

STRANGE TIDES

By Phionah Katushabe

Anxiety, longing and fear of the unknown are the only words I can use to describe how I felt before setting off to South Sudan. We were five actors/trainers (Patience, Swizen, Ibrah, Hussein and myself) and our creative director, Claus Schrowange.

At Rafiki Theatre, our mission is "Exploring and employing the tool of 'Participatory Theatre' to conscientize communities and individuals on issues of injustice and violence, and enhancing a process where the people discover alternative non-violent ways of addressing these issues in a secured theatre setting."

We are a unique participatory theatre troupe, combining three theatre directions, 'Theatre of the Oppressed', by Augusto Boal, Brazil, 'Poor Theatre' of Jerzy Grotowski, and the way it is taught by his pupil Gabor Csétnéki, and 'Improvisation-theatre' by Keith Johnston. Rafiki can be hired to create productions or to train theatre troupes.

So far, we had formed six participatory theatre troupes in Uganda, conducted theatre workshops in and outside the country and designed many participators theatre productions.

It is against such background that Rafiki was contacted and asked to do training in our method of participatory theatre for a group of young people in Kuro, South Sudan.

The journey from Kampala

According to plan, we would set off from Kampala on a Sunday evening, be in Juba by Monday morning, spend day and night there and travel to Torit and Narus on Tuesday. Then we would proceed to Kuro on Wednesday and hopefully be there by evening. But plans always change whether for better or worse. In this case, our plans changed the moment we boarded that bus from near Arua Park in Kampala (can't even remember the bus's name). We went to the garage first and only left past 10 pm, after which I thanked the stars for the good luck and closed my eyes after a while. I can't remember much of that journey till I woke up in the middle of the night, everyone quiet on the bus. The moon was shining brightly, the stars dancing above us, and I felt safe with myself and nature.

Here I was, heading to the dreaded South Sudan. I say dreaded because that is what people were telling me before we left. I had anticipated and prepared for this trip for over months, and when departure time came, it was hard to say byes, as usual.

Friends and family I talked to all asked me: “Do you or don’t you know that there is war in the Sudan?” You see, we went in May when the young, fragile and new South Sudan was at war with her mother, Sudan. The place of contention and battlefield was Heglig which lies at the border of both countries. And so to say, the people in Juba downwards were not concerned about the war, where as some did not even know of it. Surprisingly, some S. Sudanese didn’t seem sure that their country had seceded from the north.



Girls on their way to fetch water; Nurus

But all this my friends did not know, so they wanted to pump some sense into my head, not to go to the country of ‘bloodshed’ as one friend told me. In fact, he asked me how much I was going to be paid so he could refund the money, as long as I promised to cancel the trip.

This was just one day to D-day, and not that I would even consider changing my mind. To me, this trip was much more important than money. It was about the experience of travelling all that distance by road, not knowing what was ahead and it excited me. I felt the most content person, and I was living every minute of my life.

Juba



A few minutes after arrival in Juba

It was late in the afternoon when we finally reached Juba, after the long wait at the border. We were tired, with luggage and looking out of place. After many minutes of waiting, our host Uli (Ulrich Thum) and a colleague of his fetched us and took us to the guest house where we spent the night. It's from here that we traveled to Narus on Tuesday, reaching in the evening at the Catholic Church guest house which was to become our home (surprisingly) for the next few days. It was raining, dark and cold.

From Wednesday, we took to waiting for the big car- the UNIMOG that was supposed to transport us from Narus to the peace village. It was raining day and night; meaning the only way to travel was by such big vehicles. The car we had traveled in from Juba could not be used on the almost nonexistent road from Narus.



We took to climbing small mountains and hills while waiting for a car in Narus

But the UNIMOG we were waiting for got mechanical problems on the way from Kuron, while transporting children from school. They had to walk for more than sixty km to reach Narus, an experience I listened to with grief and pity, but one that prepared me for the worst, just in case.

Luckily the peace village has two of these mighty cars so we had the option of waiting for the one that was on the way from Mombasa.



