

# UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT **ROUNDAABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY** UP FALL 2007

# THE OVERWHELMING



# Understanding:

To accept as true.

To know thoroughly.

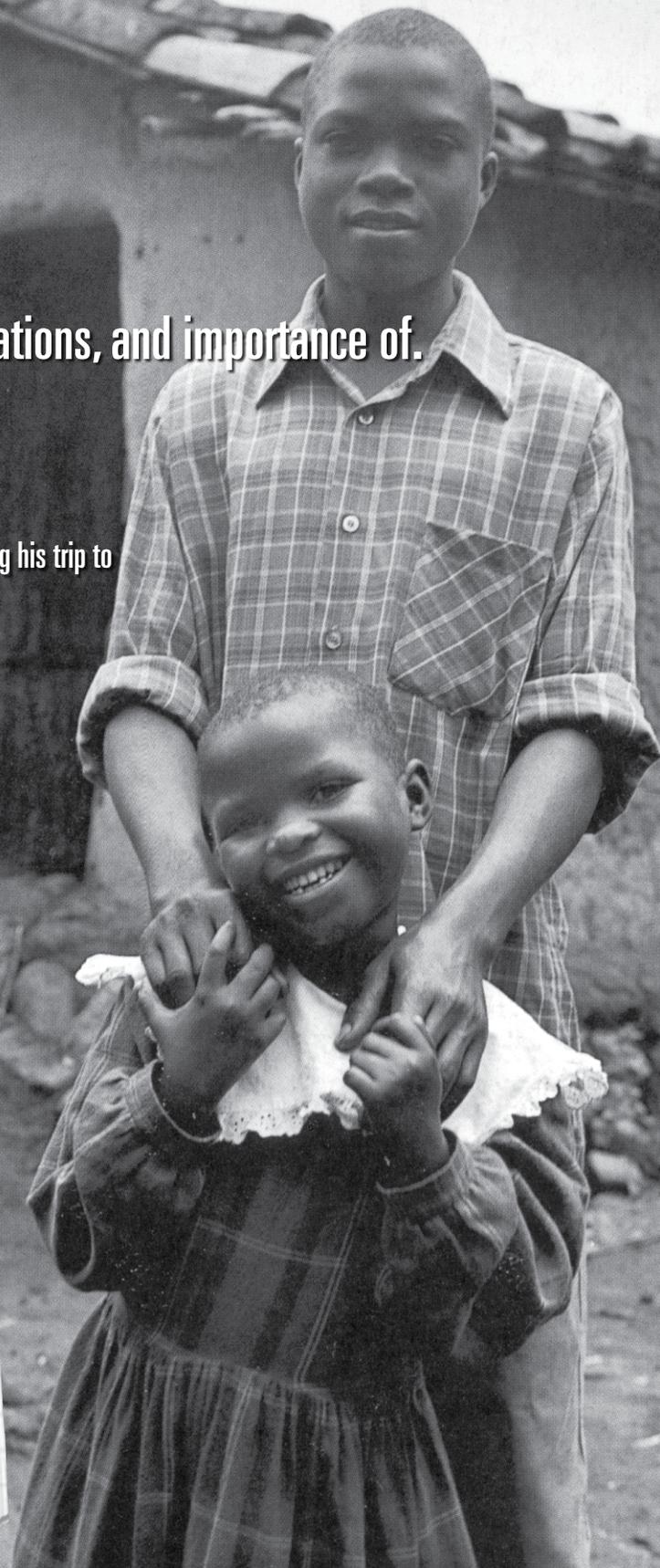
To grasp the significance, implications, and importance of.

To accept sympathetically.

From a journal written by playwright J.T. Rogers during his trip to Rwanda with director Max Stafford-Clark:

... We check in at the Hôtel des Mille Collines (a setting used in the play). I find an information pack from the local travel company through which our flights were booked. In the section titled "Rwandan Travel Fact Sheet" is information on the climate, rate of exchange, tipping policy, and the following paragraph—under the heading "Genocide-Sensitive Travel":

Photographing genocide sites and memorials is usually acceptable and sometimes encouraged. However, we recommend you always seek guidance of your guide first. It is generally acceptable to talk to Rwandans about the genocide, however be sensitive and never push the subject. You must also accept that some Rwandans will not want to speak about it and you must respect this at all times. Accept that the genocide is far beyond your own experience and is never something you will ever understand.



**education**  
**ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY**

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# Understanding

the Playwright: J.T. Rogers

4



the Director: Max Stafford-Clark

6



the Language: Useful Vocabulary

9



the Actor: Linda Powell

10



the History: The World of the Play

12



the Impact: Therese McGinn

15



How to Help: Organizations Providing Aid

17



the Play: Theatrical Terms and Resources

18



Your Role: Activities

19



# Understanding THE Playwright

## **What inspired you to write *The Overwhelming*?**

I followed these events in 1994 when these massacres were happening through the hodge-podge coverage by the American press. It was horrifying and disturbing to say the least. But it was confusing; I couldn't understand why it happened because the mainstream media's general analysis was, "Well those people over there do this sometimes." Putting aside the racial implication of that, one thing you learn as a playwright is that people don't just do such things without a reason. I started reading about the history of the region, learning more and more about it. The dramatist in me thought, what on earth would I do if I were in a situation like that? What kind of choice would I be forced to make and who would I then be? And those seem to be scary and interesting questions for a play. As I learned more and more about the historical content, I let the play percolate as I worked on other projects and waited for the "in," as it were, as to how I would tell a story with all this as a backdrop.

## **Tell me about the actual process. Did you do a lot of research in addition to that?**

I didn't really do any extensive research until a few years ago when I decided it was time to write the play. Then I did an enormous amount. As I worked, I didn't tell anybody what I was writing about. Interestingly, I had no idea that the film *Hotel Rwanda* was in the works. So I thought, in my ignorance, that I was alone is trying to write a major fictional work set against the backdrop of the Rwandan genocide. In essence, I wrote the play purely based on research and imagination. I didn't meet any Rwandans until I finished. Then I gave the play to a number of genocide survivors and asked for their brutal comments. Is it believable? Was the language correct? That was quite nerve-racking. But their responses were remarkably favorable and I got tremendous suggestions, which I incorporated.

