Humanitarian Theatre in the Great Lakes Region : In Pursuit of Performativity

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Humanitarian Theater in the Great Lakes Region

In Pursuit of Performativity

*Maëline Le Lay**

Introduction

La parole construit le pays ("Words build the country"), wrote Congolese writer Thomas Mpoyi-Buatu in his novel, *La reproduction*.[1] This quotation exemplifies the dominant perception of literature in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: performative texts that embody the very possibility of enacting the actions they enunciate. True of a broad field of what I have elsewhere called "didactic theater," this orientation toward the work of art aptly sums up the mechanisms and stakes of a specific genre of theater performed in DR Congo and across its eastern boundaries in Rwanda and Burundi—that is, "humanitarian dramaturgy."[2]

In the Great Lakes region and particularly in DR Congo, writers, actors, and directors see themselves as agents of a particular and authoritative use of words. The assertion that their words bring change when uttered is very strongly entrenched in their self-image, as well as expected by their audiences. In this regard, they illustrate J. L. Austin's theory of performative speech acts, which grants transformative—even almost miraculous in Congolese contexts—power to the speakers.[3] In other words, they embody the idea of the very power of words, imparting it with a magical, metamorphic dimension.

In the eastern part of DR Congo, Burundi, and to a large degree Rwanda, where the humanitarian sector rules not only the arts sector but much of the entire job market, written and/or performed theatrical productions brandish specific features that supposedly enable a performance's goal to be achieved, *performed*, in real life. Through theatrical *catharsis, mise en abyme*, and extensive use of choruses, playwrights and stage directors hope and expect to effect

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positive action—namely, pacific resolution of conflicts or reconciliation—in the aftermath of their performances, in part through the iterative temporality resulting from ritualized repetition of performative speech.

Based on data collected during exploratory fieldwork in DR Congo and Burundi in 2015, this chapter charts the processes and the subsequent aesthetic and political stakes of shaping the performance field according to peace and development goals.[4]

Humanitarian Dramaturgy in Africa's Great Lakes Region

What is "Humanitarian Dramaturgy"?

"Humanitarian dramaturgy" is the label that I propose for performances staged in the Great Lakes region that are molded in the humanitarian paradigm. From one shore to the other of Kivu and Tanganyika Lakes, the cities of Goma and Bukavu in DR Congo, Rwanda's capital Kigali, and Burundi's capital Bujumbura are booming metropolises, where the vibrant artistic life is largely sponsored by NGOs. Indeed, a growing number of NGOs are settling in these countries, their specific programs of reconstruction and peace-keeping tailored to the current so-called post-conflict situation of the region. Hence, the job market is shaped by what I call the "humanitarian paradigm," the discursive and institutional framework that has begun to format artistic creation in DRC and other African countries.

Africa's Great Lakes region is a prime site to study humanitarian dramaturgical practices embedded in their complex political context.[5] Involved at various levels in a seemingly unending war for more than two decades, DR Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi attract lots of NGOs. Many of them try to rival their counterparts in inventiveness to encourage local communities' empowerment. This "NGO scramble"[6] has triggered the creation of an increasing number of associations dedicated to aid and solidarity for the numerous victims of war. Theater, often mixed with music, dance, and other expressive practices, has become a favorite tool. Various theater projects are thus booming on both sides of Kivu and Tanganyika Lakes, many modeled on Theater for Development (TfD) and participatory or community theater aimed at conflict resolution. All of these forms stem from the theater-action methodology elaborated by Argentine theater director Augusto Boal in his essay, *Theatre of the Oppressed*.[7] More and more NGOs and international institutions use theater as a medium for their awareness campaigns targeting

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grassroots communities. *Vice versa*, artists increasingly appeal to NGOs, sometimes indirectly, by taking the initiative of writing the scripts of their plays and performances according to this humanitarian agenda.[8]

A close look at the plays performed or published in DR Congo and Burundi reveals the shaping of a transnational dramatic format both by artists and by NGO workers.[9] Whereas in Rwanda as Ananda Breed aptly demonstrates, the government and the international community are forging a specific official genre exclusively addressing genocide and designed to prevent another ethnic slaughter, in DR Congo and Burundi, certain patterns and conventions have been circulating more informally for about two decades. The use of common practices enables artists to create networks, to expand their visibility, and to otherwise access broader fields than if they had stayed within the borders of their native countries.

Presentation of the Corpus

The corpus of this study is composed of theatrical productions performed in the Great Lakes region and plays written, though not yet published, by writers from Goma, Kinshasa, Bujumbura, and Brussels.

Guillaume Bukasa, *De la haine naîtra l'amour* (2013). Written in Goma, not yet performed.

De la haine naîtra l'amour ("From Hatred Will Spring Love") is a play written by Congolese writer Guillaume Bukasa. Based in Goma, he also works in Kigali where he runs writing workshops at Alliance Française. He has written three plays and nine poetry collections, all self-published. On the cover of his plays, he presents himself as *poète-dramaturge* ("poet-playwright") and people in Goma commonly refer to him as "Poète Bukasa."

The play in question features a love story between two young people, Musi and Belmondo, from opposing ethnic groups. Musi finds out that she is pregnant and the lovers have an argument about the future since Musi doesn't want to leave her family to live with her family-in-law. Belmondo finally manages to convince his father, the chief, to accept his spouse and to reconcile his community with that of his spouse.

