

Cuts jeopardize play's tour to Rwanda

Goodness likely unable to accept invitation from festival commemorating genocide

MARSHA LEDERMAN

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VANCOUVER -- When the curtain rises on the second annual Festival Arts Azimuts in Huye, Rwanda, next year, the Canadian play Goodness might not be there - despite a written invitation from the festival's director insisting that the play "MUST" be part of the event, which will be dedicated to commemorating the 15th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide.

"By [bringing the play to the festival] you'll ... enable us to record Goodness for future generations and thus help to prevent conflict in the future," Odile Gakire Katese wrote in her invitation, calling the play "excellent and powerful."

Goodness, written by Toronto's Michael Redhill, features an encounter between a Jewish descendent of Holocaust survivors and a woman who has been through a much more recent genocide (never explicitly identified as the one in Rwanda).

The play has won several awards, including the Best of Edinburgh Award at the 2006 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and has been lauded by critics. The New York Times called it "gripping and important."

The problem for Volcano, the Toronto theatre company that produced the play, is finding the money to take it to Rwanda, given the federal funding cuts announced this summer. The Stephen Harper government has cut close to \$45-million in arts and culture programs, including PromArt, which supported touring Canadian artists with travel grants, and Trade Routes, which supported the export of cultural goods and services. PromArt, a \$4.7-million fund, was administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade; and Trade Routes, a \$9-million program, by the Department of Canadian Heritage. Both programs will wind up at the end of this fiscal year (March 31, 2009).

"It certainly jeopardizes our tour to Rwanda. We currently have ... very few options to replace the \$10,000 or \$15,000 we were looking to get from DFAIT," Ross Manson, the play's director and Volcano's artistic director, wrote in an e-mail from Helsinki, where the play opened last week (and where, he says, Canada's ambassador to Finland informed him that all foreign missions have been instructed not to speak about the arts cuts during the election).

"I feel that this is one tour that MUST happen," Manson continued. "Can we as a country refuse this invitation, given what it stands for? Can we refuse Rwanda even this gesture?"

The Azimuts festival has offered to pay €20,000 (\$30,500) to bring Goodness to Rwanda. But Manson estimates the total budget for the tour at more than \$80,000. He says the company will apply to the Canada Council for the Arts for additional funding, but given that the council's international touring program is relatively small, and that other arts groups will be seeking that funding to compensate for the cuts, he isn't optimistic.

Manson is also pessimistic about getting the money from private philanthropists or corporate sources. He says the private sector puts a lot of stock in government funding

decisions and he feels that Ottawa's pulling out sends a clear signal that the work of art is not worth supporting.

"Harper's assertion that the 'market' should pay for art is absurd. Should the citizen of Rwanda pay \$100 a ticket to see our show?" Manson wrote in a later e-mail from Dublin, where his show *The Four Horsemen Project* is at the Dublin Fringe Festival - a tour funded in part by PromArt.

"What I find ironic is that Rwanda is offering us \$30,000 to come, an amount that DFAIT has NEVER provided in all my years of touring."

To add to any irony: Without federal funding, Goodness would probably never have received the invitation in the first place.

The Magnetic North Theatre Festival brought Katese to Vancouver, where the festival took place this year, using funding from Trade Routes and DFAIT.

The festival's artistic director, Ken Cameron, said Magnetic North generally brings in seven to 14 presenters from festivals around the world, in an effort to get Canadian plays onto the international stage. Cameron said more than a third of the plays that have appeared on the Magnetic North mainstage over the past six years have received invitations to tour abroad.

"What's really frightening now is that some of those plays might not be able to capitalize on those invitations," he said this week from Calgary, where he lives.

Cameron added that, without the federal funding the festival has been able to secure in the past, it will be much more difficult to attract foreign presenters to Magnetic North (which alternates between Ottawa and another Canadian city).

"If this funding isn't available to us, then this festival has no funding to be able to offer [presenters]. It takes every bit of funding that we can find and every bit of sponsorship that we can dredge up just to put on the festival; just to put on the plays themselves."

Magnetic North's budget last year was \$1.6-million.

"I will need to find a way to travel myself to some other major festivals where I can meet some of these presenters and encourage them to come on their own dime to Canada, and that's going to be extremely difficult," Cameron added.

Katese said Goodness would be a perfect fit for next year's Azimuts festival, where all the invited plays are about genocide (in Rwanda or elsewhere), slavery and apartheid.

"Cultural expression has a major role to play in holding up hope for the future by opening up difficult topics and breaking stereotypes and taboos," she wrote in her invitation, later adding that "I strongly believe that Goodness MUST be a part of this commemoration."

Manson said that when he returns to Canada, he will work hard to try to find the money to go. "I can't describe to you how dreadful it feels to be telling Rwandans that we might abandon them, even for an arts festival. Given our history in that country, what we didn't do 15 years ago, how can we do this? How can we?"