In Narus, trying to cross a broken bridge

Unfortunately, the bridge at the Kenya-Sudan border broke down, so the UNIMOG could not pass. Phone calls were made, efforts put, but nothing fruitful came out. Superstition was getting the better of me. Efforts to charter a plane to Kuron were underway, only that it was too expensive. But that also would have meant that we had to leave some of our heavy luggage behind.

As if the gods had finally heard our pleas and cries, the UNIMOG from Mombasa came and we set off on the same day, Sunday afternoon. I was going to miss the people at the church compound where we were staying, mostly Betty, the brave and courageous manager. Not to mention how they cared for us, feeding us many fatty heavy meals every day. I have never felt more tired out of lack of what to do, save for eating! But there is another moment that I remember vividly. On one afternoon, after we had had our lunch; we heard some noises from behind our cottages. We went there, out of tedium. The young scout boys who were training told us they did so ***“just in case their country needs and calls on to them to defend their country-South Sudan - they should be ready”***. And among them were leaders beating the trainees who made mistakes while marching. My conclusion, serious business, period!



The boy scouts during one of their rehearsals

Kuron close

When we set off from Narus, the journey had its own challenges. We were told that in the dry season, the journey is roughly a six hour drive from Narus to Kuron. But here we were, spending more than 28 hours before finally reaching the bishop's village. At this time I only pitied Hussein (a Rafiki member) who was going to stay in Kuron for more five months to mentor the troupe that we were going to train.



An inside view of the UNIMOG, and Patience cuts tree branches to put in the road as Uli looks on

Inside the UNIMOG, we were congested and loaded, with luggage and human bodies that made life unbearable and breathing hard. I have never lacked fresh air like then. Since we had onions and fuel inside the UNIMOG, that's all I could smell. I decided to burry my head in the bags of luggage that were piled above my shoulders to avoid the smell as I was close to throwing up. It was in the middle of the night, at an ungodly hour, 2am. Deep inside, I was wishing that for some reason we would get a break and stop so I could catch some fresh air.

But then, be careful what you wish for. No sooner had I finished my wishful thinking than the truck came to a standstill. Okello (our kind driver on the journey) tried hard to push on, but the stubborn Germany made monster of a car could not move. After a few minutes, we were ordered out to go create way for it. And by this I mean to dig a road, in the middle of the night, with our bare hands. The few cutlasses that we had were used to cut tree branches to pile in the handmade holes for the car to pass. And the two spades we had were too heavy to lift.

The thorns in the soil pieced our hands, the same hands that we used to eat chapattis a few moments later, without caring to wash them. Did I mention we were in the middle of nowhere? But this small crisis showed me the humility of the people we were travelling with, mostly our hosts. I remember how Uli, Okello, David, and the turn boys Angelo and Emma were doing all they could to ensure that the vehicle moves. That is the moment we ceased to be visitors because we had to get to work immediately, more like soldiers on a must win quest. That's how far situations can push one to do things they have never imagined. Never say never!



On the way from Narus to Kuron

As if we had not gotten enough of getting stuck in the night, the same thing happened in the morning. When we had gotten uncomfortably comfortable in the UNIMOG, the huge car stopped again at round 9am. This mud digging with bare hands, in the scorching sun tired me. On top of that, we had not had real food in over twenty four hours and had finished the chapattis in the night. So here we were, depending on the only little snacks we had packed.

I vividly remember Patience (Rafiki Member) distributing milk to everyone, even when some of us had already lost appetite. On top of the hunger, we ran out of water. Getting a drop of borehole water, no matter how dirty, was a blessing and yet we had to bear in mind that we could, through drinking un-boiled water, contract guinea worm disease that the government was trying to fight.

The Peace Village

In the eyes of a stranger, the peace village is a perfect place. It is a place out of the chaotic world. A place with people of different backgrounds, beliefs, religions and countries. There, one can experience quietness and life's simplicity. But the longer one stays, the more familiar the place becomes. And with this comes staleness.



