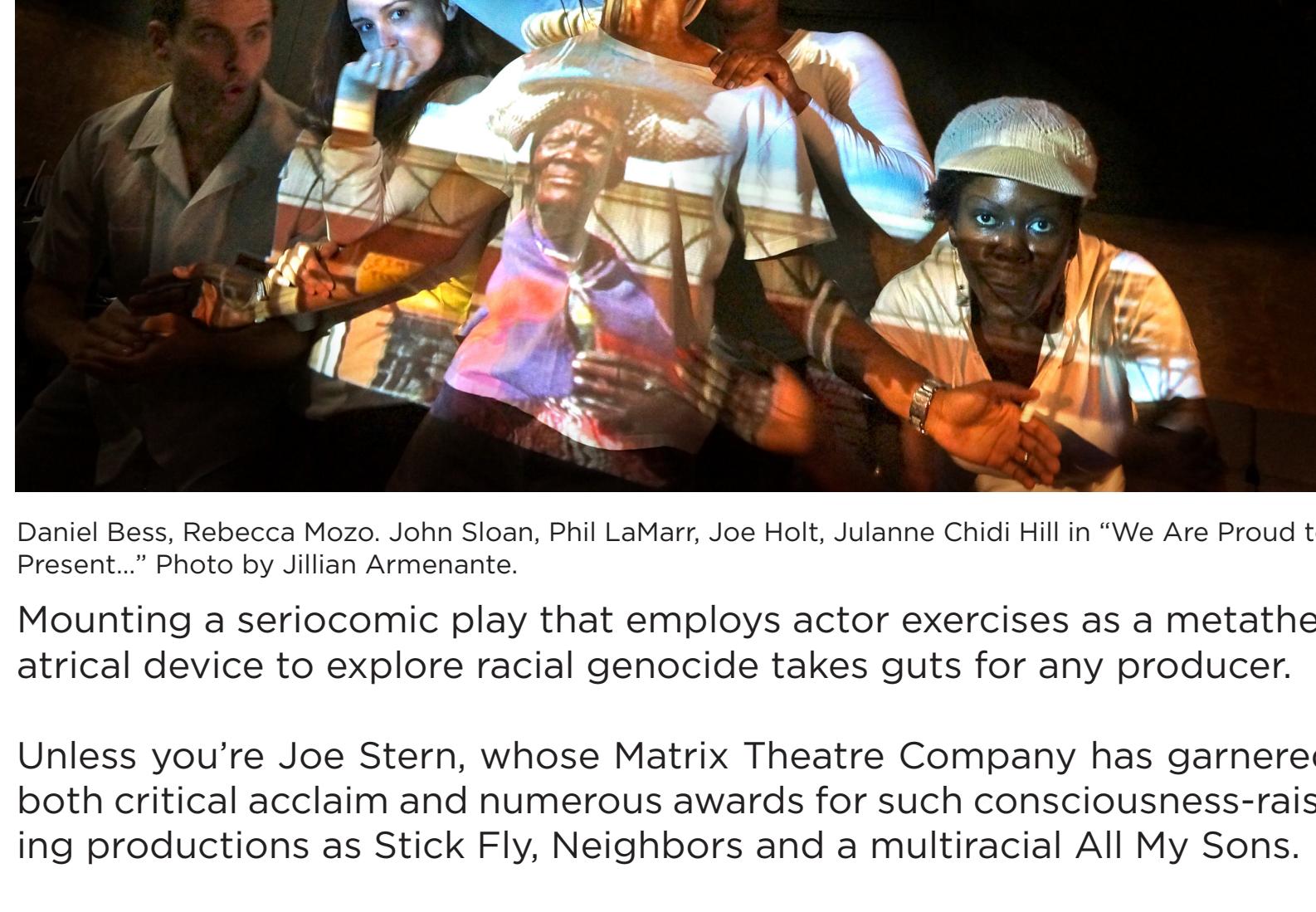


# LA STAGE TIMES

EMPOWERING ARTISTS AND ENGAGING AUDIENCES SINCE 1975

## Matrix Theatre Company Explores Little Known African Genocide

by Deborah Behrens | June 7, 2013

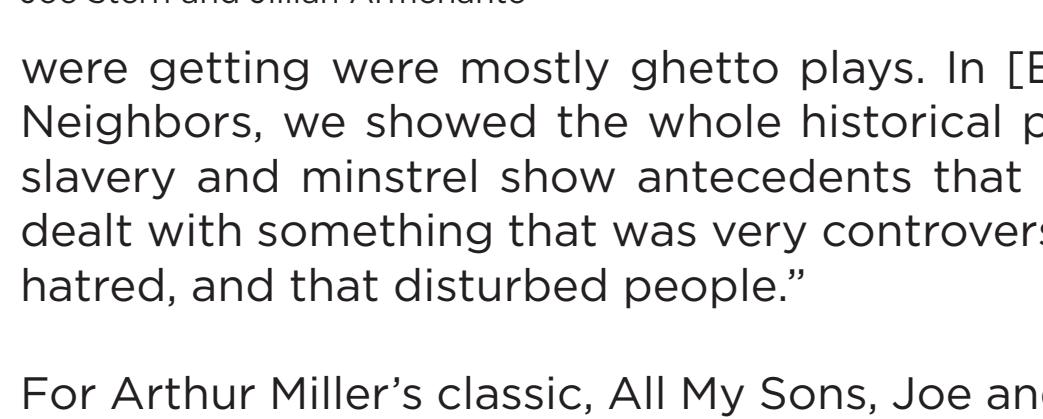


Daniel Bess, Rebecca Mozo, John Sloan, Phil LaMarr, Joe Holt, Julianne Chidi Hill in "We Are Proud to Present..." Photo by Jillian Armenante.

Mounting a seriocomic play that employs actor exercises as a metatheatrical device to explore racial genocide takes guts for any producer.

Unless you're Joe Stern, whose Matrix Theatre Company has garnered both critical acclaim and numerous awards for such consciousness-raising productions as Stick Fly, Neighbors and a multiracial All My Sons.

This time Stern has chosen 31-year-old Brooklyn-based playwright du jour Jackie Sibbles Drury's *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as South-West Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*. Directed by Jillian Armenante, the play has its West Coast premiere this Saturday. The cast features Daniel Bess, Julianne Chidi Hill, Joe Holt, Phil LaMarr, Rebecca Mozo and John Sloan.



