

Review: 'Rwanda' powerful, at times dogmatic

By CHRIS SILK (Contact)

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Although Leslie Lewis Sword would like her riveting one-woman show "Miracle in Rwanda" to be remembered as a modern-day "Diary of Anne Frank," the show ultimately fails to put its message of faith and forgiveness into a broad enough context for audience members to take away anything more than a singularly electrifying performance.

"Miracle in Rwanda," a brisk 80-minute show playing through today at the G&L Theatre at the Community School of Naples, is adapted from "Left to Tell," the autobiography of Rwandan genocide survivor Ilibagiza.

Ilibagiza was a college student home to spend Easter with her family when long-simmering ethnic tensions ripped the small African nation apart in 1994. The show debuted last year in Naples and has since played off-Broadway and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Ilibagiza survived the mass killings, in which extremist Hutu militias slaughtered at least half a million ethnic Tutsi and moderate Hutu citizens, by hiding in a cramped 3-by-4-foot bathroom in a local pastor's home.

She shared the tiny space with as many as seven other women for 91 days until a French peace-keeping mission arrived. Some estimates peg the death toll as high as 1 million.

Sword brings the harrowing trials of Ilibagiza to life in spectacular fashion. She re-enacts the woman's physical breakdown, as well as her inner journey toward learning to forgive the men who perpetrated the crimes against her family and her country — all with a powerful grace and courage.

A gifted performer and storyteller, Sword truly inhabits each of her characters, giving voice to nearly a dozen different people. These range from her father, to a sympathetic French soldier (played to comic effect) to one of the rampaging militiamen who slaughtered her entire family. She shifts with ease from character to character — many of them male — and often has the audience hanging on her every word.

The fright in her voice, the terror in her eyes, the quaver in her lip — all serve to illustrate the abject horror these women, trapped in that tiny space, must have felt and how their survival and her ultimate decision to "forgive the unforgivable" was indeed a miracle.

She's aided in her retelling by a series of spare but elegant lighting cues and sound effects. These range from the flickering light of a television screen to the scraping of an armoire across the floor. Unfortunately, given the attention to detail on the part of the lighting and sound, I was disappointed to see the pictures of Ilibagiza's family used as props in the latter half of the play, — hanging crookedly on dented posterboard on the stage curtains. For something so important to her, I was surprised to see them treated so shabbily.

I also found jarring the moment at the start of the show when audience members were asked to come up on stage to illustrate the size of the tiny 3-by-4-foot room the survivors shared. It was awkward, disrupted the momentum that had already started to build and was far less effective than you might think. On the whole, it rang of gimmick, — which the show didn't need in the least.

For all the genius that Sword brings to her polyglot collection of characters, I can't help but feel the audience would be better served and the message better delivered if at least some effort was made at putting the tragedy that occurred in Rwanda into context. The play hints at long-standing differences between the Hutu and Tutsi clans, but never really moves past a simplistic "us vs. them" viewpoint. In theater, as in life, the messy parts are the bits that are the most interesting.

The play's "tidy edges" effect isn't helped by the messianic overtones Sword adopts as she portrays her character talking to the heavens and later literally leading her party of followers to the "promised land" of a French refugee camp.

Sword would have been wise to stray further afield from the overtly Christian message of the stoutly Catholic Ilibagiza's autobiography to give the work much-needed depth and context. Beyond "trust, hope, pray, survive," the play offers little in the way of examination on the past or present state of affairs in Rwanda or to audience members looking for something beyond rosaries and platitudes.

The conflict in Rwanda was -and still is a snarled web of tribal distrust, grudges held over past injustices and politicking on a grand stage. Ignoring any part of that does the work no favors. This makes the play feel isolated and bereft and can leave the audience feeling the same way.

One of the roles of theater is to help us understand the world around us — to question, to puzzle, to cast a critical eye — all through the lens of the stage. It is here that "Rwanda" falls short of its mission. Sword is a gifted performer — and the show is an often times mesmerizing production that will find you holding your breath, but "Miracle in Rwanda" ultimately offers just a supremely well-done retelling of events without any real insight into the human condition.

Agree? Disagree? Hate it? Want to chat? E-mail me at csilk@naplesnews.com.