

Speaking the Unspeakable: Unsing the Song

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There is an old saying in the theatre, "If you have a message, use Western Union." But, for every old saying there is an exception, and Anne Bluethenthal is that exception. As an artist/choreographer/dancer, her work must be recognized, applauded, embraced. *Unsing the Song* is her most recently choreographed work as part of the travelling exhibition entitled *Relections on Genocide with Speaking the Unspeakable* which premiered last weekend at Project Artaud before continuing its international tour. To witness it is a painful honor, reminding us how infinitely transcendent and healing art can be — art that transforms the worst of experiences into something exquisitely moving, lyrical, and hauntingly beautiful.



In the US, the question "What is your Ethnic Identity?" isn't one of life or death. But in mid 20th century Germany it was. And in 1994 Rwanda, the systematic use of rape and the deliberate attempt to spread HIV to further cripple a people in the name of "ethnic cleansing" was perpetrated against 250,000 women. Today, 175,000 of these women are living in Rwanda with HIV, and of course many have died. Today, the systematic use of rape is still ongoing in Sudan, northern Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Bluethenthal and the nonprofit WE-ACTx have teamed with Rwandan survivors groups and local artists to present the Tubeho Project ("To Live Again" in Kinyarwanda), an oral history documentary project about women's experiences in the genocide and their lives today. According to Anne-Christine d'Adesky, Co-Founder and US curator of the Tubeho Project, with SURF-Rwanda, this exhibit is the first time Rwandan women who survived the genocidal rape and its aftermath —HIV and AIDS— are speaking to a global audience. Their stories of resistance and survival are inspiring and shockingly sorrowful.

There are so many heartrending moments in *Unsing the Song*, "By the time I got where I was going, they'd killed those I was going to, so I hid among the dead." Also in the gestures of the dance, one young dancer's repeated attempts to escape a nightmarish number of human obstacles, each larger than the next, or the inability to wipe off the blood of the dying, along with the dragging of bodies slain, not to mention the soul-stirring vocal accompaniment to Ms. Bluethenthal's solo.

Cassandra Carpenter's costumes in earthtone colors of dirt, and scorching sunburnt oranges and yellows against Lynda Reiman's set with its blood-red backdrop alternating with projected images of shoes and bones, amidst streams of asymmetrical white cloth torn like shrouds hung-out-to-dry add to the immense emotional impact of the evening along with the sounds of Africa —designed by Cari Campbell and Shakiri— in the first piece "I Remember, and then the Rain Came" and Melanie DeMore's and Marc Ream's sound design sung by Melanie DeMore and Pyeng Threadgill in *Unsing the Song*.

The photography exhibit of Rwanda's women survivors with their personal stories is also a platform to speak out, to educate, and to discuss the lessons Rwanda offers the world. The photographs are simple but elegant. The stories are a heartbreaking testament to the strength of the female spirit to survive through mutual support. The title *Unsing the Song* derives from the testimony of a Sudanese wise woman — highly esteemed in Sudanese culture (listen up America)— who recalls that her government instructed the women to sing their men into battle. When the wise woman realized that the army would be committing genocide, she longed to unsing her song.

"Our lives depend on collective survival. We carry the ghosts of our dead beloved ones on our backs, and we have the responsibility to do so. We must speak for the souls of the millions of victims we failed to protect in the past and in the present. We too can go forward and do something to stop another genocide from happening." And with her company of fine dancers, Ms. Bluethenthal certainly has. *Speaking the Unspeakable* gives a glimpse of what is possible. As Ms. Bluethenthal states "the one who stays silent must explain."