Thomas Riccio

Shadows in the Sun: Context, Process, and Performance in Ethiopia

Andegna (*The First*) was developed and performed during the fall and winter of 2009–10 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This article examines the complex social, political, and cultural contexts that informed the training, workshops, and process of creating an ensemble and performance in a time of national transformation. Urbanization and the crossing currents of Africa, Islam, Christian Orthodoxy, capitalism, the West, and technology prompted the re-conceptualization of performance, its function, and expression. In this article Thomas Riccio highlights the methodologies of reinventing an indigenous performance that is respectful of local traditions yet contemporary and accessible. He discusses how performance provides a forum for revealing social, political, and cultural trauma, and itself becomes an act of affirmation – an assertion of protest and healing that makes visible, immediate, and tactile the histories and unresolved issues haunting modern Ethiopia.
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Key terms: Litooma, reclamation, reconciliation, indigenous performance, social change, activism, theatre and religion.

THE THEATRE was located near Arat Kilo, a busy, noisy, exhaust-filled district of Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia. Nearby was Martyrs' Square an oversized stone tribute depicting tortured souls, those butchered by the Fascist Italian occupiers in 1936. The National Museum next door was where 'Lucy' resided – the three-million-year-old skeletal remains of the oldest hominid ever discovered. Down the street was the Papal residence of the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox church. In the other direction was Lion Zoo Park. where nineteen emaciated lions, descendants of the pets once belonging to former Emperor Haile Sallasie, were caged.

The street scene was teeming with life, contrasts, contradictions, and congestion. Diesel-spewing buses jostled with motorcycles and ox-drawn carts as late-model SUVs and luxury cars inched through traffic and the honking of car horns. Van taxis, their conductors hawking destinations, dominated the side of the road as donkeys burdened with cargo and cattle wearing bells were herded by men wearing a style of clothing evoking the time of Christ. An assortment of beggars lived in the shadows of the street's trees, among them lepers with half eaten-away noses and ears, stumps for hands and feet; homeless and pitiful pregnant women nursing; and every variety of the sick, destitute, and hungry in rags mingling with regalia-attired churchgoers, policemen, stern military men with machine guns, businessmen in suits, a smattering of cautious tourists, street hustlers selling bootlegged merchandise, and youthful students.

The auditorium at Arat Kilo was the main performance venue of the Addis Ababa University Theatre Department. To enter the

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building, which was part of the 1970s socialist era compound of concrete buildings, required identification and being scrutinized – and, if need be, searched by two armed policemen at a government checkpoint. The compound had seen better days. The Soviet-backed dictatorship that traumatized the country from 1975 to 1991 built countless, fast and poorly constructed poured-concrete buildings, which stand today as lived-in, haunted memorials. Students drifted through the humid, languid haze of fading and chipped paint, crumble, and litter, leaving a post-apocalyptic impression.

The setting was not unusual for national theatres or institutions of higher education in Africa. I had worked in similar environments in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Zambia, South Africa, and Burkina Faso. Leaking roofs, torn, battered, or broken seating, poor or no lighting, heating, or air conditioning, along with power and water outages, were frequent, with disrepair, over-use, and crowding the norm. Despite this, and with resolute defiance, filled with passion, heart, and generosity, nowhere in the world can performance be as essential and electrifying as it is in Africa.

The Addis Ababa University Theatre lobby was being used as a storage area, filled with furniture and boxes, dark and without electricity. The nearby washrooms filled the nostrils with stench; the floors were puddles of murky water. The late-day sun streaked across the echoing, cavern-like auditorium revealing a balcony, scruffy walls, and curtains heavy with filth and fatigue, full of rips, tears, and dry rot; the room smelled of mildew, sweat, and humanity. Belayneh Abune, the Theatre Department head, looked at me with a blend of frustration and defiance:

> I can say we were neglected. The Arat Kilo Theatre does not have lights or a sound system; we have nothing there really. To do a production we have nothing. So instead we just go to various cultural institutions here or there, to the different theatres, and we borrow from them and somehow we put on a show, we must put on a show. (2009)

As a cleaning woman swept, the cast and I put out beaten wooden folding chairs to create a circle on the auditorium floor. We spread long-leafed elephant grass to sacralize the performance space, as is the way in so many Ethiopian traditions. Notwithstanding the modern squalor, the performance would be a venue outside time and place, where the present communed with the invisible and ineffable forces that shaped the world outside.

Ethiopia is a troubled yet sacred place, layered thick and weighted with many histories, myths, and ghosts, which seem to inhabit, haunt, and bless the long shadows of the equatorial sun. And so it was in January 2010 as day moved into night and we waited for our audience.

The Litooma Initiative

I am a performance director and playwright who, for over twenty-two years, has conducted workshops and created performances that blend scholarly research, cultural reclamation, social and political reconciliation, drama therapy, and artistic production. My work utilizes traditional, ritual, mythological, and performance expressions specific to the context and objectives of a project.

Projects are organized under the auspices of Litooma,[1] essentially a one-man research and performance initiative that partners with theatres, centres, universities, and community groups. Litooma projects are supported by a variety of NGOs, foundations, academic and governmental agencies, often with in-kind support and self-funding.

Context, in its fullest and most comprehensive sense, shapes each project. The work is grounded, methodologically and theoretically, in my nine years as director of Tuma Theatre, an Alaska Native group in Fairbanks. The work and research in Alaska garnered invitations to work with a variety of groups internationally which were similarly concerned with the issues of preserving and utilizing traditional performance modes.

Subsequent projects have included work with a Russian group devoted to pre-Christian Slavic rituals, the Sakha National Theatre of central Siberia, and two projects with the Zulu. Others include work with the

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Xuu and Khwe Bushmen, the Greenland Inuit, Tamils, a multi-ethnic performance that toured Zambia, and a wide range of workshops, teaching, residencies, and research and performance projects in Korea, China, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Kenya, and throughout Europe (Poland, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, among others) and the United States.

Typically a Litooma performance project requires a three-month residency in which field research and documentation in ritual and traditional performance takes place. This is followed by workshops with local performers, a skills exchange and performance laboratory, and leads to the creation of a devised, ensemble-created performance that becomes an embodiment, diagram, and venue for social and cultural remediation and expression.

The short-term objectives of Litooma include indigenous and traditional performance research and documentation, education and skills exchange, social and cultural activism, and artistic production. The long-term objective is a comprehensive methodological and theoretical documentation of traditional and indigenous performance expressions, their function and context. The ambition is to articulate a viable alternative to the ubiquitous western performance styles shaping our emerging global culture.

Essentially a project, including the one here described, will aspire to identify, document, and apply indigenous and traditional expressions as an alternative.[2] Rather than adopting western dramaturgical and performance expressions unquestioningly, Litooma seeks to activate performers as activist, creators, and tradition bearers who reimagine and empower themselves and cultures through the medium of performance. This approach functions on multiple levels simultaneously, and often includes aspects of personal, social, and cultural reconciliation. In this way, a unique cultural expression and world view, often syncretic, always dynamic and unique, is given expression, enriching and evolving not only personal and cultural identity, but also the dialogue of globalization.

Each culture offers up unique resources and perspectives that are marginalized or disappearing. During this critical time of an environmentally stressed planet, all knowledge, including orally transmitted and especially place-based and embodied knowledge, is valuable, if not essential. Each voice of the earth must be articulated and heard – performance transcribes the earth's knowledge. In many ways, we are all becoming indigenous again; maybe out of the necessity of survival, we are all becoming part of an emerging culture called earthlings.

Ethiopian Contexts

One political party has ruled Ethiopia since a bloody civil war ended a brutal regime in 1991. In 2010 it was a common sight to see policemen and soldiers on the streets of the capital carrying automatic weapons and truncheons. Trucks full of armed soldiers were often parked, waiting and ready, on side streets. An army detachment and police station were located near the university. The police and military hierarchy, and many key government posts remain Tigray, an ethnic minority, which serves a syndrome of ethnic rivalry, cronyism, and corruption. Since 1995, the Tigrayan Prime Minster of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi Asres, has created an ethnic-based federalism favouring Tigray ethnicity and ruling with an 'authoritarian populism' that echoes its Leninist origins. In recent years critics within his government, many being senior officials, have sought asylum abroad (Crisis Group African Report, p. 5–6).

