

I. Ouhé - R. Mukinisia - Y. Mukagasana - F. The Borders of War

Edited by Brigitte Kaquet

Ida Ouhé

TATA EWADI

I have chosen to form a theatre group because there are no female roles that transmit an image of dignity and strength in the repertoire of the Ivory Coast theatres. In our country, plays deal with petty family affairs that do not value women. Being a woman, it has not been easy to create a group, as there are obstacles of all kinds. In particular, the financial question is difficult to solve for a woman: a man will be allowed to make debts and nobody will gossip about what he might have done to obtain money. A woman would put her honour at stake. In our country, the first staging by a woman was not until 1982 and then in 1986. In 1988, I myself took the step forward, founding a group composed of women only.

Among the problems both men and women of the Ivory Coast meet within theatre creation is that language colonisation imposed French on us. In the Ivory Coast, it is only from this year that national languages will be taught at school. So choosing a language that everybody can speak which is not French is important. Before, amongst artists, we had created a language called *Muchi*, a bit like Creole. It is a language born of the streets, at first spoken by children, which has gained ground, so now anybody can speak it. It is derived from French, with a mixture of several national languages. In the Ivory Coast we do not all have the same language, so we are forced to communicate in French, a language many people do not know, and therefore we speak this street language, which gives more intimacy. We use this language also in theatre.

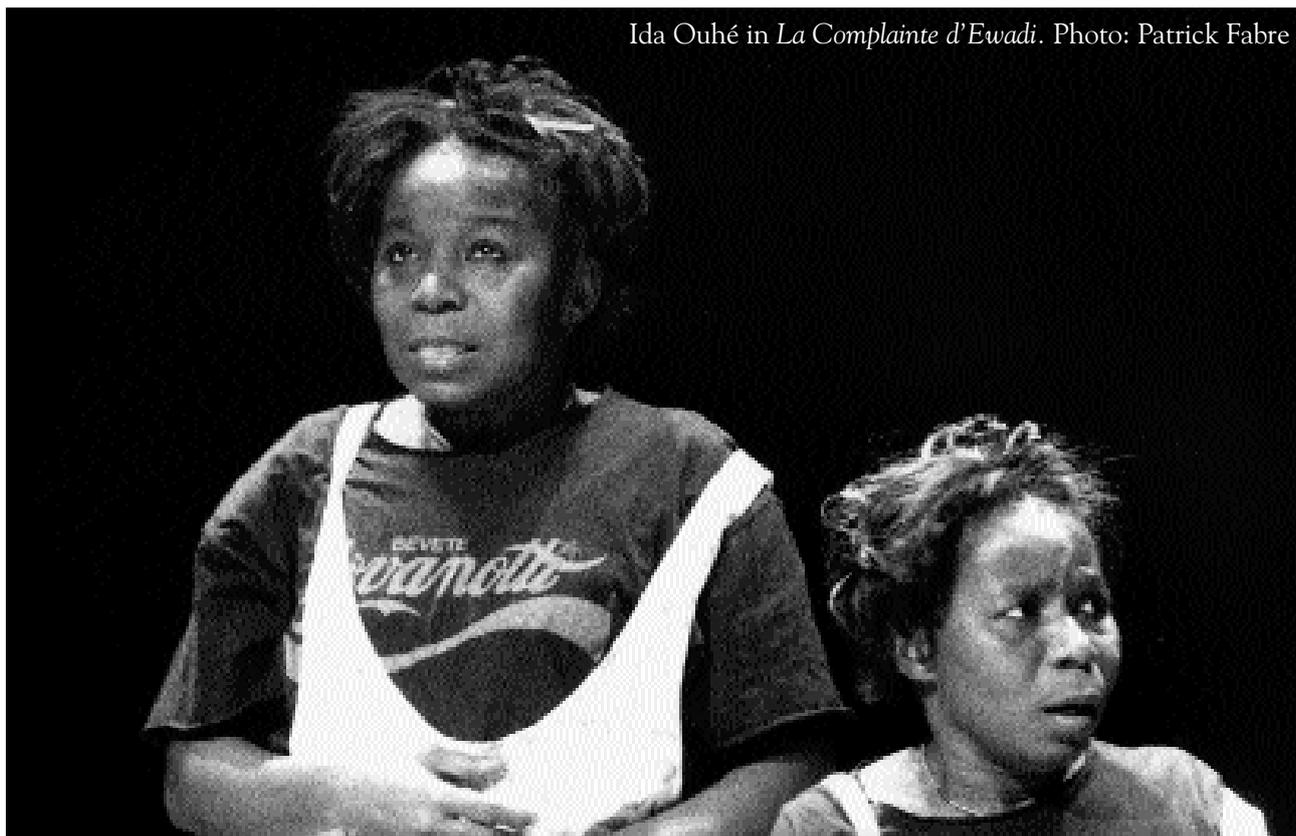
With the advent of AIDS, there have been many changes. Theatre groups have been urged to treat the theme of AIDS to make plays that inform and support a cause. This activity has given us some inspiration again.