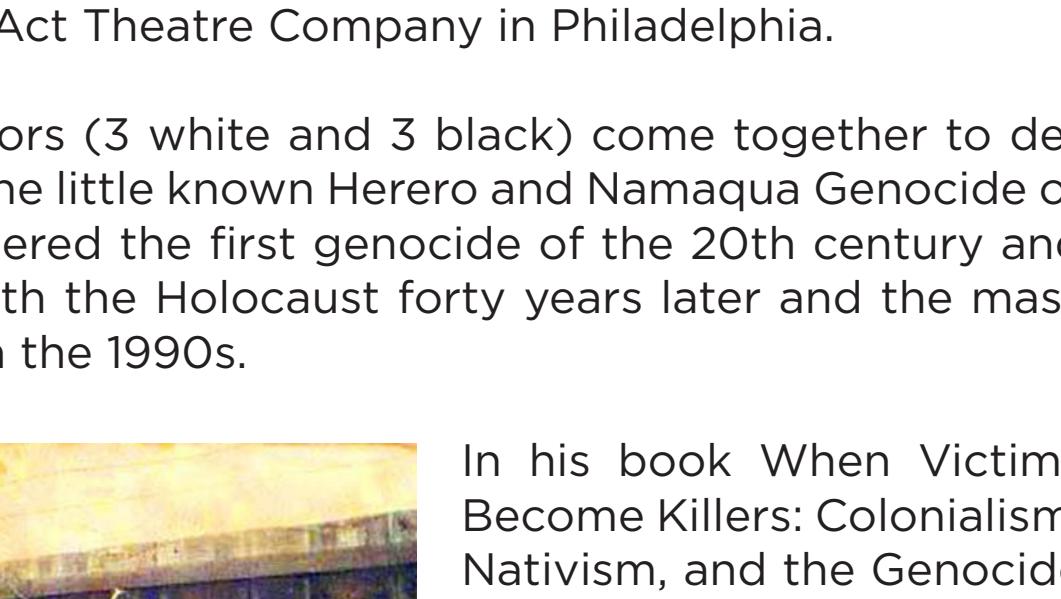
Joe Stern and Jillian Armenante

"For me, this is part of a dialogue that I started four years ago," Stern explains, seated on the Matrix stage one morning last week. "The first part was showing upper middle class African-Americans and their lives in the theater and giving that playwright [Stick Fly's Lydia Diamond] a voice.

Because the plays we were getting were mostly ghetto plays. In [Branden Jacobs-Jenkins'] Neighbors, we showed the whole historical perspective, including the slavery and minstrel show antecedents that are still with us. We also dealt with something that was very controversial, which was black self-hatred, and that disturbed people."

For Arthur Miller's classic, All My Sons, Joe and Kate Keller were played by black actor Alex Morris and white actor Anne Gee Byrd. Their son Chris was biracial, the neighbors were both Latino and white, while the children of Joe's business partner were Asian. Stern says he tried to make it an inclusive experience for more than just white audiences.

"I didn't change the language," he clarifies. "I didn't change the year and we tried to create a neighborhood for now. So it was very deliberate. It wasn't just 'throw a bunch of races against the wall and see where they land.' We had a great playwright who basically wrote a great tragedy, so that everybody could be inside the play and not just look at it and say it's just about white people."



Joe Holt, Daniel Bess, John Sloan, Julianne Chidi Hill, Rebecca Mozo and Phil LaMarr

*We Are Proud* debuted in spring 2012 at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theatre followed by a second mounting last fall for New York's SoHo Rep. Both were directed by Eric Ting. The Matrix is the play's third production, with others scheduled for Woolly Mammoth Theater in Washington D.C., Company One in Boston, Available Light Theater Company in Columbus and InterAct Theatre Company in Philadelphia.

In Drury's play, six actors (3 white and 3 black) come together to devise a work based on the little known Herero and Namaqua Genocide of 1904-07. It was considered the first genocide of the 20th century and was a precursor to both the Holocaust forty years later and the mass slaughter in Rwanda in the 1990s.

Early 20th Century postcard showing German colonialist soldiers packing up skulls of Herero tribespeople who died in Namibia's Shark Island Concentration Camp.

In his book *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Columbia University professor Mahmood Mamdani writes: "There is a link that connects the genocide of the Herero and the Nazi Holocaust to the Rwandan genocide. That link is race branding, whereby it became possible not only to set a group apart as an enemy, but also to exterminate it with an easy conscience."

The sad historical saga that pitted German colonists against the Herero tribe (and later the Nama), involved land and cattle confiscation, the attempted building of a railroad with slave labor and a subsequent rebellion that led German general Lothar von Trotha to vow to exterminate them: "I will destroy the African tribes with streams of blood and streams of money. Only following this cleansing can something new emerge, which will remain."

Von Trotha drove the tribe into the Omaheke area of the Kalahari Desert, where wells were then poisoned or patrolled, and anyone caught crawling back was bayoneted, including women and children. Only a labor shortage stopped the killing. Survivors were put in concentration camps where medical experiments were regularly performed. By 1907, only 15,000 Herero remained out of an original 80,000.

"The Germans sent out postcards of themselves packing the skulls of Herero tribespeople who had died [on Shark Island]," says Armenante, seated on the stage across from Stern. "As if to say, 'Look what we've accomplished here.' They were very popular in Germany."

