yesterday evening. We'll try to visit her tomorrow. Frédérique leads a run through and after that Jean Marie takes one. We are starting to be really happy about the show, let's hope the girls are going to be able to keep the concentration up with 3000 quarrelling women, screaming infants, flying cows, roasted goats, bellicose soldiers and rebellious chickens around.

*Djhhdhg hc dhexmmsks,flapsps,wksjsjakosmx,dywnwaMZKXOS*

The smallest kids at the girls place, writing down their thoughts on my ipad

21. Hi sweetness, in the morning we have two run through with the boys, everything is going well. In the afternoon I go out with Benjamin to get some presents for Julienne whom we will visit in the hospital this afternoon. We debate long about the color of a 'pagne' the fabric that African women wrap themselves in and the typical gift for a new mom. She already has a kid though, even though she's only 16. When we get to the hospital Julienne is very silent and not smiling at all. Her roommates tell us she hasn't even told them her name, hasn't eaten in two days. The baby hasn't either, she's not releasing any milk. They implore us to get her medicine, food, clothes, blankets, soap, the basics. We go to the pharmacy, to the market, we take her to have a meal and on the advice of her roommates, hot baby formula with sugar. After twenty minutes the milk indeed comes in, she can feed her baby. While she's eating I have to go out and I begin to sob like a child. I think about all the care, love and comfort I've been able to give you when you were pregnant and then I see Julienne here, a courageous and beautiful creature - she somehow reminds me of Nelson Mandela- starving silently in a corner, with a starving baby. Nobody to visit her, no family, no partner, supported by an organisation that hasn't sent any meals or medicine. Apparently her medication should be paid for by the red cross, but the assistants from the girls place didn't bother to inform them, or they forgot. Who knows?

We seem to be the only ones who care or who are able to help. We are so enraged by all this helplessness, we don't know if we should be grateful that we were able to help or be mad as hell and start raising a row. We decide to help and shut up and keep the rage inside.

When we get home we have a meeting with Claude and Jean-Marie to see if they can have meetings with NGO's to discuss further contracts in the region for Theatre & Reconciliation. Yes, maybe, to be continued. The meeting is interrupted by Mouna arriving, he's the big boss and he's angry that we invited UNICEF to the show. He told Frédérique before not to invite NGO's that have to do with women's or children's rights. She tells him not to worry, he gets even more mad.

She explains that if there is any questions concerning minors performing in public she will take the responsibility to answer them. He tells her he might be forced to fire Claude who sent the invite for her without consulting Mouna. This meeting is again interrupted by the Burundi actors arriving from Bujumbura with Botchum the sound technician. I'm happy about the distraction since I'm still burning with anger about what we witnessed at the hospital. I'm also delighted our Burundi friends are with us, realising only now that we have been very lonely out here. A couple of minutes later and I have you on the phone, you ask me if it is somehow like Deadwood, and I realise that indeed it is close to Deadwood, the African version, one where things might never get better.

- *What's the name of the baby?* - *You can chose.*

- *You want to call him Frédérique?* - *Yes.*

#### Julienne and Frédérique in the hospital

22. Hi buddy, today is the last day of rehearsals, the boys nearly knock down our gate at 7:15. The first girls get there about an hour later. We sort out costumes for 70+ girls and boys, blue jeans and t-shirts with neo tribal markings from the hand of Jan Standaert. The technical department is suffering from a lack of electricity. The boys are fighting for trousers, the girls probably more so. Frédérique vowed to get really mad today and she's not one to break her promises. She inspects the troops, executes a couple of kids, strips half of the lieutenants of their ranks and shouts at who ever moves or doesn't move. By the end of the rehearsal everybody who isn't too terrified to blink is running for a safe spot. I consider putting F under a cold shower but decide to take shelter in the shower myself. Today was probably the hardest day, assembling the troops and drilling them for battle, Frédérique is hard on herself that's probably why she has no trouble being hard on anybody else.

She would have made a great general in a past life. The positive result of this commandeering is a maximum of concentration and dedication, the other side of the medal is obedient actors so terrified of getting peeled and boiled that they look more like trembling branches of asparagus than anything else. With the enforced discipline and the newly amplified sound the intimacy, the softness and the oxygen seem to be out. We'll see if the patient will make it through the night.

