The Theatre of Genocide

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Four Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia

Edited by
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For my students and my teachers

The Theatre of Genocide

Introduction
"The Light of Dead Stars"

Robert Skloot

When Raphael Lemkin coined the word "genocide" in 1944, he provided a name for the kind of human savagery with which he had personal experience. Born in Poland at the turn of the twentieth century, he escaped the Nazi invasion and occupation of his country, fleeing to the United States just prior to the world's plunge into war. Forty-nine members of his family were not so lucky, and they perished in what has been called the Jewish genocide, or the Holocaust.[1]

Genocide joins together the Greek "genos" (race or kind) with the Latin "caedere" (to kill) to name behavior that had been known but not defined conceptually or legally. Article 2 of the United Nations genocide convention reads: "Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" and lists five examples of how genocide may be identified as specific acts that require punishment. Lemkin's precise and expansive definition addressed the massive scale and clear intent of the killing and stipulated that it could occur during war *or* peacetime and could be carried out by governments *or* individuals. He insisted that genocide was different than common savagery, no matter how large-scale, because whole groups were targeted for annihilation; that condition creates an entirely new crime requiring an entirely new system of punishment.

Although he had no official diplomatic status, Lemkin spent the next years of his life as an internationally known statesman for human rights, lobbying politicians and governments to endorse his proposal for what became the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of

Genocide in the early years of the United Nations. At the time of his death in 1959, the list of ratifying countries numbered about sixty; the United States ratified the treaty in 1988.[2]

In recent years, Lemkin and his work have generated much interest. Although a few have pronounced the convention an outright failure, most observers have maintained the hope that universal ratification and adoption would result in establishing both the legal definition of genocidal behavior *and* a mechanism for stopping a genocide that is in progress, if not preventing genocide in the first place. Among legal scholars and international human rights groups, the treaty is seen as the best framework to ensure the punishment of the perpetrators of genocide.[3] To be sure, a number of scholars and activists have proposed to modify some of the language of the treaty to correct errors that are understood to have their origins in the political necessities of the time during which the document was written. For my purposes, Helen Fein's definition, one that builds on Lemkin's seminal work, will be the definition that guides the analysis of the plays that appear in this volume. Fein writes of genocide (in part) as a "sustained, purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly."[4]

In the twenty-first century, as genocide continues to be in evidence in the world, the hardest lesson may be that human beings are rarely able, as individuals or working as nations, to prevent or postpone the wholesale slaughter of innocent groups. Certainly, the cry of "Never again!" that was heard first in the aftermath of the Holocaust has come to seem little more than a hollow slogan today; "Always, everywhere!" would seem a more accurate description of world events.[5]

Nonetheless, in the face of continuing violence and mass death, the horror of genocide also provokes an antigenocidal response, a genuine desire to prevent group murder, on both a governmental and individual level. Action to stop genocide takes the form of a wide range of behavior including collecting and studying facts about atrocity, working actively to condemn and intervene in its practice, and mobilizing resources for humanitarian assistance.

The commitment to diminishing genocide also includes the efforts of artists whose work creates a cultural awareness of and a social context for

the discussion of how best to confront, understand, and reduce genocidal violence. The four plays in this anthology, all written within the first years of our new century, represent contemporary theatrical investigations of genocide in English. Their artistic strengths—exciting action, evocative language, provocative engagement with difficult themes—make their contribution to the discussion and prevention of genocide noteworthy. Their authors' purpose is to bring audiences closer to both recent and distant historical periods of violence through the dynamics of theatre performance.[6] These examples of antigenocidal playwriting fill a notable gap in the materials available for studying and confronting genocidal violence. Along with film and literature, the theatre contributes to the discussion that is being carried out in historical, political, and journalistic accounts.

The category of art I call the theatre of genocide complements and advances Lemkin's political advocacy. Like all engaged art, it seeks to comment on and influence public discourse through various strategies: by the description of the victims' suffering and the assertion of their essential worthiness, the discussion of the perpetrators' motivation, the presentation of images of healing and compassion, the evocation of empathy, the questioning of the proper use of historical knowledge, and even the expansion and dissemination of what the critic Susan Sontag called a "collective instruction" of culture.[7] In the following introduction I provide a summary of the issues that link the theatre and genocide, explore the common issues raised by the plays, assess their theatrical and cultural effectiveness as texts worthy of stage production, and discuss how understanding and dealing with genocide can be made more important in the education of people about their history and their future. "We want to know," writes Morris Dickstein, "how life feeds into art, not simply how art feeds on itself."[8]

To be sure, the restorative, humane artistic project is a worldwide phenomenon. The examples provided here, part of a growing body of literary and cinematic material committed to halting genocidal violence, share a common language and a common ethical concern. Each focuses on a discrete genocide: Armenian (1915–23), Cambodian (1975–79), Bosnian (1992–95), and Rwandan (1994). As a group, they bring to audiences powerful and disturbing images of the horrors of a century that began and ended in mass killing. They map out a landscape of inquiry and raise for

discussion issues of culpability, responsibility, and justice that both inhibit and encourage the formation of the nonviolent world in which most people want to live. The plays do not, individually or as a group, propose definitive answers to political or strategic questions inherent in the historical record of destruction; several imply that the violence will continue despite the best efforts to prevent and punish it. Nonetheless, they are in accord with one journalist's assessment: "The central passion of the history of genocide is that the essential starting point of any response is to bellow moral outrage."[9] By incorporating that outrage into ourselves, we can then move on to advancing ideas about what to do next.

In truth, plays are ineffective in bringing about *immediate* changes in societies no matter how intelligent or powerful they may be. But like the best art, they can help us to better understand the violent world and provide insights into human behavior, creating images that, in the long run, may make the world more peaceful and more just. In the playwright Tom Stoppard's words, plays provide a "moral matrix" for human affairs.[10] They prepare the ground for changes in policy and thinking and, on a level of emotional engagement, give theatrical life to those whose voices have been silenced because they were marked for exclusion from a place among humanity where they rightly belonged.