The United States and Western allies have long overlooked the governmental failures and human rights violations of Ethiopia, preferring to support the strategically located and geo-politically important nation. Ethiopia is a major benefactor of US foreign and lavish military aid, and is a stalwart friend in one of the world's simmering political hot spots. To the south-east of Ethiopia is the failed state of Somalia and its coastal pirates; at the north-east is Eritrea, a country that won its independence from Ethiopia in a bloody civil war in 1991. Ethiopia considers Eritrea a break-away province and to this day relations are tense and the border militarized. To the east of Ethiopia is unstable Yemen, a corrupt and,

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One of the many dramatic rituals of the Christian Orthodox Church in Ethiopia.

increasingly, international terrorist concern; to the north is Sudan, still unstable after more than twenty years of civil war; and to the west is the newly minted and unstable Republic of South Sudan. Kenya, to the south, the most stable, albeit corrupt, of Ethiopia's neighbours, recently invaded Somalia in an attempt to secure its border.

To add to the complexity, Ethiopia is almost equally Orthodox Christian and Muslim. But the increasingly assertive and growing Muslim population, long disenfranchised, is restive and not immune to the Islamic fundamentalism stirring nearby. Add nearly seventy ethnic groups and the rule of the majority Oromo (which is 35 to 40 per cent of the population) by a minority ethnic group, the Tigray, and you have a volatile mix.

Ethiopian Performance Traditions

Ethiopia's more than seventy ethnic groups (numbers vary depending on how numbers are counted) offer up a wide variety of traditional performance languages and expressions. Many of the major traditional modes – ritual, rites, rhythms, songs, and dances – were known by our ensemble via personal cultural transmission, university classes, or television programmes, which often broadcast short cultural documentaries featuring ethnic songs and dances to defuse inter-ethnic tension and to serve nationalist agendas. The Ethiopian performance tradition is rich and varied, and includes a wide variety of musical, dance, and verbal performance vocabularies that encompass every aspect of daily ritual, and ceremonial activity. Examples include professional female mourners, farming and shepherd songs, 'bementa' (versified insults), and 'incarasa-lamenta' (a call–response poetic versification used in traditional justice proceedings).

Many ethnic groups from the nation's various regions share or have similar traditional rites, dances, songs, and rituals, due, in part, to cultural syncretism. Modernization and urbanization have also contributed to the disappearance of lesser-practised traditional expressions, and the attraction to and adoption of that which is accessible and easily shared. The historical dominance of

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the Oromo and then Amhara ethnic groups further influenced some degree of conformity and integration.

Ethiopia's more exotic and theatrical performance expressions, most notably those of the Hammer people of the south, have been increasingly commercialized and commodified – reshaped for tourist consumption. The rapid transformation and disappearance of traditional performance expressions is a growing concern, as National Theatre artistic director Tasfay Gebramriam notes:

> Unfortunately, our writers are not too concerned about tradition and using it in a modern way. I personally believe there are more distinct and interesting stories in traditional societies. These are the stories of our nation and people. There are countless stories. In the southern region, which so few people know about, they are very underexposed. We know about their music but not their performance. (2009)

Another shared heritage is the highly theatrical ceremonial form and declamatory and formal presentational style of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian church. The nearly seventeen-hundred-year influence of the Orthodox Church on the culture and psyche of Ethiopia is a shared performance language that overlays ethnic differences, and Orthodox church services, often three or four hours long, are highly theatrical events. As Tamirat Gebeyehu and Aida Edemariam, in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Africa*, observe –

> one of the most spectacular being 'Meskel of the Feet of the Cross, and 'Timkat' or the 'Baptism of Christ'. In the latter, processions of priests and deacons dressed in extravagant embroidered robes and carrying decorative staffs and colourful gilded umbrellas, sing and dance to the rhythm of drum and ululation of women as they accompany a copy of the Ark of the Covenant (which resides in the Holy of Holies of every Ethiopian church) on a journey away from and back to his resting place. (Gebeyehu and Edemariam, p. 115)

Before the 1950s, when the Emperor Haile Selassie sent Ethiopia's aristocratic youth abroad to be educated, the dominant template, structurally and expressive, for Ethiopian theatre was the Church:

> We all went to traditional schools, which means church schools. And within the church schools and the church there are many traditions, which can be turned into a dramatic form or inspire dramatic form. Funeral rites, wedding rites, christenings, everything, that is all we knew. The Orthodox Christian Church and traditional forms was our only background. There were poets and playwrights, but the structure of the plays was very limited, the language was more or less nice but the dialogue was poor, the characterization was superficial. (Gessesse, 2009)

One of the lasting influences of religious education and performance is *kine*, a poetic style of double- and even triple-entendre developed when Ge'ez (the formal language of the Orthodox Church and the educated) was dominant. The *kine* style was adapted to elevate Amharic (the *lingua franca* of modern Ethiopia) to literary status, and today influences songs, drama, and popular solo performances. Another religious adaptation into popular form is *zema*, or religious music. Both *kine* and *zema* involve a complex system of rules and are occasionally combined to create a verbal artistry in contemporary plays (Gebeyehu and Edemariam, p. 115).

Ethiopian Theatre Today

By and large, theatre training in Ethiopia references and models itself on western theatrical practice. Local, traditional, and indigenous performance styles are considered secondary. Western theatre tradition predominates for a number of reasons, among these being urbanization, the use of English (which is essentially the second language of Ethiopia), a western-modelled university system, the influence of western media, films, and television, and a well-articulated, documented, and valorized theory and practice of theatre.

Implicit within the western theatre tradition is a way of being, seeing, and ordering the world. But none of the aforementioned has much relevance to, nor is it expressive of, traditional, non-western, and community-based ways of being in the world. In many ways, western theatre is an imposed shadow, – an image on a wall disconnected from the

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bodily life. Ethiopians live in a place between two worlds.

Western dramaturgy – modes of storytelling, acting, and staging – asserts a deep, powerful, and pervasive social and cultural influence on Ethiopia, and has, in effect, marginalized local traditions. Be that as it may, the culture and theatre of Ethiopia today is syncretic, providing a rich, vivid, and at times contradictory overlay of many influences and expressions which have been adapted and sustained – their value, relevance, convenience, and practicality becoming the accepted convention.

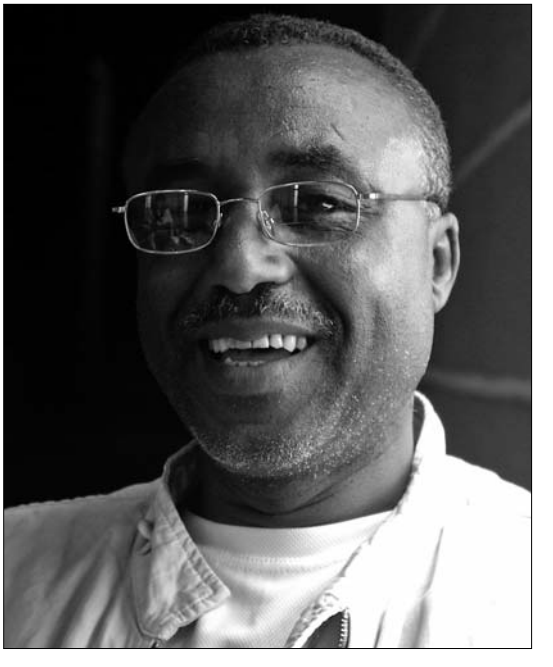
In the 1950s, Haile Selassie recognized the necessity to modernize Ethiopian theatre and sent people such as Tesfaye Gessesse to be educated abroad. Gessesse, who studied theatre at Northwestern University, was one of a handful of young people from privileged families who would return and give shape to modern Ethiopian theatre. He explains the westernization of Ethiopian theatre:

> His Majesty had gone abroad and had seen plays. He had been to operas, and wanted the same for Ethiopia. Other educated people had been to Europe and had seen plays, western dramas and they read, also. Many had read, in English, simplified versions of the plays by Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, and others like that. And they had ideas when they came back and introduced them into the Ethiopian context. (2009)

Augmenting the return of Ethiopians educated in theatre was the hiring of European directors in the 1960s to work at the National Theatre. Until that time the role of the director was not clearly distinguishable from that of the playwright. Directing was, and to a certain degree remains, conceived as the provision of a framework rather than the interpretation of the text.

