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Dogsbody Review: Child Soldiers' Pain

by Robert Hurwitt

Some of the material in Erik Ehn's "Dogsbody" may give you nightmares. It should. The jagged shards of stories told by former child soldiers in Uganda are more than heartrending. What they tell us about our oh-so-fragile humanity is terrifying.

They're also somewhat confusing in the very short piece performed over the weekend at Intersection for the Arts on its way to New York. But that may be due less to Ehn's cryptic-poetic writing than the fact that "Dogsbody" is one part of a cycle, "Soulographie: Our Genocides."

The hour-long "Dogsbody" - co-produced by Intersection, Playwrights Foundation and Erika Chong Shuch Performance Project - is the 16th of 17 short plays that make up the cycle, created by Ehn with almost as many companies in cities around the country. It's been "a 20-year project," Ehn told the audience at Friday's opening, drawn from his work with war survivors in Uganda, Rwanda and elsewhere. The full cycle will be mounted at New York's La MaMa in November.

This is also the second outing for "Dogsbody" in the city. A muddled, longer, seemingly interminable Theatre of Yugen version played Yerba Buena Center for the Arts three years ago. As reconceived by Ehn, director Rebecca Novick and choreographer Shuch, and performed by three intensely focused actors, it's a much tighter, often riveting piece.

Melpomene Katakalos' raw oil-drums-and-metal-grid set reflects the rough fragments of Ehn's script while providing a seemingly endless source of metaphor-loaded props. Stories unfold in choppy snatches of dialogue and Shuch's bursts of athletic or contemplative movement.

Catherine Castellanos, Rami Margron and Reggie D. White switch seamlessly between narrating and embodying characters. Their time-fractured rendition of the story of Scovia - a young girl abducted for four gruesome stints with the infamous Lord's Resistance Army - is immensely powerful.

Margron's face distills Scovia's pain, fury and intense repression in stark contrast to her bright hope as a schoolgirl. White and Castellanos act out the tale as she's forced to kill her father and little brother (both played by White, as well as her militia minder). A stretched string traces the path of her arrows. A hand on an arm becomes a manacle.

Scovia's tale is so effective that it overshadows almost everything that follows, with the exception of a survivor's heartbreaking testimony read by Castellanos. More problematically, the latter part of "Dogsbody" switches from the real horrors in Uganda to a fictional futuristic endless war in a post-apocalyptic Texas, which cheapens rather than broadens Ehn's message.

Perhaps those scenes will register more strongly in the context of the whole cycle, which covers genocidal incidents from the 1921 Tulsa race riot to Rwanda, Bosnia and Central America. Perhaps not. Even at its most compelling, Ehn's look at the appalling use of child soldiers in "Dogsbody" alone seems incomplete.