Raphael Lemkin wrote in his unpublished autobiography: "I always wanted to shorten the distance between the heart and the deed" and "to live an idea" through concrete action. His own method was political persuasion, exercised relentlessly and in many languages, in the legal circles and chambers open to him (or forced open by him) in the 1950s. In our time, the theatre has attempted to shorten the distance between heart and deed also. Though its methods differ from outright political advocacy, by its humane, active presence it too can contribute to Lemkin's judicial goal of preventing the scourge of genocide by offering up the kind of knowledge and feeling that only art can provide.

Definitions and Antecedents

Until we find a way of toppling the barrier that sequesters mass suffering in other regions of the world from the comfort and safety we enjoy far from its ravages,

little will be done to rouse the attention of our political or professional leaders. Domestic calm encourages distancing foreign pain. We need, but lack, a new kind of discourse to disturb our collective consciousness and stir it into practical action that moves beyond mere pity.

Lawrence L. Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust*

The long history of theatre includes examples of "scenarios of genocide" that reaches back to classical Greece. Euripides, in writing of the removal and destruction of the women and children of the island of Melos by the Athenians in his play *The Trojan Women* (415 BCE), was the first to write about genocide. (In the play, Troy stands for Melos.) The play, ever timely and relevant, continues to be staged around the world. "Scenarios of genocide" is the term the political scientist Helen Fein coined to describe narrative models or historical archetypes of genocidal behavior.[11] Fein's term can be used to refer to plays that imagine the personal relationships of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, plays that invite the public to experience dynamic stage performances that demand emotional engagement and rational response.

Several thousand years after Euripides, western playwrights continue to bring to the stage stories of the annihilation of vulnerable and innocent populations. Often, their purpose is to raise the consciousness of audiences whose own governments have perpetrated the bloodshed and then denied their responsibility in the killing. Such plays as Peter Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1967), Arthur Kopit's *Indians* (1969), Christopher Hampton's *Savages* (1974), and James W. Nichol's *Sainte-Marie Among the Hurons* (1977) were attempts to supply compelling narratives exploring the part colonial powers played in the historical occurrence of genocide and blaming them for it. The plays focused on the destruction of indigenous peoples and their cultures ("ethnocide") at the hands of ignorant and violent countries and institutions seeking power, treasure, or religious domination. In addition, the playwrights recreated specific cultural rituals to attest to the magnitude of the loss (the Sun Dance in *Indians,* the Quarup in *Savages*), providing an artistic strategy for staging genocide in a nonrealistic way.[12] Shaffer, Kopit, Hampton, and Nichol are "first-world" writers whose concern for indigenous groups that fall (in Fein's phrase) "outside the universe of obligation" is motivated by the felt need to publicly accuse their own governments of heinous, irreparable crimes. They write as insiders, full of

anger, rebuke, and guilt that spring from their connection to the colonial oppression.[13]

The authors of the four plays in this volume, however, with no colonial complicity, have only their human connections to the stories they dramatize, connections that provoke a different stance toward genocidal inquiry. The motives of the perpetrators of the genocides in Armenia, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda are different, these plays suggest, from the perpetrators' motives that resulted in the destruction of the native Indian populations of North or South America because the genocides in Armenia, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Rwanda were provoked less by religious crusading, military adventurism, cultural imperialism, or economic exploitation than by the deadly effects of violent ideology, racist ignorance, and exploitable fear. It is a harder task to understand and assess the events, ones that are located *inside* a community (the Armenian genocide is the partial exception here), though the playwrights are determined to try.

The plays that make up *The Theatre of Genocide* present retrospective assessments of specific historical genocides. Lorne Shirinian *(Exile in the Cradle)* looks back the farthest, presenting the Armenian genocide of 1915–23 in its own time as well as in ours. The play is important for asking how an affected diasporic community deals with its own history generations after the violent and deadly encounter. Catherine Filloux's retelling of the facts of the Cambodian genocide *(Silence of God)* features a journalist protagonist whose objectivity is compromised by personal entanglements that threaten her sanity and safety and make her doubt the usefulness and even the truth of the very act of writing. In *A Patch of Earth,* Kitty Felde deals with genocide in the former Yugoslavia. She shows in her play the legal system (the International Court of Justice) that was put in place to find justice for the victims, a tribunal envisioned by Lemkin's treaty forty years earlier. Erik Ehn likewise uses a real trial to structure his scenario in his rumination on human evil during the Rwandan genocide *(Maria Kizito);* for him the trial has a double meaning, both legislative and religious.

What differentiates these plays from earlier theatrical explorations of genocide is their commitment to understanding both what happened and what survivors (in the widest possible sense) are to conclude about the historical events in the present. Though they identify the perpetrators, the

plays move beyond placing blame—indeed they are not sure who or what can be blamed at all—but they are determined nonetheless to present an exploration of motive and a consideration of individual responsibility that reveals the extent to which those who feel guilt also feel an overwhelming sense of loss. In so doing, they also resist the reductionist urge often seen in the work of social scientists that results in trends and statistics replacing the human image, however abused that image may be. As Joan Ringelheim has written about the Holocaust: "We are capable of understanding within the limits of our languages and imagination. These means for approximating experience may not satisfy our deepest needs to understand, but they are all that we can hope for as humans."[14] The theatre's lasting influence lies in its ability to extend the limits of our language and imagination.

