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Writing Drama Today

Jean-Marie V. Rurangwa

The French dramatist and theorist Boileau said: « Ce qui se concoit bien s'enonce clairement Et les mots pour le dire viennent aisement » It means that when you have clear ideas you easily find words to express those ideas. Likewise, before a playwright writes his play, he first becomes very sensitive to an event, a situation, a social or political problem, an individual or collective tragedy. It is that hypersensitivity which is at the origin of any creative impulse. It is that hypersensitivity which makes him easily find words to express what he feels, what he sees, and what he dreams of. It is this hypersensitivity which makes an artist a particular individual. Because his soul is particular. That is why he feels and sees what the others do not feel and do not see. That is why artists are prophets who are misunderstood by their contemporaries most of the time.

More than any other writer the playwright needs to share his feelings, thoughts and dreams in a place that favors face-to-face relationships. That is why the playwright is not only a hypersensitive person but also a communicative one. The stage is therefore a crucial element in so far as it constitutes a link that connects the playwright (represented on stage by the actors) to the audience. Moreover, it is on the stage that the didactic and cathartic functions of a drama are fulfilled.

The French romantic poet and playwright Victor Hugo in his essay "William Shakespeare" wrote: "Le theatre est un creuset de civilisation. C'est un lieu de communication...C'est au theatre que se forme l'ame publique."(Theatre is a melting pot of civilization. It is a place of communion. It is in theatre that the soul is educated.) It is this need or desire to be together with others in order to share emotions, opinions or dreams that drives the playwright to write a play and put it on stage. In short, we can say that the creative impulse of a playwright springs from his hypersensitivity to events and his ardent desire to share what he feels with the audience.

Nowadays in Rwanda theatre has become, like radio, television, and newspapers a very efficient medium of mass communication. However, we have to say that its audience is very limited for the following reasons. First of all, the big majority of Rwandan populations are illiterate and live in the country where there are no cultural infrastructures. The only opportunity they have is the radiophonic theatre broadcast in kinyarwanda, a national language spoken by all Rwandans. Secondly, dramatic texts in international languages such as French and English are generally written for an elite group which lives in the urban centers, in schools and universities.

Theatre in Rwanda was brought by the colonizers. It did not exist in Rwandese traditional literature. There were many other kinds of performances but theatrical performances were unknown in traditional Rwanda. Theatre on stage began in schools where French teachers trained their pupils to perform the plays of French playwrights and French speaking negro -African playwrights. Later, Rwandan teachers and students began to write plays in kinyarwanda and to perform them in schools. The themes of these plays were exclusively social: dowry, arranged marriages, conflict between generations,

conflict between traditional culture and modern culture, problems related to the rural depopulation, etcetera.

For thirty years Rwandan politicians have considered the theatre as the best medium to inform populations of their social and political options. That is why plays written in kinyarwanda and focusing on social problems such as illiteracy, alcoholism, drugs, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, street children, sexual vagrancy, and unprotected sexual intercourse, are promoted. The best plays get rewarded and broadcast.

After the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi and the massacre of moderate Hutu in Rwanda, Rwandan authorities recommended that Rwandan playwrights focus on the main challenges Rwanda faces now: the fight against negationists, unity and reconciliation, peaceful living together, ethnic tolerance, fighting against AIDS and the discrimination of people infected with HIV/ AIDS, gender education...

It is impossible to write outside of these topics if you want an audience to attend the play. In fact, the first question Rwandans always ask whenever they read advertisements for a performance on posters or hear them on the radio, is :”What is the play about?”

Rwandans enjoy watching a play in which they recognize themselves, in which they find their own problems, and see in detail their everyday life, in which the actors express their sufferings, their hopes and their dreams. Rwandans enjoy watching didactic and cathartic plays.

There are many Rwandan playwrights who write plays for the radio in the national language. It is the Rwandan authorities who order those plays and indicate the topics on which the playwrights will have to focus. The best plays are rewarded and broadcast on national radio every Tuesday evening. These plays are mainly written for illiterate people although educated people enjoys listening to them too, and focus on the vices of domestic everyday life. One of the main functions of drama is thus fulfilled: ”Castigat ridendo mores.” (Drama corrects behaviors through laughter.)

On the other hand, there are a few playwrights who write for the stage in both national and international languages, but there are probably not more than seven of these in all of Rwanda.

Contrary to other French speaking countries, Rwanda, like his sister-country Burundi, is the only country where literary activities in general and playwriting in particular have not been promoted by the Belgian colonial regime or by the post –colonial Rwandan regimes. That is why we have few writers of international note. That is why we do not have a national theatre, a national theatre troupe, publishing houses for literary writings. That is why the few Rwandan writers who have published some of their writings are those who have been living outside of Rwanda. Many lived in exile and came back to Rwanda after the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi.

There are seven theatre troupes in Rwanda that perform in kinyarwanda or in international languages. The playwright also acts as the artistic director of the production.

Rwandans like theatre but do not like to pay for admission. That is why when the tickets are free there is a big audience but when the ticket must be purchased few people come. Under these conditions it is impossible to make a livelihood as a playwright in Rwanda. This is also why many theatre troupes are amateur, filled with members who have to work other jobs to live.

However, if any playwright wants to write what the politicians want him to write, he may get funds from them and earn his living in that way. But this man will be racked by an interior conflict between his desire to be free in his thoughts and the constraints of the everyday life within the political system. That is why many artists in developing countries are often obliged to leave their homes for western countries if they want to write what they feel. Let us hope that one day in Third World countries playwrights will not have to flee their home countries to be free in their writings!