Fictional letters written by German soldiers to their families form the basis for the *We Are Proud* actors' thoughtful but ineffectual attempt to theatricalize the horrific event. Parsing this skimpy and one-sided source material eventually escalates racial tensions between the white and black cast members. The play raises the issue of how subjective racial filters can consciously and unconsciously color the recounting of history and the truth.

"Where are the Africans?" asks Actor 2/Black Man. "I think we should see some Africans in Africa."

In a talkback for the SoHo production, playwright Drury explained that she was "trying to shine a light on a particularly brutal piece of history that not a lot of people know about, but I was also hoping to write a play about

race that didn't make me want to die. There are lots of plays about race that allow you to leave the theatre and congratulate yourself for not being racist. I think that is pointless. I wanted to create a play that allowed the people participating in it to talk about it without falling into politically correct scripts."

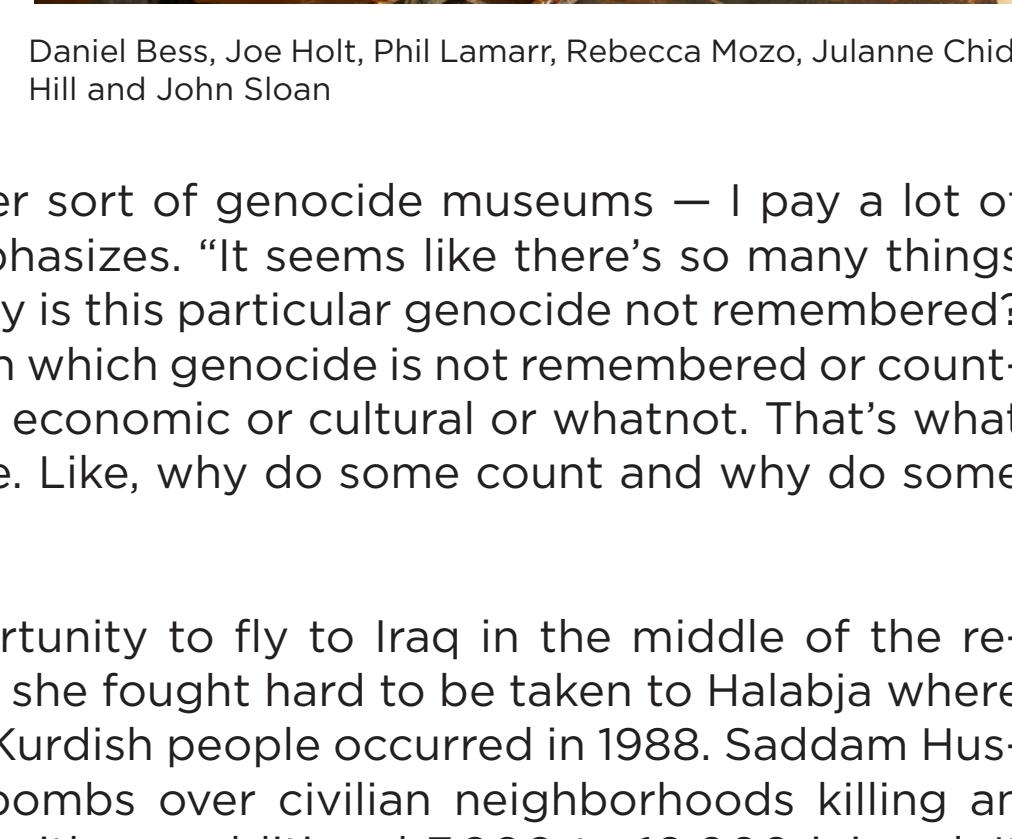


Phil LaMarr

A former member of Seattle's Annex Theatre, where she also ran a gay theater ensemble called Alice B, Armenante moved to LA to appear in the 1998 Mark Taper Forum production of *Cider House Rules* and received an Ovation Award nomination for Lead Actress. She started Circle X prior to the first Taper rehearsals, and the new company's production of *Great Men of Science* led the intimate theater Ovation nomination totals with seven the same year. In 1999, Stern cast Armenante in his television series *Judging Amy*, where she played Donna Kozlowski for six seasons.

