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culture and arts supplement

arts for advocacy, recovery and renewal

using the arts to advocate and heal

It has long been recognized that the arts hold the power to expose wounds of conflict, soothe tormented spirits and teach lessons about war and peace. Children in refugee camps draw stick figures of men with guns and houses aflame. In countries as vastly different as Uganda and Afghanistan, informal or more professional drama groups give audiences a chance to laugh or cry or just say, Yes, that's the way it was—or is. Young Sri Lankans have turned to fiction to explore a violent era of civil war and a tsunami of epic proportions. Cambodians in refugee camps a generation ago kept alive classical Khmer dancing as a precious link to their ruined country's heritage. Almost everywhere today, creative responses to tragedy go on in many forms.

the filmmakers

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than a decade had passed without compensation for the victims of rape in an ethnic war that marked the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Then, in 2006, a bold film appeared fictionalizing the tortured lives of one abused woman and her daughter, a story so searing in its emotional impact that it galvanized public opinion and led to a new law that finally provided long-denied benefits. The 2006 film, *Grbavica*, was written and directed by

Jasmila Žbanić, a young graduate of Bosnia's Academy of Performing Arts. Grbavica, the Sarajevo neighborhood for which the film is named is now a fashionable middle class district at the edge of the city. During the Bosnian war, it was captured by ethnic Serbian troops, known as Chetniks, who set up internment camps or makeshift centres where women were sexually abused. The film's main characters are tormented by that legacy.

Žbanić was in her teens when the war started. "I was happy because my math test was cancelled," she wrote on a Web site devoted to the film. "What interested me most, as a teenager, was sex, or it was more talking about sex, dreaming about sex as the highest realisation of love. But in 1992, everything changed and I realised that I was living in a war, in which sex was used as part of a war strategy to humiliate women and thereby cause the destruction of an ethnic group! 20,000 women were systematically raped in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war. I lived 100 metres from the front line and was most afraid of this kind of fight." Rape and its consequences became an obsession, she said. "When I gave birth to my child, that was a fruit of love, motherhood—which triggered a whole set of emotions in me—this shocked me completely," she wrote. "I asked myself, what emotional significance does

this have for a woman that has a child who was conceived in hate. That was the moment I knew what I wanted from *Grbavica*.”

Žbanić’s *Grbavica* tells the story of a mother, Esma, a victim of multiple sexual assaults by ethnic Serb soldiers, and of her adolescent daughter, Sara, who does not know that she is the offspring of a wartime rape by any one of countless men. Sara’s schoolgirl life falls apart when she is asked to produce a document for a school trip proving that her father was a Bosniak Muslim martyr, a *shahed*, killed in the war. That is the imaginary story her mother has spun for her, until the terrible moment when Esma has to tell her the truth. A hardworking woman traumatized by her past, Esma has sacrificed all she had in life for Sara, and now she is forced to recall the horror of her internment and admit bitterly in a wounding cry, “You are a Chetnik bastard.” Sara turns on her mother in rage. Two generations of Bosnians are now victims of war.

Grbavica resonated painfully among ethnic Bosniaks and those Serbs and Croats who were also wartime victims. Though in the guise of fiction, the film reflected the lives of real women now in middle age who made a choice or had no option but to bear a child of sexual assault by ethnic Serb captors who boasted of humiliating and miscegenating the Bosniak community. To deepen the pain, an unforgiving conservative

Bosnian society made many of the victims, pregnant or not, feel guilty when their ordeals were over, and not a few women were chased from their homes or deserted by husbands and relatives. The children some of them bore—no one knows how many—are now teenagers who sooner or later demand to know the truth about who they are. No longer gullible, they cannot be brushed aside or told lies.

Jasna Zečević, the Director of the Vive Žene therapy and rehabilitation centre in Tuzla, in



northeastern Bosnia, recalls how she and other advocates of aid to civilian victims of war had been campaigning for compensation and redress by 2006 and were met with apathetic responses and remarks that their repeated pleas were getting “boring.” War veterans were receiving pensions, but not the traumatized women of “rape camps” whose plight played a large role in making sexual

abuse a war crime in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, established in 1996.

“In 2006, it was very clear that we as a society had to provide the victims this rehabilitation, this justice,” Zečević said in interview at the centre. “But they didn’t have justice, they didn’t have rehabilitation.” It was *Grbavica* that finally made the campaign take off, she added, “because all our politicians are very open to the media, and they supported us.” Wartime rape was suddenly

no longer as taboo a subject as it had long been. The law had been introduced in Parliament, she said, “and that was the moment they approved it—because of that movie.”

