



a project in collaboration with European Alternatives, Human Rights Nights Film Festival, Zurich University, Bologna University, Centre Bruxellois de Action Interculturelle, Foundation Strefa WolnoŚlowa in Warsaw.

Europe's Footprints

A 1600 km long Theater

In August 2012, John Mpaliza Balagizi, 40 years, an exiled of the Congolese diaspora, will leave the work he has in Reggio Emilia and begin to walk. He will cross the Alps and walk through Switzerland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, on foot, under the sun, the rain, camping wherever he can, he will go on walking up to forty miles a day until he comes to Brussels. Sixteen hundred kilometers, what's needed to reach the European Parliament, try to be received and listened. In front of the European Parliament, John will be the mouthpiece of thousands of testimonies of the chain of violence that made six million dead in the 1998-2003 conflict and continue to tear his country, the Democratic Republic of Congo. Then he will invoke the help of Europe.

But John's request for help is not only directed to the official Europe of political and administrative institutions. Along the way, John will tell the reasons of his march to as many people as possible, he will tell about the oblivion of Congo by the mass-media and the international institutions, about UN resolutions of no effect, about economic interests that revolve around the immense mineral resources of that country but also of the violence against women and children that, partly because of these interests, continues to make thousands of victims.

Which is the Europe John is talking to? What is happening in the depths of the Europe he is crossing?

What have we got to do with what John is doing, with what he says?

What unsaid, unsolved, repressed questions his complaint is raising in our minds?

What matters are raising about relations with non-Europeans, what issues regarding the role and the future identity we imagine for Europe?

As Europeans, as artists, as theater people working for many years with political refugees, many of whom fled Congo, we felt we had to respond to John's gesture.

Too many are the echoes that our history, our culture, our memory let resonate within us.

Too great is the hyperbolicity, the paradoxical, the exemplarity of his act.

A black man, an exiled, a survivor, in a desperate attempt to stop a chain of violence which seems to have no respite since colonial times, walks across Europe to go to the heart of the empire which owned Congo as its private property, where the helm of economic technocracy lies today, to plead for justice, memory, rationality which are peculiar of the West, in front of the symbol of democracy.

A sort of upside-down reflection of the journey that Conrad's Marlow carried out through Congo towards the heart of darkness comes necessarily to our minds, or the demand for justice that Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas directed to his emperor, or the "unthinkable" thought that only a foreigner, Kafka's K., could come up with, in order to meet and be recognized by the senior officials of the Castle.

But also, leaving literature, the exhausting walks through Europe made by others who survived the horror, and devoted their lives to witness, so that this would never happen again. And still, Aimé Césaire's provocation reappears as a doubt, as a shadow we can no longer escape from: when he argues that the scandal of Holocaust on European conscience had perhaps more to do with seeing those processes applied on European populations, that had been since then used (and mostly tolerated) in the colonies.

And then we wonder to what extent we can apply to John's gesture Pier Paolo Pasolini's insight in reading Aeschylus's Orestes as an exiled African who is in Athens, in the heart of European rationality, the Areopagus (the tribunal established by Athena), which is a crucial tool for transforming the avenging Furies, the Erinyes, in the peaceful Eumenides, in order to break (*respite* in Primo Levi's words) the chain of bloody revenge and violence and finally access to a world in which right and rationality are governing conflicts among people.

These myths, these stories, these founding protagonists of European culture suggested us to interact with the stories, with the terrible testimonies, with the ghosts of John and the other exiles from the Congolese diaspora which will accompany his path. It was the thought (perhaps the illusion) that also

art, and not only law, can be one of those human inventions which can help transforming the Furies into Eumenides, maybe because, through the mirror of artistic representation, we can look at the horror of the Medusa with an indirect gaze, thus avoiding to be transformed into stone men.

Therefore, we decided that if John is Orestes, we will be his chorus, once and for all sanctioning the common membership of foreigners and artists to the crowd of those who are constantly oscillating between inside and outside.

