

SINCE AFRICA



Mia McCullough, the author of SINCE AFRICA, recently answered some questions from Jack DePalma, the Play Development Director at the Globe.

HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITE THIS PLAY?

I had read an article about The Lost Boys in the NY Times Magazine. It had really intrigued me, but not inspired a story. Then, I saw a well-heeled North Shore woman in the local grocery store showing the cereal aisle to a very confused looking young Dinka man in ill-fitting, second-hand clothes, and I thought: "This relationship must be so bizarre."

So the play started with Diane and Ater. And then Reggie popped in, and then Eve. So much of writing this play has been an on-going struggle to access Ater on an emotional level. Most refugees who have experienced severe trauma are necessarily very emotionally disassociated, which is a difficult feature in a major character. A constant challenge has been figuring out how to crack Ater open. Dinka culture tends to be stratified by age. Closer bonds are far more common in people of similar age. So Eve became essential to seeing other sides of Ater.

Unfortunately it wasn't enough. The feedback on the play was that it felt far more weighted towards Diane's story. And while I think, in many ways, Diane's journey is more central, or primary, I wanted to open up the story to Ater; bring more Africa into this American setting.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE NAMELESS ONE? HOW DID YOU COME UPON THIS DEVICE?

My initial impulse to write the story came from a desire to put African culture and American culture side by side and see the contrast. I really started to think about what our rituals are. Western culture has so few rituals. We've abandoned so many, or the ones that we've kept have lost most of their meaning. I wanted to find a way to bring ritual on stage.



And then there was this other odd thing happening. I had statues popping up in all these scenes. These statues of women and girls (only one is left in the current version of the play). And the characters would talk about them, imbue them with personality and flaws. And I kept thinking, what are they doing there? I kept wanting them to be alive. The Nameless One came out of that. And the more

developed she became, the more I was able to access Ater's emotional life, and the better the audience response became. Once she was up and moving on stage I knew: "Yes, this is it. This is the connective tissue that was missing. She was always there. She just wasn't always moving around."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10



LOST BOYS

In the 1980s a group of boys fled their villages in Southern Sudan. They were orphans and were afraid that they would be slaughtered as many of their families had been by government troops. Some boys were as young as 6 years old. They are called the “Lost Boys” because they had to fend for themselves without parents or elders. The Lost Boys walked a very dangerous route across rivers and deserts from the country of Sudan to Ethiopia. When they reached Ethiopia they were sent back to Sudan and finally ended up in refugee camps in Kenya.

Sudanese refugees have gone to the UK, USA and France. In 2001 the U.S. government agreed to allow 3,600 Lost Boys to begin new lives in America.



THE DINKA

The Dinka originate from 3,000 BC and are believed to have introduced the idea of farming cows. They are one of many tribes from Southern Sudan. They were farmers, cowherds, high court judges, civil administrators and doctors. They were the South's richest and proudest tribe. Traditional homes were made of mud walls with thatched conical roofs, which might last about 20 years. Cattle have important religious meaning and are never eaten as meat. They have beautiful poetry and songs for holidays, praise to their ancestors and the living, field work, preparation for war and initiation ceremonies. Women make pottery, and weave baskets and mats while men are blacksmiths.

In the 1930s, Christian missionaries went to Southern Sudan to convert the Dinkas into Christians. Although the Government has tried to make the country an Islamic one, the South has rejected this religion. Sadly, the Dinkas have been deeply affected by the war. The chaos of war has led to lost dialects and shaken beliefs. The separation and murder of family members has meant that the tradition of caring for the elderly by extended family no longer exists. Dinkas were forced from their homes in the South and to refugee camps. Some moved to Darfur where they have been affected by the conflict there.



The photo above right shows a “Corseted Dinka Man” in Sudan. Besides cattle, the most coveted possession of a Dinka man is an intricately beaded corset. This corset is sewn on tightly and worn until marriage. The height of the beaded wire at the back indicates that the wearer comes from a family rich in cattle.



“PARAPUOL”

The Dinka people populate most of Southern Sudan, and the majority of The Lost Boys come from this ethnic tribe. In traditional Dinka culture, parapuol marks one's initiation from childhood into adulthood. Through a ritual of scarification, tribal marks are cut into the forehead of the initiate, usually around the age of 12. Those who have gone through parapuol are considered to be the warriors or guardians of the tribe.