## **Why did you put an American family in the center of the story?**

This play is radically different than the usual middle-class theatre fare, in terms of its location, politics, language—all these extraordinary "foreign" elements. I knew that I wanted to delve into these things in depth and not write some blanket, generic play about Africa. So I realized I needed to have the protagonists be people that American theatergoers like myself

would instinctually follow, so they would then follow everything else that would come afterward. The challenge was to write a play where you had Bangladeshi, Rwandans, Brits and South Africans—twenty-two speaking parts of three-dimensional people from all over the world—as opposed to a play with some interesting Americans and the window dressing.

## **How did the character of Joseph develop?**

John Ford said that "there are two kinds of stories: a man comes into a town or a man is trying to leave a town." I realized early on that if we are going to have this American family be the center, then the catalyst needs to be a Rwandan and not an American. I often know early on what form a play I am working on is going to take. I need to know the form so it will set me on the path. In this case I knew early on that the play would be influenced by the element of espionage and, "What's going to happen? How's it going to happen after that? Is so and so who they say they are?"

## **What other challenges came up for you in writing the play that you haven't already addressed?**

I don't speak French and I don't speak Kinyarwanda. That was a big challenge. And I'd never been to Rwanda. I had to piece together a street map of Rwanda in '94—it was on my wall at one point—so I could memorize the names of streets, and know whether they were gravel-paved or not, and know what the name of the hot nightclub was. Early on I realized I was working on a play where I had to confine the locations to either outdoor or indoor locations that I knew I could fully evoke without having physically been there. The question I get asked all the time is, "How difficult was it to create characters from Rwanda?" Well, that was the easy part, the people. You learn to find the right voices for the right personalities in your mind and write them.

## **Who are some of your influences as a writer?**

I think a great deal of what influences me as a playwright is not theater: it's a novel or article I've read, the people I interview, or the experiences I've had. I remember seeing Tony Kushner's NYU student production of *Perestroika* twelve years ago and that was an amazing experience. I admire Albee's work a great deal. Richard Nelson I admire—the fact that he

## UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED PLAYWRIGHT J.T. ROGERS.

is so restless creatively. He just gave me a remarkable new play to read, called *Conversations in Tusculum*, which is going to be at the Public in January. I was honored to be asked to read it. As I am in my thirties now, I look more and more to artists who were born generations ahead of me who are still being adventurous. I find their work immensely inspiring—proof that, yes, you can keep pushing the envelope for a long time.

### **What would you say to a young person who wants to write? What would you advise them to do?**

I would first give them the advice I was given by all the artistic directors of theatres in New York that I talked to when I first came to New York as a young twenty-year-old and wanted to start a theater company. They all told me: “O, sweet God, don’t do it!” But if this young person is as stubborn as I was and chooses to disregard such wise advice... I think acting training is fantastic. I was an actor before I was a playwright, and being one is what taught me what sounds good in the mouth of an actor. I don’t think there really is one way of learning to be a playwright, though the most important thing is that you have to read ferociously. You have to read novels and newspapers. You can’t be a good, let alone a great writer if you don’t know the world. We’re in a country that doesn’t put a lot of stock in that, but I think as artists it is essential. The writers I most admire—however different their work is, however different their politics are—are artists who are always learning and writing about new things. And those would be things other than whether or not Lindsay Lohan is going back to rehab.

### **Is there something that you would like the audience to think about or consider after they see this play or is that up to them?**

Jim Reborn, who is playing Woolsey in the play, said the following to me a couple of days ago: “The thing I like about the play is that it really doesn’t tell you what to think about what happened or what would have been the right course of action or the wrong course of action or what we should have done.” Then he took a long pause. “Of course people could get the *wrong* idea, right?” And I said, “Yes, that’s the danger.” I write to answer questions I have, questions that are big enough and meaty enough that when I’m done writing the play I still haven’t really answered them.



But that’s okay because our job as playwrights is to ask difficult questions. This can be done in entertaining ways—we don’t always have to be somber—but our job is to ask such questions. My hope is that the audience will listen very carefully to what is being said and when they leave the theater they will continue to think about it and talk about it. I think to ask anything more than that is hubris. But we live in a culture where everything is McDonald-ized: we eat it and throw it out, eat it and throw it out. I try to write plays that I would like to spend my time and money watching—that I don’t want to dispose of the moment the curtain comes down. 

# Understanding THE Director

## **Why did you choose to do this play?**

One of the characteristics of English Theatre that has made it strong over the last, say ten years, is that it turns its eyes outward towards the world as well as inwards to itself. Any writer has in them a family play, history play, a broken marriage play. But a characteristic of a number of English writers—Howard, Churchill, David Hare, Stella Feehily—is that they turn their eyes outwards. I was delighted to be sent J.T.'s play. It was coherent and confident about a subject I knew very little about—the genocide in Rwanda. I thought it was extremely strong and Nick Hytner, the director of the National Theatre, phoned me and said “Do you want to do a workshop on the play?” and I said, “No, I don’t think we need to do a workshop at all, the play is fine. There are some difficulties with the time line which I am sure we will sort out in rehearsal but who knows at what point. But really what I would like to do is have a trip to Rwanda so I can see it for myself with the writer.” Nick Hytner did some math on the back of an envelope and worked out that sending the two of us to Rwanda for ten days would be cheaper than doing a workshop for a week with eleven actors, so off we went. And to be honest I was a little, not cynical, but skeptical about the whole enterprise. I mean, what can you find out about genocide ten years after it has happened? But in fact, it was an incredible trip that among many things located the places in the play. Scene three takes place in a hotel and scene five takes place in a church: how long does it take to walk from one to the other? All those questions were solved, but much more importantly, what we found was a nation still in post-traumatic shock. We talked to a number of widows in what are called “widow centers.” Almost every small town has a widow center because if your whole family is wiped out, then your insurance for your old age is gone and widows found great solace in talking to each other. What was remarkable is that some people seemed, as you would expect, still in some shock, and in a way it was intrusive talking to them because we weren’t doctors, we wanted to tell their story. We were assured that repeating their story was a form of therapy for them but we also met other people who were able to distance themselves from their own stories—they recounted them like an adventure story. And they played the kind of intentions you play if you’re telling this adventure—to interest, to amuse, to entertain, to grip somebody. That was fascinating, but also just learning the information about the country was fascinating. We stayed in the same hotel that the play

features—that was indeed in *Hotel Rwanda*—the Hotel Milles Collines. We met a survivor who told us what room she was in and we opened the room, which was perfectly ordinary, and she said twenty-eight people were in that room. They used to send the children down to the swimming pool every afternoon with a bucket to bring water back.