*Jouez bien sinon je vous coupe la tête.* (Play well or I will cut off your head)

General Frédérique Lecomte

23.

I'm at the Coco Lodge, a place for basungus -white people. I'm hoping, praying for a connection with the world wide web and today seems to be my lucky day. At the table next to me three men, looking like engineers to me - one Japanese, one Irish and one Canadian, far in their fifties. They are discussing something serious -I hear «*Mining, we are trying to assess if they want to get out of the agreement we have or if they are really in trouble*». They are on skype with someone at the other side of the world. Are those men the 'whites' we are talking about in the show? They seem pretty harmless to me and full of good intentions... I'm coming here to write and structure my emotions and thoughts about the last couple of days.

Frédérique in the meantime is going back to the hospital to see Julienne. She took Jean-Marie with her, maybe she'll be able to get a clearer picture how all of this could have happened. Frédérique is furious at the girls' assistants. They told us today that they did bring food, soap and oil to Julienne. Why are they flat out lying to us? And to which degree? Did they want to punish the girl for getting pregnant again? Maybe somebody was charged to take the food to the hospital but ate it herself? Are they consciously abandoning mother and baby so there is one less and not one more mouth to feed?

Or is it simply an example of inefficiency, lack of means, low wages for the assistants and a lack of motivation as a consequence?

Is it possible -like Frédérique suggests- that being slow and inefficient is the only way that women can object to their position in this society? That it is the only means of resistance they have against being bossed around, abused and raped by men who look down on them? But can it really be that this kind of resistance would be applied towards the total abandonment of another woman in need? Somebody that has been the victim of rape, abuse and poverty? Is Julienne reminding them so much of their own position in life that they literally try to stay away from her as much as possible? It all seems too improbable.

Somehow our visit to the hospital seemed to reveal some essential and horrible truth about this place, something that has been there the whole time, that this place is an endlessly crumbling rabbit hole. Even without bad intentions -I look again at the international team of sympathetic engineers to my left- there seems to be no way out. No solid ground to stand on. *Apocalypse Now* reverted back to its original horror. Maybe that's why Frédérique works the way she works -*Fast and Furious*- it might be the only way here. The only way not to get caught up in this downward spiral, not to tumble down the rabbit hole.

*Donnez-nous cent francs.* (give us a hundred francs -the equivalent of ten cents)

Bernadette and Zavouadi, two of our best and most powerful actresses

24.

Hi sweetheart, today is the big day. We get up at five thirty, everybody is very late, but we do manage to get out of the city before nine o'clock with everyone and everything on board. The first village where we play is thirty five minutes away. We are traveling on the side of the lake and later over successive hills that are taking us higher and higher into the countryside past banana plantations, little villages, and markets.

There are small dust roads escaping left and right into a landscape that looks exotic, gentle and welcoming. I have the feeling I'm finally getting a taste of Africa. When we get to the first location the boys are helping out with installing bright orange plastic covers around a circular stage with a diameter of about 10-12 meters and setting up the technical material to amplify the sound. We are ready, we wait ten more minutes for a *musungu* -Fabrice from Belgium- and we start.

The boys are performing very well, the girls are still a tiny bit lost. I'm standing next to Prosper from Burundi who is holding a woman's umbrella in exchange for some shade. The women around us are telling Prosper again and again «This is not only theatre, we witnessed this ourselves, more than once.» After the show everybody immediately starts breaking up the technical material. A police man is telling me he liked the show, but he's still waiting for his drink. I don't feel like giving him one of the special pineapple drinks we got for the kids so I try to act as if I didn't understand. We fold the plastic covers and get all the material back into the Jeep. Two hours after arriving we are ready to take off again. Claude is telling me that the police officer is asking to be paid for the protection he claims he has been giving us, two thousand Congolese francs. I'm disgusted but I pay him the money.

All the kids get back onboard one of the five minibuses and we take off for the second village where we will play today. It's located just outside the city airport. When we get there, a big football field without any shade welcomes us to an open confrontation with the African heat. Again we form a stage and set up the technical material. We pass on bananas, bread and pineapple juice to the kids. Local kids approach and ask us for food. I hand out half of the banana sandwich I made to three, four kids around and make a sign to keep it quiet. The pineapple juice I keep for myself.