We decided to support John in his march, to invite artists from all over Europe to do a bit of traveling with him, and think that the way we will walk on is a giant canvas on which they can paint, sculpt, make installations; or a huge page on which we can mix the tracks, or a large land of which we have to turn over the clods, a page on which we can write and rewrite history, but brushing it, as Benjamin would say, against the direction. As if it was a stage-world, yes, because we are theater people, a 1600 km long theatre, within which those who will walk beside us will listen to Congolese stories and testimonies having a dialogue with European memories, African writers interacting with European writers, Aimé Césaire being read together with Joseph Conrad, and Franz Fanon with Aeschylus.

And in the evenings around the fire – as it happened to other travelers in the city of Euphemia told by Italo Calvino – with those camping with us, we will exchange stories and memories starting from these writers, but also from such keywords as *memory, violence, justice, exile, roots*, and then we will realize the next day, when the march restarts, that our memory is no longer the same, that it also moved, it also walked, thanks to the others' stories.

And upon arriving in Brussels, in the second half of September, we will witness John's testimony in front of the European Parliament. Then we will start a series of meetings, performances, events, workshops with the most diverse communities living there, in places of culture, schools, theaters, intercultural centers. The aim is to use this trip and the artistic creations resulting from it as a lever to raise and disseminate (in contexts where it would otherwise never arrive) a debate on issues that have to do with Europe, with the Europe we, the people, can imagine, with a memory capable of becoming critical and dynamic, with the construction of a future that is nurtured by the encounter with the other.

Also because of this second phase, the march to Brussels will be documented and told in many ways:

- a writer will recount it through travel notes published in a daily blog on the website of a major Italian newspaper, which will later become a publication;
- a log book will be held by a cartoonist in comics, that will evolve to become short animated movies;
- since October 2012, a project will start involving two theater companies made up by political refugees, working with Teatro dell'Argine (Bologna, Italy) and the Foundation Strefa WolnoSłowa (Warsaw, Poland), and including two theatre workshops with final show;
- finally, a troupe made up of Italians, French, Germans and Poles will shoot a documentary, conceived as a diary in pictures and words, where images of the meetings and artistic performances during John's voyage will alternate with interviews to artists and others joining the journey, with animations taken from the comics, with materials supplied by the Congolese exiles, with scenes filmed in the theater workshops and shows realized with the companies of political refugees.

In order to guarantee the European dimension of the project, a lot of institutions, artists and intellectuals have already joined in: Senate of the Italian Republic, Dynamique de la Diaspora Congolaise en Emilia-Romagna, ITC Teatro di San Lazzaro (Italy), European Alternatives, Transeuropa Festival, Human Rights Nights Film Festival, Department of Political Geography of Zurich University (Switzerland), Department of Education Sciences of Bologna University (Italy), Reggio Emilia Municipality (Italy), Roma Province, Reggio Emilia Province (Italy), Albinea Municipality (Italy), La Spezia Municipality (Italy), National Archive of Diaries in Pieve Santo Stefano (Italy), Centre Bruxellois d'Action Interculturelle (Belgium), Foundation Strefa WolnoSłowa in Warsaw (Poland), ARCI Bologna (Italy), ARCI Milano (Italy), Marco Baliani (director and actor), Ascanio Celestini (author and actor), Massimo Marino (journalist), Marianella Sclavi (anthropologist), Fanny e Alexander (artists), Alessandra Belledi (director Teatro delle Briciole in Parma, Italy), Letizia Quintavalla (director), Association Olinda/Ex Ospedale Psichiatrico Paolo Pini in Milan (Italy), Gerardo Guccini (Bologna University, Italy), Elisabetta Pozzi (actress), Paolo Jedlowski (sociologist), Ivo Quaranta (anthropologist), Matéi Visniec (dramaturg), Fabrice Melquiot (director Théâtre Am Stram Gram in Geneva), Théâtre de Poche (Brussels, Belgium).