Getenet Eneyew, one of Ethiopia's most respected directors, commented in an interview at the National Theatre that, 'The role of director is still vaguely defined', a fact compounded by the limited educational opportunities in the field, and also due, in part, because 'the European directors who set the examples in the 1960s did not know Amharic'. They compensated for an interpretive or actorly focus by 'using lavish sets and costume', reducing their role to not much more than that of stage designer or manager (2009). To this day many plays are written and directed by the same person.





Two of the leading figues in Ethiopian theatre: Tesfaye Gessesse (above) and Getenet Eneyew.

Western acting styles were also introduced in the 1960s and remain a cornerstone

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of actor training at Addis Ababa University. Gessesse observes, 'We used method acting, realistic acting, because in those days everyone wanted to be like Marlon Brando' (2009). Acting on Ethiopian stages today is an odd mixture of styles, with naturalistic styles mixed in the same production with highly theatricalized and comedic stock characterizations. A declamatory heroic acting style, its gestures reminiscent of Delsarte, is also represented in historical dramas.

A recent trend in style and content has been to domestic comedies. These plays are often adapted from western dramas, but, though from written texts, the actors often improvise their performance. This popular style is shaped to please a young audience that wants to be entertained and which encourages the variety improvisation offers. The National Theatre and the Hager Fikir Theatre (Addis Ababa's other government-funded theatre), are the places to go on dates; and often couples see a performance, which runs in repertory for three months to a year, several times. As a consequence, the 1,200-seat National Theatre is often sold out for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday performances.

The performances I attended at these theatres were festive and youthful social events. The houses were open an hour or more before curtain time; uniformed vendors circulated through the auditorium selling food (sandwiches, nuts, candies), drinks, and newspapers as audience members mingled and conversed. Ticket prices were 10 to 15 *birr*, which is about the price of a packet of cigarettes. Tasfay Gebramriam, the Artistic Director of the National Theatre, commented during an interview in his office:

> It is the youngsters that come. They come because the prices are very good. Newlyweds and early married people come, but if they're married for ten or fifteen years they're not interested in coming to the theatre. (2009)

But the full and youthful houses are a mixed blessing, which some seasoned theatre artists feel have a commercial and negative influence in reshaping Ethiopian theatre. Several theatre practitioners bemoaned the tendency to play to the audience and for cheap laughs or emotions. Getenet Eneyew saw the trend as diluting or cheapening the importance of Ethiopian theatre and undermining its once central function as a venue for cultural discussion and progress.

> It does not advance the art or the country. This style follows the audience because the audiences laugh. So, the actors exaggerate and do what they must to give them what pays. (2009)

The *Andegna* Project

The *Andegna* project ensemble actors had an awareness of the crossing currents affecting Ethiopia. They all owned cell phones, had email accounts, and were college-educated. They were also very aware that they lived in a nation in which newspapers and media were controlled by the government. Dissent is dealt with severely. Email service was very slow and censored: 'Thanks to Chinese electronic monitoring and control software, the government is able to block most opposition electronic communications when it desires' (Crisis Group African Report, p. 29).

Television is entirely state-controlled, offering propagandistic programming and nothing foreign, radio either state-controlled or, if independent, tightly monitored. Cinemas show, with few exceptions, locally produced films, with limited content and poor production values. An average Ethiopian's sense of the greater world is censored and restricted so as to control the population. Ideas are considered dangerous. When Brad Pitt visited Ethiopia a few years ago he was, to his delight, able to walk the streets unmolested: no one recognized the international movie star.

Although official media outlets are controlled, there is an underground, though fragmentary, stream of information coming into the country via the large and extensive community of Ethiopians living abroad. Every ensemble member had relatives or friends living abroad in the US, Europe, or Canada, and, through these channels, they understood that they were marginalized, disadvantaged, and lacked the basic opportunities (for employment, educational and political freedom) enjoyed by their contem-

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The two government-funded theatres in Addis Ababa: the Hager Fikir Theatre (above) and the National Theatre (below) – 'the places to go on dates'.



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poraries in the developed world. They lived in two worlds and were deeply conflicted, proud of their nation and its culture, yet acutely aware of and frustrated by Ethiopia's economic stagnation, censorship, conformist thinking, political paralysis, limited opportunities, and poverty. 'I am always looking for something to follow because I don't know who I should be any more,' said performer Nigussie Baylie during one of the many discussions that developed *Andegna*. 'How did I become a shadow of myself? I am afraid I will disappear.'

All of the performers were university trained, meaning that their experience was a blend of western-style psychological realism, traditional performance, and dance, street theatre, and traditional ritual expressions as practised by Christian Orthodoxy and the numerous ethnic groups of Ethiopia. All had performed in western dramas and worked with a variety of western modes, including puppetry, mask, and broad, burlesque and cabaret styles. A few, including Michael Million and his wife, Meaza Takele, worked in the Ethiopian film, television, and radio drama industry; a few others had their own companies doing theatre for development for international non-governmental agencies, or performed traditional dancing for tourists at local hotels and clubs.

The performance of *Andegna* was developed by working five days a week over an eight-week period in October and November 2009. A two-week workshop was followed by a six-week performance development phase. Both phases worked to reconnect performers with their physical, imaginative, cultural, and creative selves. Initially the shadow-self theme was vague, but, as the work progressed, it became increasingly articulated, emerging from the work and discussions as a potent, centrifugal metaphor.

The workshop phase interpolated skills exchange and a sharing of traditional dances, songs, drumming, traditions, and stories. In this way, performers and the group at large explored and re-evaluated their cultural inheritance in a positive and pro-active way, making it their own and themselves participants in its evolution. Traditional performance languages embody cultural knowledge, portraying a specific place and way of being in and with the world. The rhythms, vocalizations, movements, and gestures are integrated components, and in some ways the narrative of a living culture. For many young people, traditional knowledge generally has little modern currency and only a limited, culturally hermetic expressiveness.

In Ethiopia, as with my work with indigenous groups elsewhere in the world, performers tend to separate their traditional and western theatre selves and expressions. When performing, the tendency is to apply one or the other mode, preferring western dramaturgy and performance expression when dealing with their 'modern' self and social concerns. Between the traditional self and the western shadow is a schism that rends asunder psyche, social, and cultural self and is, arguably, a fracture creating social and cultural trauma. To work with indigenous groups is to engage with this disconnection and sense of loss and confusion. As a consequence, creating performance within such contested contexts typically blends drama and social therapy, education, the interpersonal, and cultural exchange. Artistic production serves as an edifice that gives form to feeling, making visible the invisible forces that surround and shape a person and culture, to reveal its moment in time and space.

In this way performance creation becomes both an event and venue for activism, with all participants serving as socially aware creators and exemplars of possible change, becoming a collective force seeding cultural and social change. This activism focuses on empowering artists within their own cultural context and on their own terms. Performance thus becomes a site of education, transformation, and healing.

Lul Theatre

Litooma produced the *Andegna* project in partnership with Lul Theatre (*lul* means 'world' in Amharic), which hosted the project in a large, walled compound in the mountainous region – altitude 7,546 feet (2,300 metres) above sea level) – north of the city centre.

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A workshop in the compound of the former residence of Esther Selassie's grandmother. Here, in partnership with the hosting Lul Theatre, *Andegna* was workshopped and first performed.

Anatoly Antohin, a Soviet-era dissident playwright and former colleague at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, had recently retired in Addis Ababa and invited me to develop a project. His wife, Esther Selassie, is the great-granddaughter of Haile Selassie, the former Emperor of Ethiopia. She was of royal blood and a princess who had left the country thirty years earlier, narrowly escaping death squads. The government, hungry for foreign investment, had changed its policy and encouraged once-exiled Ethiopians to return home by repatriating confiscated properties. Antohin and Selassie wanted to create an arts centre in the former family compound.