In Uganda, it was a riveting 43-minute documentary, not a commercial film, that brought into the open another subject long surrounded by silence: the sexual abuse of men in conflict. When it won the award for best documentary at the Kenya International Film Festival in 2009, the citation read: “*For the surprising and yet obvious theme and the ability of using witnesses with discretion and respect, in a well documented structure.*”

The documentary, *Gender Against Men*, was produced by the Refugee Law Project at Makerere University’s faculty of law in Kampala, Uganda’s capital. Uganda had experienced not only internal violence, the worst of which was inflicted on northern towns and villages by a horrific rebel movement that called itself the Lord’s Resistance Army, but also spillover from fighting in other areas of the Great Lakes region of Africa, including the long-running conflicts in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, from which refugees fled into the country.

Chris Dolan, Director of the Refugee Law Project, described the film at a preview showing in Kampala in 2008 as “a movie about men, violence, and the inability of society to recognize or address male vulnerability in times of conflict.” He expected it to be provocative, and it was. Some organizations and numerous individuals believed, and still feel, that a film like this dis-

tracts attention from the suffering of women, or appears to leave the impression that violence against women is often a result of how men have been marginalized, humiliated and unheard as they also suffered in conflict and disaster, making them turn to violence as their only recourse.

Dolan expected that, and wrote: “The movie raises as many questions as it gives answers in its quest for an honest examination of the gender stereotypes underlying mainstream approaches to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Why is it that in the eyes of the international community as well as many domestic policy makers, SGBV remains a women’s issue—despite mounting evidence of sexual and gender-based violence against men? What makes us portray women as perpetual victims and men only as perpetrators? Who, if anybody, benefits from rendering male victims invisible?”

The film was directed by David Neumann of the Refugee Law Project, which had financial backing from the Swedish International Development Agency, the Norwegian foreign ministry, the Fund for Global Rights and Christian Aid, among others. The project staff, who were responsible for all aspects of the film’s production, succeeded in encouraging men, who are often reluctant almost everywhere to talk about abuse and humiliation, to describe what happened to them at the hands of rebels and also troops from several armies, including Uganda’s.

The refugee project offers counselling for victims of abuse, and counselors contributed their important insights to the film drawn from

their experience in cases they encountered. The counselors note that where seven in ten women who come for help in overcoming trauma report sexual abuse, only one man in ten does. “It takes more time for men to come out; it takes courage,” a counselor says in the film. “They will tell you other stories, but somehow you get a gut feeling that something else is happening.”

Men, especially among the Acholi people of northern Uganda, were often caught in the middle of a vicious war: abused by the undisciplined soldiers of the Lord’s Resistance Army for just being there, trying to keep and protect their homes, and then assaulted sexually by troops aiming to intimidate their communities and eliminate any potential supporters of the rebels. Furthermore, for years many Acholi men were confined to displaced persons camps, where their place in traditional society was undermined.

Gender Against Men uses footage from camps and villages where barren huts beyond the worst recognizable definition of poverty and cruel abuses unimaginable to outsiders form the backdrop of daily life, such as it is. An elder talks of being sodomized nine times by armed marauders who stripped him of his possessions while abusing him “until all my chickens and goats were gone.” A refugee told of being sexually assaulted repeatedly. Yet he sensed that aid workers were more interested in an attack on his daughter. “People don’t listen to you,” he said. “People don’t listen.” The message of the film to aid donors and relief workers in governments, international organizations and charity groups was clear:

Please stop thinking only of women and think also of us.

In Liberia, a powerful women’s peace movement emerged out of the political turmoil and deadly civil wars from 1980 to 2003, and the film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* became a celebration of the movement’s improbable success and an enduring, inspiring lesson to future generations. The 2008 film, which won the Tribeca Film Festival jury prize in New York for best documentary that year, was produced and directed by Americans, Abigail Disney and Gini Reticker, respectively, but its voices and footage are all Liberian.

In *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* the world was introduced to Leymah Gbowee, a leader of the Liberian Women in Peacebuilding Network. Her courage, strategic creativity, collegiality with like-minded citizens and extraordinary natural talent for inspirational public speaking played a major part in forcing the government of President Charles Taylor to negotiate with the warlords moving in on the Liberian capital with considerable brutality. The aim of the rebels was not good government but pure power and what was left of the spoils in a ruined country. One in three Liberians were displaced and countless homes and businesses destroyed by conflict. Gbowee, who describes herself as a single mother with no social standing who seemed an unlikely leader, was nonetheless propelled into action by the suffering and terror around her.