The Plays and Their Premises

> I contend that, ultimately, our awareness of our own capacity for evil—and of ways to cultivate the moral sensibilities that curb that capacity—is the best safeguard we can have against future genocide and mass killing.
>
> James Waller, *Becoming Evil*

Lorne Shirinian's *Exile of the Cradle* dramatizes the Armenian genocide over the course of nearly a century and across continents, from Constantinople to Toronto. Beginning with the deportations and forced marches that preceded the wholesale extermination of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915, Shirinian's play shifts its attention to the legacy of the genocide for subsequent generations that have no personal experience with the destruction. His play describes a profound and crucial fissure in communities where genocides have receded in time and survivors are almost completely absent. What will be remembered when the witnesses are gone? Who gets to decide? Does there come a time when history is only "past" and not "present"? These questions have wide application to other genocides, most notably the Holocaust, where the world will soon confront a "chronology of absence," though with significantly more cultural carriers of memory available (memorials, museums, libraries, recorded testimonies) for consultation and study. The playwright writes in his essay "Towards an Armenian

Diaspora Theatre" about the challenges to creating personal identity in a diasporic community formed and organized around historical catastrophe.[15]

Through a clever staging device, Shirinian unifies the wide expanse of time and place. He calls for identical images and spatial relationships to define the areas of action, so that the funeral parlor in act 3 can suggest the deportation train in act 1. Characters age through the play, but their presence unifies the text in performance, enabling the audience to see the same actor playing a character in different times. When that occurs, we realize how a people can inhabit simultaneously various times and spaces in the conflict that arises between memory and present understanding. Old and Young Pierre confront each other at the start of act 2—Young Pierre of Anatolia speaks to Old Pierre of Toronto in 1985: "On some nights, I dream of Pierre, sitting alone in this apartment, dreaming of me."

Throughout the play, Shirinian the artist questions his own role, and the role of artists in general, in the creation and maintenance of cultural identity. Pierre is a poet; he writes to provide a voice for his abused people and to record the atrocities they suffered; "something must remain," he says at the end of the first act. But his antagonist Salim has good reason to mock the idealism of his prisoner: "People will learn what we tell them. We will become the source. There will be no others." And so it went during the Armenian Genocide, when even with the eyewitness reports of emissaries of foreign governments, the killing went on for eight years without interruption; only years later, in the survivor community, was the truth known and disseminated. "They'll allow no record of our presence," despairs Young Pierre, before he becomes the lone survivor of the death train.

In the next generation, Old Pierre's daughter Armig has inherited his poet's gift and his passion for witnessing. She is of the "middle" generation, positioned between the genocide survivor and the "new world," where the memories of the atrocities are contested—both their content and their perpetuation. Armig's two daughters, one of whom is also an artist, seem in perpetual disagreement over what, how, and whether to remember the killing that has been the defining historical event of their community. As noted earlier, other communities face, or will face, a similar situation as they invent themselves and reinvent their past in the face of relentless pressures to assimilate and the loss of both "reliable" memory and language to evoke it.

In the last act, Armig's poetry becomes the object of discussion and source of motivation, the basis for personal negotiation and communal disputation. Cradling baby Yerchanig ("happy" in Armenian), grandmother Armig recites her last poem about the legacy of slaughter. Accompanied by the sound of the deportation train, the final image embodies two restrictive circles, one generational and the other historical. Shirinian's characters worry about the meaning and use of history; the freedom they seek from the weight of history and culture troubles and conflicts them. His own work as an artist relates the story of genocide that can be both hopeful and hopeless, an affirmation of both life and death, a future full of paradox and conflict. Thus, if exile begins in the cradle, can home ever be found?

Catherine Filloux's *Silence of God* (2002) is one of several plays she has written that deals with the genocide in Cambodia, a country she has lived in and knows well. The play's protagonist is Sarah Holtzman, an American journalist who has scored a scoop by gaining an interview with Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge. The scenic design of the play relies heavily on light and sound to move the action over several countries and many years, though the action begins and ends in 1998. Filloux writes in her author's note about the historical incident that is at the center of the play's fluid chronology: "In the spring of 1998 the U.S. had a secret plan to capture Pol Pot to try him for crimes against humanity, and Pol Pot's adversary Ta Mok made overtures to hand him over. I have placed fictional characters in a fact-based story."

The Edmund Burke epigraph that introduces the text seems to point to the play's theme: "All that must be done for evil to flourish in this world is for the good man to remain silent." Nonetheless, the play complicates Burke's pronouncement, and through its action wonders whether it is too simple a declaration, one that if invoked at all ought to be done so ironically. In fact, the focus of the play comprises a philosophical inquiry concerning the origins and consequences of evil as well as our complicity with it.

When Pol Pot first appears in the play, he is dressed partly in Khmer Rouge black pajamas and red scarf and partly in a monk's orange robe. The image is one of several throughout the play that combines the visual opposites of peace and war, of goodness and evil. The technique becomes more prominent through the casting of the same actor to play both Pol Pot and

Heng Chhay, a Cambodian poet, later a monk, with whom Sarah falls in love. Earlier in time (1985), Sarah urges Heng to help her "crack the puzzle" of why evil flourishes by describing his past life during the genocide, a past dramatized through a flashback to 1976. Reluctantly, Heng speaks of his "transformation" into a farmer, the murder of his wife and sons, and of his connection to murder when he recounts how the gold bracelet he sold for food causes the brutal death of the desperate man who bought it.

In Sarah's interview with Pol Pot, he appears as a gentle and kindly patriot, partially blind and sick, and he successfully evades Sarah's inquiries. Another interview follows with Ta Mok, a homicidal madman who represents the continuing degradation of a country whose mass murder of innocent thousands by governmental edict has, in a literal way, lost its humanity. Disgusted with Sarah's glib journalism, Heng assumes part of the blame for the paralysis of his own goodness. He is tormented by the doubled guilt of an accomplice and a survivor and asks:

> What can you do with your life, when you have caused the deaths of others by your very acts and turned away from them to go on living?
>
> *Why do you survive and not them?* There is no life after that. That is the truth. No Life. My wife killed because of her "light" skin. You are right. You are exactly right. The smell of fear is everywhere. Even here. But do you know what it is like to *survive?* To find food to live just one more day? "Where is Buddha?" you ask yourself. Everyone has a story like mine, in Cambodia. It's the truth. And the truth is good.