## **How did you go about casting the play for the American version? What did you look for in the actors? What did you need?**

Well, I think Carrie, the casting director, offered us great riches with actors. I looked for the same thing I looked for in England. I think it was very important to have an African in the cast, and indeed we do, and actors who are intrigued and interested in the work, which they are. And the cast, two weeks in, are terrific—engaged in the subject and learning more about Rwanda everyday. The research is gathered from film, documentaries (one in particular—a powerful piece called *The Ghosts of Rwanda*), from talking to people, but mostly from books. The actors set themselves a book to read and then they give book reports to the rest of the group, so gradually we are assimilating all the information that has been written. J.T. has become a self-taught genocide expert. We are meeting a doctor this week that works at Cornell Presbyterian who was in Rwanda in 2004 counseling both survivors and killers. Just last week we met a young woman who is a survivor—she lost her mother and many of her family in the genocide. I think it was a very powerful and moving experience for the actors.

## **You have a very specific way of working, can you tell us about your process?**

I never studied. If you go to Russia and study, the first question they ask you is what masters have you worked under. And the truth is like most British directors I picked up directing pragmatically from working on the job. I never went to a drama school but I did work with a director, Bill Gaskill, who was some ten years older. He was a predecessor at the Royal Court and through him I learned about Stanislavski. So actions are derived from Stanislavski’s methodology. You ask an actor what his intention or tactic is for a particular line—Is it to entertain? Is it to educate? Is it to attack?

Gradually you work out a scale—let’s say ‘convince’ is stronger than ‘persuade’ and ‘grip’ is stronger than ‘convince.’ And you go through the play like that. That means the actor is always playing their intentions to

## UPSTAGE DISCUSSED *THE OVERWHELMING* WITH DIRECTOR MAX STAFFORD-CLARK.

the other actor, instead of playing a state. A state could be either anger, or enthusiasm, or could be anything, but if you play the state you simply play a generalized emotion.

### Can you tell us about your company, “Out of Joint?”

My own company is a touring company and in practice we always have a partnership with a London theater, in the case of *The Overwhelming* it was the National Theatre. It could be the Royal Court or the Young Vic. The next project is with a small fringe theater, The Bush. This always means we have a co-producing deal whereby each company pays a proportion of the production costs and we are paid to tour. So after the full run of the play in London, Out Of Joint will tour the play to towns and cities throughout the country. Our income comes from two sources: a box office deal we strike with the theaters we play in and from the arts council.

### How did you decide upon your design team and what influenced the designs?

Well, the play has forty-two scenes, so what you need above all is a set that can be flexible and fluid. I talked to Tim Shortall (who was our designer in London) about the play. J.T. showed the photographs he had taken while in Rwanda. The set incorporated a number of features gathered from our research; for example, a bombed church where a grenade had been thrown and one wall had been blown off, a market store, a bar that we drank in and the Milles Collines Hotel. This composite set proved to be flexible enough for every room that was needed in the play. There are chairs and tables that the actors move about but really there is very little scenic change. A car is two chairs side by side. An office is depicted by a simple desk and chair.

One of the most distressing and emotional visits J.T. and I had is when we went to the churches. One near Bandar and one in Tarama, which were genocide sites. Now by “church” you’re not going to see an American or indeed an English concept of a church—it’s more like a primary school, a kind of one story red-bricked building. No colored glass, just plain glass windows. 3,000 people were slaughtered in Nyamata church. We went in and the pews were simply single plank benches, so by stepping from bench to bench you could in fact walk down the nave. At the back there was a kind of cupboard, open bookshelves, really, which were full of skulls and you could see in the skulls where a machete carved somebody’s head off.



Photo by John Haynes

And some of them had remnants of shirts or scarves the women wore around their necks. As you walk from bench to bench down the nave you are inescapably walking over the bones of the people who have been killed there—shin bones, tiny bones—but also water bottles, school exercise books, flip flops, sandals, baskets of all the things they happened to have on the day they were killed. These genocide sites have been preserved by the current Rwandan government but of course not until the bodies had completely decomposed. They were too revolting to go into. I’ve been to Auschwitz and though horrifying, on the whole, it is very like a museum experience. Everything has been categorized. All the shoes in one room, all the hair cut from people’s hair in another, all the gold from the teeth in another room. You can’t really conceive the enormity of the original event. I haven’t been anywhere where the enormity of the original event was so captured as in Rwanda, where you were also walking over ten years of red dust. The earth is very red, from a kind of clay that when it dries it just crumbles, so all of these bones, hats and flip-flops have ten years worth of red dust, and that’s captured in the design as well. There is one cue at the end of the play when a blind drops and you see what has been a perfectly African wall is actually what you would call an usury of bones and skulls. People were very willing to talk about their experiences, which sort of surprised us. And just like Kennedy’s death everyone knows exactly where they were the moment Juvenal Habyarimana’s plane was shot down. We talked to people who have been through a most horrendous experience, some of whom were clearly experiencing

post traumatic shock and as I said earlier some of whom have distanced themselves from the experiences just as I am talking to you now.

The costume design here in New York is by Tobin Ost. He came highly recommended and indeed he has done a fine job with the costumes, which is the result of research on his part but also his feeling for the play. David Weiner is our lighting designer and as the result of our communications and his feeling for the play has created a very evocative and effective lighting plan. Remember, it is a forty-two scene play; the design not only requires imagination but also practicality.

### **What do you think was the challenge of directing this specific play?**

The play takes place in the month leading up to the genocide and its structure is sort of a thriller where the audience is drip-fed the information at the same rate as the principal character and the family receive it. The moment the play stops, the genocide begins. So I suppose the big challenge is that the event is about to happen but actually never happens within the play.

### **Do you feel you have learned something from directing this play?**

Tremendously. On a scale of one to ten I knew about negative ten, and what I know now is a six or seven. I think J.T. is either a nine or ten. Part of the value of the play is that it explains what is otherwise an inexplicable tragedy. I mean you read that 800,000 people were killed in three months and that seems to be the statistic that most people accept, but that is hard to get your head around even going there. Doing the play made me understand how it could happen and I feel that is a great feat for a playwright to achieve. The theatre's ability to take you into another world or to realize in dramatic form another world is a huge achievement, and I think J.T. does that. I think the theatre has borrowed more from journalism in the last ten years than it has from any other art form. In rehearsal—in a way—you are asking the actors to become journalists and to research and cover the same research that J.T. has done. And I have to say the actors have been extremely enthusiastic and assiduous in doing that.