I decided to make a performance on the theme of women in times of war. I think war is first of all a matter of

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Ida Ouhé in *La Complainte d'Ewadi*. Photo: Patrick Fabre

men, and that women and children are its first victims. I wanted to embody the character of a woman, Tata Ewadi. She is the heroine of the play, a woman caught in the trap of history, of political conflicts and male intrigues. She is not responsible for what happens to her, she is a simple woman, who is married and has children. Then war comes and takes all she has. In this ravaged world, the only thing she can do is cry out her pain. It seems to me to be the case for many women, wives and mothers, who live in the numberless wars which devastate our planet. For me, Tata Ewadi is a woman's cry of indignation.

Reine Mukinisia
THE QUEEN OF CANNIBALS

The Centre for Research of African Arts (CRASA) was founded in 1985 in

Zimbabwe. In the past we have worked with the theme of women and peace, because we realised that woman in our African tradition has certain characteristics that make her seek peace. In fact, until now, apart from some historical cases, we have not seen a woman start an ethnic war for thirty, maybe fifty years. We never saw a woman, not even a politician, start a discourse of violence to the point of turning it into conflict.

We made the pursuit of peace our target, especially within our region, that of the Great Lakes, a region which is the most troubled at the moment. We said to ourselves: peace is essential. All performances should be concerned with this theme with woman in a central role. Woman, the mother, the real victim of the war, letting her cry, in order to show the consequences of war. We have worked on live performances

with themes for our region, rather than on exportable plays based on aesthetic canons and exoticism, exportable on the market.

Yesterday I saw a book on the table, *Death Does Not Want Me*. I asked the director of my group: "Have you seen that title?" He looked at it and we said: "It is as if our entire research is summarised in a book we have not read".

We worked in Zimbabwe because there we understood the origins of our culture. The Bantu civilisations started in Zimbabwe and spread along the course of the river Nile, as far as its basin.

The first play we created in Zimbabwe was *Goré, Black Woman and Slave*. It is a play about the tragedy of the first women slaves, who left for the United States and worked in the sugar-cane plantations. They have engendered myths like Mohammed Alí, Forman and Michael Jackson. It was always the women who exported our songs, customs, traditions, epics and stories. We tried to express this exodus made of motherly grief, of a broken umbilical cord, in our play.

The second production was *The Migration of the Bees*. Here the stress was on maternal milk, symbol of the vitality of a nation. The third was *Metamorphosis* and the last is entitled *The Queen of Cannibals*, about the wandering of a young female victim of the ethnic wars afflicting her region. This play is concerned with the problem of the women from the Great Lakes region, who live a life always on the move, full of burden, breakage and motherly sorrows. All this is expressed through the compulsory exile of an innocent young woman who is submitted to events she has no part in provoking. We are not interested in using a political language about the problems within our region, but in communicating the language of women's feelings which express their confrontation with reality.

We are happy to have met the woman who inspired our work, Yolande Mukagasana.

Yolande Mukagasana **DEATH DOES NOT WANT ME**

My son would visit my mother, when I still had children. He was curious about the can where she kept the milk. Every time he went to visit my mother, he would say: "I am going to grandmother's to drink some milk". The milk was kept fresh in the traditional can. I did not have that kind of can at home. My children were able to preserve a tradition I was losing.

I am forty-four and I used to live in Rwanda. I was born and grew up there following the history of my country, seeing the first murders. I was five years old when I met armed men. One of them put his spear on my thigh while the others laughed and said: "Let's see what sort of blood she has". Right then I discovered I was a Tutsi and that Tutsi had to be killed. I tried to understand why, all the time I was asking: "Why, why?"

Before colonisation, the problem between Hutu and Tutsi existed on an economic level, defining who was richest. The country's economy was based on cows. Those with more than ten cows, were officially Tutsi, and if one day he had less than ten cows, he was officially Hutu again. A Hutu with more than ten cows, became Tutsi. Only since 1931 when we received identity cards we were Tutsi or Hutu for life. But we are all Bantu. We speak the same language, we pray to the same gods, and in the same way. Therefore I asked my parents: "Why? Why?" I never got an answer, because there was none, of course.