Freddy Sabimbona, *Monsieur le Président* (2011). Written and staged in Bujumbura, not yet published.

Freddy Sabimbona is a very active young playwright and director living between Bujumbura and Kigali. Trained by Patrice Faye (the musician and

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writer Gaël Faye's father) and the theater company Pili Pili, he then founded his own theater company, Troupe Lampyre. He and his colleagues have launched the first theater festival in Burundi, *Buja sans tabous* ("Tabooless Buja"), which shares works, personnel, and funders with other artistic events of the Great Lakes region, as well as Burkina Faso's artistic milieu. He has written several plays, mainly in French, but also in Kirundi. None have been published yet, but all have been staged at least once.

Monsieur le Président ("Mr. President") recounts the bid for power of former Burundian president Pierre Buyoya, here called Bucumi. Buyoya was twice president of Burundi, each time coming to power in a putsch, first in 1987, then in 2003. He is considered to have achieved reconciliation between the Hutu and Tutsi and national unity thanks to important measures and to have promoted the country's democratization. Even though many accusations of authoritarian governance sully his presidency, he gained respect on the African and international political stages when he accepted defeat in favor of Melchior Ndadaye, here called Melchior Magnoni. The complexity of this figure is well portrayed in Sabimbona's play.

Nzey Van Musala, *Panique à Goma* (2015). An adaptation of Brecht staged in Kinshasa and Bas-Congo.

Nzey Van Musala is a playwright and director based in Kinshasa, where he ran a theater group called Compagnie Marabout Théâtre for about thirty years. He stages his own texts in French—some of which have been published[10]—or other texts, notably those written by Francophone African writers such as Cheikh Aliou Ndao's *Un trône à trois*. He has also written short sketches, also in French, commissioned by development programs. Moreover, each year he organizes a theater festival in Kinshasa and in the neighboring province of Bas-Congo.

For the 2015 festival edition dedicated to Brecht, he decided to stage *Panique à Goma* ("Panic in Goma"), an adaptation of Brecht's *Drums in the Night* (1919), as he noticed a strong analogy between the besieged city of Berlin during the Spartacist revolt and the besieged city of Goma, several times invaded by "Rwandan" rebels (who were actually mixed in with Congolese rebel movements). During a very tense political situation of ambushes and attacks, Mr. and Ms. Balicke manage to convince their daughter, Anna, to disavow her lover who has gone to fight in North Africa for four years. They decided to marry her off to a brutal man called Murck,

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but just at the moment of the engagement, her lover, Kragler, turns up and stops the ritual. After arguments with his fathers-in-law and his pregnant lover, he calms down and renounces both his anger and revolutionary ideals.

Frédérique Lecomte, *Théâtre & Réconciliation*.

Frédérique Lecomte is a Belgian sociologist and theater director living in Brussels. She founded the association *Théâtre & Réconciliation* to produce participative theater destined for performance in conflict zones. She has mainly worked in Burundi and DR Congo, where she frequently organizes workshops and courses with groups of local actors who continue performing when she returns to Europe. After working on improvisation and taking part in a very rigorous training program, they create a show together in the local *lingua franca*, Kirundi in Burundi and Swahili in Eastern Congo. These shows focus on the region's social problems: sexual and gender-based violence, the demobilization of child soldiers, intra-ethnic tensions, and so on. Lecomte then sells these shows to NGOs such as UN institutions, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), or RCN Justice & Démocratie. Occasionally her plays are commissioned by NGOs to address specific topics for previously targeted communities. While she describes her methodology in a collective publication about her work that she herself edited,[11] the texts presented below were written afterward based on multiple improvisations.

Théâtre & Réconciliation, *Si Ayo Guhora/Ce n'est pas à taire* (2002). In Burundi (mainly Bujumbura and Gitega), staged all over Burundi.

The very poetic play *Si Ayo Guhora* ("This Should Not Be Silenced") portrays a group of actors who compete through their improvisations to recount taboo, touchy, or painful topics, while playing music, singing, and dancing in humorous sketches.

Théâtre & Réconciliation, *Habuze iki?/Qu'est-ce qui a manqué?* (2005). In Burundi (Bujumbura and Gitega), staged all over Burundi.

The play *Habuze iki?* ("What Was Missing?") adopts the same structure as the former, but demands justice by staging a trial on different victims' competing pain and trauma. The topics are even harsher than those in *Si Ayo Guhora*, facing the reality of horrors experienced during war and mass killings. Interestingly, the play ends on the same question with which it opens: what is missing?

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Théâtre & Réconciliation, *Indirimbo Ababi n'Abeza/La chanson des gentils-méchants* (2008). In Burundi (Bujumbura and Gitega); staged all over Burundi.

Indirimbo Ababi n'Abeza ("The Song of the Sweet-Wicked") is a face-to-face confrontation between real *and* portrayed executioners and victims. The show came out of a very rigorous training program. During this work-in-progress, after having expressed emotions such anger, hatred, regret, and shame aesthetically, the actors are invited to imagine what others might have experienced and, in a sense, to understand it.