### **What advice would you give a young person who wants to direct or have a theatre company?**

Nurture your enthusiasm. The theatre is full of talented and ambitious people, but talent and ambition are essential in themselves and not sufficient.

You must have a direction. So the question you get asked in Russian workshops, “Who are the great masters you have studied under?” is really not that stupid a question. Develop your taste. Find out whose work you are enthusiastic about. Go into an interview (if you are being interviewed for the position of assistant director) knowing whose work you like in the city, so that you are already pointing in a certain direction. I think those years between 16 and 26 are most important because that is the time in which you develop your taste. So in taking on a young director, I want them to be talented, I want them to be ambitious, I want them to be confident, but above all I want them to start in developing their taste.

### **Anything else you would like to add?**

The journalists we met in the original production were very affected by the genocide. We met Lindsey Hilsom who is now the news editor for Channel 4 and Fergal Keane, a correspondent for the BBC, whose life has been changed by Kigali. He found in this town a room full of people who had all been mutilated by machetes. One girl had a huge scar on her head and the nurse was changing her wound and she was crying. He keeps in touch with her—in fact I think he sponsors her and goes back to Rwanda every year. He wrote a preface for the program in London. Fergal himself is the son of a playwright and he said what is important is that this play reaches parts which the journalism cannot reach. Other journalists were very humbled by their experiences in Rwanda because they got two things wrong. Firstly, they didn't cover it when it was happening—nobody paid much attention to it. Secondly, when it was over and the Hutu's were fleeing to Zaire, they were depicted on television as victims of a savage and incomprehensible tribal war when in fact they were the perpetrators of the genocide. Another of the important lessons we learned from being there was that at any given moment during the genocide, one could be a victim, a survivor, or a perpetrator. People told us that no Hutu ever saved a Tutsi, that it was quite unlike the holocaust in Germany where Germans often saved Jews. In fact, we found the reverse: almost anyone we talked to who was a survivor, a Tutsi survivor, had been helped at one point by a Hutu.

### **What does the title refer to?**

The title comes from the Congo. Genocide was perpetrated in the Congo by the Belgian's. The Africans had no word for it so they called it “the overwhelming.” And the overwhelming in Zaire refers to the period of the 19th century when people died of diseases, punishment and malnutrition. 

# Understanding THE Language

## Vocabulary

**Alienation**—A feeling of separation or isolation of the self from the material or objective world.

**Burundi**—A country bordering Rwanda, where civil strife had also been characteristic and Tutsis and Hutus were divided. When the Tutsi-led government in Burundi attacked Hutus, Rwandan Hutu extremists used this to scare the Hutus of Rwanda into action.\*

**Butare**—A university town in Rwanda initially considered safer for Tutsis than Kigali, but the killing soon spread.

**CDR (Coalition pour la Défense de la République)**—A Hutu extremist party (that Samuel Mizinga belongs to).

**Commerce**—The exchange of goods and services between nations or people on a large scale.

**Estrangement**—The replacement of a bond of love or harmony with a new relationship of hostility or indifference.

**Expatriate**—A person residing in a country or culture different than the place of their upbringing or legal residence.

**Fabrication Politique**—A French term meaning a fiction created for political reasons. Elise calls the Hutu/Tutsi divide a “fabrication politique” because she believes it is not based on anything concrete, it is a politically-motivated concept.\*

**Fragmentation**—The absence or underdevelopment of connections between smaller groups in a larger culture based on social, economic, political, or educative inequalities.

**Genocide**—The deliberate and systematic extermination of a national, racial, political, or cultural group.

**Interahamwe**—The civilian Hutu militia trained to keep Hutu power by killing Tutsis.

**Juvénal Habyarimana**—Rwanda’s Hutu President in 1994. The genocide was sparked when his plane was shot down over Kigali on April 6, 1994.

**Kigali**—The capital city of Rwanda.

**Kinyarwanda**—The principal African language spoken in Rwanda.\*

**RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front)**—The Rwandan rebel army which gathered strength and recruits outside Rwanda, largely from Tutsi refugees who had been leaving Rwanda under Hutu persecution since 1959. Its aim was to reinstate the refugees in their rightful homeland.\*

**Tutsi/Hutu**—Terms used to classify the wealthier and poorer classes of Rwandans created by Belgian colonists in 1918. The Belgians divided the population by classifying each person as either Tutsi (the elite) or Hutu (the poorer workers) even though they shared a common culture. Tutsis enjoyed greater opportunities under Belgian rule, causing Hutus to grow resentful. Rwanda is approximately 85% Hutu and 14% Tutsi.

**Twa, or Batwa**—A small minority of Rwanda (1%) of a pygmy race who are the oldest inhabitants of the mountain forests of central Africa.

**UN Peace Keeping Forces**—Recognizable by their blue helmets, these are soldiers, police officers, or trained civilians (*pictured here*) whose job might include organizing elections, supporting human rights, or monitoring an area once a peace agreement and cease-fire have been declared between fractious parties.



**UNAMIR (United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda)**—The official presence of the UN in Rwanda, UNAMIR was originally established to help implement the Arusha Peace Agreement signed by the Rwandese parties August 4, 1993, under which Tutsis and Hutus were to share power.\*

**United Nations (UN)**—An international organization created in 1945 (reorganized from the League of Nations established in 1919) whose mission is to mediate in conflicts between nations and to prevent war. There are currently 192 member nations cooperating on issues of security, international law, economics, the environment, disease, poverty, and human rights.

\*From a study guide produced by The Royal National Theatre.

# Understanding THE Actor

## **Why did you want to play this role in *The Overwhelming*?**

It was the fact that the play opened my eyes so much and forced me to widen the lens on how I view the world. It excited me about the possibility of being a part of something that could do that for other people.

## **Can you talk a little bit about preparing for this role?**

It is early in the process. My process as an actor changes from role to role. I change the way I work depending on what it is I am asking myself to do. Leading up to this, I did do some reading on Rwanda and I have an idea based just on the little bit of work we have done with Max so far that there is going to be a lot of character history to be built, very clear work on intentions.

## **How do you think the fact that Jack and Linda are an interracial couple affects the story?**

I think the dynamic of the two of them being in Africa as an interracial couple has a lot of really interesting aspects to it that will be fun to explore. I also think the fact that he was her professor is also a whole other layer to the dynamics between them and affects the way each of them deals with the world around them. I think that the fact that he was married when they first started their relationship is also a huge part of what's going on with them.