In the middle of the compound was a large, ramshackle house built in the 1920s, the former residence of Selassie's grandmother, a deeply religious woman, who turned the compound into a home for abused women and children. Selassie and her family were restoring the residence as a museum, with outlying buildings as artists' studios. However, in the compound also lived sixty squatters, some of whom Selassie's grandmother had housed and protected. But the majority of residents, though having no connection with the grandmother, refused to give up their free housing even though many had adequate income and owned property elsewhere.

It was there, under the mountain sky, in a field at the front of the compound, near a stone well and next to a garden, that we rehearsed and presented the first public performances of *Andegna*. Goats, chickens, and dogs would wander through our rehearsal space, children would play and watch nearby as women hauled well water, washed clothes by hand, and cooked over open fires. Servants and labourers, making on average $20 a month, cultivated the large garden. The compound was a village, an often loud and eventful microcosm of the nation in the midst of transformation – an ideal setting for our project, which aspired to be part of the larger cultural fabric.

Challenges, Choices, and Changes

When *Andegna* premiered and was subsequently performed at the Lul compound, word travelled fast. The national elections,

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however, were approaching, and the single-party government was sensitive about any suggestion of dissent. We wanted to tour our performance, but university administrators, most of whom are members of the ruling political party, hesitated to take responsibility for what had people talking. When we talked to the two state theatres about performing there, the response was wide-eyed fear. Similarly, the Russian Centre, Goethe Institute, and the Alliance Française also demurred 'for the sake of delicate diplomatic relations', as one official told me. The national television network had heard of the production and initially expressed great interest in doing a news feature or possibly a live broadcast. That changed once the station chief saw a videotape of our performance.

If it were not for the sympathetic Belayneh Abune we would not have performed at all. With Abune's help, permission to perform was secured from the police and university administration at an outdoor space for several performances on the main campus located in the palatial grounds of former Emperor Haile Selassie. But that permit was inexplicably withdrawn, Abune said from the 'fear the performance would incite a riot' (2010).

The University had been known since the early 1960s as a cauldron of political unrest and activism. In a student demonstration in 2005 nearly two dozen students were killed, with scores beaten and injured, when police opened fire on and ruthlessly beat defenceless protesters. Many of the ensemble members had been part of that demonstration and had seen the campus protests first hand, been beaten, or knew others who were killed or injured. Abune, a member of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, adamantly claimed the government had no influence on performances. However, whether that was wishful thinking or wilful ignorance, the reality proved different.

In an interview, I asked Tesfay Gebramriam, artistic director of the National Theatre, whether there was censorship. His response, 'It's not a problem in Ethiopia. In our country you should censor yourself.' When asked how, he replied, 'When you make a new play, you always talk with people who will advise you if it is not good, if there's something that should not be presented they will tell you. Especially in the government theatre, we are not free. There is no censorship per se but everyone is accountable in their own way' (2009).

During the previous national election, the play *Addis Ababa*, written and directed by the highly respected playwright, poet, performer, and director Getenet Eneyew was banned the night before the expensive and highly anticipated production was due to open at the National Theatre. (In the 2005 national elections, Addis Ababa voted overwhelmingly against the ruling party. Soon after, a census was ordered by the government which astonishingly found the capital losing population, which meant that it would lose parliamentary seats held by the opposition party.)

The *Daily Telegraph* in London, reporting the 2010 elections, suggested that they had not changed the country politically, and that an embedded, pervasive, and duplicitous culture of political corruption persisted:

> New York-based Human Rights Watch criticized Sunday's vote as corrupted by pre-election irregularities, including telling voters they could lose food assistance, public-sector jobs, loans, and educational opportunities if they voted against the ruling party. 'Behind an orderly façade, the government pressured, intimidated, and threatened Ethiopian voters,' said Rona Peligal, acting Africa director at Human Rights Watch. 'Whatever the results, the most salient feature of this election was the months of repression preceding it.' (14 May 2010)

The *Andegna* performers were understandably apprehensive about the university performance, but also resolute. Although Ethiopia calls itself a 'democracy', it is not in a sense any North American or Briton would recognize. Speaking your mind, even a little, can result in direct or indirect consequences. Just before I left Addis Ababa in January 2010, seven newspaper reporters and editors of the leading independent newspaper, critical of the ruling party, fled the country ahead of being arrested.

Because the approval to perform at the Arat Kilo theatre came late, we had less than

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Andegna in rehearsal.

a day to advertise the time and new location. Despite only a few hand-made posters, put up around town and campus, word of our performance got out and travelled swiftly by word of mouth and cell phones. By the time we began the performance, the auditorium floor, stage, and balcony were filling, and latecomers continued to arrive, crowding the space with nearly four hundred spectators, mostly students and young people.

Our performance of *Andegna* – which means 'the first' in Amharic – was charged not with politics, provocation, or sedition, but rather with something in its way more dangerous – questions. For questions are like shadows, following and watching, dark and looming, hanging in the air. Only the hard, direct light dissipates a shadow.

The ensemble talked extensively about the consequences of speaking their minds and asking questions in public. 'It is the only way things will change. What else do we have?' remarked ensemble member Endale Berhanu during one of our development discussions.

The first two weeks were of general workshops, offered to thirty-six participants selected through interview and audition. These workshops consisted of general training, theatre games, improvisations, and awareness exercises. From this group ten performers, aged between twenty-three and thirty-one years old, were asked to participate in the performance development phase of the project.

Over a period of two weeks the group developed a culturally specific warm-up that recombined traditional movements, steps, gestures, rhythms, and chants. This 'ritual preparation' served to activate the cultural body and voice as it created an ensemble and provided a template for performance. The strategy was developed while working in a variety of cultural contexts (notably with Alaska Native Tuma Theatre) and has proved to be an effective and immediate demonstration of how to identify and then participate in the transformation of tradition.[3] Yoga and meditation were also introduced as were cul-

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turally non-specific exercises to explore trust, awareness, stillness, concentration, leadership, and imagination.

Body, movement, vocal, and language explorations were also integral to the mix. All our work was discussed, which established an open dialogue and ensemble identity. Personal, bodily, emotional, racial, physical, and cultural barriers were broken down, and, as the work progressed, an awakening unfolded. Giving expression to personal feelings and unleashing of creativity was an unexpected discovery for most of the ensemble. It was something outside a cultural context that values compliance over individual feelings and creativity.

Games, exercises, and improvisations were shaped to explicate our central metaphor of 'shadows'. One game, developed specifically to serve our performance objectives, was a series of partner interactions.

1) To start, one partner, shadows/mimics exactly the other partner, beginning with movement and evolving to include sound and language.

2) The shadow decides selectively and chooses what to shadow/mimic.

3) The shadow decides what, how, and when to dialogue with their partner.

4) The shadow questions and then defies their partner.

5) The shadow instructs and manipulates their partner.

6) The shadow controls their partner, who now becomes the shadow of the shadow.

This, along with other explorations, provoked wide-ranging discussions, which, in turn, spurred further explorations and improvisations – each step building and referring to the previous steps, culminating in the performance of *Andegna*.

The process, methods, and objectives were continually adjusted and discussed, often in Amharic, with my presence being advisory. The work ethos requires transparency, shared ownership, and enabling the ensemble to continue without me. To this end, the group was often divided into smaller groups to work on specific scenes or tasks that they determined. The groups would then return to the larger group for review and discussion. This strategy served short-term and production objectives as it developed leadership skills and allowed the process to breathe with dialogue.

The Neighbourhood Context

The neighbourhood surrounding the outdoor compound offered up a daily cornucopia of expressions that inspired and shaped our workshop. Rhythmic chants and songs coming from the street over the wall would announce various merchants, repair men. and vendors (for example, of grain, fruit, clothing, and junk) as they passed nearby. Each had a uniquely identifiable vocal signature and cadence. The blowing of a traditional small brass horn followed by a call and codified chant would announce a death or funeral in the neighbourhood, adjusted to announce a birth, marriage, meeting, or other occasion.

These call–response chants, calls, and announcements, along with the ubiquitous horn blowing, were explored through discussion, exercises, and improvisation, and became a thematic motif in our performance development phase. Examining metaphoric and theatrical expressiveness of the givens, the overlooked, and the taken-for-granted actions of the everyday served to ground our work. We were in a sense, dialoguing with our community, recognizing the depth and vitality of living performance expressions, as we shaped a contemporary expression. Our work was not exotic – it didn't come from another place, it wasn't something to be learned, but rather all around and already present.