Based on the study of this corpus of plays performed and/or written in DR Congo and Burundi, I have identified a number of patterns that illustrate how an ethos of disaster and an ideal of redemption are dominating theatrical narratives. Focusing on daily life in a very contemporary perspective, these texts are wholly inscribed in *présentisme* as Hartog coined it, a specific regime of historicity characterized by an emphasis on present-time. These narratives tend to highlight the multiple hardships people undergo on a daily basis, while the depiction of the characters' environment is dark, even often apocalyptic.[12] An essence of redemption is embedded in these tragedies' archetypical features. Such stories are resolved either through the reconciliation of a thwarted union or thanks to a traitor's reform.[13]

In narratives structured according to the thwarted union pattern, redemption is achieved through the reconciliation of opposing parties. *Jirani ni Ndugu*, a Swahili expression meaning "Your neighbor is your brother," is the title of a very famous broadcast theater program in Kivu that focuses on neighborliness and mutual understanding. Strongly anchored in its philosophy is the conviction that neighborhood problems and conflicts can be seen as a metonymy of conflict in general, whatever form it may take. As a codified patterned structure hinging on the issue of peaceful cohabitation, *Jirani ni Ndugu* has become the soap opera par excellence of the Great Lakes region. The quasi-universal format of impossible love or thwarted union between two people of enemy ancestry is also displayed in other fictions written and/or performed in the region,[14] illustrating at a micro level conflict between communities through the lens of a love story. In narratives structured according to the reformed traitor pattern, redemption is achieved by a single character. The traitor reforms either through a kind of sacrificial martyrdom for the sake of the enemy community or by the renunciation of the revolutionary ideal that pushed him/her to battle against his/her own peers. This

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pattern often emerges through the adaptation of classical plays in which the writers have discovered echoes of their own political context.

Deploying The Potential of Theater: Performativity

More thoroughly than Austin, Judith Butler highlights the theatrical dimension of performative speech. In the introduction to the 1999 edition of her well-known essay *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she explains how the concept of performativity drives her entire reflection on power relations:

> My theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions. In *Excitable Speech*, I sought to show that the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions.[15]

The multiple characteristics of performative speech that unfold throughout her in-depth inquiry into the concept of performativity—from its initial theorization by Austin, to its discussion by Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, and Shoshana Felman—can be applied fruitfully to those theatrical pieces created in Africa's Great Lakes region, which can also be seen as engaged in a kind of performative quest. Echoing Felman, Butler argues that any speech is embodied and that "the bodily effects of speech exceed the intentions of the speaker, raising the questions of the speech act itself as a nexus of bodily and psychic forces."[16] This is obviously pertinent when the speech is performed on stage or in any other kind of theatrical dispositive dedicated to the embodiment of fictional roles. Reflecting on the temporality of performative speech, Judith Butler then argues that performative speech is never delivered in a unique moment, but exists as a part of a ritualization process. "The 'moment' in ritual is condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance."[17] In other words, the effectiveness of performative speech is not limited to its immediate enunciation. Although the extent of its

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effectiveness is very hard to measure, its "iterativity" (to cite Derrida) enables the performative to succeed because the action echoes anterior actions and "accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of prior and authoritative set of practices."[18] The guiding principal of humanitarian dramaturgy exactly reiterates that of performative speech: those working in humanitarian theater and those expecting plays to lead to visible change in a problematic social situation believe that the process has to be constantly repeated and thoroughly disseminated among the target communities.

Moreover, the strength of the performative is due less to the indisputable and intrinsic sedimentation of speech than to its capacity to be decontextualized, to be displaced from its former context, meaning, and time so as to inhabit a new one. As Butler concludes: "The possibility of a resignification of that ritual is based on the prior possibility that a formula can break with its original context, assuming meanings and functions for which it was never intended."[19] For example, in Africa's Great Lakes region, NGOs and other donors including governments use development-marketed theater to reappropriate the performativity of locally common forms of hate speech into performances designed to fight against what is described in DR Congo as *anti-valeurs* ("anti-moral values"), inhabiting a new, somehow discordant meaning. In an attempt to turn individuals into *capacitaires*, as Cynthia Fleury describes those endowed with capability,[20] or in other words to empower them, NGOs resort to the performative potential of theater. This can be achieved by different tropes and figures, such as the use of choruses, mise en abyme, and catharsis. The efficiency of all of these practices partly relies on the temporality in which they are introduced in the performance.

The Centrality of the Chorus

In the corpus of plays written and/or performed in DR Congo and Burundi, the chorus appears as a recurring figure. Yet this kind of chorus has little to do with the chorus of antiquity, which, as Martin Mégevand states, "more or less explicitly conveys the evidence of an idealistic perception of unison."[21] Instead, they embody a common feature of contemporary theater, which he calls "chorality" (*choralité*): "a specific disposition of voices, which is neither dialogue nor monologue, which require a plurality . . . , circumventing the principles of dialogism, especially reciprocity and fluidity of sequences, to

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establish a rhetoric of dispersal . . . or the intertwining of words that musically respond to one another."[22]