Lost and afraid, Sarah asks Heng: "What is there left for me to do?"

The play does not provide an easy answer to that question, and it certainly complicates Burke's aphorism. Despite the pleading of an American diplomat, Sarah files her story of her Ta Mok interview, nearly desperate to do something meaningful to stop and punish genocide. Moments later Pol Pot, a solitary prisoner, declares he has no moral sense of evil. He protests that his "hands are clean" and admits to only one mistake: leaving a photograph of his part in a political assassination. "You see," he concludes, "there must *never be a face to the act.*" In a dream, a Khmer Rouge man eats a human heart while Pol Pot's voice proclaims "Even God is silent," and Sarah, terrified, begins to eat as well, asking "What is inside the heart?" *Silence of God* ends as it began, with a scene between Sarah and the Faceless Man

who has been disfigured and blinded by an acid-throwing thief. Sarah, bereft and alone, embraces the Faceless Man, thus conceding and relieving her part in the horror. Facelessness thus links perpetrator and victim, another of Filloux's images that specify the connection between the doer and the recipient of evil as well as the contending forces of ego and anonymity in human life and action.

Filloux's strategy of having one actor portray both Heng and Pol Pot shows the contradictory human impulses that permit people to both accept and reject responsibility for evil. Both characters commit suicide in an identical way. Late in the play, at Heng's destroyed house, Sarah reflects on what she has learned, about herself and the world. She speaks to the "imaginary" Heng:

> I've cracked my father's puzzle. Remember? Why does evil flourish?
>
> This is a world where you float. So beautiful and . bottomless. [T]he glistening, bending light, the reflections, are the magic of love, and also your own suffocating drowning. That's the world of water. . . . You might ask yourself, "Are we fish, not human?" and I will answer that we are human, but that we don't always do human things, and that is all I can tell you.

"Heng," she says, "I love you more than the shadow." And he replies in her dream: "And I love you. With it." Filloux's shifting, changing characters and moving, questioning dialogue provoke a continuing inquiry into the human origins of genocide and our responsibility for it.

Kitty Felde's *A Patch of Earth* has its origin in her work as a journalist covering the International War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague in 1996. The protagonist of the play is Dražen Erdemović, the twenty-four-year-old soldier who was the first man convicted by the tribunal after pleading guilty to war crimes. Erdemović was sentenced to ten years in prison, a term cut in half on appeal. He was released from jail in 2000.

The staging of *A Patch of Earth* calls for multiple locations, in part because Felde has located much of the action (as did Filloux) in the "mind and memory" of her protagonist. In a series of quick scenes, Felde dramatizes the actions and motivation of Erdemović who admitted to killing 120 people during the massacre of 7,000 Muslim men and boys that took place

during the siege of Srebrenica in July 1995. The play covers a year's time, and uses some of Erdemović's actual testimony before the court where he defended himself by insisting he would have been shot by the Bosnian Serb forces if he refused the order to kill the Muslims in their custody.

A Patch of Earth takes its title from the question posed in the play about the amount of blood a patch of earth can absorb before being saturated. It dramatizes the events leading up to the massacre and its judicial aftermath. Erdemović begins as an inept and unaffiliated war profiteer who, fearful of being killed, enlists in the Serb army. Felde wants to focus on the quality that distinguished him from the others: that among killers, he held to some kind of an ethical standard the longest. Rejected by his family and his wife, Erdemović is shot by his comrades who suspect him (correctly) of wanting to talk about his participation in wholesale murder. Later, we see him in his jail cell in the Netherlands, abandoned by everyone except his Dutch prison guard.

Felde's particular interest in Erdemović lies in her belief that, despite his part in the Srebrenica slaughter, he was a man of some conscience. He weeps throughout the play, especially when confronted by the ghosts of his victims who enter the play to form an accusatory presence in his fevered imagination. Felde, like Filloux, has ghosts haunting her play, stage presences asserting the terrible events that surround the story and carrying moral questions that are raised by Dražen's involvement in the massacre. At one point, the ghosts even form a chorus that provides the voice for Dražen's infant son, Nevin (played by a large doll), calling him "monster" over and over.

Along with staging the repeated appearance of the ghosts, the other challenge of the script in performance is to decide the nature and duration of the audience's sympathy for the perpetrator of atrocity. At the end of the first act, the challenges are combined when Dražen unburdens himself to a friendly bar owner:

I *am* a coward. So what? Show me one human who's not a coward in his heart. Everyone thinks they will do the right thing when the time comes. They think "Oh, yes. I will be the one to rescue the woman being beaten by her husband. I'll be the one to catch the thief stealing from the fruit stand." But what do we really do? Stand there and hope like hell someone else will do it. Well, Julija, nobody else

did a damned thing out there in that cornfield. And when it came down to it, neither did I. Is it my fault that I tried to save my life? Am I to be blamed for that? All I could think was, "I want to live. Dear God, let me live." . . . Stanko [his Serb commander] was right. He said I was soft here, in my belly. . . . I have no stomach for courage.

When Stanko shoots and wounds him, Dražen's only defender is one of the ghosts of his victims, and Dražen, knowing his guilt, recoils from its protective presence. His statement of his actions raises for the audience questions of culpability and responsibility that are at the ethical center of the play.

Erdemović's most articulate antagonist is his wife, Vesna, who is appalled at his desire to tell the truth. She says: "People don't want to believe these things. We are civilized modern people. Not monsters. You're the monster, Dražen. You." Yet, her bitterness and rejection of him, together with the hostility of all the others, are what in the end convince him to confess to the tribunal. By confessing, he is able to raise publicly the issues of complicity and truth that are often asked about perpetrators' murderous deeds.