A few minutes after we had arrived at the Peace Village

Just after four days, I was already feeling for those who have to stay there all year long. They face the same challenges, conflicts and problems. In this peace village, it's either the dry season and sun shines all day long or it is the wet season and it rains.

It's at this compound that we did two performances, both at night, and the third at the Youth Centre that is just across the river, but you still have to walk for 30 minutes, because the only bridge close to the peace village broke down.

The Bishop

This man, Bishop Taban Paride necessitates no introduction. He is the founder of Kuron Peace Village. He is in my view one of the most famous people in S. Sudan. I must confess that prior to the trip, I had not known about him or his works, apart from the little from the photocopied papers that Claus had given us in preparation for the journey. But I did not even read them all. So I was pretty green about this man of the cross by the time I entered S. Sudan.

However, before long, I was forced to know a thing or two about him on the way. Wherever we reached and people cared to ask where we were going, and we mentioned the peace village, they would immediately begin talking about the bishop. Soon, all talks were about him. I did not even

know his name by then. But the impression I got of him was that he had worked so hard in the fight for S. Sudan's independence, and he had built this peace village that was in the most remote place of the country.



How I wanted to find him there, talk to him and ask him questions! Unluckily, he was not around by the time we reached his village, and he was not to come until after our departure. I still tell myself that I need to meet him.

In the eyes of Angelo Lokeno

Angelo is a pupil at St. Thomas primary school, just like the rest of the members of Nyakica theatre group that we formed and trained in the days we spent at Kuron. This group is charged with addressing some of the dire issues in Toposa land, using participatory theatre as a tool.

This young man, whose name Lokeno means 'kitchen' seemed different right from the start. Relatively small, tall, dark skinned and focused. He would fix his eyes on whoever was conducting a training session, like he did on the first day of training as I guided the group in a massage session. I demonstrated on one person, John, and asked the rest to follow and do as I was doing.

This message, simple as it was, helped break barriers between the trainees and the trainers. And that is when I noticed that Angelo was careful, always asking for guidance and doing the best he could to have everything right.



Training sessions and scene development, with Angelo Lokeno.

As Rafiki, we help actors to discover themselves, that is, their body, senses, voice, feelings and needs. We do not write scripts so actors use their own words. This helps them to perform any role more authentically, honestly and empathetically, and to create an emotional link with the audience. Angelo was all eager to learn how to do this, as if it was a ticket that would get him out his village and reality to the place he has always dreamt of.