Ethiopia is possibly the most religiously expressive country in the world, with each day bringing a saturation of amplified religious chanting and sermonizing in the near and far distance. Each day was also organized by the Muslim call to prayer, beginning early in the morning and continuing throughout the day. Not to be outdone, the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox churches

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would often broadcast sermons, prayers, and songs for hours on end on significant holy days. On any given day, an Orthodox festival, saint's day, or funeral would take place somewhere in the capital, attended by thousands of the faithful and enveloping them in a highly theatrical and sensuous experience.

Daily, the devoted could be seen walking the streets in full and often elaborate religious regalia. Nuns, monks, and priests would be variously preaching, asking for alms, or proselytizing. When a neigbourhood church had a festival day the streets near our compound would fill with the devoted, the rough stone passages coming alive with performance. The influence of the religious worlds that surrounded us provoked discussions, explorations, and improvisations during our development phase. Religion was the elephant in the room that no one spoke of. It was simply accepted as a given.

Unlike North Americans and Europeans, who value individuality and freedom, the underlying cultural emphasis in Ethiopia is on cultural homogeneity and conformity – in behaviour, dress, and thinking. Proverbs, religious or religiously referenced, are oft repeated and serve as touchstones for the Ethiopian culture of orthodoxy and conformity. 'A fly never enters into a shut mouth', 'Being quiet is gold', 'When you open your mouth your brain is seen', and 'A shoe should be under the bed' (meaning your thoughts should be hidden from the world) are typical.

The Expectation of Conformity

Lealem Berhanu, a twenty-nine-year-old workshop participant, playwright, and director of a children's puppet company, noted that, 'Ethiopians are raised not to question. To ask questions is to be threatening.' Nibret Baychenkin added that he was raised to ask 'what must be done, and not to question. Otherwise you are criticized, maybe beaten by your father, family, teachers, the church, everyone. That is why we are the way we are.'



Rehearsing in the theatre.

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Discussions and improvisations (which explored body codifications) revealed how religious conformity begot social, political, and imaginative conformity. Ethiopia does not draw on a long historical progression of individual rights and freedoms, which, dating from the Magna Carta to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, democratic societies such as the United States, Great Britain, and Western Europe understand as a given. Ethiopia is bereft of such a legacy of individuality and freedom, and is rather a historical succession of religiously fuelled emperors and political despots, dating from the fourth century.

The forty-four-year capricious rule of Haile Selassie, which ended in 1974, was essentially that of a medieval feudal state. That era was followed by civil war and then seventeen years of brutally enforced communist rule, which was followed by the one-party, ethnically determined 'democracy' that holds power today. The admonishment to 'not ask questions' was and remains an acculturated practicality. Many members of the ensemble had family members who were tortured, imprisoned, or killed as a result of the reign of terror that ended in 1991. Add in numerous droughts, famines, civil wars, economic instability, and uprisings, and you have some deep-seated insecurities and traumas generationally flowing through the culture. However, sixteen hundred years of conformity – whether religiously, educationally, or politically manifested – is now coming into daily contact with the egalitarianism conveyed by an emerging global culture and its incumbent values and aspirations.

A theme that the ensemble kept coming back to, and that informed our discussions, work, and improvisations, was conformity. 'We are afraid to ask questions and are ashamed to accept the opinion of another,' said Nuredin Nesro, a tall Muslim performer. 'That is why we are inflexible; we are stuck in only one way of thinking and afraid of anything new,' added Meaza Takele, as she nursed her infant son.

Endale Berhanu, a former church deacon, often became passionate: 'And when people talk it is all about nothing. People talk around things and are afraid to say anything meaningful. That is why Ethiopia never gets anything done. We are all fooling ourselves.' Daniel Gumatain, a recent university graduate, was frustrated: 'And that is why people are suspicious of one another, we don't trust one another, we think everything has a subtext. "What did they mean by that?" you ask all the time. It is how we are raised. That is why we stay silent. It is the safe way to go. Silent, unless talking about nothing.' The group described their culture and education as one of recitation, a 'mimic culture'.

The process of creating our performance required the interrogation of accepted modes and traditional performance forms, which served simultaneous and contradictory functions. Traditional performance expressions encode ways of being in the world, identity, values, history, and behaviour, and that is a deep resource. However, it can also be limiting and restrictive. The individual is shaped by culturally inscribed perceptions of self and body, which, in turn, shape the emotional, psychological, and imaginative ways of being in the world. It could be argued that traditional cultures are sustained by how the body and their world is encoded and written upon. To inscribe the body is to control a person and a society. In this way, traditional inheritances can cut two ways: they are integral to identity, yet can be restrictive, often valorizing outdated ways of being that resist larger social and cultural evolutions.

Bespeaking the Monster

To revisit, transform, and re-contextualize, making the tradition malleable and reflexive, enacts a pro-active re-evaluation of personal and cultural identity. The project asked the performers to question and re-conceptualize their cultural resources. Rather than blindly accepting western modes of performance creation and expression or, alternatively, reverting to the structures of traditional performance, the ensemble members were charged with the creation of an expression suited to their specific needs. Our work was not about creating nostalgic, museum renderings, but rather about reimagining

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Ethiopia and themselves through their bodies and performance.

We had been working for nearly three weeks when I asked a question: 'If Ethiopia is such a great nation and culture, one going back thousands of years, what happened? Why is your life so miserable now? Why is it at the bottom among the world's nations?' The ensemble members stirred uneasily. Although we had developed a friendship and trust, I was nonetheless an outsider criticizing their nation.

An Ethiopian's connection with their land is sacred, beyond patriotism – almost spiritual. Several ensemble members had their afterbirth buried as a demonstration of their connection to the land. They are not a nation of immigrants but of people who have inhabited a land for thousands of years, developing a place-based culture and world view that is difficult for migration-based cultures such as the United States to comprehend. For me to criticize Ethiopia was to criticize them personally.

I was, however, bespeaking the monster of truth. I was obliged to say what they could not, should not, or would not. My role is to connect the events of their lives with the events they present on stage. I see performers as avatars, community surrogates, creators, destroyers, and catalysts for social change.

The unemployment rate in Ethiopia is about 45 per cent, higher among young adults, who are forced to live with parents, marry late, and scrape by with low-paying jobs and their wits. Occasional radio drama, theatre, and film roles provided performers with some income. Several taught an occasional drama class at an international school; one had a children's puppet theatre, others cobbled together income by doing day labour, working in shops, doing translations, being street vendors, or simply finding what they could when they could. Two ensemble members were former high-school teachers with salaries equal to $75 a month. Several in the group could not afford bus transport, which came to 80 cents a day. During our eight-hour workdays I provided lunch or dinner for the ensemble at a local restaurant, which cost about $12 for the entire group.

Soon after my initial question, the process took on a life of its own. Like any culture, history melds with mythology, willing into existence an idealized, prideful, self-image, which, if not counterbalanced with a dose of honest evaluation, can lead to delusion and the perpetuation of the irrelevant or dysfunctional. Such was the case in Ethiopia. For many of the performers, disillusionment and distrust in their system was an accepted fact. 'We have not learned from the past because we are so prideful, and we are so prideful because in reality we are afraid and insecure,' Endale Berhanu said during a discussion. This was later incorporated into our performance. 'We accept we are poor because we know no other way.'

'We have become deceitful and dishonest with ourselves and one another. A man may be hungry, but he will act like he is wealthy. A man may tell you he is your friend, but he is really working against you. This is the way we are now. We like the past because our present is so pitiful,' remarked Lealem Berhanu. 'We hide the truth. When you talk to people there is always a subtext, we are a people that have a public face that hides our private face. This is because for so long we have not been able to say what we really think or feel. Now it has become the way we are,' continued Mehyahel Teshome. These sentiments were included in the perforance of *Andegna*.