The plays studied display "chorality" through the presence of choruses, who intervene from time to time, giving voice to communities. Their speech disturbs the plot and more specifically the action of the leading character, as in *Monsieur le Président* by Freddy Sabimbona. At the play's beginning, the chorus echoes the speech of the President, basically amplifying it. By claiming to be the executive committee who accompanied the putsch of the new President Bucumi (inspired by the real president Pierre Buyoya), they explicitly voice his authoritative speech. Progressively, the chorus's initially very stable political positioning starts to move toward an ambiguous one, and President Bucumi realizes that he doesn't know the chorus as well as he thought. When he discovers his jester actually belongs to the chorus, the latter introduces a degree of discord into what formerly seemed to be propagandistic speech. Simultaneously, the chorus starts unraveling, its appearance of unity becoming diffracted. When the concerned President Bucumi asks the chorus who they are, their answer continues to instill ambiguity and dissonance within the monolithic authoritative speech:

Bucumi: Qui vous a embauché?	Bucumi: Who hired you?
Didace [le bouffon]: Embauché? . . . J'appartiens au chœur.	Didace [The jester]: Hired? . . . I belong to the chorus.
Bucumi (regardant le chœur): C'est vrai? Il appartient à vous? Ça m'étonne!	Bucumi (looking at the chorus): Is that true? He belongs to you? I am surprised!
Chœur: En principe, nous sommes là pour vous assister.	Chorus: In principle, we are here to assist you.
Bucumi: Mais, dites-donc, qui êtes-vous à la fin?	Bucumi: But, tell me, who on earth are you?
Chœur: Nous sommes les Parques. Nous appartenons à votre destin, comme . . . L'Oracle.[23]	Chorus: We are the Fates. We are part of your destiny, like . . . the Oracle.

Later, Bucumi is led by the Oracle to a refugee camp to attend a traditional performance promoting national Burundian cultural identity. When he returns from that visit in the following scene, he understands that the dancers and actors are also members of the chorus. At the end of the play, the chorus broadcasts a speech of wisdom delivered by the Oracle, pushing

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Bucumi in the positive direction of good governance by advising him to organize open elections and to sponsor a policy of reconciliation between rival communities. By acting over and above the President's will and even his mere awareness, the chorus threatens his superpower, subtly introducing subversion into the totalitarian nature that his power has begun to take. In this perspective, Freddy Sabimbona's "chorality" illustrates what Florence Fix writes about the role of the chorus: "The chorus is responsible; it has to accomplish an act of memory."[24] She adds: "The chorus is one of the theatrical forms authors choose to recount history, because it allows them to emphasize the position and role of the people in relation to the rulers."[25] Notably in political plays designed to tell a crucial sequence of history, the choral character voices the fractured voice of history by embodying it.

It is exactly from this perspective that the choral character is used in the plays created by the association Théâtre & Réconciliation. In fact, "chorality" is the feature that best defines the work of this association and its director, Frédérique Lecomte. In every play, the chorus intervenes throughout the performance to give communities a voice, be they the dead killed in past slaughters as in *Habuze iki?* ("What Was Missing?"), or the executioners and victims of torture committed during the Burundian civil war as in *Indirimbo Ababi n'Abeza* ("The Song of the Sweet-Wicked"). In *Habuze iki?* the chorus shapes the whole structure of the play, as we shall see in the next section. The other plays, even when the chorus is not called a chorus—for example, simply "the group" in *Si Ayo Guhora* ("This Should Not Be Silenced")—all include either a sung chorus (*chœur chanté*), a spoken chorus (*chœur parlé*), or sometimes both. This omnipresence substantiates the embodiedness of performative speech following Butler's and Felman's arguments, as speech for positive change is thoroughly embodied by a community united in a synchronic voice.

Nevertheless, even though this "chorality" can, at first glance, be understood as a metonym of "the people"—a united community sutured by a common experience, perhaps mass killing or injustice as in the plays by Théâtre & Réconciliation—this unison is neither fully achieved nor even intended by the authors; the chorus is more likely to become splintered. Interestingly, it is precisely this flexibility that guarantees its potential for change. Florence Fix shows how a chorus is meant to endorse an activist function: "Featuring the community is of no interest if it is not done in relation to a given society, through an audience that benefits from the disunion and division. Thus, the chorus draws it strength from its potential to repair, to unite that which is splintered; its motivation is that of restoring social ties."[26]

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The authors' foremost goal for the obvious artificiality of the chorus is to embody theatricality. This characteristic serves a particular dramaturgy, theorized and practiced by artists such as Lecomte and achieved through choral composition, as well as through use of mise en abyme.

Mise en Abyme as a Lever for Political Action

Mise en abyme is an artistic method which consists of creating a specular or mirror effect within a work of art, be it a painting (e.g., *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan Van Eyck), a film (e.g., *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* by Woody Allen), or a written fiction. Theatrical mise en abyme is theater within theater, as can be seen in some more famous examples such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare or *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Pirandello.[27] African playwrights are not to be outdone in this practice. Kossi Efoui used it in *Récupérations* while it is also found in *The Island* by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Shona.[28] In these plays and in those of the corpus studied, a mise en abyme is created by activating a dramatic sequence inserted into the main one, more often than not in order to produce critical distance from the plot and the characters.

