

A one woman-play recounts the terrible days of Rwanda's genocide

By Elizabeth Kellar

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When Leslie Lewis Sword talks about her friend Immaculée Ilibagiza, a survivor of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, she grows excited, respectful and a little awestruck. It's as if Lewis Sword is still feeling the initial thrill of hearing Ilibagiza's story, remembering the first terrible conflict and final surprising resolution. But when Lewis Sword becomes Ilibagiza — as she will this weekend when she premieres her original, solo production of "Miracle in Rwanda" in collaboration with Naples only Equity theater company, TheatreZone — she is polished and smooth, a cool conduit for the woman whose young life and entire family was devastated by violence. Lewis Sword slides without effort into her friend's elegant accent, adopts a strong and quiet posture. Her story, Lewis Sword explains as Ilibagiza, is "sad but joyful." It's the story of how a kindly minister hid the 21-year-old Ilibagiza and seven other women in a three-by-four-foot bathroom in his home for 91 days. It's the story of how Ilibagiza prayed practically every minute of all of those days, prayed even though she didn't feel like praying and how the words often held no meaning. It's also the story of how Ilibagiza learned to forgive the men who murdered her family and so many of her friends. "And I think that is why God saved me," Lewis Sword says, speaking as Ilibagiza. That's the story Lewis Sword heard Ilibagiza retell at a public speaking engagement in Orlando in October 2005 and it's the tale that changed her life, too. Lewis Sword was struck by Ilibagiza's message of forgiveness, a message that endured even when she eventually had a chance to confront the killers of her family. A month after hearing Ilibagiza speak, Lewis Sword was on plane to Rwanda to discover more. "It's totally changed my life," Lewis Sword says. That's hardly an understatement. Lewis Sword's acting career began early; she started with appearances on public television's "Sesame Street" when she was 6 years old. Later, she earned her Masters of Fine Arts from the University of California at Los Angeles and continued to work in theater, film and television. She and her husband moved to Naples in 2004, but Lewis Sword maintained a professional life in New York City. In 2005, she performed as Dorothy Dandridge in an off-Broadway solo production of the film star's legendary rise and tragic fall. During that production, Lewis Sword recalls, she sometimes felt a kinship with Dandridge, whose life ended before she was able to achieve the personal fulfillment she craved. Hearing Ilibagiza lecture about her experiences during the Rwandan genocide, Lewis Sword felt inspired. Ilibagiza had survived so much sorrow and destruction, Lewis Sword says, but somehow she could forgive it all. That, Lewis Sword recalls, is what struck her most of all. From the moment she heard Ilibagiza speak, Lewis Sword believes she began to write "Miracle in Rwanda." In the one hour, 10-minute play, she will play 10 characters, including Ilibagiza, her brother Damascene and Pastor Murinzi, the man who hid her and the other women in his home, risking his own safety. It is set in real-time, during the roughly three months in 1994 when an estimated 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slain by radical Hutu militants. The play begins with an announcement that the president of Rwanda has been killed in a plane crash. That event sparked the genocide and prompts Ilibagiza's father's decision to send her to Pastor

Murinzi's house for asylum. The voice on the radio proclaims it is time "to cut the tall trees," a frightening metaphor for the holocaust to come. Ilibagiza doesn't want to go, but her father insists. And when she arrives at the pastor's home, her brother Damascene in tow, she learns Murinzi can hide her — but only her. Damascene, her parents, cousins and many friends were all killed in the genocide. Only one family member, a brother who was studying abroad, was spared. Years later, Ilibagiza returned to Rwanda with a news crew from television's "60 Minutes." She was asked — as she has been asked many times — if she has vowed any vengeance on the men who killed her family. Once, she believed yes, she would like to kill them, she said. But not anymore. Lewis Sword has also returned to Rwanda with Ilibagiza and seen the bathroom where her now-friend was hidden. In her time in hiding, Ilibagiza lost 40 pounds, Lewis Sword explains, and found a connection to God. "She turned that bathroom into a monk's cell," Lewis Sword says. It's that transformation that Lewis Sword hopes to share in "Miracle in Rwanda." She has performed the play for a limited audience already, including her family and multiple Tony award-winning playwright Terrence McNally, who is a friend of the play's director Edward Vilga. McNally, Lewis Sword says, praised the play as "very brave." After its Naples premiere, Lewis Sword has plans to take the production to New York City. For her part, Lewis Sword has found something, too. In addition to a friend and personal and professional inspiration in Ilibagiza, she and her husband have since adopted two children from an orphanage in Kigali, the Rwandan capital: Christian, her son, is 19 months old and Savilla is 14 months old. "I think that people will really be moved by the story," she says, "and also be moved by her and what she represents."