The two have wanted to do a play together for some time. "I have been interested in exploring genocide for years," Armenante explains. "Six years ago I actually travelled to Namibia. I was walking around downtown Swakopmund and going into shops that were selling Second Reich helmets and swastikas. I was confused at the time because I thought I was going to the lovely African desert and instead they were selling wiener schnitzel. Seeing these two cultures collide in real life and walking around sauerkraut houses in the middle of Africa was a little jarring and alarming for me."

When Stern sent her Drury's play, Armenante says she found it amazing that while in Swakopmund, she saw no buildings that honored the memory of the revolt and massacre that had occurred there 100 years ago.



Daniel Bess, Joe Holt, Phil Lamarr, Rebecca Mozo, Julianne Chidi Hill and John Sloan

"In researching this play and knowing about the Herero uprising as they called it — and having experienced a lot of other sort of genocide museums — I pay a lot of respect to that," she emphasizes. "It seems like there's so many things going on with racism. Why is this particular genocide not remembered? There are many cultures in which genocide is not remembered or counted for some reason, be it economic or cultural or whatnot. That's what attracted me to the piece. Like, why do some count and why do some not?"

Armenante had an opportunity to fly to Iraq in the middle of the rehearsal process. She says she fought hard to be taken to Halabja where a genocidal massacre of Kurdish people occurred in 1988. Saddam Hussein dropped chemical bombs over civilian neighborhoods killing an estimated 5,000 people with an additional 7,000 to 10,000 injured. It is considered the largest chemical weapons attack directed against a civilian population in history.

Armenante brought back a "very graphic" and "badly made" video to show the cast. They watched it together on a projector set up for the show. She admits that the images were nightmarish.

"It became a conversation that was just more immediate because they're people who are like us," she explains quietly. "They're people who were alive while we were here. They're people who were eliminated in their steps, on their front yard, holding their children. It wasn't Pompeii."

And yet, says Armenante, no one in the room had heard of Iraq's Bloody Friday. "Not a single person. So we had that dialogue, that this is still occurring today, that it's not a tribe 100 years ago. Grounding the play away from its funny little actor moments like 'No, come on you guys, this is serious' to something concrete was very forceful in the rehearsing of this."

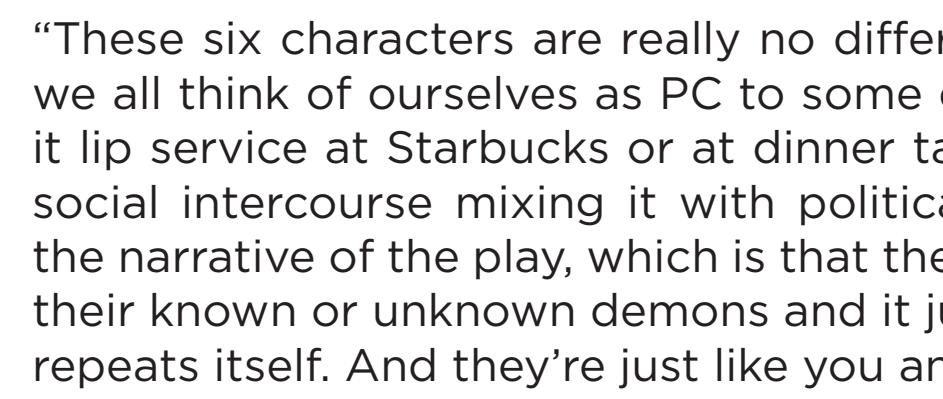
### Having Room to Explore

The action in *We Are Proud* alternates between the actors rehearsing and presenting vignettes of their findings, often in a seemingly improvisational and comical manner. That's because playwright Drury, a fan of ensemble-created text, has intentionally left open wide sections of the script for the actors and director to devise or inhabit their own reactions. The play was written as her graduate school MFA thesis at Brown University.