In Congolese and Burundian theater, mise en abyme is activated at two different levels: either within the diegesis itself or within the setting up of the fiction as a means of introduction or prelude to the play. The first level is the most commonly used and occurs simply when some of the characters start performing theater, as in *Monsieur le Président* by Freddy Sabimbona. In a Burundian refugee camp in Tanzania, Kamariza Rose/Sabizuri, director of a theater troupe, takes the President to attend a ritual performance where the words she utters sound prophetic. After having criticized his policies, she proposes that he use the ritual performance of Burundi's traditional drummers to partake in the reconstruction of national identity, even though it is delocalized in another country, Tanzania. Just as she is the one who brings the plot into a mise en abyme, she also serves as the character driving the story, taking on the same role of enlightened prophet through different forms. First she appears as a mysterious oracle whose words unsettle the President, and then she introduces herself as a theater company director when she takes the President to the event which will inspire him to direct his policies in the "good" direction of reconciling the adverse

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communities. Hence, in this play, theatrical mise en abyme enhances the superpowers of theater. Provoking a substantiation of Burundian culture represented by archetypal features such as the famous Burundian drums, this sole Burundian performance in a refugee camp is able to influence the destiny of a nation. A performance staged to celebrate Burundian traditional culture and to promote the reconstruction of national identity succeeds in effectively orchestrating major political action capable of changing a country's existence.

While this sort of reflective sequence could be considered a sort of basic style of mise en abyme, the plays by Théâtre & Réconciliation, notably *Habuze iki?*, stage a different form. The whole structure of the play is choral, presenting characters who play a group of actors coming to perform sequences for special purposes that are explicitly presented in the prologue:

La chanson de qui nous sommes et pourquoi nous sommes venus.	***The song of who we are and why we have come.***
Nous sommes les comédiens de Si Ayo Guhora	We are the actors of Si Ayo Guhora
Ne cherchez pas nos maisons	Don't search for our houses
Les collines sont nos maisons	The hills are our houses
Ne cherchez pas à connaître nos familles	Don't seek to know our families
Vous êtes notre famille	You are our family
Ne cherchez pas à savoir d'où nous venons	Don't try to know where we come from
Le vent nous a apportés jusqu'à vous	The wind brought us to you
Demandez-nous ce que nous sommes venus faire ici?	Ask us what we have come to do here?
Nous sommes venus pour chercher la justice	We have come to seek justice
Nous sommes venus pour apaiser les cœurs meurtris	We have come to soothe the bruised hearts
Nous sommes venus pour trouver le mot conscience	We have come to find the word conscience
Nous sommes venus pour nettoyer les plaies de vos cœurs	We have come to clean the wounds of your hearts
Nous sommes venus par le vent	We have come on the wind

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Nous sommes venus ici pour vous dire ce qui pèse sur notre cœur	We have come here to tell you what weighs on our heart
Nous sommes venus ici pour échanger	We have come here to exchange
Nous sommes venus ici pour vous saluer	We have come here to greet you
Nous sommes venus ici pour vous encourager	We have come here to encourage you
Nous sommes venus ici pour éloigner vos peurs	We have come here to ward off your fears
Nous sommes venus ici pour que vous puissiez nous aider à juger	We have come here so you can help us judge
(Tambour)	***(Drum)***
Dominique	***Dominique***
Par quoi allons-nous commencer?	What shall we start with?
(Ils répondent tous ensemble dans un joyeux brouhaha en même temps qu'ils se disposent en cercle sauf le comédien qui parle qui reste au milieu de la scène.)	*(They answer all together in a merry hubbub while simultaneously forming a circle, apart from the speaking actor who remains in the middle of the stage.)*

Afterward, each of them proposes a story to perform together for the audience, whether playing drums and *likembe*, or staging revenge, rebellion, slaughter, or chaos. Finally, they agree to perform a trial to judge victims and executioners. This setup, which instills a cheerful atmosphere despite the gloomy proposals, lasts for almost a quarter of the play before any stories start to be enacted and sung. The mise en abyme in this play is incorporated into the main structure of the plot. By unlocking the mechanisms of theatrical illusion, the collective authors, Frédérique Lecomte and her theater group, make it part of the play's spine.

In doing so, Lecomte's plays adopt the dramaturgy of forum theater as conceptualized by Augusto Boal, however partially and unwittingly.[29] In his essay *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the Brazilian stage director insists on the importance of the joker. It is this special omniscient person—both character and actor—who alternatively stands on and off stage to ensure that the play goes in the direction of the desired goal that has been collectively determined before the performance by the actors and sponsors of the play. S/he is also the one who invites the audience to take part in the performance, so that they can

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become "spect-actors" of the play. From this perspective, the dramaturgy of *Theatre of the Oppressed* can be considered as an eruption of theatrical mise en abyme because of the specific relationship established between the stage and the audience, the actors and the spectators. This movement of *va et vient* ("going to and fro"), as described by Christian Biet and Christophe Triau, creates "an effect of porosity between the two different levels, which allows the audience to observe . . . its own behavior."[30] Focusing on the spectator and the responsibility conferred on him/her by the mise en abyme, Carole Egger more precisely outlines the process:

> Speech, which in theater is usually action, thus becomes a sort of commentary on the action which the reader-spectator is invited to interpret in order to draw the foundations and the truth from it. This ritualized speech introduces a bias . . . Both critical and aesthetic distance are thus established between speech and the spectator.[31]

Catharsis as a Major Creative Possibility

The plays commissioned by NGOs or designed by artists to be used in awareness campaigns arrange various events dedicated to the utterance of truths, mostly expressed through testimonies voiced on stage by actors and sometimes actors and public together. These moments most often appear at the ends of plays and are designed to play a cathartic function according to the authors, whether NGO workers or artists. Thus *catharsis* is an essential component of these performances. The play commissioners and creators expect the public to be interpellated by the dramatic turn of the story and by the fate of the heroes. Feeling the emotions of the characters, identifying with them, they are meant to be "cleansed" and hopefully partially healed by this process of self-expression.