## **How does this idea of being “the other” affect your character?**

Linda actually has a moment when she talks about finally not feeling like “the other,” which I think is speaking from a naive place because, in reality, she shares more with the white Americans she's come with than the Africans around her. But she feels suddenly like maybe “this is where I am from, this is who I am.” She has always been an African-American woman moving in a very white academic circle and has felt like “the other” at least most of her adult life, and possibly much through her childhood as well.

## **What do you think the challenges will be in working on this play?**

I think the challenge for me is being careful that

the amount of research I do doesn't make Linda too knowledgeable. She's imperfect. I feel that the challenge is not to bring everything I want us to know and everything I want to think I would have done in the situation to bear on what she actually does, which is very specific to the story that J.T is telling: the way these people behave.

## **What do you look for in a director and how would you describe Max's approach to this play as director?**

Max is very specific in the way the text is approached, but we also do these fabulous, amazing improvisatory games that are about status. It's not all about pencils and books and exactly what we are writing out in character histories. There's also a lot of play in the room, surprisingly enough, which I think is important. I look for a director that's going to challenge me but also be open to what I'm bringing to the table. You look for that perfect balance in someone that's going to push you someplace where you might not have thought to go, but not close the door on something you might bring. I have high hopes for this. I hope it just doesn't make people say, “Oh that's awful – let's have a drink.”

## **What advice would you give to a young person who wants to pursue acting?**

I have acted since I was 11, maybe 9. I did children's theater and community theater, theater in school, theater in college. I was an English major and I really didn't necessarily think [acting] was something I was going to do for a living until probably sophomore year of college and it was time to declare majors. I just decided to be a theater minor. I think the liberal arts education was one of the best things I could have done. It's important for actors to have read, to know about the world, to know about all different types of people in the world. I think that literature can do that for you. Travel can do that for you too, and if you know early enough that you are sure acting is what you want to do, then I think doing it is the best thing. The more skills you have the better, but not to the point where you're closed off to the rest of the world. Studying something other than theater in college has helped me with so many of my roles. I would advise a good liberal arts education.

UPSTAGE RECENTLY TALKED TO ACTRESS LINDA POWELL ABOUT HER ROLE IN *THE OVERWHELMING*.



**Do you find you prefer the stage to other mediums?**

Absolutely, I prefer it. I love to work in film and TV too, but if I had to choose I would choose theater. I mean, you are a part of the director's vision and that is part of your job and the fun of the process is figuring out where those things meet. But you can put more into the final product on stage than I think you do in film. I also love the adrenaline rush of being in front of the audience and the give-and-take you get from any given audience. I also love the fact that it will be different every night because of what happens. It's addictive. Another thing I love about the theater is the rehearsal. I love rehearsal as much as the actual run of the show. I love getting up and going to work and trying this and trying that and seeing what other people come in with, going too far and saying, "Oops, too far!" Whereas on film you come in and get to do it 100 times, but you kind of get stuck with the choices you make early on.

**Is there something you feel that you will personally take away from the experience of working on this play?**

One of the most important things to take away from this play is to be aware and to know the context of the world around you. See if you can help, and see what you can do to help. Don't walk past people. 

# Understanding THE History

## A Chronology of Genocide

In 1994, Rwanda experienced a genocide unparalleled in modern history. In less than 100 days, approximately 800,000 men, women and children were brutally murdered. Within four months, an estimated 1.75 million people, or a quarter of the country's pre-war population, had fled.



**1918** Under the Treaty of Versailles the former German colony of Ruanda-Urundi is made a UN protectorate to be governed by Belgium, adding to the vast Belgian possessions in the Congo. The two territories (later to become Rwanda and Burundi) are administered separately under two different Tutsi monarchs.

**1926** Belgians introduce a system of ethnic identity cards differentiating Hutus from Tutsis.

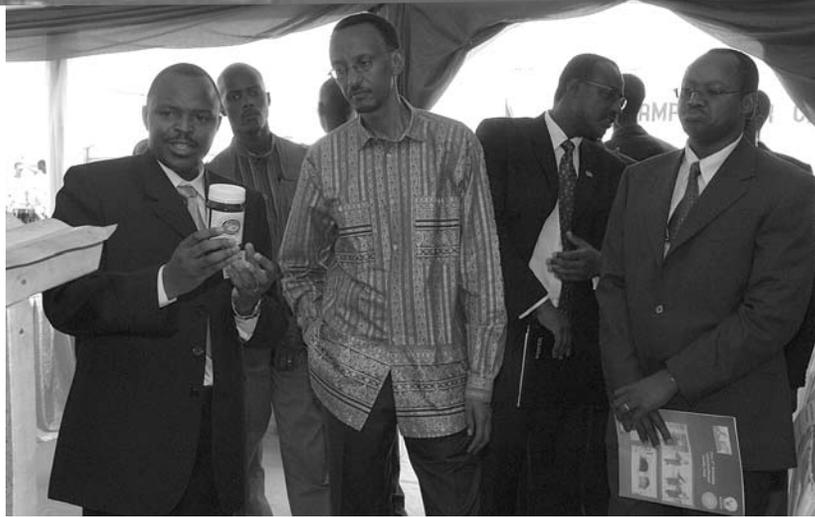
**1957** PARMEHUTU (Party for the Emancipation of the Hutus) is formed while Rwanda is still under Belgian rule.

**1959** The Tutsi king, Mwaami Rudahigwa, dies. Hutus rise up against the Tutsi nobility and kill thousands. Many more Tutsis flee.



Hutus in Rwanda, September 1994.

- 1962** Rwanda gains independence from Belgium. Wide-scale killing of Tutsis and further massive outflow of refugees, many to Uganda. Hutu nationalist government of Grégoire Kayibanda's PARMEHUTU comes to power.
- 1963** Further massacres of Tutsis. More refugees leave. By the mid-1960s half the Tutsi population are said to be living outside Rwanda.
- 1967** Renewed massacres of Tutsis.
- 1973** Fresh outbreak of killings. General Juvénal Habyarimana seizes power, pledging to restore order. He sets up a one-party state.
- 1975** Habyarimana's political party, MRND, is formed. Hutus from the president's home area of northern Rwanda are given overwhelming preference in public service and military jobs.
- 1986** The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) is formed.
- 1990** **October:** Guerrillas of the RPF invade Rwanda from Uganda. After fierce fighting, a ceasefire is signed on March 29, 1991.
- 1990 -91** The Rwandan army begins to train and arm civilian militias known as Interahamwe ('Those who stand together'). For the next three years Habyarimana stalls on the establishment of a genuine multi-party system with power sharing. Throughout this period thousands of Tutsis are killed in separate massacres around the country. Opposition politicians and newspapers are persecuted.
- 1993** **August:** At Arusha in Tanzania, Habyarimana finally agrees to power-sharing with the Hutu opposition and the RPF. 2,500 UN troops are subsequently deployed in Kigali to oversee the implementation of the accord.
- September 1993– March 1994:** President Habyarimana stalls on setting up of power-sharing government. Training of militias intensifies. Extremist radio station, Radio Mille Collines, begins broadcasting exhortations to attack the Tutsis. Human rights groups warn the international community of impending calamity.



