

Eclipsed is not to be missed

Written by Peter Rachleff, Professor of History, Macalester College



Our metro area ranks among the best nationally in opportunities to see live theater. Much of that theater is quite good. But, now and then, a play is staged which simply cannot be missed. For the year 2010, that play is *Eclipsed*, to be staged from September 17 to October 10, at the Playwrights' Center on Minneapolis' Franklin Avenue by Frank Theatre; the production is directed by Wendy Knox, and features a spectacular local cast.

Written by Danai Gurira, a young Zimbabwean-American of great heart and intellect, *Eclipsed* is the story of five Liberian women trapped in that country's prolonged civil wars. Four of them are the unwilling "wives" of a guerrilla "commanding officer," who use threads of solidarity and competition to weave themselves into a fragile community. The fifth is a "peace woman," an educated, urban dweller who, like the others, has lost all her material possessions and, like the others, is unsure of her future. Their dreams, visions, and even identities have been "eclipsed" by the violence which surrounds them, but not erased. We sit on the edge of our seats, waiting to see what will emerge, what these young women can make emerge, as they explore their relationships with each other and the situation around them changes shape.

When *Eclipsed* premiered last fall at Washington, D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth Theatre, the *Washington Post* called it "a surprisingly vivacious portrait of helplessness, of the entirely human impulse to adapt, conveyed with a lovely authority, at times even a whimsicality." At the end of the 2009-2010 season, the Washington, D.C., theater community recognized *Eclipsed* with their Helen Hayes Award as the best new play of the year. It received similar praise in Los Angeles and New Haven, and, when it was staged in Johannesburg's Windybrow Theater this past month, *Shout-Africa* wrote: "Drawing on reserves of wit and compassion, these defiant survivors ask: when the fog of war lifts, could a different destiny emerge?" The South African production is soon to move to the famous Market Theatre, while the Twin Cities production will soon be matched by local productions in Boston and Chicago.

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Eclipsed is spreading awareness of Gurira's talents. Born in Grinnell, Iowa, where her father taught chemistry, she and her family moved to Zimbabwe when that country was born out of the former "Southern Rhodesia." She was five. Gurira was educated in the new Zimbabwe and, upon her graduation from high school, she returned to the U.S. Midwest to attend Macalester College. There, she studied Psychology and Theater, became a leader among African and African American students, always seeking to build bridges between these on-campus communities, and sharpened her acting skills. Not only did she appear on the Macalester mainstage, but she also created a solo piece which she performed on the Penumbra Stage as part of Laurie Carlos' "Late Nite" series.

Upon her graduation, she headed to New York City, where she earned an MFA in Acting at NYU. While there, she developed her interest in playwriting, and, in 2006 wrote and performed a two-woman piece, "In the Continuum," which was a surprise hit in New York City, leading to productions in which she performed in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, Harare, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. For this play, which explores, with searing intensity and humor, Black women's experiences with HIV/AIDS across the diaspora, Gurira was awarded the Village Voice's coveted Obie Award in playwriting. Even as she continues to write (she is currently working on an historical trilogy about Zimbabwe), Gurira also continues to act, receiving accolades for her work in the independent film *The Visitor* and as "Martha Pentecost" in the recent Broadway production of August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The richness of all five characters in *Eclipsed* give evidence of Gurira's roots as an actor. Each one is a role that any actor would love to perform.

Gurira's Midwestern ties give us a bridge to this play. So, too, does the presence of Liberians in our community. Indeed, our metro area is home to the largest U.S. community of Liberians, and their struggles to achieve stable immigration status, to create economic security for themselves and the members of their families who remain in Liberia, and to find their own place in our communities, have touched many of us deeply. With Jewish Community Action, the Advocates for Human Rights, the Immigrant Law Center, the Council on Black Minnesotans, and other community-based groups, Liberians helped to create the Coalition for Permanent Residency, which has sought to stabilize the situations of all immigrants on "temporary protected status" in our community. They have collaborated with playwrights and theater artists to create plays which examine the historical relationships between African Americans and Liberians. They have provided support for Congressman Keith Ellison's projects for immigrant rights and racial justice, and they have become visible participants in key labor unions such as the Minnesota Nurses Association, the Service Employees International Union, and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union. *Eclipsed* gives us an opportunity to engage some of the history that brought our Liberian co-workers and neighbors to our community.

Part of what also makes *Eclipsed* a great play is the way it challenges its audiences to consider what we would do were we in those women's places. In an interview, Gurira said: "Who would you be in those circumstances where the choices are as awful as they are?" As we watch these five women wrestle with sexual assault, material privation, and humiliation, and weigh their options from adaptation to resistance, from picking up a gun to picking up a book, we realize that, in Gurira's words, we are "in an environment where the correct choice almost doesn't exist."

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Do we put our emphasis on “almost” or on “correct” or on “environment”? As we appreciate the strengths these women manifest and the possibilities they create, we cannot help but think of our own lives. What of our hopes, visions, and identities have been “eclipsed,” and what might we yet make emerge? Come and be challenged by a great piece of theater.

Eclipsed will be staged from September 17 to October 10 by Frank Theatre at the Playwrights’ Center, 2301 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis. Performances will be Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, and Sunday afternoons at 2 pm. The Sunday afternoon performances will be followed by panel discussions. Eclipsed is directed by Wendy Knox and features Sha Cage, Hope Cervantes, Nisreen Dawan, Signe Harriday, and Yeukai Mudzi. For tickets and other information, call (612) 724-3760 or visit www.franktheatre.org