Program Notes *continued*

(Mia McCullough interview continued)

THE DIANE/REGGIE RELATIONSHIP IS PRICKLY. DIANE IS NON-RELIGIOUS. DO YOU FIND THAT IT'S HARD FOR NON-RELIGIOUS PEOPLE TO RELATE TO CLERICS, OR IS THIS JUST DIANE'S PROBLEM?

I do think it's difficult for many non-religious people to relate to clerics. I think there's a little fear, mistrust, an inherent belief that they will have nothing in common. Many non-religious people, including myself, tend to be very judgmental of people of the cloth. A lot of Diane's hackles in the Diane/Reggie scenes are my own. And in writing those scenes I really had to confront my own biases and my own naiveté. Diane's biggest problem is that she has a "disbelief system" instead of a "belief system." So even if Reggie is wrong about God, his belief is active and positive and it makes him strong; whereas Diane's disbelief is inherently negative and does not make her strong or serve her in a time of crisis. I'm not saying we need to believe in God to be strong. We need to believe in something to be strong. I see a lot of empty belief in this country: people going to church out of habit instead of out of need. Rituals that have more to do with TV and shopping and checking our e-mail than in getting in touch with something larger than ourselves. And I believe there is something larger than ourselves. And The Nameless One represents that something. And she is desperate for Diane to recognize her.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Director Seema Sueko sat down with Jack DePalma, the Globe's Play Development Director to discuss *Since Africa*.

JACK: You directed this play at the Mo'olelo Performing Arts Center where you are the Artistic Director. How will this production differ?

SEEMA: Well, I think the biggest difference was having more space. The other production was in Diversionary Theatre, a tiny pie-sized stage. So here, we'll be at the Copley with much more space and a little more freedom. Because of that we knew we wanted to represent a little of Africa somewhere and that's where the light boxes on the walls pour these images out. We wanted to do that so we could support The Nameless One a little bit more in this production.

JACK: Let's talk about The Nameless One.

SEEMA: She's very much an African spirit, in her early twenties, so youngish but not a child. She is an ancient presence, timeless and that she'll help everyone on their journey. I envision that she was with The Lost Boys when they walked across Sudan twice, and she was with them protecting them when we meet her. I hope to kind of present that in the first prelude that will open with the sound of wind and footsteps, people walking through the brush and then lights on her walking and it turns into a representation – a dance representing a bit of The Lost Boys experience. Then she meets Diane, who's on her trip to Africa – who's shopping and who purchases this shield that The Nameless One has — this purchase brings The Nameless One home with her who then sees Diane's need and Ater's need.

JACK: So it's really Diane that makes her appear, not Ater. Or does Ater complete her?

SEEMA: Exactly. It's this transaction that brings her into Diane's world but she's probably been with Ater long before.

JACK: Ater is trying to find his place here and there is a continuity. Maybe that's his completeness so he can be here but he has that past too.

SEEMA: Yes, throughout the play she's trying to remind him, don't forget where you came from. You know there's that scene where they go shopping and he's got that polo shirt on and she's there to remind him and after the phone call she's there – she's the one, she pushes him to make that phone call, so she's very much reminding him of where he belongs. She does the same with the other characters too. With Reggie she sees a man of the cloth but it's all through this Western perspective and she's trying to connect him to more ancient tribal spirituality and she succeeds in that. He's going to go to Africa by the end of the play. It's interesting, I think at the start of the play Reggie's the character who so knows where he belongs. He belongs at the church, he belongs to this community. He knows what he's doing but by the end of the play he starts to question it and he's about to go on his journey and maybe really ask that question or get a different answer.

JACK: Will you have music?

SEEMA: Yes – lots of music and Paul Peterson is a great sound designer and he's found some wonderful African sounds that just are dynamic and will really add a lot to the production. We've got some great Dinka chanting and some wonderful drums, some great warrior sounds, so I'm very excited about the sound design.

JACK: Great – and you've immersed yourself in Dinka culture?

SEEMA: Well as much as you can. It's tough because much of the Dinka culture is very much a culture that's been in war and certain aspects of the culture are disappearing. Even The Lost Boys – they were all between 3 and 7 years old when they fled their villages and then they spent five years walking and then ten years in Kenya at a refugee camp, so even for them the Dinka culture, it's what they can remember from their childhood.

JACK: Also what I imagine is it's not a culture that keeps records.

SEEMA: You're absolutely right; it's very much an oral culture.

JACK: This has been great - thank you.

SEEMA: Thank you.

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