The current President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame (center), returned to Rwanda in 1990 after living in exile in Uganda. He was a former chairman of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1998.

**1994 6 April:** President Habyarimana and the president of Burundi, Cyprien Ntaryamira, are killed when Habyarimana's plane is shot down as it comes in to land at Kigali Airport. Extremists, suspecting the president is finally about to implement the Arusha Peace Accords, are believed to be behind the attack. That night the killing begins.

**7 April:** Rwandan armed forces and Interahamwe set up roadblocks and go from house to house killing Tutsis and moderate Hutu politicians. Thousands die on the first day. UN forces stand by while the slaughter goes on – forbidden to intervene, as this would breach their 'monitoring' mandate.

**8 April:** The RPF launches a major offensive to end the genocide and rescue 600 of its troops surrounded in Kigali.

**21 April:** The UN cuts its forces from 2,500 to 250 following the murder of ten Belgian soldiers.

**30 April:** UN Security Council spends eight hours discussing Rwandan crisis. The resolution condemning the killing omits the word 'genocide'. Had the term been used, the UN would have been legally obliged to act to 'prevent and punish' the perpetrators. In one day 250,000 Rwandans, mainly Hutus fleeing the advance of the RPF, cross the border into Tanzania.

**17 May:** As the slaughter of Tutsis continues, the UN finally agrees to send 6,800 troops and policemen to Rwanda with powers to defend civilians. A fresh Security Council resolution says 'acts of genocide may have been committed'. The United States government forbids its spokespersons to use the word 'genocide'.

**22 June:** The United States government eventually uses the word 'genocide'.

**July:** The final defeat of the Rwandan army. The government flees to Zaire. The RPF sets up an interim government of national unity in Kigali. A cholera epidemic sweeps the refugee camps in Zaire, killing thousands. Different UN agencies clash over reports that RPF troops have carried out a series of reprisal killings in Rwanda. Several hundred civilians are said to have been executed. Meanwhile the killing of Tutsis continues in refugee camps.

From Fergal Keane's *Season of Blood: A Rwandan Journey* (Penguin 1996). Used with permission.

# Understanding THE Impact

UPSTAGE DISCUSSED RWANDA WITH THERESE MCGINN, ASSOCIATE CLINICAL PROFESSOR OF POPULATION AND FAMILY HEALTH AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY.

## **Were you in Rwanda before or after the genocide? What was your role?**

In 1994, I was in Rwanda with CARE International, a relief and development organization. I was there as a consultant working on an evaluation of a reproductive health program inside Rwanda. I had been working in Rwanda traveling back and forth over the years since the mid-1980s, so it was a country I knew pretty well. So at that particular moment in March and April of 1994, I happened to be in the country when the genocide started. I was in the northeastern part of the country, working for the Ministry of Health with a team of colleagues from other Rwandan organizations and another consultant.

## **Was the RPF near where you were?**

We were actually in between the two armies. The RPF was to the north of us and the Rwandan army was to the south of us, from what we could figure out.

## **How did you get embroiled in the actual genocide? What happened?**

Well, I woke up on Thursday April 7th and learned that the President's plane had crashed. And you know, the information came piecemeal over the course of that morning. Now, that happened the night before, but I didn't find out until the next morning because there was no television, there wasn't very good information. So the first piece of news I learned in the morning was that the President was in a plane crash and had died, and we didn't know what that meant at first. Then over the course of the morning we learned that these gangs, that there were killings going on; there was the beginning of genocide. We were hearing these stories; more like rumors, because we didn't have a phone and there was nothing on the radio at that point the first morning. Early in the afternoon, on April 7th, we got in a vehicle to drive to find a telephone to call the capital Kigali to find out what was going on and what we should do. People thought they knew about a phone in another district, so we drove there, and that's when we saw the killing, that's when we saw people massing to kill others.

## **Did you actually see corpses as well, was that a part of your memory there?**

Yes. Looking back I realize I didn't comprehend it.

I saw things and it was only later I realized what it was. For example, you're looking at the beautiful, beautiful country of Rwanda. It's hilly and green and lush and very beautiful and you look over this lovely scene and there is smoke rising. At that point I had been in Africa for almost fifteen years or so; I'd been working and living in Africa for much of that time. I was accustomed to being in rural areas, to living in different countries and all, and to see smoke rising in the distance is not that odd a sight. Farmers often burn their fields to increase yield short term. And so I saw smoke rising and assumed they were burning their fields. A Rwandan colleague who I was with knew right off that they were burning houses and I said, "No, they are just burning fields, what do you mean?" and he said "No. They are burning houses."

## **Do you feel comfortable talking about what you think allowed this genocide to happen?**

I'll talk about it, although I have to say after thirteen years of thinking about it—I wrote my dissertation on it, I've read all the books—I can't say that I have a very profound or very convincing explanation of what happened. I think there were very many factors: history, level of development, education, and all these things mattered. I think there is a fundamental part of it that I don't understand and I don't know that I ever can. I don't understand how neighbors could kill neighbors, how all of these fears... And again, I can understand the economic, the social, the political pressure—whatever kinds of explanations that have been put forth may well have something to do ultimately with what caused this, what pushed it, made it as extreme and severe as it was. I still don't understand how all of that turns into someone quite literally walking out of his house and killing his neighbor—someone who he's lived next door to for twenty years.