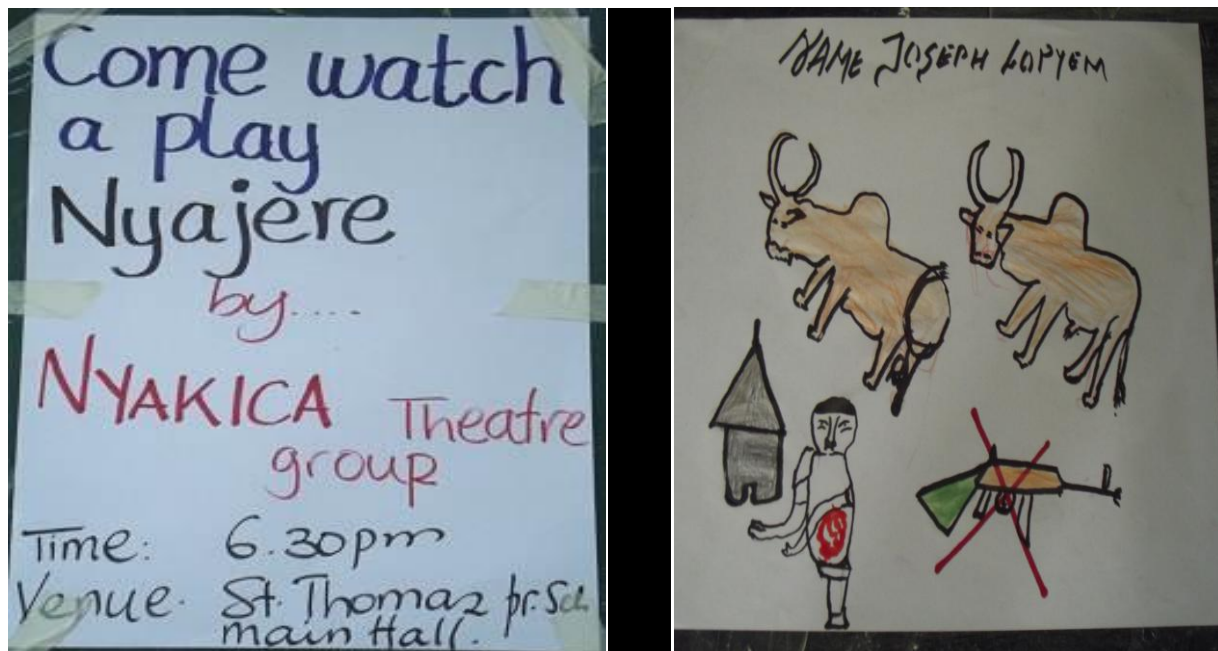
The girls forming a song and drawing

The trainees easily grasped the concept of theatre, the Rafiki way. By encouraging them to draw, write poems, short stories, create songs, prepare choreographies, and use their words, they had a good and successful show, attended by some ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ in their community.

Like many others in the school, Angelo went to school to escape the suffering that many of his peers were going through. For example, lack of food, raiding and grazing cattle all day. He admired a man who was a grade five drop out and now MP.

“If he stopped in primary five only and he can be MP, how about me who dreams of going to secondary”? He asked rhetorically.

Apparently during the dry season this MP would buy Lorries of sorghum and oil to sustain his family. It is for such reasons that Angelo wanted to go to school and later manage to help his family by not doing what other boys were doing: *raiding*.



One of the images drawn by a member of Nyakica Theatre group

At a young age, Angelo was challenged by his age mates to go raiding the neighboring tribe, the Jie. He feared to refuse, so he went with them though deep inside he felt different and wanted to refuse. They went and instead of focusing ahead on the raid, all he thought about was when and how to escape and go back home. When time was ripe, Angelo pretended to want to go for a long call of nature. Like the unwritten rule in Toposa land is, the rest remained in a straight line waiting for him.

He managed to fool them and escaped deep into the bush, and back home. While still in the thicket he would hear them looking for him, shouting: “If we get him we will kill him and claim that the Jie killed him!”

After some days his peers came back defeated, and the ‘enemy’ had killed one of the young boys. His mates had no kind words for him for backing out of the deal and accused him of bringing them bad luck.

“It’s because of you that he is dead. If you had not run away may be this bad luck would not have befallen us” they said to him.

During discussions with the young trainees, I discovered that almost all the boys blamed such calamities of death while raiding on women.

“Women are the cause of all this because they reject anyone who does not have cows to marry them. They call such a man a coward. So they are responsible for the killing of such young men” Angelo claimed.



Scene from the play ‘Nyajere’ by Nyakica Theatre group, and an audience intervention afterwards

The Toposa Culture

When a man marries for the first time, the father is obliged to pay the bride price for his son. Sometimes the cows asked for are too many (above fifty) and the groom’s family has to pay in installments, but they must pay.

Angelo's father wanted him to marry by 15 years already but he run away from home instead and joined school. He is currently in grade eight and his father every once in a while sells a cow to get him some pocket money.

"My father appreciates the fact that am in school now and I have promised him that I will marry when am done with secondary school. I also made him promise that he would look after my wife when am away for further studies" he says, adding that he must leave his wife pregnant.



Scene from the play 'Nyajere' by Nyakica Theatre group and an audience intervention afterwards

However, his mother was hesitant to accept that her son should remain in school because she wanted him to remain home and help her to plant sorghum when the rains comes so as to avert the hunger during the dry season.