Aspects of *Andegna*

Ethiopian culture is thousands of years old, one of the oldest continuing cultures in the world, born at the crossroads of ancient civilization and, arguably, the first in many ways – and although no longer the first today, a culturally embedded and propagated sense of superiority, if not arrogance, lives on. It was this out-of-date and inflated self-image the ensemble wanted to expose. Where did it come from? Why and how did it persist?

When it was pointed out to me, I became aware of the oft-repeated advertising and billboard slogans proclaiming 'The First' and 'The Best' all around the city. In everyday

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conversation, in body language and interactions, a sense of anointed entitlement, if not racism, became increasingly apparent. The ensemble identified Ethiopia's mythic self-image as a 'co-existing evil twin', a 'ghost' or persistent 'shadow that has turned on and destroyed its master, reality'.

The ensemble touched on sensitive racial issues, calling even the concept of what was 'traditionally' Ethiopian into question. The physical look associated with Ethiopia is generally characterized as lighter and brown-skinned, with angular facial features and straighter hair, reflecting centuries of intermarriage with Arabs and other Middle Eastern groups. This generally accepted, traditional Ethiopian look was part of a cultural narrative shaped by the Tigray people of the north, the historical site of the ancient Axumite Empire and the city of Axum, a major trading and military power dating back to dynastic Egypt.

Axum, Ethiopia's oldest city and home of the Queen of Sheba, is today a small, arid city of scattered ruins visited by tourists. The current prime minister is from the Tigray region, as are many in his government and military, perpetuating an elitist and racial provenance that overshadows the national narrative. Those Ethiopians coming from the south of the country had what many Ethiopians derogatorily called 'Bantu' features, and those living near the border with Kenya border were often considered 'black' and 'African', not 'really' Ethiopian. A racial sense of hierarchy, based on physical appearance and ethnic association, was another aspect of the Ethiopian sense of being 'the first'.

Lucy, Our Genetic Mother

The oldest human remains in the world were found in Ethiopia – often referred to as the cradle of the human species. The fragmentary bones named 'Lucy' provide the oldest humanoid remains, the genetic mother of us all, the 'first', and a point of national pride. The irony of Lucy being ape-like, and given her English name by a white, American archaeologist, is not lost. It was with Lucy that our performance began.

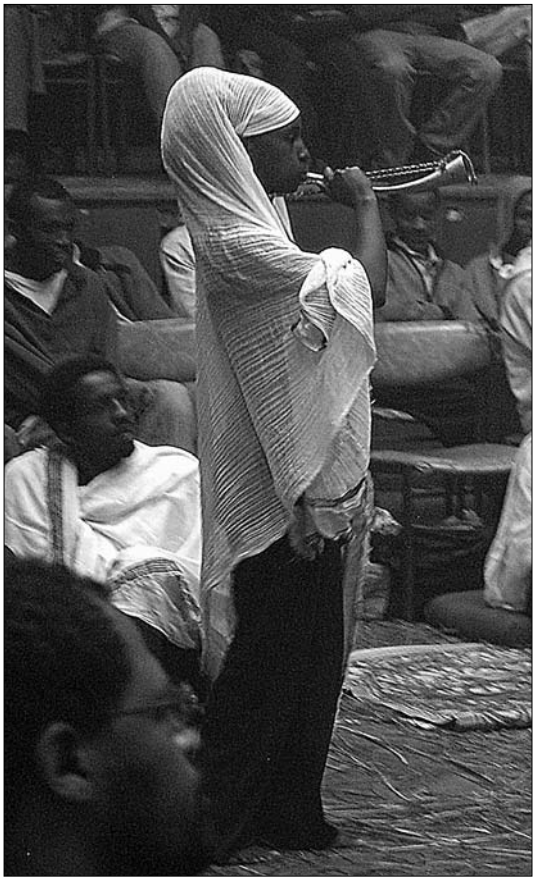
The performance opens with the stage empty and encircled by the audience. Behind and surrounding the audience the performers used a variety of traditional 'calls'. These codified and stylized calls, still used in rural and urban settings today, are familiar to Ethiopians and are evocative of 'traditional' ways of being. The calls, serving as a sort of town crier, were inspired by what echoed on the streets outside the compound where we rehearsed.

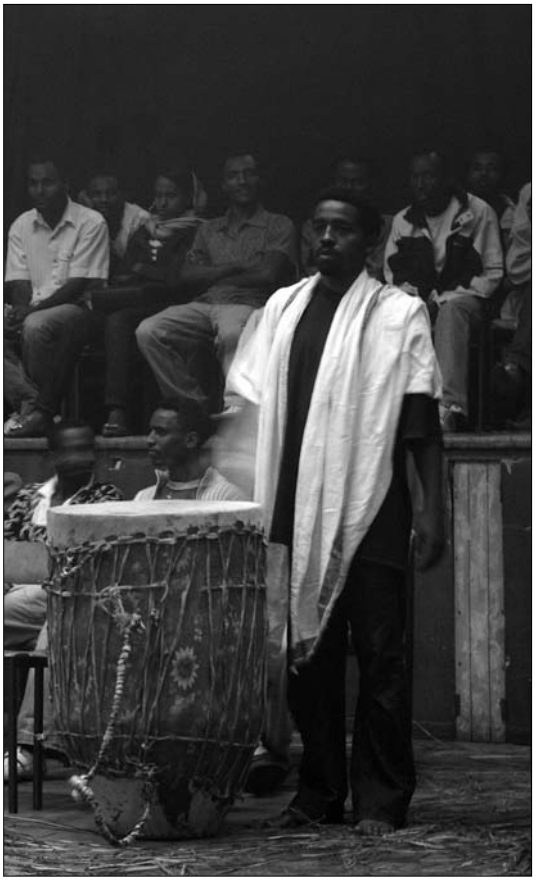
The multiple and simultaneous traditional calls immediately established the context for our performance, with the overlay of calls suggesting a stylized reinvention and application of the tradition – in a sense creating a preface for what was to come. A brass horn blowing – a traditional form of announcement – beckoned the ensemble to the circle, forming the metaphoric and mythic Ethiopia. Once in the circle, the performers, each representing a different and far-reaching ethnic region (conveyed by dialect or local language), used traditional call-responses to convey why they are calling. One is making a call to war, another for a death, and others for a land dispute, auction, celebration, and the like.

Then the action switches to dialogue and disagreement: 'Why are we all called here?' 'You are disturbing me, I was busy.' There is anger and confusion, which persists until the fragmented Ethiopian culture, calling and arguing for so many different reasons, falls away once it is realized that Lucy, their mother, has called to unify them. The weight of the truth coupled with the recognition of Lucy makes them ashamed and afraid.

Unlike the performers and the myriad ethnic groups they represent, Lucy was deemed without shadows. She implores them to stand, much like our evolutionary ancestors had to. She asks the gathered Ethiopians, her progeny, to stand and adapt – to grow up. They try, stumble, and falter. Some are afraid or use crutches, others make excuses, or make fun, imitate, mimic, or ridicule those who try, or refuse defiantly, self-righteously, preferring the crippled status quo. The inability to stand on their own resonated loudly with our audiences. And

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Andegna in performance.



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with this thinking, complacency and fear were established as themes. Hoots and hollers of audience recognition told us that we had hit a nerve.

Lucy leaves, going into the world. Those left behind miss her, realize, and bemoan their missed opportunity, crying and calling out for another chance.

The Queen of Sheba

Slowly, they stumble awkwardly, learning to stand on their own. The Queen of Sheba returns from Jerusalem and in her womb is Menelik the First, son of wise King Solomon. Sheba is, of course, the most beautiful woman in the world, her child fathered by the wisest man in the world. This is the origin of the Ethiopian cultural and mythic narrative. The ancient kingdom of Axum is established and is equal to the other great empires of the ancient world.

Soon Emperor Menelik goes to his father King Solomon and steals the Ark of the Covenant – the stone tablet on which God inscribed the Ten Commandments for Moses to deliver to the world. Ethiopians do not see this as thieving, but destiny, for the Jewish temple would soon be destroyed, and it was they, the Ethiopians, who saved the sacred tablets for all of humanity. To this day, Ethiopians insist that the Ark of the Covenant resides in their country, its exact location kept secret for its protection. The Jews think the Ethiopians are delusional, whereas the Ethiopians (many ensemble members among them) vehemently argue that they are the God-ordained keepers of the sacred tablets on which human civilization stands. It is for this reason that Ethiopia is said to be one of the lost tribes of Israel, and why Haile Selassie, the direct 'descendent' of Sheba, came to be God incarnate for the Rastafarians. The history and culture of Ethiopia is a folding of myth and history, often made to serve political or religious agendas. When repeated often enough, compounded, and built upon, it becomes fact.