We are ahead of schedule, should we begin or wait? The sun is too much to bear, we start. The boys are playing even better than before, the girls are a very close second. The whole performance takes about an hour and twenty five minutes and it's functioning really well.

The patient that was still in shock yesterday has not only been released from the hospital, he's out on the streets and starting to dance. Again Prosper has made an umbrella deal with one of the spectators and again they are make comments about scenes addressing things they know firsthand. I'm not sure what effect the show has on the spectators and what they take home from it, but the kids and the team are very satisfied. At the end of the show we dance all together. The little local kids are surprised and delighted, they want to touch my beard, they want me to take them with me or at the very least make me their prisoner. After half an hour of running, beard pulling, laughing and wrestling I manage to escape to one of the minivans where the actors are already waiting for take off. Village kids around are again asking for bread, bananas. One of the elders of the village pays me a visit and explains me that it would be improper not to give him a couple of dollars. I tell him we came to bring them a theater show and not money. He understands and thanks me for the show, but now the show is over and it's time to get back to business. I apologise and tell him we are using all our means for the kids we are working with. Two minutes later we take the road and I feel like a white coward, happy to have escaped the hungry cannibals. I somehow changed my mind about the symbolic order.

It seems now that making use of the symbolic dimension of theatre is the only way to create a space where we can share something that isn't reduced to a « you-give-me-money-now-because-we-have-nothing-and-you-have-everything » relationship. We are creating a space that didn't exist before and didn't seem possible. And it's a space that is strictly symbolic, not material. In the scene with the speech of the 'whites' the boy says in Swahili «Our pockets are empty, but we are coming with symbolic things that are worth more than money.» I'm not sure how ironical we are about this, and although we are eager to feel guilty, I'm not certain if we should.

*Namuuuu na bukaletu di na f na pune tadi gaaaaaa* (repeat forever) (The above is a phonetically noted version of what I could understand from the Swahili song meaning : The work we have done with Frédérique is now completed)

The boys and the girls singing and dancing at the end of the second show 25

25.

Hi buddy, it won't be long now before I take the road home. Today I'm finally starting to enjoy Afrika, the people, the dust, the goats, the crazy rides. It all blends together into some kind of harmony. In the morning we play at Panzi, a very poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Bukavu. We can see it from the road, half hidden by the smoke piles of burnt plastic. The poverty doesn't scare me any more. Everybody looks beautiful to me. In the afternoon we play in a village only a couple of miles further out of the city. But suddenly the city seems far away. Girls are dancing over the hills in happy groups, we are having lunch under the eucalyptus trees. There is a banana plantation next to a little church and a hill with shade looking out over the football field/ town square... Since we won't be there for the next four representations, F appoints the chain of command. The first person in charge is Jean-Marie and after that it's Jimmy, Ghislaine and Shendeko. Jimmy in particular is taking F's chair now and the test run is going very well. He's a great actor, but he might be good at directing too... When we get home a couple of hours later everybody seems satisfied, delighted even. The work is proving to be more than worthwhile.

*Those kids are not afraid to speak even when there is white people watching.*

Prosper translating a member of the audience who thinks I might be taking offence by some scenes in the show

It's four in the morning, Sunday, my last day in Africa, it's dark. On what I have called Deadwood Avenue, the kids are coming by in big numbers, ushered forward by the voices of adults. It could be a military drill or an exodus of refugees. In the first week I probably would have thought war was upon us, but it sounds festive somehow. I go downstairs and ask the guardian what is happening. It's the weekly sports event. There are no sporting facilities in the city, but Deadwood Avenue is still deserted at this hour. So the road becomes the equivalent of a stadium, with several thousand kids running, jumping, working out in the pre-dawn darkness...

