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# LOVING CAREFULLY



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## AN HIV THEORY FORMULATED IN UGANDA FINDS THEATRICAL RELEVANCE IN LESOTHO

BY KATT LISSARD

**MY THEATRE EXPERIENCES IN AFRICA HAVE BEEN BUILT ON SYNCHRONICITIES. ONE OF** These fortuitous intersections involves Uganda, science writer Helen Epstein, New York's Housing Works Bookstore and the Winter/Summer Institute—an international project whose aim is to create theatre in Africa focusing on the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Epstein first went to Uganda in 1993, and over the next 10 years she traveled throughout eastern and southern Africa investigating how governments, health care workers, NGOs, AIDS activists, traditional healers and ordinary people were responding to the ravages of AIDS. Her travels and ongoing research eventually took her back to Uganda to look at that nation's impressive and singular success (beginning in the late 1990s) at decreasing the spread of HIV.

That success—as Epstein explains in her engrossing book, *The Invisible Cure: Why We Are Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa*—was based on people in Uganda understanding where their HIV risks were coming from and responding in a focused way. Chief among those recognized hazards was “concurrency”—a greater tendency for African people to have simultaneous, ongoing, committed sexual relationships with a small number of people at a time. This pattern contrasts with the “serial monogamy” com-

Above, post-performance bilingual dialogue (Sesotho and English) with Lesotho's Maluti mountain range as a backdrop; below, Katleho 'Moleli and Rethabile Mokete

mon in the West, or the casual relationships that occur everywhere.

With concurrency, people are at high risk from HIV even if they aren't promiscuous in the usual sense of the word. A married man, for example, might have a girlfriend on the side, and his girlfriend might have a long-term boyfriend of her own, and her boyfriend might have another girlfriend or a wife. If any one of these people contracts HIV, they are all placed at high risk, even if they have been involved with each other for years. HIV might be introduced into such a concurrency network if only one person has unprotected sex with a casual partner who is infected, or if one of these stable relationships breaks up and a new partner is linked into the network.

While Epstein points out that Uganda was uniquely primed for an active, community-based response to HIV, the urgent message of her book concerns concurrency's impact on the spread of the virus in the rest of East and southern Africa, home to nearly half of all those living with HIV today. *The Invisible Cure* doesn't advocate imposing Western sexual lifestyles on Africa, or attempting to dismantle concurrent networks, but it does encourage making clear the risks involved. In Uganda, one of the most successful campaigns dealing with concurrency was built around the slogans "Love Carefully" and "Zero Grazing," which sent Uganda's AIDS Control Program's message: "Avoid indiscriminate and free-ranging sexual relations."

I didn't know about *The Invisible Cure* when Lucy Winner and I walked into Housing Works in May. As co-founders of the Winter/Summer Institute in Theatre for Development (WSI), we brought along six of Lucy's students from Empire State College, State University of New York, to hear someone else speak: South African journalist Jonny Steinberg, whose excellent new book, *Sizwe's Test: A Young Man's Journey Through Africa's AIDS Epidemic*, deals with stigma and denial. All of us would be taking part in WSI's summer residency in Lesotho, a constitutional monarchy and landlocked country (formerly Basutoland) entirely surrounded by South Africa. But Epstein's voice on the panel—and her theory about concurrency—was revelatory. It had an immediate effect on what we planned to do in Africa.

Six weeks later, in the impoverished mountains of Lesotho's Malealea Valley, we would "perform concurrency" for an audience of more than 600 villagers and two chiefs. WSI actors and village performers would stage a comically chilling scene—a concurrent network of lovers coming together, then unraveling in the wake of HIV.

We were careful to construct our theatrical concurrent network using immediately recognizable characters. The first link in the chain is the sanctimonious married man in the village who claims to be devoted to his wife when everyone knows he's been sleeping with her best friend for years—his wife takes one extended arm, his girlfriend the other. The audience bursts out laughing, elbowing each other and hooting at the actor playing the sanctimonious man. "That's how it is!" a villager standing next to me in the audience, wearing a traditional patterned Basotho blanket, exclaims: "That's just how it is!"

The wife of the sanctimonious man offers her unattached hand, and her lover, a retrenched miner, comes swaggering forward into the chain to claim it. The miner is followed quickly by his other long-term girlfriend (his high school sweetheart), who has also been carrying on for several years with her boss at the bottle store. Moments after the miner's girlfriend and her boss and her boss's wife join the chain, the principal from the primary school comes forward and attaches himself to the boss's wife while extending his free hand to the slinky, seductive

young intern at his school. The increasing hilarity of the entwined network has the audience in hysterics—their comments grow louder as the chain becomes more complicated and intermeshed. It continues to grow, until the final link appears in the character of the Visitor. He takes the free hand of the last lover in the chain and introduces HIV—the virus symbolized by yards of brilliant red silk whisked in, out and around, infecting the entire network. The audience falls silent and reflective. The next scene begins in a graveyard.

Launched in June '06 by eight colleagues from the U.S., U.K., South Africa and Lesotho, WSI is a collaboration among student performers and faculty facilitators from three continents as well as community participants from Lesotho's rural mountain villages. (One of the founders heads the Malealea Trust, a community-development project in the mountains of Lesotho, where the educators connect and work with villagers.) The biennial program challenges participants to create issue-based, aesthetically provocative, entertaining theatre around HIV/AIDS. Our collaborative process begins months before we gather in Africa with shared resources (books, films, articles) and, once we arrive in Lesotho, continues with presentations by African colleagues, community organizers, medical personnel and people living with HIV. This enables us to establish a shared platform from which our multicultural group can create fresh, visually dynamic theatre. We strive to be the opposite of "message" theatre, building our performance through an improvisational process that weeds out anything that doesn't make us laugh or pull us in or cause us to think.

For us, Epstein's work was provocative. Most people doing AIDS-related work in East or southern Africa can attest to the number of largely ineffective public campaigns focused on attempts to change individual behavior. One such effort, the ubiquitous "A, B, C" campaign, is a source of ridicule, especially among young people, because its trio of commands—"Abstain, Be Faithful, Condomise"—is so out of touch with the realities of people's lives. Concurrency, on the other hand, rings an immediate, eerily familiar bell.

After the Housing Works panel, we asked Epstein if she'd tell us more. She agreed, and delivered to us a computer-assisted presentation, which we videotaped and took with us to Africa. In Lesotho, our first speaker was Dr. Molotsi Monyamane, a leading medical practitioner and co-founder of the country's People Living Positive with HIV. His presentation, *Choices We Make with Regard to HIV/AIDS Testing: The Situation Now in Lesotho*, ended on an astonishingly synchronistic note for the New York contingent. Addressing the particularities of HIV's spread in southern Africa, he said, "We like to point the finger at prostitutes and transient laborers, those unlike ourselves, as the ones responsible. But the truth is we must look at how we live our everyday lives. You know, you're out with your girlfriend, and she wants to use a condom, and you say, 'No, come on, it's okay, it's just you and me...and my wife...and your boyfriend...'"

Shortly after his talk we showed the concurrency video and began to experiment with staging overlapping relationships. The performance for our WSI residency now had a riveting focus, thanks to Epstein's findings in Uganda, and, thanks to Dr. Monyamane, a provocative title: *It's Just You and Me...and My Wife and Your Boyfriend*. ■

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