## **How much do you think the concept of "ethnie" contributed to the whole conflict?**

### **Have you heard that term before?**

Yes, from an anthropological perspective, what are called the tribes or the ethnic groups of Hutu and Tutsi—many anthropologists would actually say they don't exist because they shared a common language, Kinyarwanda, and other markers of culture. Rwanda was in many ways a homogenous country in sharing



photo: Joan Marcus

Sam Robards and Ron Cephas Jones

one language—there aren't that many African countries that can claim that. The other traditional markers of culture—for example, religion, marriage practices, work practices, and other things—there are few differences in these among the groups in Rwanda. But what is clear throughout the colonial history, and then exacerbated by some of the more modern era politics: there were enough differences that could be exploited. Differences, either real or created, turned into true differences that could be exploited. So a group became the “other”—and then you can demonize the other.

### How did the propaganda contribute to the development of the conflict?

Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, the famous propaganda station, contributed to the genocide by all accounts. This makes a lot of sense to me as someone who was there. I don't understand Kinyarwanda so I didn't understand the words but I heard the tone of the radio. I find it very convincing that people listening to this on the radio around the country believed it. What has been reported is that the radio was saying, “Go out and kill these people before they kill you. You must kill them. It's the only thing to do.” Where I was in the northeastern region there was a list going around. I actually saw the physical list of names; those were the people who were being hunted down to be killed. And several of our colleagues' names were on the list.

### Because they were Tutsi?

Some were Tutsi. But political activities were also targeted, and some of them were politically liberal or moderate. One colleague, for example, was a human rights activist. Yes, certainly the majority of the people killed were Tutsi and were targeted for just that reason, but it was a political action as well; there were a lot of political moderates killed.

### But wasn't it the Hutu President's plane that was shot down?

Yes, and the president of Burundi was on that plane too and he went down. The two Presidents were actually coming back from Arusha where they were for peace talks about Rwanda. The thinking goes that the people that downed the plane were actually political Hutu extremists who were unhappy that the President was “giving in,” allowing this peace to go forward, because the peace involved a political voice

for the RPF. It seems to be the thinking that in fact it was political extremism on the Hutu side that brought down the plane to engender just the kind of violent response that occurred—and these groups of killers were actually already in place, because the killing started almost immediately.

### They had scores of machetes already?

Well, I mean, everybody has a machete in their home because they're farmers. It wasn't odd they would have that, but they were organized and they were pre-programmed to use the machete and other weapons to kill.

### How did you get out? And when did you get out?

For several days we were in a CARE guest house in the northeast. We did have a shortwave radio at the CARE office so we were monitoring information that way, which was sort of interesting because every now and then we would hear the RPF or the army; we quickly would get off those frequencies. We didn't have much news. It's so interesting that in this age of cell phones we had no communication. We would listen to BBC and French radio to see what was happening down the road. We were planning actually to get a CARE vehicle to get passage through the military lines to try to get out of the country. So, just as that was happening the CARE country director drove in. He got in his vehicle in Kigali and made his way to us. He was an American—he had safe passage out of the country but he wouldn't leave. He said, “I'm not leaving my staff and consultants behind.” So now we were trying to make a plan: Where do we go? What's the best road? Just then a group of foreign NGOs came in. It turned out they were organizing a convoy with army protection for foreigners only. So ultimately we joined that convoy which wouldn't allow any Rwandans. It was kind of touch and go for a while about whether they would let us out but they did. I was out by April 13th or something and I got to the States on April 15th.

### Based on your experiences in Rwanda, what do you think students can learn?

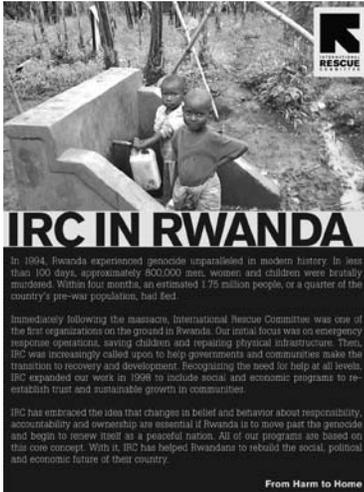
I think one rather dark lesson, which is horrifying but true, is that this truly can happen anywhere. There is nothing special about the Rwandans: they're not particularly evil, particularly violent, nothing like that. What happened there feels like it should be an aberration of history and humanity, but regular people did it. Regular people were brought to a point where they were willing to kill family, friends and neighbors because political leaders convinced them that they needed to do that. The lesson is that we have to be alert to those who encourage such hatred. I think that's a gruesome lesson, but a lesson. <sup>UP</sup>

*Therese McGinn, associate clinical professor of Population and Family Health at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, is principal investigator and director of the Comprehensive Reproductive Health in Crises Programme.*

*Previously at the Mailman School, she served as deputy director of the Averting Maternal Death and Disability (AMDD) Program and as principal investigator of the Monitoring and Evaluation Program of the Reproductive Health Response in Conflict Consortium. During her more than 20 years of public health work in resource-poor settings globally, Dr. McGinn has focused on using sound data collection and analysis to improve the scope and quality of reproductive health services, in order for men and women to make important choices about their sexual and reproductive lives. She has worked most extensively in Africa, and also in Latin America and Asia. In addition to her applied research activities globally and teaching responsibilities, Dr. McGinn participates in professional conferences and contributes to professional literature.*

# Understanding How to help

Here are organizations providing aid to Rwanda and to many other places across the world. Each group has a different mission and addresses different needs. Check out their websites to find out more about what they do and what you might be able to do to help.



**The International Rescue Committee (IRC)** serves refugees and communities victimized by oppression or violent conflict worldwide. Founded in 1933, the IRC is committed to freedom, human dignity, and self-reliance. This commitment is expressed in emergency relief, protection of human rights, post-conflict development, resettlement assistance, and advocacy.

The International Rescue Committee began emergency and relief operations in Rwanda immediately following the 1994 genocide. As the country stabilized, they concentrated on restoring physical infrastructure, a process that is mostly complete. Since 1998, IRC programs have focused on reestablishing trust and sustainable economic growth in communities. Over the last five years, they've helped local governments and emerging community-based organizations to rebuild the physical, social, political and economic institutions in Rwanda's post-conflict environment.

—From their website: [www.theIRC.org](http://www.theIRC.org)

**CARE** is a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty. They place special focus on working alongside poor women because, equipped with the proper resources, women have the power to help whole families and entire communities escape poverty. Women are at the heart of CARE's community-based efforts to improve basic education, prevent the spread of HIV, increase access to clean water and sanitation, expand economic opportunity and protect natural resources. CARE also delivers emergency aid to survivors of war and natural disasters, and helps people rebuild their lives.