In a recent New York Times interview by Rob Weinert-Kendt, Drury gave credit for the play's style to a historiography class taught by Brown professor Patricia Ybarra.

"She has people do class presentations about serious subjects, and these undergraduates always did them either super-irreverently or super-earnestly," Ms. Drury recalled. "You'd hear students being like, 'I, as a white man, cannot ever understand the pain,' and you're like, 'Oh my God, just say what you're talking about.' There was so much fear in speaking with authority, which I could really relate to."

So how has the process been for Armenante and the Matrix cast? "This is the kind of theater I was sort of weaned on," the director notes. "I left a very commercial theater program and ended up studying in London where my world just sort of shattered. I went from being a New York actor to seeing people sewing themselves inside stockings. Much more exploratory. Working at early Riverside Studios. This is more my wheelhouse of what I love to work in, and it's rare to be able to get this opportunity in the world of commercial theater."



Phil LaMarr, Julianne Chidi Hill, Rebecca Mozo and John Sloan

More than half the cast consists of Antaeus Company members whose focus is presenting classical plays. Holt, Bess, Mozo and Sloan are all seasoned interpreters of Shakespeare and Shaw, Coward and Pinter. But they, and fellow cast members Hill and LaMarr, are thankful for the opportunity to perform in this collaborative way, Armenante says.

"Even this week they have each taken me aside and in their own way, said, 'I cannot be grateful enough to be able to do this kind of work and bathe in our own impulse and instinct,'" she says. "I think they all know how fortunate they are to have such a good piece and to be able to work in a way that they generate and get to mess with."

### Everyday Racism

So can the well-intentioned ever get beyond their racism? Is polite social dialogue simply a mask for a simmering subliminal outrage? Or as director Eric Ting posed in a Victory Garden Theater audience video: "With our sound bite lifestyle, how do we not fall prey to superficiality? What does it mean when we tackle big things from a two dimensional place?"

"These six characters are really no different than us, in the sense that we all think of ourselves as PC to some extent," offers Stern. "We give it lip service at Starbucks or at dinner tables, and spend more time in social intercourse mixing it with political intercourse. Basically that's the narrative of the play, which is that they come to consciousness with their known or unknown demons and it just escalates. Then history just repeats itself. And they're just like you and I."

"The audience knows from the beginning that there's an elephant in the room and they watch it evolve."

For Armenante, art remains a crucial vehicle for facilitating behavioral change by advancing social and political awareness. "I was a 14-year-old when I got to see [Pablo Picasso's] *Guernica* and the fury of the nostril of that horse," she offers. "If I wasn't affected by that art, I wouldn't have known that Hitler bombed a village. So through art and through exploring these things, stories can get told and a conversation can continue. I don't know that I'd sit in a Starbucks...and be like, 'Yeah, how about that Herero massacre, eh? You know what I mean?'

"So I think it is the duty of artists to bring this into discussion."

**We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as South-West Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915, Matrix Theatre Company, 7657 Melrose Ave, LA 90046. Opens Saturday. Thu-Sat 8 pm, Sun 2 pm. Through August 11. Tickets: \$30. 323-852-1445 [www.matrixtheatre.com](http://www.matrixtheatre.com)**

## Directing a Play About Genocide

For Matrix director Armenante, the play represents the latest project in a theatrical career known for producing, directing and writing material with thought-provoking themes. The former Circle X Theatre Company co-founder and artistic director is the force behind such multiple award-winning productions as Love Loves A Pornographer, Laura Comstock's Bag-Punching Dog, Un Flagrante Gothic and Great Men of Science, Nos 21 & 22, often in collaboration with her partner Alice Dodd.