Making a space for dialogue: a conversation with Jennifer H. Capraru

By Julia Gray

It is apparent when you meet Jennifer Capraru that she is incredibly passionate about the work she does; theatre that provides a space for dialogue. As the Artistic Director of the Canadian award-winning company Theatre Asylum, her work focuses on theatre about women and humanist issues. More recently, she started a theatre company in Kigali, Rwanda called ISÔKO. Described as an intercultural theatre company that creates contemporary theatre for human rights, ISÔKO’s work is deeply intertwined with Rwanda’s social development and creative economy. ISÔKO’s first venture was Canadian playwright Colleen Wagner’s play The Monument, originally written in 1993 in the wake of the war in Bosnia.

I had the chance to catch up with Jennifer in her Toronto apartment, over gently-brewed Rwandan tea.

Can you speak a little bit about your background and your training?

I come from a diverse family in Montreal. My mother is Jewish, and a child survivor of the Holocaust, my father Romanian, but I was raised by my mother and my French-Canadian stepfather as my father died when I was young. I spoke both English and French at home and I was raised in a very socially-minded family. I was lucky enough to have the arts as a major part of my growing up: music, dance, ballet; and I went to a Humanist Sunday school. My family’s philosophy was: what matters is in this world, and it is in this world that you act and make change.

I was originally interested in studying psychology in school, but in the end I didn’t stick with that. I decided to audition for theatre school in England to study as an actor. But I felt slightly uncomfortable as an actor. It wasn’t where I felt right. I knew through that experience of training that the theatre was where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. So, I started to apprentice and assistant direct. And then I received a grant that no longer exists, it was cut in the Mike Harris years. But for five years, two directors were sent to Europe to train for a year as a director’s assistant. So I did that, and it was a phenomenal experience. I trained in Germany - I had spoken a little bit of German before I went, but it was mostly through Yiddish. It was great to train but also to learn German. It had a significant impact on how I approach theatre; my
aesthetic style, my approach to physicality and the influence of Brecht’s philosophies on aesthetic distance and critical thinking in theatre.

And of course, I continue to learn and train, formally and informally. For example, I received my MA from York University’s Department of Theatre. It was a great experience to give myself a year to learn, read critical theory, performance theory as well as continue teaching.

And how is it that you came to work in Rwanda?

When I am not doing theatre, I work part-time in film as a ‘script supervisor.’ In the summer of 2006 I was called to work on the Canadian feature film *Shake Hands with the Devil*, which was about the experiences of Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire during his tenure as UN Force Commander during the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. I spoke French, I had all my Africa shots, and so one week later I found myself on a plane heading down there. In going to Rwanda I was changed. Making that film, meeting Rwandans, seeing the land, hearing their experiences, I was overwhelmed. I met great friends and colleagues. From that film, I was invited to give script development workshops for the Rwanda Cinema Centre. At that time I did some staged-readings of *The Monument* and *Littoralas* test runs. I had met some theatre people working on *Shake Hands with the Devil* – like here in Canada, many theatre people work in film too. I directed these staged readings because I wanted to see how people would react to *The Monument*. I didn’t want to re-traumatize anyone and doing staged readings allowed me to test that out in a safe way.

People connected deeply with the play. Many people thought it must have been written about Rwanda and were surprised to hear that it was written by this white lady from Canada about somewhere in Europe.

Can you speak about navigating the difficulties with infrastructure and the material of the play? How did you work through these things in rehearsal?

This [the 2008 rehearsal period for *The Monument*] was the most difficult rehearsal period of my life. In 2008 the cultural and artistic infrastructure in Rwanda was very different from today – everything was very much in flux, and it was reflected in the infrastructure. This was a real, immediate challenge that we were immersed in. We kept losing our rehearsal space, we didn’t know where we were going to be performing.

The material was obviously difficult too and the combination of lack of cultural infrastructure made it difficult to make decisions and move forward in terms of producing. I had the play translated from English into Kinyarwanda, as, of course, I don’t speak Kinyarwanda. This could have been a huge barrier, but in fact, the commitment of everyone involved and the universality of the human experience allowed us to move forward in rehearsal. And, we held rehearsals in French.
And we did move forward. I started changing my language from “I” to “we” – I implicated the actors directly in the creative process. We faced each crisis as something we would work through together.

We managed the material together as well. Decisions about the material, the sensitive material, went hand in hand with the artistic decisions. At the time we made, and we continue to make, decisions collaboratively. It is definitely intercultural theatre. We are not there to re-traumatize anyone, we walk through things together.

**And how did you work aesthetically while in Rwanda? What did you bring to working on ‘The Monument’, and did you find your aesthetic changed?**

I was very committed, and still am very committed, to a strong, interesting aesthetic. While I think the work that theatre for development accomplishes is important and very admirable, that is not the work that I do. I call it ‘theatre for human rights’ - I call it this on purpose, because the quality of the aesthetic is important. I want a forum for people to be able to come together, witness a production, sit with ideas, discuss. I felt as a foreign artist in Rwanda that what I could offer was a space to open up dialogue. I am not a social worker, nor a doctor. I can provide a space for dialogue through theatre. But it has to be done with a strong, rigorous aesthetic.

I went to my artistic roots, and referred to Brecht. I wanted to have that place for people to be able to distance themselves and reflect. And, I was able to do that through certain aesthetic elements. We played right on the floor, and the play was lit with candles. We had certain pieces that reflected each of the girls, like a pair of glasses, a book and other things. With *The Monument* I wanted to be able to create a play that would tour Rwanda and be for Rwandans, but could also be seen at any international festival and be of that quality. The show was invited to the World Stage Festival in Toronto this past year and was received very well. It was a very different kind of audience; in a way it was a coming home for the play, but for the actors it was a coming out. It was so well received and it was validating for all of us, but particularly for them, I think.

**What work are you doing now? Where are things moving in the future for you?**

ISÔKO’s second production, *Littoral* by Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad, or *Tideline* in English, is performed in French not Kinyarwanda and we plan on touring it. The artists I work with are very interested in touring it internationally. If *The Monument* represents the past of Rwanda, shortly after the genocide, *Littoral* is about the present, with diaspora returning, loved ones missing, ghosts haunting and with perpetrators living side by side with victims. It’s an unprecedented example of reconciliation. Our third production will be about Rwanda’s future. It will be collectively created by artists living there today and will incorporate research, interviews, writing, film and music.
Personally, I spend up to three months per year in Kigali. I became friends with a family in Rwanda and live with them in their home while I am there working.

Is there anything else you want to add?

Rwanda can teach the world so much. If there is anything I have learned from my time there, it’s that. Rwandans have worked through so much, and know about compromise and collaboration. They live side by side, they are integrated. Rwandans have come through this terrible genocide and they now live together; right together. I have often heard young people who are looking to do volunteer work, or something, who say “I want to go and teach Rwandans about conflict resolution, or peace building” and I think how offensive that is. YOU are going to teach THEM? They know it. They are living it. They can teach US.