Hewa Rwanda, letter to the absent



By Dorcy Rugamba
With Dorcy Rugamba - Majnun

Creation
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Hewa Rwanda, lettre aux absents

Thirty years after the trauma of the Tutsi genocide, leading Rwandan theatre figure Dorcy Rugamba opens a space for communion with the absent. Accompanied by Senegalese musician Majnun, they create a unique ceremony for his lost family and for the thousands of Tutsis cut down by unspeakable hatred in 1994.
In a delicate and moving reading-performance drawn from his book, he intertwines personal stories and songs to trace a new path toward those who are no longer here.
Inspired by the artistic and spiritual legacy of his father, a poet and choreographer, Dorcy merges gesture and orality, inventing a living practice of remembrance.
To contend with the unthinkable, his powerful writing delves into the heart of the tragedy and finds words that bring solace.
In his lucid yet serene gaze emerges the vision of a country where life, at last, prevails.

By Philippe Couture

ABOUT

Every year, Dorcy Rugamba returns to his family home in Kigali: there is still ivy on the walls, calla lilies and flaming tongues on the terrace, the palm tree and papaya tree at the entrance, Mount Jali to the north, Mount Kigali to the south. But for many years, this return was impossible.

In this reading — at once a love letter to those who are gone, a hymn to life, and an act of ancestral remembrance — Dorcy Rugamba addresses his father, his mother, all the absent ones. He speaks of what he saw and learned from them, of the child and young man he once was, and of the time it took afterwards to accept the unacceptable. He stands as close as possible to the absent, honoring their memory and their lives, exploring the world that came before to reveal its beauty and poetry, and asking: How can one put into words what lies beyond reach?

A writer and a major figure in Rwandan cultural life, Dorcy Rugamba offers us a profoundly moving story, carried by writing, a voice, and an intensity of rare depth.



Author, actor, dancer, and Rwandan stage director. A first-prize graduate in dramatic arts from the Royal Conservatory of Music in Liège, **Dorcy Rugamba** was first trained in the performing arts by his father, Cyprien Rugamba — a writer, choreographer, composer, and museum curator.

Based between Brussels and Kigali, Dorcy Rugamba co-wrote the play Rwanda 94 in 1999 and, in 2001, founded Les Ateliers Urwintore in Kigali, a space dedicated to contemporary creation.

In 2005, he directed The Investigation (L'Instruction), a play by Peter Weiss about the trial of the Auschwitz perpetrators. Dorcy Rugamba is also the author of the play Bloody Niggers, a sweeping fresco on mass violence with Césairean overtones, was produced by the Théâtre National de Belgique and toured across Europe and Africa starting in 2007.

In 2012, he founded Rwanda Arts Initiative in Kigali, an arts center dedicated to supporting cultural entrepreneurs.

In November 2018, he created in Hamburg the afrofuturist choreographic performance Planet Kigali. In April 2019, he wrote and staged in Kigali, for the official ceremony marking the 25th commemoration of the Tutsi genocide, an opera entitled Umurinzi. In March 2020, he created at the Théâtre National de Belgique Les Restes Suprêmes, a performance about Africa's heritage in European museums.
In October 2020, at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, he began a collaboration with Abderrahmane Sissako on the staging of the opera Le Vol du Boli, with music by Damon Albarn. He presented at the Avignon Festival in 2021 Liberté, j'aurai habité ton rêve jusqu'au dernier soir, written and performed by Felwine Sarr.
In May 2022, as part of the special projects of the Dakar Biennale, he created the visual and performative version of Les Restes Suprêmes.

In February 2024, together with the team of Rwanda Arts Initiative, he launched the Kigali Triennial, whose first edition took place from February 16 to 25. On March 13, 2024, he published with Éditions J.C. Lattès his book HEWA RWANDA: A Letter to the Absent, a narrative devoted to his family.

Majnun is a truly charismatic and inspired artist. His name, which means “the madman” in Arabic, is a deliberate choice — for madness, he says, is his space of freedom, the place where he can explore the depths of his soul. Originally from Senegal, he grew up in an environment where art was omnipresent. Music, theatre, and literature were part of his world from an early age. But it was his encounter with the guitar that marked the true beginning of his artistic journey — one that would later lead him to become a multi-instrumentalist. Over the years, he has cultivated a distinctly eclectic art form, in harmony with his nomadic spirit. Afrobeat, jazz, funk, trance, and Latin music are today the different colors that make up his vibrant musical landscape.