In 2002, with like-minded women, she organized a meeting at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, a Monrovia landmark, to call for support. In the

congregation was an influential Muslim woman, Asatu Bah Kenneth, Assistant Director of the Liberian National Police. She not only brought in Muslim support but also proved to be the movement's eyes and ears within the security forces when the women moved into the streets to demand peace.

Pray the Devil Back to Hell tells the dramatic, heroic story of how hundreds and then thousands of women, among them market women, the backbone of the informal economies across West Africa, changed Liberian history. Dressed in the movement's white T-shirts, white headwraps and bright patterned wraparound skirts, they sang and danced to keep their spirits high. They held up their home-made posters demanding peace in daily, very visible sit-ins at Monrovia's fish market, along a route they knew the president's convoy used. They raised money to pursue the adversaries to the negotiating table in Ghana, and barricaded them in a conference room until an agreement was reached. In the film, their story is now recorded for future generations in Liberia and women around the world to see. *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* has been shown in conflict zones worldwide. It is an astonishing, encouraging story that could not be made more dramatic in fiction than it was in real life.

Gbowee, who later earned her first academic credentials from the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University in the United States, now runs a regional peace centre in Ghana. The film captures her natural flair for leadership in news footage from 2003. There are

clips of her presenting a petition to President Taylor. There is also a retelling of her dramatic confrontation with a security officer who threatened to arrest her for obstructing justice.

“And that word, ‘obstructing’ justice, was almost like when you took gas and poured in on an open flame,” she said. “I just went wild!” If they wanted to arrest her, she said, she would make it “very, very, easy” and began to strip—a profound insult among Liberians—to shame the men.

The peace movement and market women around the country generally went on to campaign for the victory of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as president of Liberia in 2005, after peace was established and a United Nations force deployed. Sirleaf, the first woman to be elected president of an African country, thanked them at her inauguration early in 2006. Gbowee, commenting on that triumphant day in *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, looks back and, with her unfailing sense of priorities, calls the women's peace movement “the cake—and her election was the icing.”

the painters

Leslie Lumeh, a Liberian artist driven into exile in Cote d'Ivoire while Charles Taylor was still president, painted his way through the turmoil and rebirth and has given the country an artist's history of trauma and joy. He portrayed the women dancing and singing for peace. He also recorded on canvas the return of exiles when peace was won and people like him returned to shattered homes and devastated villages to begin

life anew. Now back in Monrovia, Lumeh struggles to keep a small gallery called Art of the Heart alive and hopes for a chance to teach painting when he can find the space. He sells some paintings to foreigners. Liberians are, for the most part, too poor to acquire art, and those with money have little taste for it. But he presses on, believing that an artist has something to offer a nation in need of healing.

“Artists can’t effect immediate change, but we can offer suggestions for the future,” Lumeh said in a conversation at his gallery, as electrical power went off and on. “You have to be determined to have a positive spirit and share it with others to give other people confidence and hope.” Artists, he said, must play a role in shaping society.

“If people don’t have a value for culture, they have no value for beauty,” he said, “and people who have no value for beauty have no value for life. A lack of interest in the arts gives way to a lack of interest in culture, beauty and life as a whole, which can actually lead to the destruction of life itself. We have experienced this in Liberia.”

In Timor-Leste, Maria Madeira, who works in paint, mixed media and textile collages, is creating what she calls a visual biography of her



Leslie Lumeh *Dancing for Peace*
oil on canvas. 24 x 36 inches.
2008, Monrovia.

in Australia, where she is finishing a doctorate in art at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, begins her artist’s search for justice and reconciliation in a mythical past, with the crocodile that legend holds is the ancestor of all Timorese. Her rendering of that tale depicts crocodile skeletons on canvas using a mix of acrylic, impasto gel, gesso, ink, pastels, pencil and shellac.

“Everything we do is related to our ancestors,” she said over coffee in a Portuguese-run hotel in the capital, Dili. “We truly believe we live with them. Unless wrongs done to them are resolved, the country won’t be stable. The dead are not sleeping in peace.” She spoke of the *uma lulik*, sacred clan houses in the Tetum language, where the dead are worshipped, and how Timorese have much to atone for killings that resulted from in-

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