In the year 420 of the modern era, Ethiopia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as its religion. Orthodox means the 'correct way' and Ethiopians feel that only they practise Christianity as Christ intended, with all other forms of Christianity being inferior.

Today, one cannot underestimate the pervasive influence Orthodox Christianity has on Ethiopia. Ethiopia is religious to an extreme: its history, politics, mythology, and religions blur. Ensemble member Lealem Berhanu told me, 'Religion and Ethiopia cannot be separated because they are the same. It is how the people survive and are controlled. If not for religion, there would be violence because our situation is very bad.'

Orthodoxy and Islam

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Ethiopian psyche and identity were shaped and are today maintained by the contours of regressive and repressive Christian Orthodoxy which categorically resists any social, cultural, or individual advancement. But, in an uncertain, changing, and challenging world, the Orthodox Church has become also a salve holding great sway over the people and perpetuating unhealthy co-dependency.

Endale Berhanu continued: 'It is like family, you know it may not be correct, but it is your mother and father and you can do nothing but love and protect them. It doesn't matter what you feel and know otherwise.' This line was incorporated into the performance, which voiced publicly the widely felt and unspoken.

The religious righteousness of Ethiopia was further solidified when, in the eighth century, it became the first nation to accept and offer refuge to Islam.

In Islamic history and tradition, Ethiopia (Abyssinia or Al-Habasha) is known as the 'Haven of the First Migration or Hijra'. For Muslims, Ethiopia is synonymous with freedom from persecution and emancipation from fear. Ethiopia was a land where its king, Negus or Al-Najashi, was a person renowned for justice and in whose land human rights were cherished.

The meaning and the significance of 'Hijra' is embodied in the Islamic calenda. . . . History has shown that the first migration to Ethiopia and the second migration to Madinah have indeed laid down the foundation on which Islam, as a universal religion, was built. Ever since that experience, the Muslim community, wherever they settled,

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Andegna in performance.



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shifted from the position of minority to majority, from weakness to permanent strength, from tribalism to universal brotherhood that knows no defined political boundaries. (Najib Mohammed, 2011)

Many Muslims stayed and made Ethiopia their home, and today Christians and Muslims live in relative harmony. And, with this, Ethiopia's special and first status was further validated. 'Surely,' Nuredin Nesro, a Muslim ensemble member remarks ironically in the performance, 'Ethiopia is a special land and people blessed and protected by all gods and religions.'

Nationhood

Ethiopia was the first African nation. The strong rule of Ras Tewodros rides into the performance grandly on the shoulders of others and introduces the spark of modern nationhood and identity. Tewodros fights would-be colonizing England and rather than be captured in defeat kills himself.

Ethiopians see this act as self-sacrificing and heroic. England, distracted by other wars, leaves. Menelik II solidifies the dream of nationhood in the nineteenth century and Ethiopia becomes the first African nation to unite varied and often rival ethnic groups into a modern nation state. Ethiopia was the first and only nation to defeat a European power (the Italians in the late nineteenth century) and the only African nation never to be colonized; they consider the five years of Italian Fascism (1936–1941) an occupation. Ethiopia was also the first African nation to modernize.

The forward-thinking, yet often despotic, Menelik II forced Ethiopia into the modern era, making it the first African nation to have telephones, automobiles, hotels, and cinemas, and the first to adopt modern education and warfare.

The influential Menelik II is introduced as a character bestriding the country, subjugating and transforming rival ethnic groups into a nation. That scene transforms into a schoolroom setting, where the mentality of the modern nation is shaped – schooling being metaphoric of a larger transformation. A classroom lesson evolves into an argumentative free-for-all. Everyone wants to lead and no one is listening or allowing anyone else to finish what they are saying. Some refuse or are ashamed to accept the possibility that others might be correct, and finding fault in others is rampant.

One of the students cries out, 'Why are we always talking and never getting anything done?' Another replies, 'What did you mean by that?' Others are afraid to question the authority of the increasingly demanding teacher. Students become resistant, inflexible. 'Stay silent, that is the safest way to go!' declares one student, and the teacher responds, 'Yes, silent unless talking about nothing!' The scene spins into absurdity, with everyone talking about a non-issue and no one listening. Lucy, a student in the classroom, stands and speaks out, admonishing her classmates, only to be shouted down. 'What you are doing will have consequences! You have been living closely together for too long and are eating one another!' she declares, as she is banished from the scene.

Throughout the production, the ensemble either directly applied or reworked traditional performance, dance, song, and stylized forms of dialogue to retrace the well-known high points of Ethiopian history and mythology. The weaving of traditional expression with contemporary perspectives proved to be an unexpectedly potent mix. The juxtaposition and conflict of form and content pointedly revealed to our audience the disconnection between idealized Ethiopia and modern reality. The hollowness of a spent vision of Ethiopia was exposed.

The performance was presented, excepting a few lines, entirely in Amharic; it was created for its community, not for export. It was not a parody or satire, which would have been too easy and less effective. Nor was it a history lesson, but a thematic interrogation of Ethiopia's wilful self-delusion and interpretation of events. Each scene wove familiar thematic threads of a mythohistorical narrative, questioning and showing them not as heroic, but rather religiously and politically motivated. The performance traced Ethiopia from its ancient roots

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through empire to modern nation, characterizing it as having always served a hierarchical ruling or religious elite rather than the best interests of the people it controlled and exploited.

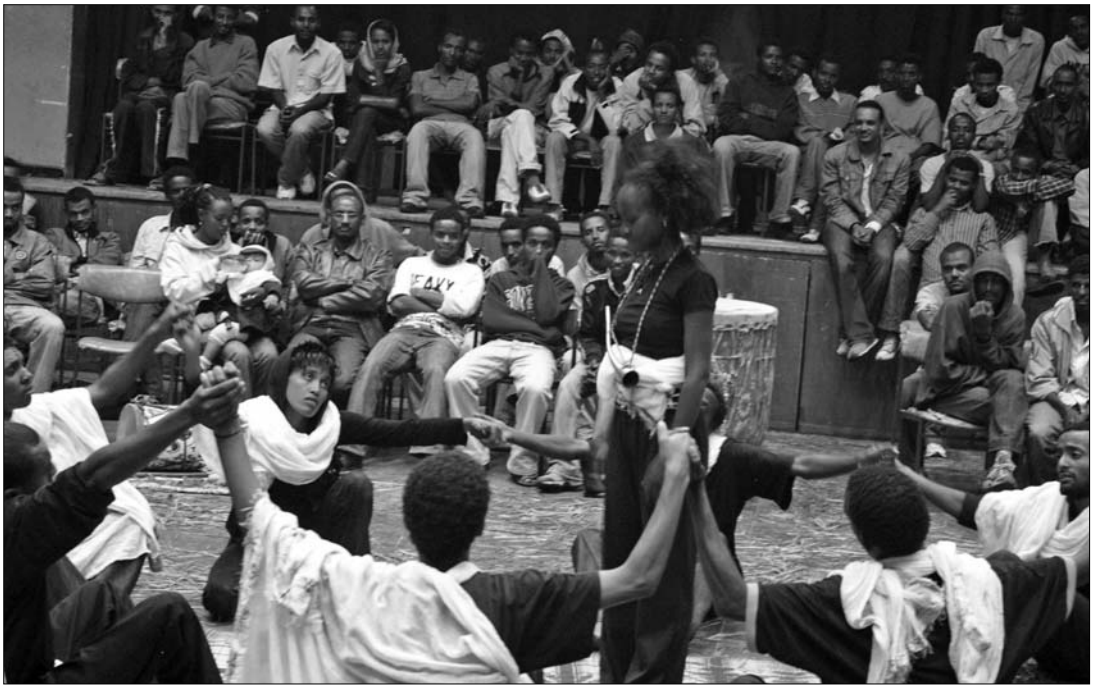
From Haile Selassie to the Derg

Ethiopia continued its misguided, corrupt, and self-serving journey under the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie. The Selassie period is now far enough in the past to be often romanticized, with the man portrayed as a hero, now showing up on T-shirts and posters as a symbol of modern and defiant Africa. 'His shadow is long and still with us,' remarked Nuredin Nesro. Ethiopia, under the forty-four-year reign of Selassie, created the Pan-African Union, a sort of United Nations of Africa, which made him a *de facto* spokesperson for Africa during the Cold War, another 'first' and point of Ethiopian pride.