His voice reveals the rich imagination that inhabits him and conveys, with sincerity and precise emotion, the incredible epic that is human life — a story he never stops telling us.
With extensive stage experience, he produced and released his first album in 2015, while also taking part in numerous artistic collaborations.
In 2019, after nineteen years in France, Majnun embarked on a West African tour with his band The Black-Magic Sofas Sofas. The tour, titled “The Decolonial Tour,” took him through Benin, Mali, and Senegal — a true homecoming for this musical nomad.
It was also an opportunity to record live his new album “Mandigo’s Fight,” released on the Senegalese label WOTI. In this work, Majnun explores the theme of decoloniality — this time choosing to speak to us from the perspective of his country of origin.

After a long musical career, Majnun takes his first steps in theater with the play "Liberté j'aurai habité ton rêve jusqu'au dernier soir" (“Freedom, I Will Have Lived in Your Dream Until the Final Evening”), written by Felwine Sarr and directed by Dorcy Rugamba. Accompanied on stage by three fellow performers, he appears in a dual role: that of an actor deeply possessed by his part, and that of the musician-singer who, while composing the play’s original music, brings it vividly to life on stage. Premiered in Dakar and presented as part of the IN program at the Avignon Festival in July 2021, in the courtyard of the Collection Lambert, the play went on to enjoy a successful international tour.

Next, it was in the play “La vie comme elle vient” (“Life as It Comes”), directed by Denis Mpunga and based on a text by Alex Lorette, that Majnun had the opportunity to explore the full range of his acting abilities. Indeed, in this production, which delves deeply into questions of identity through a story set between Belgium and Congo on the eve of its independence, he embodies numerous characters, transcending differences of skin color, gender, and social status.

From January to April 2022, the artist experienced a true theatrical immersion in Brussels, culminating in an extended series of performances:

He is currently accompanying the musical reading by Dorcy Rugamba, “Hewa Rwanda, lettre aux absents”, on a world tour in 2024/2025/2026. At the same time, he is working on a poetic-musical performance, “Peuple de l’eau” (“People of the Water”), based on a text by Issa Damaan Sarr, in which he takes on both the roles of musician and performer, with a tour scheduled for the 2025 season.





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Interview with Dorcy

By Philippe Couture

Since 1994, art has been a fundamental means for the Rwandan population to reclaim its history. How does your work contribute to this, particularly through Hewa Rwanda?

Art played a central role in Rwanda after the genocide. Theater, dance, poetry… everything was mobilized to recover lost humanity and to restore a connection between the living and the dead. Forms evolve over time. When we created Rwanda 94, just four years after the genocide, the performance did not serve the same purpose as the works we create today. At that time, it was still necessary simply to name the genocide, whose nature was still being debated by courts and international organizations. We had to present the context, tell the story, and share testimonies for the first time with the power of theater, which offers extended time and a privileged listening environment. Today, in Hewa Rwanda, I aim to reaffirm the role of memory in the process of collective healing. Beyond mere testimony, Hewa Rwanda goes further: it is a form of communion with those who are no longer with us, a space where the absent can still speak, smile, and exist. I try to give a face, a voice, to those erased not only by violence but also by oblivion. It is not simply a tribute; it is a way of asserting that they are still present, in our memory and in our daily lives.

You often speak of the difficulty of putting such a tragedy into words, of it being "beyond reach." How can one express the inexpressible?

The unspeakable is a reality that is felt above all, an experience that surpasses words. After the genocide, I was struck by a profound shock. How can one convey this suffering? I believe that theater, in its ceremonial dimension, allows an alchemy between the body, speech, and soul. Moreover, such a genocide requires particular care in the choice of words. It is an ideological crime that begins with verbal violence, with narratives and propaganda. The artist must go beyond mere testimony to create a representation of what happened. If they are not careful, they risk unintentionally reproducing the narrative that justified the violence. Literature and theater, fortunately, allow one to continually revisit a word, a gesture, and give shape to the inexpressible.

The performance also draws in part on Une saison de machettes by Jean Hatzfeld to explore the intimacy of the perpetrators. What can we learn from the psyche of the perpetrators?