I had history books at school. Fortunately my father, unlike many other parents, could read. When he consulted my books, he would get furious and say: "What

you learn is not true, this is not the real history of your country." Then he would tell me about the past and add: "Do not tell anybody, keep this for your own children, because if you say something, you will be threatened with death. Nobody can tell this story, so nothing has to be said."

I was a nurse and in 1994, I had spent the day taking care of people as usual when I got a call from my husband. He was upset. At home I found him disheartened: "The President has been murdered, it is the end." That same night our troubles began. We never again slept at home. At first we wanted to leave the capital, but there were blockades everywhere; we realised we were surrounded, so we ran away into the brush. We had to find something to make beds for the children. That night military men went to our house to kill us and did not find anyone. They killed the dogs, had some drinks and left. The following morning, we needed a radio to know what was happening in the country. We went home, turned the radio on and we heard someone announcing my death. I thought I was going crazy; if I had been alone, I would have gone crazy. My husband and I looked at each other and I said: "I do not understand".

Rwanda is now a country of orphans and widows. When I look at my country I know its future depends on women because only women are left. But how is it possible to reconcile these two kinds of widows?

Florida Uwera
IN EXILE WE DANCE IN THE OPEN AIR

Where is my god?
Where is my god?
I cry and you do not answer.
What have I done?
If I have sinned,
why kill the child, the elderly?

Why kill the innocents?
Tell the Holy Virgin
to intervene,
so that Rwanda does not continue
drinking from the satanic source.

I am a singer and composer. I am sixty years old. I come from Rwanda. I used to live in my native country, then I lived in exile. I was born into a royal family. During my childhood I lived amongst neighbours and other children like me. We played together, ate together, they would come to my house, we were together at school and at college. I had friends who were Hutus and Batwas. At that time we were very close. At night everybody was at home, singing and dancing. This is how I started to sing when I was thirteen or fourteen. After leaving school, I got married to somebody who loves music like me. I was happy with my husband.

We had to leave Rwanda because we were threatened. We lived in Burundi, in Bujumbura, until 1960. Then they wanted to send us back to Rwanda to have us there, so we went to Zaire. We stayed there for four years. Once again, the government of Rwanda asked to have us sent back to Rwanda. So we left Zaire and, as Burundi had become independent, we returned to Bujumbura.

As I had started to sing when I was a child, in exile I was introduced to the king who also lived in Bujumbura. He asked us not to lose our culture; wherever we are, we should remain the same, we should dance and sing.

In 1966, we created a big company of female and male dancers, and singers. As we were in exile, we liked to remember our country. We felt better when we sang and danced. We remembered the hills and rivers. All of us saw Rwanda through singing and dancing. It was the effect of our homesickness. At that time I started to compose for

the company. I sang to the beauty of the women dancing. Then I began composing following the imagination. In fact I already knew I was good at composing as lots of people asked and begged me to compose for children and weddings; I even composed for some who had lost their relatives, for the deceased. In this way I became known among the people from Rwanda.

Before, when we were in Rwanda, we could not sing in public. Women sang with women and men with men. In exile this changed, we danced in the open air, in public. Moreover, there were songs that had to be sung by men: the praises. Women could not sing the praises of men. But, so as not to let these songs sink into oblivion, I started to sing these songs. Then I became known abroad and in this way I was invited to come to Belgium and France.

Translated from French by Maria Ficara

IDA OUHÉ (Ivory Coast) is an actress and singer whose work is based on the technique of the Griot and relies on long professional experience. She founded Ojiwa Theatre company, performed her solo show *La Complainte d'Ewadi* at Transit Festival in Denmark and she has participated in the Women's Voices Festival in Liege, Belgium, also giving workshops.

REINE MUKINISIA (R. D. Congo) She graduated in drama from the Institute of Arts in Kinshasa and now belongs to the Centre d'Art du Spectacle Africain (CRASA), which is involved with attempting to forge new forms for contemporary African drama, while relying on traditional modes of expression.

YOLANDE MUKAGASANA (Rwanda) A nurse, she lost all her family in the genocide of April 1994. Now a refugee in Belgium, she is the author of *La Mort ne veut pas de moi* (Death Does Not Want Me).

FLORIDA UWERA (Rwanda) is a singer who is related to the Royal family. She has lived most of her life in exile and now lives in Bujumbura.

BRIGITTE KAQUET (Belgium) is a founding director of Cirque Divers Centre for Arts, Liege, in charge of theatre promotion and production. She is the artistic director of Women's Voices Festival. She is also a writer and director, her most current project is based around *Zarathustra*.