

Agathe

Review of R&D theatre at Pinter Studio, London

Suraya Bains

With soaring music followed by the sudden jump by the Announcer onto the platform in the middle of the stage, we are thrown into the peak of propaganda on RTML radio. The Hutu broadcaster encourages social division and the demonisation of Tutsi minorities in 1994 Rwanda. It was disconcerting to hear the Tutsi people being cast off as 'cockroaches' in such a zealous evangelical voice. This was the backdrop for Agathe Uwilingiyimana in the mid-1990s, a chemistry professor, advocate for women's education, and peace activist who wanted to have power shared between the Hutu and Tutsi people. Her progressive views were not widely respected, however, and instead we learn that she is on a 'hit list'. In any genocidal situation, the sensible are swept away, some unfortunate enough to be killed in the tirade.

Although we don't yet know Agathe's fate in the drama, there is a foreboding atmosphere that contrasts markedly with the beautiful landscape of Rwanda that Agathe points out through her window, untouched by industries and western powers as there are no minerals, oil, shoreline or 'strategic American interest' in the country. These were the main reasons why the few UN peacekeeping forces in Rwanda had such little support from the international community at a time of dire need. Even calling 5,000 extra troops to keep the peace was beyond consideration. Instead, the simmering climate was left to boil over into a bloodbath – to be triggered by an event that soon came to light.

The suspense is gripping. We see Agathe agonising over what to do with her family while she tries to forge some kind of alternative path. We see how she has already been tortured for her views when she reveals the shocking scars on her legs. We learn about what youth are doing to women in the market, literally making them crawl like cockroaches as they abuse them in full public light. But the window for peace gets darker and darker until that fated day when the trigger - that is, the assassination of the

Tutsi president in an aeroplane – launched a full-on killing spree where not even children at church were safe.

Nowadays, hardly anyone knows about Agathe's life and her role as a President for less than one day, eclipsed as it was by the brutality of the massacre. This play makes an impressive impression to ensure Agathe's name is not erased from the chronicles. The music by Tarun Jasani was of a cinematic quality, underlining the fact that the play could well be a contender for an epic film, easily throwing the Hollywood movie, *Hotel Rwanda*, out of the frame.

Despite the horrors of history, there are some moments of relief in an excellently crafted script by Angela J Davis. It was a winner of several awards including a finalist in the prestigious Jane Chambers award and a new scriptwriting competition, Rise Against Fanaticism Through the Arts (RAFTA), launched by Sohaya Visions and Mukul & Ghetto Tigers in 2022, who then decided to take *Agathe* to this stage. The dialogue flows with erudite humour, imparting important information to orientate without bogging the audience down. Agathe's expertise in chemistry is dexterously applied to her love for cake-baking as it is to comments on the colonial legacy of 'race science': 'Here, in this country, I am colourless. Like most organic compounds. Colourless, that is, until one "introduces" another element. Like when a European introduced sulphates and potash to the blackest coal tar, and voilà: Killer shades of purple! The perfect dyes for silks, woollens, oil paint, mascara.'

Skilfully directed by Mukul Ahmed, the abridged play has stellar performances from the cast especially Natasha Bain for the irrepressible Agathe; Alexandra Ricou for the idealistic UN peacekeeper; Jordon Kemp for his agitated efforts as the commanding officer, Addie; Matthew Faucher for his dual switches between the toxic Announcer and Agathe's sweet yet cynical son; and David Rawlins as Mbaye – a smooth Senegalese army captain with a 'killer smile' – a feature that was also factually corroborated in the real life heroism where Mbaye saved so many people as elaborated in the Q&A discussion.

The post-show panel included Dr Lyndsay McLean and Professor Shahaduz Zaman from the University of Sussex who had conducted research in Rwanda from the 1990s and responded to the coproducer's, Raminder Kaur, questions with much insight. They pointed out that despite the sensitivity of the subject and how it continues to raise difficult issues, the play tread the grounds 'successfully'. Remarks were also made by

the audience on 'the way all the elements were interwoven so wonderfully', about how the 'whole experience opened my eyes', how the history of Agathe should be 'spoken about and part of the education system' and 'I learnt a lot about something and someone I didn't know anything about'. This play definitely needs to get out to more people everywhere. *Agathe* provokes, entertains and educates all at the same time, making for an unforgettable evening.