A provocative and complicating event occurs late in the play in a conversation Erdemović has with his prison guard, a Dutch soldier named Elsbeth van der Kellen. She speaks about her brother, a U.N. soldier assigned to guard the Muslims at Srebrenica whose failure to protect them, because of *institutional* cowardice, made her brother another casualty of the atrocity at the farm in the nearby village of Pilica. Elsbeth's story makes a shrewd contrast to the prisoner's and complicates further the distinctions observers make between those who act morally and those who don't. She says,

When Willem came home, he and the rest of the Dutch peacekeepers were considered heroes. Some of his mates were taken as human shields, you know. Not Willem. But he was a hero in my father's eyes anyway. They all were. Until the truth leaked out. Suddenly the Dutch heroes were labeled collaborators and cowards and criminals.

He never talked about Srebrenica. After a while, he stopped talking at all. He hung around with his mates, mostly. Drinking. He was drunk that night. It was in January. It wasn't cold enough to freeze the canals, but the roads were icy. Willem slipped on the ice and fell off his bicycle. They found his body in the Mauritskade canal. They say he killed himself.

A Patch of Earth concludes with the session of the ICJY during which Erdemović is convicted of war crimes. He speaks of his sorrow for the victims of all the Bosnian war atrocities and defends his actions: "Because of everything that happened, I feel terribly sorry. But I could not do anything. When I could do something, I did it. I have nothing else to say." Later, when he hears his sentence of ten years, he is furious. In his final speech, he speaks to the ghosts of his victims who "bow to him in unison. One by one they turn their 'faces' away from Erdemović. He is truly alone." Convicted and abandoned. Dražen concludes with words whose interpretation is left to be defined in performance: "Free. I'm free." However they are to be understood, there is no doubt that Felde means the ghosts of Srebrenica to haunt us long after the play ends.

The plays of Erik Ehn are distinguished by their extraordinary imagery, vibrant poetry, dense religiosity and avoidance of realistic forms. His play *Maria Kizito,* like Felde's play stimulated by an actual courtroom trial, seeks to find an answer to the question of why a Rwandan nun, Sister Julienne "Maria" Kizito, could have joined the forces that directly caused the slaughter of 800,000 Tutsi victims in the savage "hundred days" of 1994. When Tutsi women and children sought refuge from the genocidal terror in the convent at Sovu, Sister Maria welcomed them, only to distribute gasoline to the Interahamwe (Hutu) killers who incinerated the five hundred fugitives in a garage. She was convicted, along with another nun and two others, and sentenced to twelve years in jail at a trial held in Brussels in 2001.

Like the other plays in this volume, *Maria Kizito* is highly poetic, presenting extraordinary staging challenges in dramatizing genocidal action. Ehn's lyrical text provides powerful images but is not prescriptive in its directorial guidance. Like Filloux and Felde, he asks for fluid and nonrepresentational staging, with actors playing multiple characters (as when the nuns also play the Interahamwe killers and their victims), all of whom are visible on stage during most of the performance. He structures his play around three stories: Maria Kizito's trial, the massacre at Sovu, and the attempt of a white Catholic novice, Teresa, to come to an understanding of what happened in Sovu and how to integrate it into her faith. The text is preceded by an epigraph from John 16.2: "The hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God."

Music plays a dominant, continuous part in *Maria Kizito,* supplying the play with theatrical excitement, cultural/ethnic contrasts, and thematic meaning. Ehn suggests specific pieces of music that could be used in production, including songs taken from *Africa: Music from Rwanda* from the Anthology of World Music series; they are set against Catholic hymns, contemporary rock, and the music of Brahms:

> God is what is left when we give everything away. Vocation is when you are only a space. Citizenship is the hole through which emergency rushes. Country is what is left after you have given the citizens to God. *(Music of Brahms.* MARIA *knifes the ceiling.)*

Bringing together Brahms, a representative of classical Western music and an example of how, in Maria's words, "religion came in with the Germans," with contemporary popular musical forms creates both clashing and complementary sounds that continuously energize the dialogue and action.

The *playing* of the Rwandan music is important because the songs and accompanying talk, broadcast on Rwandan radio during the genocide, served as the primary means of incitement against the Tutsi and as the urgent disseminator of hatred and vengeance as the slaughter ran its terrible course. The only male figure in the cast is "Radio/Rekeraho," the thug who "broadcasts" the Rwandan music and the leader of the Hutu militia as well. In addition, the text of the play "incorporates witness accounts from African Rights' *Obstruction of Justice: The Nuns of Sovu,* along with material from the trial and the Catholic Divine Office." Speeches frequently overlap, and the structure of the play is doubly chronological because most of the text follows the sequence of the atrocities committed from April 15 to May 6, 1994, and because it is informed by sung prayers roughly aligned with the Catholic Office of the Hours.

The action of the play mixes the murder of the innocents with scenes from the trial and Teresa's judicial witness. Often, prose testimony grounds the play in a clearer linguistic reality than is possible in the more ritualized and poetic parts of the play that include a stylized "machete dance" by Rekeraho and a "play-within-the-play" performed in owl masks by the nuns/refugees. Elsewhere, money is set on fire, eyeglasses are made to burn candles on their lenses, "Fire" has a dialogue with its refugee victim, and

somewhere near the middle of the play, Teresa begins to speak more than a little like Maria:

She makes coffee in a dead woman's mouth with a teaspoon of earth. She makes bread out of chewed grass on the dead woman's belly. She makes gasoline out of wet nerves inside the dead woman's teeth and siphons it into seven beer bottles. She makes candles out of the woman's eyes. She makes beer from fat. She pulls a city out of the salt at the base of the woman's throat, with tweezers.

She gets the gasoline.

Meeting the staging challenges of the play, from its graphic and allusive language to its charged and shocking action, is the difficult and creative work left to the director.