The commissioners and writers rely on a long history of this effect commonly dated back to Greek antiquity. While this history confers an erudite form of legitimacy, they resort to the practice for very different ends compared to the Greek model, objectives sometimes far from local theater traditions as well. The way the concept of catharsis is used in fact reveals two levels of confusion: first, a misunderstanding of the political and psychological stakes in provoking catharsis; and second, a confusion about the genesis of the concept (which, it turns out, is ultimately fruitful).

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Firstly, the play commissioners and writers who see catharsis as the nodal aspect of their dramaturgy often refer to Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Yet, in his book, Boal rejects Aristotle's "coercive system," which he considers a way to extinguish any burgeoning rebellion before it could emerge: "Aristotle formulated a very powerful purgative system, the objective of which is to eliminate all that is not commonly accepted, including the revolution, before it takes place."[32] Thus, while Boal's heritage is constantly and paradoxically proclaimed, the *Theatre of the Oppressed* model is more often mobilized to reconcile opposing parties through catharsis than it is to urge real social change, much less to encourage people to stage revolution as Boal conceived it.

A similar problem of misjudging catharsis outcomes is the risk of retraumatizing people. The initiators of these performances, seeking to give people a way to express deep emotion, sometimes revive their audience's traumas. Questions of the psychological consequences of catharsis in such sensitive contexts are shown in a documentary about the work of Théâtre & Réconciliation.[33] In it, we see a woman in the audience who, after having undergone a terrible emotional shock in the past, refuses to carry anew the emotional burden triggered by the performance: "The mention of slaughters is what shocked me the most. It reminded me what happened here. And by the way, I forbid you to take this play here. It hurts me to be reminded of the past slaughters."[34] By expressing her refusal, this woman warns the artists that such performances risk re-triggering post-traumatic crisis.[35]

Secondly, meta-theatrical discourse about catharsis attests to the ignorance surrounding the concept's genesis. Indeed, when speaking about catharsis, people commonly refer to it as the main characteristic of an ancient theatrical form mainly celebrated for its Dionysian dimension. There is, however, a confusion between the theater presented by Aristotle in his treatise *Poetics* and the ancient theater that his model is mistakenly thought to embody. Florence Dupont, a philologist specializing in ancient literature, demonstrates that the theatrical form promoted by Aristotle—that is, tragedy—was dramatically different from most theatrical forms performed in antiquity. As Brecht himself had previously argued, the model promoted by Aristotle was a "text-centered" theater, structured on the *muthos* or fable and aiming solely at catharsis, whereas the theater more often performed in antiquity was much more musical and far less narrative-focused. Claiming that Aristotle is the inventor of the notion, Florence Dupont stresses the fact that "catharsis is mentioned once in *Poetics,* and only in the definition of tragedy,

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associated with fright and pity."[36] The mechanism of tragedy, catharsis is the process of "transformation of pain into pleasure through *mimesis*. Indeed, Aristotle had previously developed the idea that mimesis allowed one to take pleasure in something which, in real life, would cause pain."[37] She explains how mimesis—which turns out to be almost synonymous with *muthos*, as philosopher Paul Ricœur had earlier observed[38]—is the only way Aristotle shows to provoke catharsis. She argues that the supremacy of *muthos* and mimesis promoted by Aristotle is what allowed Western playwrights to eradicate all elements other than text and storytelling from theater performance since the seventeenth century, when *Poetics* was unearthed by classical poets:

> Thus it is the perception [of *muthos*] which gives the show's pleasure and . . . the perception of other aspects of tragedy which involve mimesis, such as characters or ideas. However, everything that defies mimesis—like music, song, metrics, or spectacle (*opsis*), that is to say gesture and pronunciation—can only give nonessential pleasures because they are not mimetic.[39]

Yet the exclusive power of text in Western theater is not valid for our corpus from DR Congo and Burundi. Whereas in the majority of plays belonging to the Western theater repertoire, catharsis is achieved through textual material and storytelling structure, in the plays studied, catharsis is activated in one or several musical sequences. Let us recall, for example, the way in which catharsis is achieved in *Monsieur le Président*: it is the musical and choreographic *opus*, the performance in the refugee camp, that triggers the President's catharsis and accordingly the audience's. The plays by Théâtre & Réconciliation are mainly composed of a sequence of songs and dances during which catharsis can occur at several moments. As for Guillaume Bukasa's play, the possibility of catharsis appears slighter, but one might still consider the scene of the chief's refusal of the wedding between two rival communities, an act echoed by his dancing and singing courtiers, as the acme, the nodal point of the story where the problem is concentrated. In a way, it too is sublimated by music and dance.