From opportunities to meet with CARE staff and visit projects in the field, to helping spread the word about CARE's mission to your friends and family, there are many opportunities to join CARE in the fight against global poverty. —From their website: [www.care.org](http://www.care.org)

**Amnesty International (AI)** is a worldwide movement of people who campaign for internationally recognized human rights.

AI's vision is of a world in which every person enjoys all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. In pursuit of this vision, AI's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights. —From their website: [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

**The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)** is a fund established by the United Nations to enable more timely and reliable humanitarian assistance to those affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts.

The CERF was approved by consensus by the United Nations General Assembly to achieve the following objectives: promote early action and response to reduce loss of life; enhance response to time-critical requirements; strengthen core elements of humanitarian response in under-funded crises.

The CERF assures that the funds will go where they are most needed in the network of international aid organizations. Those include the most experienced organizations such as the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organizations (WHO) to name a few. —From their website: <http://cerf.un.org>

# Understanding THE Play

## Theatrical Terms

**Episodic**—A type of dramatic structure where events take place in multiple locations and in various moments, sometimes in non-linear time (instead of one time and place).

**Historical plot**—A fictional story written from the facts of history, sometimes to shine light on similar contemporary events.

**Interwoven narrative**—Multiple storylines woven together into a tapestry of intricate plot.

**Language as a tool**—Using language as a tool for a particular result. In the case of *The Overwhelming*, the playwright uses foreign languages to alienate his audience in the same way the characters themselves feel alienated.

**Monologue**—A speech delivered by one actor, either to other characters or to the audience.

**Point of view**—The character or perspective from which you watch the story unfolding, which sometimes comes from only one character and sometimes constantly shifts between several characters.

## Resources to Further Your Understanding

### BOOKS:

*The Holocaust and Genocide CD-ROM* published in January 2004 by Hodder Education.

*Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* and *Into the Quick of Life: The Rwandan Genocide—The Survivors Speak* by Jean Hatzfeld

*Season of Blood: A Rwandan Journey* by Fergal Keane

*Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* by Roméo Dallaire

*We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* by Philip Gourevitch

*Will Genocide Ever End?* Edited by Carol Rittner, John K. Roth and James M. Smith.

### MOVIES:

*Ghosts of Rwanda* (documentary)

*Hotel Rwanda*

*Sometimes in April*



# Activities to Understand Your Role

## Before the Show:

- Locate the country of Rwanda on a map. Think about what you know about this country.
- The playwright uses the term, “the other.” What do you think this term means? What do you think this term means as it relates to belonging to a particular society? In your own environment are there examples of people that are considered, “the other?” Why are they labeled as “the other?” How is being “the other” connected to money, culture, power, race, or gender?
- Write a monologue from the perspective of either Geoffrey, Jack or Linda that expresses their feelings about what happens to Joseph at the end of the play.

Or

- Write the next scene: what do you think happens to Geoffrey and his family? How do you think this experience has affected them?

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the artists who created *The Overwhelming*.

Mail to:

Education Department

Roundabout Theatre Company

231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200

New York, NY 10018

Or email to: [education@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:education@roundabouttheatre.org)

## As You Watch the Show:

- Notice the specific choices the director and playwright have made in telling this story. Why do you think those choices were made? How do those choices make different characters become “the other”? How do those choices give you a sense of being “the other” as an audience member?
- Notice how the actors communicate the different status levels of the characters.
- As you listen to the different arguments and the historical information presented by all the parties involved, notice who you believe and why.

## After the Show:

- Geoffrey is a student, a high school senior, and he finds himself in a position to make a decision several times during the play. Consider some of the choices he makes and how they impact his family. Why could you consider Geoffrey to be “the other” in this play? How might the rest of his family be “the other?”

Linda Powell, Michael Stahl-David and Sam Robards

# When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

## TICKET POLICY

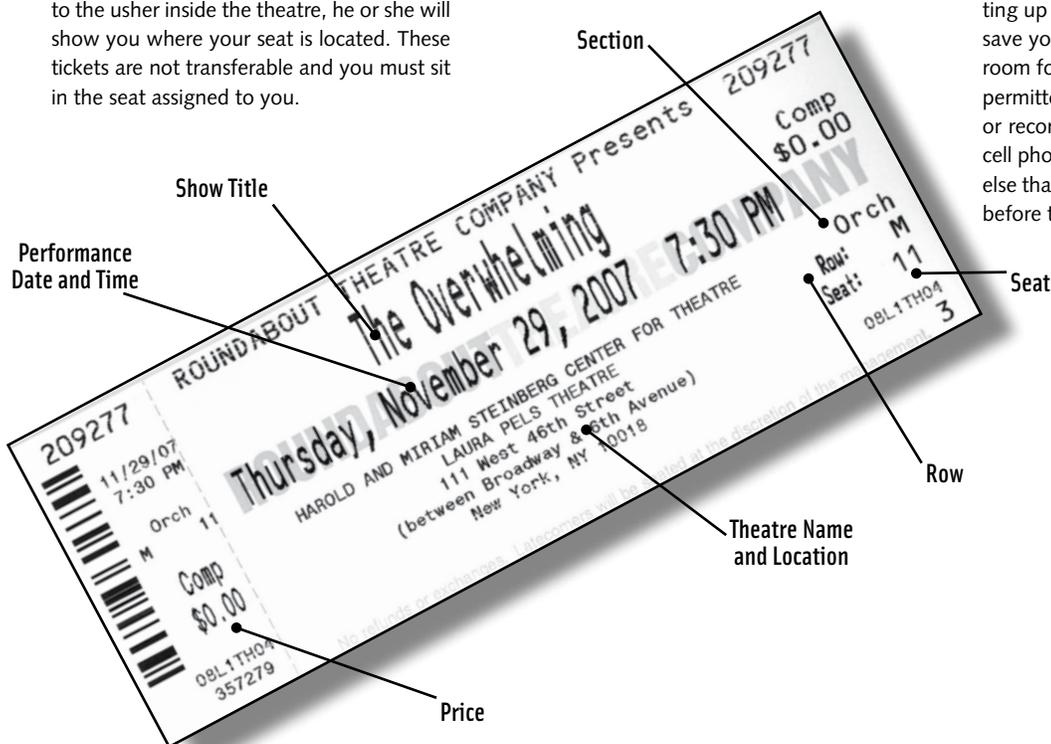
As a student participant in Producing Partners, Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

## PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY'S STUDENT MATINEE SERIES GENEROUSLY UNDERWRITTEN IN PART BY  **Merrill Lynch**

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