



IRISH THEATRE INSTITUTE

creating opportunities abroad **strengthening resources at home**

World Theatre Day 2011 Message

A Case for Theatre in Service of Humanity

Jessica A. Kaahwa, Uganda

Today's gathering is a true reflection of the immense potential of theatre to mobilize communities and bridge the divides.

Have you ever imagined that theatre could be a powerful tool for peace and reconciliation? While nations spend colossal sums of money on peace-keeping missions in violent conflict areas of the world, little attention is given to theatre as a one-on-one alternative for conflict transformation and management. How can the citizens of mother-earth achieve universal peace when the instruments employed come from outside and seemingly repressive powers?

Theatre subtly permeates the human soul gripped by fear and suspicion, by altering the image of self - and opening a world of alternatives for the individual and hence the community. It can give meaning to daily realities while forestalling an uncertain future. It can engage in the politics of peoples' situations in simple straightforward ways. Because it is inclusive, theatre can present an experience capable of transcending previously held misconceptions.

Additionally, theatre is a proven means of advocating and advancing ideas that we collectively hold and are willing to fight for when violated.

To anticipate a peaceful future, we must begin by using peaceful means that seek to understand, respect and recognize the contributions of every human being in the enterprise of harnessing peace. Theatre is that universal language by which we can advance messages of peace and reconciliation.

By actively engaging participants, theatre can bring many-a-soul to deconstruct previously held perceptions, and, in this way, gives an individual the chance of rebirth in order to make choices based on rediscovered knowledge and reality. For theatre to thrive, among other art forms, we must take the bold step forward by incorporating it into daily life, dealing with critical issues of conflict and peace.

In pursuance of social transformation and reformation of communities, theatre already exists in war-torn areas and among populations suffering from chronic poverty or disease. There are a growing number of success stories where theatre has been able to mobilize publics to build awareness and to assist post-war trauma victims. Cultural platforms such as the "International Theatre Institute" which aims at "consolidating peace and friendship between peoples" are already in place.

It is therefore a travesty to keep quiet in times like ours, in the knowledge of the power of theatre, and let gun wielders and bomb launchers be the peacekeepers of our world. How can tools of alienation possibly double as instruments of peace and reconciliation?

I urge you on this World Theatre Day to ponder this prospect and to put theatre forth as a universal tool for dialogue, social transformation and reform. While the United Nations spends

colossal amount of monies on peacekeeping missions around the world, through the use of arms, theatre is a spontaneous, human, less costly and by far a more powerful alternative.

While it may not be the only answer for bringing peace, theatre should surely be incorporated as an effective tool in peacekeeping missions.

Biography

Jessica Kaahwa, PhD is not only an accomplished playwright, actress, director, and theatre academic; she is also highly respected internationally for her humanitarian work. A Fulbright scholar, she is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards to continue her research and fieldwork using theatre and media as a constructive force in conflict zones and for health improvement.

Jessica Kaahwa is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Departments of Music, Dance and Drama at Makerere University in Uganda, where she also received her Master's degree. Widely travelled, Jessica Kaahwa's undergraduate degree is from the University of Benin of Nigeria where she also worked as a broadcaster with the External Service - Radio of Nigeria. In 2001 she received her PhD in Theatre History, Theory and Criticism from the University of Maryland, USA.

Jessica Kaahwa has written over 15 plays for theatre, television and radio, including "Cornerstone", "Dog-Bite Justice", "Paradise for Ever", "Echoes of Peace", and "Drums of Freedom". She has directed and starred in several of her plays. Her directing credits include "King Lear" by William Shakespeare, "Mother Courage and Her Children" by Bertolt Brecht (translated in Luganda and toured in South Africa and Washington D.C.) and she co-directed the "Soldier's Tale" by Igor Stravinsky. Acting credits include "Cornerstone", "Things Men Do" (by Rose Mbowe), "Our Husband Has Gone Mad" (by Ola Rotimi), "Death and King's Horseman" (by Wole Soyinka) and "No More Oil Book" (by Tunde Fatunde).

A strong advocate for human rights, good governance and development, Jessica Kaahwa relentlessly raises her voice for gender equality and peace and conflict communication. She has also orchestrated several national and international initiatives using theatre for development and continues her research on the multiple applications of theatre in all facets of society.

Writing publications and manuals and lecturing on these issues internationally, she has conducted many training workshops for international and national organizations, as well as many higher education institutions.

Kaahwa is a strong believer in "teaching by doing." Her humanitarian actions also include the establishment of a centre for orphaned children on her farm in Uganda, where she spends much of her free time enabling them to regain a sense of belonging and security.

Jessica Kaahwa speaks English, French, Swahili, and most Bantu languages in and around Uganda (fluent in Runyakitara).