Ehn seems to say that facts have their place in law courts and official testimonies but that understanding human action, if it can be understood at all, comes in forms other than the rational and the literal. He knows the books of great faith are also books of great violence and that the spiritual transformations that faith inspires are akin to the theatrical transformations that attract artists to ritual, magic, and wonder. *Maria Kizito* makes the placing of blame a secondary concern; the identity of the perpetrators is never in doubt and their acts are both reprehensible and beyond literal description. Instead, Ehn suggests the value of a less factual kind of understanding involving knowledge of human behavior that sees atrocity and complicity with it as provoked by terrors harbored in the human heart, terrors that seem to be both provoked and condemned by theological belief and religious witness.

The Plays in Performance

It seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others.

Susan Sontag

The work of genocide awareness and prevention encompasses many strategies, from armed intervention to academic symposia. My aim here is to

argue for the power of the arts to carry forward Lemkin's legacy. The theatre in particular possesses the capacity to assist in raising awareness of the scourge of genocide and in engaging emotional responses that can both offer images that provoke empathy for peoples whose lives are vulnerable and endangered and bring audiences closer to understanding the historical and cultural forces that create the lethal conditions for mass murder. Through theatrical production, the four plays in this volume do the humane work that the theatre contributes uniquely to the world.

In attempting to provide a sense of what these plays are about, something more can be said by comparing one with the others. First, the plays deal with the perpetrators of the genocides as well as with the victims. Of great importance is the strategy of all the playwrights of "doubling" their characters by having their actors assuming multiple roles. This complicates (but does not eliminate) our awarding sympathy to specific characters. As I have already noted, in *Silence of God,* the same actor plays Pol Pot/Heng Chhay, a technique through which Filloux asserts that good and evil are found in each of us. In Ehn's play the nuns and the refugees alternate roles, and in Felde's play, one actor plays Dražen's father, a Serb officer, and the Serbian defense attorney. Shirinian's play moves Young Pierre through time, and his presence asserts the continuing effect of genocidal history in the lives of people in the present. Associated with this multiple role-playing are the fluid, abstract settings, a technique that produces dynamic theatricality and faster pacing as well as lends universality and relevance to the story. All the plays rely heavily on the use of lights, sound, and devices such as projections to tell their stories. All four plays contain ghosts of one sort or another.

The plays' scenic abstraction, which the playwrights achieve by dispensing with the detailed objectivity of stage realism, frees them from the problems of realistic representation of atrocity. To be sure, there is much "naturalistic" dialogue, and even the eating of the human heart in *Silence of God* might be stylized in production. But gone is the need to show "real" atrocity—as if that were possible anyway. In its place are poetic images that move us emotionally to respond to the violence and death at the center of the plays. Shirinian's play progresses to a more realistic staging (though it can be positioned "in space") to define the problem of what to do when the

everyday world, generations after the genocide, *displaces* the abstract one (early images of atrocity appear as upstage projections).

Several of the plays use media as both staging devices and thematic points of reference. In *Maria Kizito,* "Radio" functions as both exciting purveyor of song but also as the incarnation of the hatred of the murderers; he accomplishes his destructive deeds *through* manipulation of sound. (And what does it mean that *we* in the audience might be moved and excited by the music?) Felde's play utilizes scrims and screens for the projection of historical newsreels and as a way of adding the component of "TV news" to the dramatization of Dražen's confession. Cell phones are props in Filloux's play.

Two of the plays *(Maria* and *Patch)* utilize the trope of the trial to explore the nature of both evil and justice, a theme also explored by Filloux in *Silence.* None of the playwrights provide immediate answers to the question of how to stop homicide and torture; they are interested in psychological, philosophical, and cultural inquiries into the phenomenon of genocide. In trying to understand the perpetrators' reasons for rape and murder, Ehn, Filloux and Felde reveal complexities of motivation rather than easy answers to catastrophic human action; Shirinian keeps close to his focus on the complicated effect genocide has on the identity of those who are born much later. Interestingly, none of the four plays makes comparisons to other genocides; only Filloux makes an oblique reference to the Holocaust, which has long been accorded "first among equals" status because of its well-known history and the wide dissemination of the artistic attempts to deal with its meanings and its legacy.

In a notable overlap with the premises of postmodernism, the plays seem to provide material for the study of "the absence of things." That is, in a world without millions of people who were connected to families, communities, and ethnic groups, there is opportunity to theorize about "what isn't there" and about how that gap gives a charged valence to everything that remains. Testimonies of victims of genocide, including Holocaust testimonies, for example, contain breaks and ruptures where past experience is both inexpressible and ineradicable.[16] (In general, theatre works in more concrete ways, so that the ache of loss is manifested in psychological disturbances of character, and the evidence of destruction may be shown

or symbolized in diverse ways, from fragmentary scenery to the appearance, as in a number of the plays at hand, of ghosts who refuse to rest. Of course, this can be said to apply to the staging of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* too.[17])

The plays in this volume, taken together, make an important contribution to the study of genocide. They are dynamic, provocative, and powerful, and enlarge the critical mass of caring and concern that is necessary for contributing to the struggle against genocide. Different from other arts in their method and from history in their mode of understanding, the plays offer stories inhabited by characters who *perform* their experiences and who, through their "liveness," create immediate, emotional connections in asserting their truths. From their places of safety, the playwrights appeal to audiences similarly situated to take into themselves new knowledge of the misfortunes of others in places far away. They create stories where violence and betrayal are both human and seemingly inevitable and where chaos and fear touch everyone, including themselves. They speak in worried, chastened voices, too familiar with the past to evince hope but too concerned with the future to accept helplessness. But their words and images are part of the work necessary to understand and respond to genocide and help create the moral matrix whereby change for the better can be identified. They provide a field of feeling with which Lemkin's antigenocidal text can be more complete and effective.

The Pedagogy of Genocide

In his book *Anti-Genocide,* Herbert Hirsch asks: "Is it possible, if people believe that they must share their fate on this small planet, that the seemingly continuous cycle of violence might somehow be broken?"[18] Hirsch provides an affirmative answer that relies on the transformative force of education, and it is here that some final remarks about the ends of a theatre of (anti)genocide can be made.