Understanding the other side of the mirror is essential. By humanizing the perpetrators, I seek to understand the mechanisms that made the unimaginable possible. Une saison de machettes allowed me to go beyond stereotypes. Perpetrators are not monsters—they are men, fathers, sons. If we see them only as abstract figures, we lose a fundamental lesson: genocide is not inevitable; it is a human construction. This reflection is crucial to avoid reducing perpetrators and victims to disembodied symbols of cruelty or suffering. In Hewa Rwanda, I try to convey the complexity of human beings in order to consider the mechanisms that lead to such acts.

Your father, Cyprien Rugamba, was a renowned Rwandan poet and man of the stage whose legacy permeates your writing. His vision of Islam and the Qur'an also influences the performance, even though he was a Christian. Why?

After my father's death, I found a Qur'an in his library, and it was a revelation. Beyond his artistic practice, he was also a historian and linguist, and although he was Christian at the end of his life, he had a deep interest in the Qur'an. He was not seeking to conform to a religious practice, but to draw from the spiritual depth that each religion…

…can offer. This quest inspired me, and I followed a similar path. After the genocide, many Rwandans lost faith in religious ceremonies, because in the face of such immense suffering, the question of God becomes profoundly complex. If God exists, what meaning does He give to all of this? What can justice look like? These metaphysical questions form one of the guiding threads of Hewa Rwanda and have shaped my own artistic reflection.



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"All my work as an artist in recent years has been dedicated to fighting the project of annihilation by giving back a face, a name, a life, a reality to the victims, so that they cease to be mere numbers or sufferers seen only through the lens of the horrific conditions of their deaths. Long before that, they were individuals with lives, dreams, plans, families—a full existence whose flame it is our responsibility to rekindle."

Dorcy Rugamba

Presse

" In Hewa Rwanda – Letter to the absent Rugamba has woven together a suite of poetry, music, and story telling that not only captures the pain, but also its mirror – the love from which the pain springs ".
FESTIVAL REVIEW: HEWA RWANDA – LETTER TO THE ABSENT

"Here, it is approached in a very personal way, and what strikes you from the moment Dorcy Rugamba takes the stage accompanied by the musician Majnun is the stance they maintain throughout their performance: a solemn and proud uprightness, men standing tall in the face of the unnameable."
REVUE FRICTIONS INCISIVES ZÉBRURES

"Dorcy Rugamba erects in this admirable, soberly metaphysical narrative a tomb for his own."
TÉLÉRAMA

"A moving text. While this commitment to writing the memory of a tragedy is collective, the text draws its power from being intensely personal and intimate."
LE FIGARO LITTÉRAIRE

"An essential book, thirty years after the Tutsi genocide. This book will be a landmark. Writing afterwards? Writing how? On stage and in this narrative, the survivor has succeeded, as he intended, in building a shared consciousness."
LE POINT

"The text of a lifetime (...) An essay in survival, enriched with poetry and reflections."
LE MONDE DES LIVRES

"In this magnificent text, where the dead are so alive, the author offers a splendid meditation on the sudden loss of loved ones and on the way they continue to live within us."
LA CROIX

"Dorcy Rugamba himself carries on stage a language of great clarity and beauty, expressing the love he bears for those who have passed."
LES ZÉBRURES

"During the few moments when Majnun and Rugamba move and sing together, the piece enters another dimension — their blended voices and synchronized movements reflecting the profound connections explored in Rugamba's narratives."
FARRIN FOSTER FOR ADELAIDE FESTIVAL, AUSTRALIA

"Returning to the house of one's childhood, where loved ones were massacred, and seeing one's child laugh in that space once marked by tragedy, becomes a powerful act of reconciliation and tribute."
LE CARREFOUR DE QUÉBEC



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Cast / credits

Author: Dorcy Rugamba
Performers: Dorcy Rugamba and Majnun
Music Creation: Majnun and Akasha
Lighting Design: Christophe Chaupin
Stage Managers: Brice Tellier, Christophe Chaupin (alternating)
Rehearsal coach for the English version: Judy Dennis (USA)

Production: La Charge du Rhinocéros (Belgium)
Distribution: La Charge du Rhinocéros (Belgium)
Partner: RAI – Rwanda Arts Initiative (Rwanda)

Book published by: JC Lattès (France)

Performance in French and English.
Surtitles available in French, English, Spanish, German, and Portuguese.

Kigali Triennal

La Charge du Rhinocéros



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