

'Miracle in Rwanda' show to host premiere in Naples

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Immaculée Ilibagiza, a 22-year-old college student, was home visiting her family for Easter in 1994 when the death of the Rwandan Hutu president sparked a 100-day slaughter of ethnic Tutsis in the country. Ilibagiza, a Tutsi, was sent by her father to a Hutu minister's house to ask him to protect her from the genocide. Although the minister was a Hutu, he was a friend of Ilibagiza's family and agreed to help her. Ilibagiza and seven other Tutsi women hid in a 3-foot by 4-foot bathroom to escape the Hutus who were roaming the streets, killing any Tutsi in their path. The women's terror escalated as Hutus came repeatedly to search the house for them. The women hid for 91 days before fleeing to a Tutsi refugee camp operated by French troops. But when Ilibagiza reached the camp, she learned that her parents and two brothers had been killed by men she knew. Ilibagiza turned her story into a memoir, titled "Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust." Her story also has been developed into "Miracle in Rwanda," a one-woman show that makes its world debut at TheatreZone at The Community School of Naples this weekend. "She is the Anne Frank of our time," said Leslie Lewis Sword, the actress who will portray Ilibagiza on stage. "She is living proof that it is better to forgive." Murphy, 15, center, tells Rwandan genocide survivor Immaculée Ilibagiza that her story of faith and forgiveness encouraged her in her faith in God. Ilibagiza shared her story with high school students from Community School of Naples Friday. The one-woman show based on her story is called "Miracle in Rwanda." It chronicles Ilibagiza's survival and forgiveness of the people who killed her father, mother and two brothers. The next performance at the Community School of Naples will be during a gala fundraiser tonight. There will be a standard-priced show Sunday. Lewis Sword, who also co-wrote the show, heard Ilibagiza speak at a conference in Orlando in October 2005. Two weeks later, she met Ilibagiza at another conference and the two women had lunch. Ilibagiza told Lewis Sword she had plans to return to Rwanda in two weeks. "I just invited myself along," she said with a laugh. "I got to see the 3-foot by 4-foot bathroom where she lived. I met the pastor who hid them and I saw where her family home had been. It was an amazing journey." Lewis Sword said she was amazed that Ilibagiza was able to forgive what most would consider unforgivable. "This material is so heavy and deep, but when I met her, she has a lightness to her that is astonishing. I think that is because she has forgiven them. Not because they deserve to be forgiven, but because she could not live without forgiving them," she said. Lewis Sword said she developed the one-woman show based on conversations with Ilibagiza, her visit to Rwanda and her own research, which included listening to Rwandan music. The show will be presented to the public and also to Community School students, who also will have the opportunity to hear Ilibagiza speak. "I hope it resonates with them. The Holocaust, which seems so long ago, still happens. The United States largely ignored (the genocide in Rwanda). She overcame it," said Mark Danni, founding artistic director of TheatreZone. Danni said Ilibagiza's story of survival should be admired. "She found a way to forgive the people who slaughtered her family," he said. Danni said he hoped to bring in shows of this caliber when he started TheatreZone two years ago. My mission was to bring the lost treasures of Broadway to the community. I wanted to bring something that you might not see in community or dinner theater," he said. "I also wanted to create a place where shows premiered prior to moving on."