A couple of hours later we are saying our goodbye to our girls and our boys. It's the most bittersweet goodbye I have ever witnessed. They ask me to bring shoes for them when I come back next year... When we head out of the city, down to the frontier, I'm still not able to believe we will really get out. The first stop is the Congolese border, they let us wait for half an hour, but no trouble. And then just over the bridge, the border of Rwanda. There is a problem with the car. The serial number of the engine is missing. I pray to god that they won't send us back. We wait for forty five minutes. In the end they let us go. We get stopped once more by the police twenty minutes later, we have to pay a fine. Frédérique makes a joke about Jesus being aboard (me) and in the end we can simply go on. We pass the border with Burundi without much difficulties. We begin to feel more free. We drive through the dust and more sideways than straight ahead avoiding the enormous holes in the road. After some hours the traffic gets more and more crazy. We are nearing Bujumbura. Miraculously we end up making it to the city without getting killed or killing anybody. Frédérique suggests to spend the afternoon at the beach. When we get there it feels like paradise. We treat ourselves to a nice dinner, a couple of beers. We go and swim in the lake. I float on the water. There is no danger, no threat. It feels like we have successfully escaped. I don't feel guilty. At five thirty we head out to the airport. Benjamin and me are the first to go back, Frédérique is staying one more week to set up some future projects in Burundi.

We say goodbye again. We drink some more, this time I let myself float on the alcohol. When we get on the plane it feels more like a space ship. We stop in Nairobi and again I'm thinking that something must go wrong, that this is all too good to be true. When we are later flying over the Sahara I finally fall asleep and when I wake up again we are flying over Italy. We are in European reality airspace. I feel like the thread with Africa is already cut. Just before landing I look at Belgium from above and it feels so gentle, so peaceful, so safe. A couple more hours and I will be seeing you and our baby and they will warn us about pickpockets and we will get on a train and be home.

*Dames en heren de volgende halte is Aalst.* (Ladies and gentleman the next stop is Aalst)

The Belgian train conductor on the omnibus to Ghent

**«I'D RATHER PUT A FIRECRACKER UP THEIR ASS THAN CRY»  
OR THE THEATER & RECONCILIATION METHOD  
ACCORDING TO EWOUT D'HOORE**

They asked me to write something about Frédérique for the book. Something about her method, about why it works in the context she's working in on the African continent. I've never been sure F really has a method, let alone a method that can be transmitted. I honestly think it's more of a moral compass, a perspective on the world and some tools to fight back. Thinking of it, fighting back is probably not a bad description of what she does. Even though she called her organisation Theatre and Reconciliation, she's a born warrior. She listens to people up till the moment she hears something that is worth fighting for and then she is unstoppable. It doesn't take her much time, the conditions don't have to be perfect, the people don't have to be great actors. As long as they are willing to fight.

When I met her years ago I was working in a Belgian prison. The actors in the show were people with an unlucky past, but most of them had a strong heart and they knew how to fight. We loved them for it even though they were 'bad'. We could feel the beating pulse of life itself through them. I think it is what keeps F going. Giving damaged people the opportunity to fight back, to reclaim their dignity and their birthright – to live without fear or shame. All of that before the eyes of their community, all of that through play.

I remember working with a prisoner who told us a horrible and traumatic story of how he had tried to get to Europe and how his two companions had died trying. F later scolded us for listening and listening until everybody was buried under the weight of his trauma.

She forbade us to do it ever again; to sit there and watch people relive their horrors without intervening, out of so called respect. She ordered us to make theatre. Whatever the conditions were. No matter how little time there was. When horrible things came up we should help the actor fight his demons through the structuring of a scene; and through play. To help him defy whatever is haunting him; whatever is keeping him down under a fixed identity. She warned us not to get lost too much in intellectual or aesthetic niceties but to focus on opening up, taking away the symbolic barriers that isolate us and enabling everyone to come together.

It's a mechanism she discovered in Africa about fifteen years ago. The need was high I think, a lot of people could not take up the fight for themselves and she happened to be there. She worked in difficult conditions, without text or script and in the mother tongue of the actors. With tools that are so simple and essential that they can always be applied, even when there is no electricity or when there is censorship or a war raging. Opening up a space that didn't exist before. A space without taboos or polite lies, but a space that can be filled with redemption, humanity and hope. She is still doing the same and she won't stop soon. Keep well love, I can't wait for you to get back and get me into trouble again.