Many years ago, I wrote: "Although I have my doubts that the theatre can ever change people, it would be foolish, even irresponsible, to suggest that the arts cannot make a contribution to improving the cultural health of society."[19] It is the theatre's purpose to expand understanding and advance

questions that may, subsequent to the theatre performance, lead to a world that more closely resembles the one that Raphael Lemkin envisioned. It is likely that the specifics of language, economy, culture, and geography determine whether a particular play will serve to strengthen a disposition toward peace or even tolerance, but I have no doubt that the plays collected here can assist the larger project well. Plays have many functions, and education is one of them. "To fail to educate students and the public at large about genocide . . . has . profound implications."[20] In her book about photography and its power to inform about the suffering of people, Susan Sontag disputes that there is such a thing as "collective memory" and proposes instead the phenomenon of "collective instruction" that I mentioned earlier. "All memory is individual, unreproducable—it dies with each person. What is called a collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds."[21] The theatre in performance contains an inexhaustible supply of images and words, created in the *present* (not like the *pastness* of a photograph) that can in an important way add to the process of instruction. The dramatized stories of terror from Armenia, Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda lock the pictures of genocide in our minds, and with them in place, they become a stimulus for encouraging and sustaining purposeful, humane action in response to what is revealed on stage.

In the conclusion to his book *Fantasies of Witnessing,* Gary Weismann points to the ways in which representations of the Holocaust have become "dispersed and fractured" and now appear in multiple genres with varying concerns and intentions. "And yet," he writes, "the problem of the unpresentable Holocaust will not go away."[22] The issue of the "representation" of the Holocaust has a long critical history, and my hope is that by referring to examples of the destruction of Europe's Jews between 1939 and 1945 together with the theatre of genocide, a useful relationship can be created that will enhance our understanding of all attempts to imagine genocide and its consequences. Because in the twenty-first century we know a lot more about the Nazi process of mass murder, and a lot more about the politics and culture that shaped that catastrophe, we are able to assert historical correspondences and engage common methodologies in assessing a

theatre of genocide, which is situated now where the theatre of the Holocaust was a generation ago, with artists asking similar questions and seeking suitable answers to historical, artistic, and ethical problems.

It is a commonplace to say that showing the killing of hundreds of thousands of people needs to be managed abstractly or obliquely, poetically and symbolically, on stage, because theatrical realism cannot accommodate this purpose.[23] The plays in this anthology proceed in that way, utilizing poetic language, retrospective narrative, ritual enactments, and the bridging of the spatial gap between actor and audience to portray atrocity without attempting to replicate it. Weismann is correct that "no matter how much we are affected by portrayals of brutality and suffering, the reality was different[;] . . . no simulation of past reality grants full presence to what it represents."[24] In addition, the theatre's presentness and inherent pretense (to say nothing of the magnitude of the slaughter) demands that genocide be displayed in ways that dispense with the need for realism, replacing it with other forms that arouse conscience and deeper understanding.

In its confrontation with genocide, theatre records stories of human responses that typify the conflict: fear, endurance, resistance, despair, grief, confusion, courage, and cowardice. Testimonies of victims of recent genocides have appeared to provide eyewitness descriptions that, along with the records of the International Court of Justice and several truth and reconciliation commissions, offer plentiful raw data for artists to use as a basis for their antigenocidal work.[25] Remembering the past gets both easier (as more is known) *and* harder (as more is forgotten); in fact, Shirinian's play takes this as its central concern. With these materials at hand, the theatre, always a controversial and complicated art form, has continued to supply performative interpretations of the phenomenon of genocide.

What the theatre can bring to this social and political challenge is an emotional *connection* among human beings and among groups through the creation of empathy. In *A Human Being Died That Night,* Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, recounting her interviews with Eugene de Kock, "the most despised white person in post-apartheid South Africa," provides an assessment into the benefit of empathy as well as an insight into how the theatre and performance could heal a politically shattered community or world:

One of the challenges a political community faces in seeking to make the transition into a properly functioning democracy is therefore to create conditions that encourage replacing enmity with, if not love or friendship, then at least regard for others as fellow human beings. For the absence of empathy, whether at the communal or personal level, signals a condition that, in subtle but deeply destructive ways, separates people from one another. . . . We are induced to empathy because there is something in the other that is felt to be part of the self, and something in the self that is felt to belong to the other.[26]

Ehn's Teresa and Filloux's Elizabeth explore this insight in complicated encounters, while the ghosts that appear in a number of the plays arouse empathy wherever genocide shows itself.

Finally, the plays in *The Theatre of Genocide* have many objectives, not the least of which is to present to readers and audiences words and images that concern the very complicated ongoing debate regarding the prevention and punishment of genocide; the playwrights themselves recognize their responsibility to enter this debate. In Ehn's "Historical Note" we read of drama as an agent of repair: "That drama and literature come as correctives to staged, rhetorically perverse distortions of truth is right, just, and effective. What was taken away, what was cast in ruin, must be restored through story." In her book *Utopia in Performance,* Jill Dolan demonstrates through a number of examples how performance artists have been able to create the images of a better world and combine those with moments of awareness where sectarian antagonisms can be transcended and human communities formed.[27] In doing antigenocidal work, theatre artists accept the challenge that is informed by the theatre's humane and inclusive goal: to bring the excluded into the universe of obligation. The prevention of genocide can be advanced through theatrical images that protest against killing, test our ethical assumptions and responsibilities, and affirm a knowable, palpable communality as a basis for a humane future. They supply the stories that, through word and image, can move audiences to action.[28] Helen Fein has written: "Any strategy to defend human rights which empowers individuals and associations and restricts the state from exploiting its monopoly of force without internal checks or external sanctions is a strategy to prevent genocide."[29] That strategy includes the theatre.

Notes

The subtitle to this introduction is taken from the opening sentence of André Schwarz-Bart's novel *The Last of the Just* (1959).