He is the only one who goes to school from his family. And though he wanted his siblings to join school, his parents refused, reasoning that there would be no one to take care of the cattle if all of them went to school. Besides, there is no money to pay school fees for all those many children.

In his culture, when a woman does wrong she is warned three times and the fourth time she is punished by beating.

After the theatre training, Angelo was more confident to stand up for himself and what he believes in, a thing that he did not think he could do before. For example, he thinks that before beating up his future wife, it is good if they just talk about the disagreement.

One more for the road

As Rafiki, we have always done risky things, and so it was no surprise when we decided to have the last performance in one of the settlements. And that anticipated fourth performance was scheduled to take place at night because that is the only time when people are in their compounds. During the day they go cattle grazing. We set off in the evening and by the time we were drawing closer to the village; the UNIMOG got stuck in a valley, again! We tried to dig it out in vain. In the process we were delaying, so we set off by foot to begin the performance as the rest of the group figured out how to pull the car out.



Night-performance with discussions on domestic violence

We started the performance past 8pm, in the darkness, save for the light from the few solar bulbs that we had carried. Well, our audience was composed of many children, some women and men. The men were either standing or seated on their portable stools while the women sat down with the children. As the moderator for this particular performance, this was already ringing a bell as to what to expect when discussions commenced.

We did our usual Nyumbani (Home) play which focuses on various forms of domestic violence. The time for discussions was not only limited but there were other hindrances like language barrier, and darkness itself. Albeit these limitations, I remember what some people said: for example, there was a woman who emotionally spoke out that they will not allow men to beat them anymore.

We did not go that deep, but it was a starting point for the women in this community who have been battered and made to feel inferior to their husbands, to the extent that they are not allowed to seat at the same table with men, mostly during discussions. The discussions are done by their husbands, sons and fathers and so are the decisions.

We had to walk the six km back to the peace village, stumbling along the way and once in a while going off-track, reaching after 1am! Can you imagine having cold dinner at that time? Or perhaps I should say, early breakfast?

Just like all good things do come to an end, our time in Kuron passed quite fast, and soon we were on the road again! It was a significant trip for me because during those weeks I experienced not only physical changes but also change in perception.

Therefore believe me when I say that leaving was no easy feat. I looked at the bed in the guest cottages as my own; sat at the dining table like it was home and I had gotten used to the people there, Michael, David, Phillip and Francis, the group members plus the man who was responsible for our making it there in the first place, Uli.



One of the settlements near Kuron, and an aerial view of the peace village

Return Journey

We may not have had the smell of onions in the UNIMOG on the return journey, but we had another nightmare! We carried sick people who were being transported to a hospital in Kapoeta. Just after a few kilometers, one who was next to where I was started throwing up. Not long afterwards, another one followed suit. The first one was doing so in a five litter jerry can while the next one could only use his shoe. We were congested, the air was not enough.

Usually, throwing up is sort of contagious. After a few minutes, I felt my inside turn upside down. I tried to hold it and succeeded but for a short while until I had to rush to the only open place, the back of the truck. I was later joined by Patience and together we decided that being hit

by dust was better than the sight inside. So from then onwards we were at the back with the turn boys. We were living on the threat every time Okello made an abrupt turn. We also had light moments as we discussed what a great driver he was, maneuvering in this bush, creating roads, which as we were told, and henceforth called the “*Okello roads.*”

The next day was not any easier, travelling from Narus to ensure that we are on Ugandan soil by 5pm. That is when I ceased to see all the troubles, hindrances and negative things of the journey and instead started reminiscing about the beauty of S. Sudan.

We have trained other theatre groups before but there was something special about this group from Kuron. I don’t know if it was the timing, place or the people, but I felt different in South Sudan. And to summarize this different feeling, I will borrow Emma’s words in Deborah Scroggin’s book ‘Emma’s war’, “*Sudan has a magic that takes hold of you for better or worse. I have known other people who have fallen under its spell. It’s not a beautiful country. It’s the people who are so charming.*”



The last photo with the members of the new participatory theatre troupe in Kuron