The shrewd and self-aggrandizing Selassie was self-mythologizing, presenting himself as the 'Lion of Africa', promoter of modernization, independence, and, of course, the Rastafarian godhead. But his rule also had a dark side – namely, his feared secret police and prisons, his opulent lifestyle, his delusional and capricious feudal rule, and a gross insensitivity to the needs of his people, causing the deaths of millions during some of Africa's worst droughts. Selassie's official title was so grandiose it verged on self-parody: 'King of Kings, Emperor and Conquering Lion of Judah, Elect of God and Imperial Majesty of Ethiopia' (Buyers). The years of his long rule, his mythology being so well known, needed only passing reference in *Andegna.*

The crumbling of his reign is what the performance focused on – particularly when he was photographed in one of his gold-flaked palaces feeding large steaks to his pet lions, the symbols of his rule. At that same moment, a British documentary filmmaker was in another part of the country filming the effects of one of the worse famines Africa had ever seen. Millions died. It was the moment that crystallized Ethiopia's wilful and flagrant disconnect between myth and reality.

But such self-delusion did not end with the overthrow of Selassie's feudal reign. Forgetfulness and not seeing the obvious seems to



Lucy celebrated.

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be a part of the Ethiopian psyche. Ethiopia suffers from a willed amnesia: although it embraces and lives in the past, it does not seem to learn from it.

Selassie was overthrown by Africa's first Soviet-styled communist regime, the Derg. In performance, traditional dances and songs mutated into communist slogans, marches, and songs. One form of brutal rule blurred into another, more savage and bloody rule. 'Ethiopia repeats its past because it is afraid to move forward. The past is where we live,' Lucy intoned.

Depicted in the performance was how the Derg hunted down and killed anyone who was educated, could read and write – basically anyone who could think, and so was seen as a threat. Those who could not escape were shot once in the head, their bodies dragged into the street to rot. To add to the horror and trauma, the family of the murdered had to pay for the bullet, and mourning was not allowed under penalty of death.

Over the course of communist rule, millions of Ethiopians lost their lives. The shadow of the Derg, which lost power in 1991, still haunts the psyche of the nation to this day. 'The truth is left unsaid, festering and infecting the present and future' became a line in the performance. The psychopathic leader of the Derg was never brought to justice and today resides in Zimbabwe, a country where another African horror story is waiting to be told.

Today

Throughout the performance of *Andegna*, the spirit of Lucy, the mother of humanity and symbol of Ethiopia's origins, returns to witness, comment, and ask questions. Sometimes she is recognized, becoming a battle cry or a political symbol when needed, but most of the time she is ignored or forgotten. At the end of the performance she returns for a reckoning.

The gentle and petite Kidist Girma performed Lucy with quiet simplicity, trudging through the Ethiopian psyche like an understanding and long-suffering mother. It isn't until the present day – the now, the where and when of the performance – that the ensemble begins to listen and respond to the questions Lucy has been asking all along: 'We have made ourselves the way we are, and we can make ourselves the way we want to be.'

The performance of *Andegna* could not critique the present government; to do so would have been dangerous for the performers. They would have been threatened, beaten, or jailed, and I would have been deported. Such a possibility was real and very much on our minds.

The last ten minutes of the performance was a quiet conversation after much physical action, singing, dancing, and some hard-hitting dialogue during the action. The ensemble sat in a circle and talked informally about what it had discovered during the process of creation and performance. They revealed what they had learnt about themselves, about Ethiopia, what needed to change, and their hopes for the future. We avoided any direct criticism of the present government by speaking only abstractly of the past and the future.

Up until this point in the performance the audience had variously cheered, whistled and openly commented, while singing and clapping along with the performers. During this last section they sat motionless. The scene was developed as a structured improvisation. Performers, working off the theme of shadows, could say whatever they felt appropriate. It was simply an open dialogue in front of their community, but that in itself was radical. Performers and audience alike were all witnesses and participants. The theatre and its double – the shadow and reality – converged and conversed.

At the very end of the performance Lucy, the symbol of standing up, is elevated by the ensemble and carried into the future. The performance, developed and offered with generosity, was met with a generous response. For generosity, not selfishness was how the seeds of Ethiopia's future would flourish.

At the end, as the audience mingled and talked with the ensemble and one another, I was told that the planned second performance in the auditorium was cancelled, our permit revoked.

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During the performance, the two policemen assigned to us had threatened to shut the show down immediately. Quick thinking Lealem Berhanu promised I would pay the equivalent of $50 if allowed to finish. I paid.

Freedom in Ethiopia can't be guaranteed, but it has a price.

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Notes

1. The Lozi people of southern Zambia believe their ancestors live on an island in the sky called Litooma, which humans call to earth during performance. The songs, dances, and rhythms of performance are a call serving to create a site that brings the many parts of the community together to perform as an expression of communality and continuity. The rhythm of the land unifies and propels the event, the community is reaffirmed, problems and conflicts are identified and sorted, and the totality of the world is revealed. All earthly and human issues are interrelated and only coherent in terms of other parts of the larger community. All human sickness is spirit sickness, and weather, migrations, good and bad fortunes are all related to the fragile balance of place and its inhabitants. The function of performance is to break down the boundaries between realities and community participants so as to reaffirm, and in so doing, rebalance the world, human and non-human. When the Lozi performance is finished, the island of Litooma, the village of ancestors, returns to the sky to watch over the earthly community. Other community members (humans, animals and other elements) return to their way of being in the world, boundaries separating them until they perform again.

2. 'Indigenous' and 'traditional' are often problematic, overlapping, and fluid terms. When using the term 'indigenous' in reference to performance, I mean a performance language (actions, regalia, rhythm, song, and structure) that implicates and expresses specifically an indigenous world view. Within that world view humans are only one part of the community, the conveners of an event that brings together other members of the community of place, namely, the animals, spirits, ancestors, and elemental forces of nature. Performance within this context has the implied objective of celebrating, remediating, and balancing a community of place. Performance in this context is a functional interaction to effect real and practical change, and shares the characteristics most vividly exemplified in the ritual and shamanistic practices of hunting-gathering groups. The elements of the indigenous performance are shaped by and expressive of this intent. When using the word 'traditional', I mean those actions, regalia, sounds, music, and structures that have been codified by a culture and become mnemonics and containers of cultural memory. Traditional expressions may very well have indigenous origins and indigenous performance manifestations serve a similar mnemonic function; however, the fundamental difference is that traditional performance expressions (folk dancing, for instance) are not focused on the objective of expressing and/or remediating place. Traditional performance expressions can be atomized, can travel, and be reconfigured. Indigenous expressions have currency only relationally to a larger community of place, context, functionality, and objective. Indigenous performance expressions out of context become something else; they may become traditional, but their function changes.

3. Those interested in further details regarding performance development tools and methods can refer to my book *Performing Africa: Remixing Tradition, Theatre, and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); and to my essays: 'Emandulo: Process and Performance in a Changing South Africa', *Theatre Research International*, XIX, No. 3 (1994), p. 238–61; 'Politics, Slapstick, and Zulus on Tour', *The Drama Review*, XL, No. 4 (1996), p. 94–117; 'Reimagining Yup'ik and Inupiat Performance', *Northwest Theatre Review*, No. 7 (Fall 1999); and 'Body Space Place: Creating Indigenous Performance', in Eva Leveton, ed., *Healing Collective Trauma with Sociodrama and Drama Therapy* (New York: Springer, 2010), p. 149–77. See also my website, <www.thomasriccio.com>.

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