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Building bridges with Zimbabwe

By **Alexis Akwagyiram**
BBC News

A UK organisation is staging a theatre production with actors in Zimbabwe, to prove that they are still connected with other artists from all over the globe.

BBC News found out about the ideas behind the scheme.

Staging a play about a transvestite in Nazi Germany is not widely considered to be high on the list of ways to ease tensions in Zimbabwe.



Giles Ramsay began working with actors around the world in 2001

But Giles Ramsay and his Developing Artists group are not trying to solve the woes of an entire country.

Instead, they hope their production of *I Am My Own Wife*, at the annual Harare International Festival of Arts (HIFA), which takes place in May, will "build cultural bridges" with Zimbabwean actors and audiences, nurturing "a mutually beneficial creative spirit" in the process.

The Pulitzer Prize winning play, which is being staged in partnership with US theatre group Northern Stage, tells the tale of a real-life German transvestite who survived both the Nazis and Communists.

Crocodiles, a second, more overtly political production, will also be staged by Developing Artists.

The play, which Giles penned himself, involves the fall of a government and social unrest in an unnamed African state.

The play's four characters will be Zimbabwean actors cast in the country and given a month to learn their parts.

Giles, a 41-year-old freelance stage direction lecturer from Battersea, south London, set up Developing Artists as a not-for-profit organisation in 2001.

“ It's important that at this time Zimbabwe does not become isolated from the world community ”

Giles Ramsay

He said the aim was to focus on "regions where economics or politics may have failed to fully encourage creative ambitions", adding that box office profits are usually given to

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the actors.

Since his international network of actors, directors and artists was set up, Giles has embarked upon three visits to Zimbabwe in as many years, as well as organising plays in Mexico, Cape Verde, Uganda, Libya and Turkey.

During this process he has worked with dozens of performers.

In an attempt to outline the ethos behind the Developing Artists, Giles said his organisation promotes "self-expression both within and beyond their local community."

The precarious political situation in Zimbabwe is well documented and has become increasingly fractious in recent weeks.

Tension has been high in the country since police broke up a prayer meeting in March organised by the main opposition party, detaining and beating several government rivals, including opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).



Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's president, wants another term in office

And a two-day strike, called by Zimbabwe's trade unions in protest at the economic crisis, was held earlier this month.

Meanwhile, more than 80% of Zimbabweans living in poverty and inflation is running at more than 1,700% - the highest in the world.

Basic items such as bread, sugar, petrol are often not available in local shops.

But Giles and Northern Stage are adamant that the plays will have an effect on the country's cultural life - an aspect that many fail to consider.

"It's important that at this time Zimbabwe does not become isolated from the world community," Giles said.

He went on: "They need to know that they are still connected with other artists from all over the globe. The HIFA is a beacon of hope, joy and creativity at the heart of a country facing difficult times. The arts connect.

"By working alongside local Zimbabwean artists it is possible to create a dynamic hybrid as we share our mutual skills and different past influences. No one tells anyone else how things should be done. We all work alongside each other as equals."

“ Every time an artist steps on to one of the stages or utters a single word, it is a statement about human rights and the importance of creativity in a community that is struggling to cope

”

Manuel Bagorro
HIFA artistic director

These sentiments appear to be shared by the organisers of

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the festival, which is independent and therefore free from government funding.

Manuel Bagorro, HIFA's artistic director, said the festival had occupied a "unique position" within Zimbabwe's "cultural life".

He said the event would be "a time to show that artistic expression has meaning and purpose for a community that is facing challenging balancing acts every day".

'Symbol of hope'?

The festival organiser went on: "The arts express our desire to make life better for ourselves as individuals and as a diverse community.

"HIFA 2007 is a celebration of all the small-scale acts of creative heroism that give magic to ordinary things."

"Our artists and audiences are people who are looking to the future of this country....people who know only too well the devastating effect that current circumstances are having on their own lives and the lives of their families."

The event organiser said the HIFA was "a symbol of hope".

"Every time an artist steps on to one of the stages or utters a single word, it is a statement about human rights and the importance of creativity in a community that is struggling to cope."

The Harare International Festival of the Arts will run from 1 to 6 May.

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