I want to thank Barbara Grossman for her editorial assistance on this essay.

1. Other names for the destruction of the Jews of Europe are Shoa (Hebrew) and Churb'n (Yiddish).

2. An up-to-date list can be found on the Prevent Genocide International Web site, http://preventgenocide.org.

3. The best place to begin a study of Lemkin and his treaty is Samantha Power's *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). Two recent plays have Lemkin as their protagonist: Catherine Filloux's *Lemkin's House* (New York: Playscripts, 2005) and my own *If the Whole Body Dies: Raphael Lemkin and the Treaty against Genocide* (Madison, WI: Parallel Press, 2006).

4. See Fein, "Genocide: A Sociological Perspective," in *Genocide: An Anthropological Reader,* ed. Alexander Laban Hinton, 74–90 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

5. "The Holocaust remains the ghost at our feast; every time it slips from our mind it makes a terrible recurrence: Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, now Kosovo" (Michael Ignatieff, "Ascent of Man," *Prospect* [October 1999]: 31). Also see Ignatieff's essay "The Legacy of Raphael Lemkin," delivered as a lecture at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 13, 2001.

6. This anthology avoids intentionally the inclusion of plays about the Holocaust, which are readily available elsewhere, including the two volumes of *The Theatre of the Holocaust,* ed. Robert Skloot (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981, 1998).

7. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 85.

8. In *A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 256. "Long-term genocide prediction and prevention require understanding of the societal nutrients that fertilize the seedbeds of mass murder," write Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan. "We do not suggest," they continue, "that the specter of genocide can finally be banished merely by pronouncing its name. But even if scholars fail to speak out clearly, or mumble prevarications, victims will continue to suffer unheard, and the unspeakable will haunt our species in a new century of genocide" (*The Specter of Genocide: Mass*

Murder in Historical Perspective [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 374, 380).

9. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Never Again, Again?" *New York Times,* November 20, 2005.

10. Stoppard summarizes: "Briefly, art—Auden or Fugard or the entire cauldron—is important because it provides the moral matrix, the moral sensibility, from which we make our judgements about the world. . . The plain truth is that if you are angered and disgusted by a particular injustice or immorality, and you want to do something about it, now, at once, then you can hardly do worse than write a play about it. That is what art is bad at. But the less plain truth is that without that play and plays like it, without artists, the injustice will never be eradicated" ("Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas," *Theatre Quarterly* 4.14 [May–June 1974]: 13–14).

11. Helen Fein, "Scenarios of Genocide: Models of Genocide and Critical Responses," in *Toward the Understanding and Prevention of Genocide,* ed. Israel Charny, 3–31 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984). Fein's important work in defining genocide begins with and credits Lemkin. See also "Defining Genocide as a Sociological Concept," in *The Holocaust: A Reader,* ed. Simone Gigliotti and Berel Lang, 398–419 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), and Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

12. See Robert Skloot, "Theatrical Images of Genocide," *Human Rights Quarterly* 12 (1990): 185–201.

13. Pascal Bruckner, in his book of the same name, is contemptuous of "the tears of the white man," which he defines as "compassion as contempt." From his perspective, the performance of "rituals" might be seen as further evidence of cultural exploitation (New York: Free Press, 1986). Plays written by victims of colonial rule are now a common part of academic inquiry in postcolonial studies. See, for example, *Postcolonial Plays: An Anthology,* ed. Helen Gilbert (London: Routledge, 2001).

14. Joan Ringelheim, "The Strange and the Familiar," in *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians,* ed. Michael Signer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 41.

15. The essay is reprinted in this volume, after *Exile in the Cradle.* The Turkish government's refusal to acknowledge responsibility for the Armenian genocide continues to be a volatile international subject in European and Near East politics and it energizes Armenians in their demand for recognition of their genocide now nearly a century ago.

16. See Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

17. I have dealt with these issues in "'Where Does It Hurt?' Genocide, the Theatre and the Human Body," *Theatre Research International* 23.1 (Spring 1998): 50–58.

18. Herbert Hirsch, *Anti-Genocide* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 168.

19. Skloot, "Theatrical Images of Genocide," 201.

20. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Robert K. Hitchcock, "Confronting Genocide and Ethnocide of Indigenous Peoples," in *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide,* ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 82.

21. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 86.

22. Gary Weismann, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 207. The description of the "breakdown" is taken from an essay by Andreas Huyssen. Many Holocaust writers and critics deal with this ethical-artistic issue but rarely discuss theatre. Such is the case with, for example, Saul Friedlander's *Probing the Limits of Representation* (1992) and Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* (2000). A useful volume is Claude Schumacher, ed., *Staging the Holocaust: The Shoah in Drama and Performance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

23. The literary critic Geoffrey H. Hartman has written: "At best, [art] also provides something of a safe-house for emotion and empathy. Most historians are intensely suspicious of any discursive or creative mode that deviates from realism or clear, referential touchstones. They see positivistic accuracy as the last remaining safeguard against relativism and revisionism" (*The Longest Shadow* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996], 197).

24. Weismann, *Fantasies of Witnessing,* 208.

25. See Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Israel Charny, eds., *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views* (New York: Garland, 1997).

26. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 126–27.

27. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). She writes: "I do believe that the experience of performance, and the intellectual, spiritual, and affective traces it leaves behind, can provide new frames of reference for how we see a better future extending out from our more ordinary lives. Seeing that vision, we can figure out how to achieve it outside the fantastical, magic space of performance" (20).

28. "Darfur [i.e. the genocide in Sudan] is just the latest chapter in a sorry history of repeated inaction in the face of genocide, from that in Armenians, through

the Holocaust, to the slaughter of Cambodians, Bosnians and Rwandans" (Kristof, "Never Again, Again?"). Working with Kristof, Winter Miller has written a play about the Darfur genocide that was read in January 2007 at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in May 2007.

29. Helen Fein, "Scenarios of Genocide," 23.