Moreover, the distance and "to-and-fro" movement created by the mise en abyme might also be the possible and necessary transitional space for catharsis to happen, if we consider along with Lecomte that catharsis requires such distance or alienation effect to be truly effective. In *Panique à Goma*, the adaptation of Brecht's *Drums in the Night* by Nzey Van Musala, the last

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scene creates a slight mise en abyme which triggers the conclusion of the play and achieves a catharsis initiated just before. In an earlier scene, Kragler the suitor had come back from the war after four years and found his betrothed pregnant. In the conclusion, he explodes in anger, treating her roughly. But suddenly, he begins to act out a kind of unexpected fantasy:

KRAGLER *(not looking at her, pacing back and forth, holding his neck)*: Enough! *(He laughs in irritation)* It's just theater! Planks, paper moon and behind, the last living butcher's stall. *(He paces back and forth, arms dangling, and takes the drum from the bar. He beats it)* "The Half-Spartacus, or the Power of Love," "Blood in the Newspapers District," or "In his Skin, Every Man is the Best." *(. . . He plays the drum)* The bagpipes whistle, poor people die in the Newspapers district, houses collapse on them, the dawn has come, they are lying on the asphalt like drowned cats, I am a pig and the pig is going home. . . . *(He plays the drum . . . roaring with laughter, almost suffocating . . . The laugh catches in his throat, he staggers, throws the drum)* Drunkenness and childishness! Now come to bed, the big and large, large bed, come!

ANNA: Oh, André! . . .

KRAGLER: It's cold *(He puts the scarf around her neck)*. Now come!

Conclusion

Drawing their material from cultural spaces such as DR Congo and Burundi and dominated by a didactic paradigm, NGOs working in peacekeeping *via* performing arts are growing within a fertile field. Their quest for performativity of "good speech and acts" is achieved by several means related to what could be cast as "humanitarian dramaturgy": extensive use of chorus, mise en abyme, and catharsis.

However, the development of such artistic practices ordered by NGOs invites us to question their apparent novelty in the artistic field. If one considers the current context and especially the style of these performances, one observes not a sharp contrast with anterior forms, but, in some cases, the feeling of an unsettling contiguity. Indeed, the quest for performativity seems to have been fundamental for playwrights in the Great Lakes region for ages, a quest in which artists have always used music and dance to provoke catharsis in crucial scenes. This raises new questions: How can we identify

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these possible links and potential intellectual and institutional affiliations? What are the historically constant patterns of these forms across narratives and throughout discursive, enunciative, aesthetic, and institutional matters?

Notes

*. My thanks to researcher, lecturer, and French-to-English translator Melissa Thackway for corrections to this chapter.

1. Thomas Mpoyi-Buatu, *La reproduction* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986), 46.
2. Maëline Le Lay, *«La parole construit le pays». Théâtre, langues et didactisme au Katanga (République démocratique du Congo)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014).
3. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).
4. This fieldwork was supported by LAM (Les Afriques Dans le Monde) in Bordeaux, CNRS (InSHS, Institut National des Sciences Humaines et Sociales), IFRA-Nairobi (Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique), and IFAS Johannesburg (Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique du Sud).
5. For an extensive overview of this situation in the Great Lakes region, see Ananda Breed, *Performing the Nation: Genocide, Justice, Reconciliation* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2014); Chérie Rivers Ndaliko, *Necessary Noise: Music, Film, and Charitable Imperialism in the East of Congo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
6. Alexander Cooley and James Ron, "The NGO Scramble: Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action," *International Security* 27, no. 1 (2002).
7. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, [1975] 1985).
8. Chérie Rivers Ndaliko proposes to distinguish *engagé* artists (committed artists), those who make art about social and political issues commissioned by NGOs, from "activists," those who "undertake campaigns, whether cinematic, musical, political etc., without any promise of payment simply because they are concerned about an issue and feel compelled to catalyze changes. When successful, such projects or campaigns often become targets of collaboration on the part of NGOs which are positioned to introduce money and power into movements that started at a grassroots level." Ndaliko, *Necessary Noise*, 9.
9. Many of the playwrights and companies discussed also work in Rwanda. However, I myself have only conducted research in DR Congo and Burundi, so I limit my more specific remarks to those contexts.
10. Nzey Van Musala, *Zérocrate* (Paris/Kinshasa: Editions Nzoi, 2014).
11. Frédérique Lecomte, ed., *Théâtre & Réconciliation. Méthode pour une pratique théâtrale dans les zones de conflit* (Bruxelles: La Lettre volée, 2016). To learn more about Frédérique Lecomte's work, see her website: http://theatrereconciliation.org/
12. François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

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13. For a deeper analysis of these narrative patterns, see Maëline Le Lay, "Literary and Theatrical Circulations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, from the Belgian Colonial Empire to the Africa of the Great Lakes," *Artl@s Bulletin* 5, "South-South Circulations," edited by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Catherine Dossin, no. 2 (2016).
14. This trope was commonly found in Congolese novels during the 1990s and has been revisited since the 2000s: Tandundu Bisikisi, *Quand les Afriques s'affrontent* (1984); Katsh M'Bika Katende, *La joue droite* (1990/2008); Bernard Ilunga Kayombo, *Contre vents et marées* (1996); Lomongo Elomba, *L'instant d'un soupir* (1984); Wilfried Mushagalusa, *Beti. La haine ou l'amour (récit)* (2005).
15. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), xxv.
16. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 141; Shoshana Felman, *Le Scandale du corps parlant. Don Juan avec Austin ou la séduction en deux langues* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).
17. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 3.
18. Ibid., 51.
19. Ibid., 147.
20. Cynthia Fleury, *Les irremplaçables* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).
21. "[La choralité] postule la discordance, quand le chœur—ainsi du moins que l'entendaient les Grecs—porte toujours, plus ou moins explicitement dans son horizon, la trace d'un idéalisme de l'unisson." Martin Mégevand, "Choralité," in *Nouveaux territoires du dialogues*, edited by Jean-Pierre Ryngaert (Arles: Actes Sud, 2005), 37.
22. "Cette disposition particulière des voix qui ne relève ni du dialogue, ni du monologue; qui, requérant une pluralité . . ., contourne les principes du dialogisme, notamment réciprocité et fluidité des enchaînements, au profit d'une rhétorique de la dispersion . . . ou du tressage entre différentes paroles qui se répondent musicalement." Mégevand, "Choralité," 37–8.
23. Freddy Sabimbona, *Monsieur le Président* (2011), 21. Unpublished manuscript courtesy of the author.
24. "Le chœur est responsable; il doit faire acte de mémoire," Florence Fix, "Introduction," in *Le chœur dans le théâtre contemporain (1970–2000)*, edited by Florence Fix and Frédérique Toudoire-Surlapierre (Dijon: Presses Universitaires de Dijon, 2009), 9.
25. "Si le chœur est l'une des formes théâtrales choisies par un auteur pour dire l'Histoire, c'est qu'il permet de souligner la place du people par rapport à ceux qui décident." Ibid., 11.
26. "Figurer la communauté n'a d'intérêt que vis à vis d'une société, par l'entremise d'un public qui profite de la désunion et de la division; ainsi le chœur puise-t-il sa force de ses potentialités à réparer, réunir; sa motivation tient au rétablissement du lien social." Ibid., 13–14.
27. The term *mise en abyme* is attributable to André Gide, *Journal 1839–1939* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1948), 41.

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28. Kossi Efoui, *Récupérations* (Carnières-Morlanwelz: Lansman, 2010 [1990]); Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, *Sinzwe Bansi is Dead & The Island* (New York: Viking, 1976 [1973]).
29. Frédérique Lecomte denies practicing Boalian Theater. Lecomte, *Théâtre & Réconciliation*.
30. "L'effet de porosité entre les deux univers qui met le public en état d'observer . . . son propre comportement." Christian Biet and Christophe Triau, *Qu'est-ce que le théâtre?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 307.
31. "La parole qui au théâtre est normalement action devient ainsi une sorte de commentaire de l'action que le lecteur-récepteur est invite à interpréter afin d'en dégager les fondements et la vérité. Cette parole ritualisée introduit un biais à son adresse. . . . Il s'établit de la sorte une distance à la fois critique et esthétique entre la parole et le spectateur." Carole Egger, "Sur les différentes formes de la citation au théâtre," *Cahier d'études romanes* 5 (2001): 147.
32. Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 47.
33. *Je ne peux pas me taire*, directed by Pascal Capitolin (EIRENE International Christian Service for Peace, 2012), https://vimeo.com/65996320.
34. Ibid., 00:12:28.
35. On re-traumatization, see: Breed, *Performing the Nation*; Jean-Luc Brackelaire, Marcela Kinejo and Jean Kinable, eds., *Violence politique et traumatisme. Processus d'élaboration et de creation* (Paris/Louvain-la-Neuve: L'Harmattan/Academia, 2013); Yvette Hutchison, *South African Performances and Archives of Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). In late 2016, an important conference was organized on the subject in Ghent, "Re-Moving Apartheid: Postdramatic and Postnarratives Modes of Coping with Trauma," http://www.re-movingapartheid.ugent.be/
36. "La *catharsis* n'est mentionnée qu'une fois dans la *Poétique* et seulement dans la définition de la tragédie, associée à la frayeur et à la pitié." Florence Dupont, *Aristote ou le vampire du théâtre occidental* (Paris: Aubier/Flammarion, 2007), 61.
37. "Transformation de la douleur en plaisir grâce à la *mimèsis*. Aristote en effet, avait précédemment développé l'idée que la *mimèsis* permet de prendre plaisir à ce qui dans la réalité causerait de la douleur." Ibid., 62.
38. See also: "Ce que je retiens pour la suite de mon travail, c'est la quasi-identification entre les deux expressions: imitation ou représentation d'actions et agencements des faits"/"What I retain for my continuing work is the quasi-identification between the two words: imitation or representation of actions and disposition of facts." Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit I* (Paris: Folio, [1983] 2001), 71.
39. "Ainsi c'est la perception [du *muthos*] qui donne le plaisir du spectacle, et . . . la perception des autres parties de la tragédie qui relèvent . . . de la *mimèsis*, comme les personnages ou les idées. En revanche, tout ce qui échappe à la *mimèsis*—comme la musique ainsi que le chant et la métrique, ou le spectacle (*opsis*), c'est à dire la gestuelle et la prononciation des acteurs—ne peut donner que des plaisirs non essentiels à la tragédie . . . car non-mimétiques." Dupont, *Aristote*, 63.

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