HERE WAS A CHILL IN THE AIR WHEN I STEPPED outside the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. It was mid-August, and night had fallen with a crisp energy that was completely new to me. Groups of Africans were huddled by the exit to greet loved ones, haggle for cab fares, or to guide safari-clad tourists to their vans. Meanwhile, I was an actor headed to a remote village to teach Shakespeare. Curious eyes were gazing at me. Men rushed to me with trinkets to sell and prices to bargain. I was a foreigner in a new city, and yet I felt incredibly at ease.

How did I get here? I can trace the path back to one evening in 2012 in a stark room at the Mark Taper Annex at Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles. Fresh from New York City, I was attending a teaching artist workshop, where I met two actors who ran the Shakespeare Youth Festival, a program of the Los Angeles Drama Club. Within two weeks I found myself in South Los Angeles co-directing 24 children in The Tempest as part of the festival’s year-round effort to bring the Bard to young people in Watts, East L.A., and Hollywood. Their efforts have in more recent years expanded to Mexico, Botswana, and, last summer, Kenya.

Earlier in 2019 we received an invitation from Dr. Auma Obama to bring our program to her home country. Just three months later, six teaching artists and four teenage Shakespeare nerds were on a plane to Nairobi. We then journeyped 250 miles deeper into the heart of Kenya. We passed the Great Rift Valley, uncelebrated towns teeming with life, and ancient rock formations, until we arrived in a place called Nyang’oma Kogelo, the birthplace of Barack Obama Sr. and his daughter Auma, half-sister to former President Barack Obama.

Auma Obama had a vision for her hometown: to create a platform for disadvantaged children that would allow them to discover their strengths and realize their full potential to live independent and successful lives. In 2009, the Sauti Kuu Foundation (Kiswahili for “powerful voices”) was born. As part of their programming, every summer for one week, 100 children aged 10 to 18 are invited to board on the campus grounds and participate in workshops on such subjects as first aid, woodworking, sewing, sports, and horticulture. This year, Dr. Auma (as they call her) wanted to develop the drama component of SKF, hence her invitation.

In transit, I practiced my limited Kiswahili: “habari,” a more formal “hello,” as opposed to “jambo,” which is what they say to tourists, and “nina furaha kukutana na wewe,” or “nice to meet you,” which proved to be a challenging tongue twister. English and Kiswahili are Kenya’s official languages, but there are a total of 68 languages spoken by different regional tribes. Where we were heading in western Kenya, roughly three million speak Luo, including Dr.
Auma and her Sauti Kuu students.

We poured out of the van after a seven-hour drive and were overtaken by local attention. Some boys were playing soccer and invited us to jump in. I scored a goal, luckily! Red dirt caked the white soles of my Adidas shoes and sweat ran down my face. Here I was, 10,000 miles from home, engaging with an amazing group of strangers on a soccer field made possible by President Obama’s sister.

We were greeted by local staff, who made us feel like honored guests, taking our hands with strong eye contact and guiding us to a circle of chairs where we would all share ourselves. There were offerings of mandazi, a fried bread snack, and delicious lemongrass tea. We met with Dr. Auma, field projects coordinator Dan Joshua Oduor, sport coordinator Lucy Akinyi Otieno, communications intern Kennedy Omondi, and other SKF team members. We played theatre games as an ice breaker and toured the vegetable garden.

The chosen theme for our gathering was “All the world’s a stage—How will you play your part?” We were to use Shakespeare’s words to inspire and empower the students of Sauti Kuu, culminating in a performance for the village at the end of the week.

There was a buzz when the students arrived. They came from the many tribes of upcountry Alego and Nairobi, including Luo, Kisii, Luhya, and Kikuyu. I helped a few boys pitch their tents. A group of girls surrounded me to ask about my hobbies. “Crossfit,” I said, and they giggled. I met Gabriel, age 10, who quickly became my friend and personal translator. “Just remember,” he said, “erokamano means thank you in Luo.” Everyone gathered for the opening ceremony. Dr. Auma welcomed her students. Then we danced. Stories, drama, and poetry can be universal, but nothing brings communities together like music and movement.

As Westerners teaching in Africa, we knew we were treading the shark-infested waters of colonialism with the plays of a “dead white guy.” While Shakespeare was writing Hamlet circa 1599-1602, the Portuguese had taken control of Mombasa, perpetuating an era of European and Middle Eastern rule that lasted until Kenya declared independence in 1963. Some 420 years later, the Shakespeare Youth Festival was invited by a rural Luo community to launch their first performing arts program.

People may assume that Shakespeare Youth Festival LA is a predominately white organization, but in fact half of our staff are people of color, and 82 percent of our students are from marginalized backgrounds. My mother, who has Hawaiian-Chinese ancestry, hails from the Big Island of Hawaii, and my father is a European mutt from Nebraska.

Still, in Africa, we were Americans, and we came bearing Shakespeare. We had a lot to learn about how we and our project were perceived. My colleague, Anniwaa Buachie, who is first-generation Ghanaian British, made me very aware of this sensitive situation. Though we are used to working with children in an American context, the story of our African American brothers and sisters is quite distinct from that of our African brethren. It’s not enough for us to go to Africa and experience the customs. As citizens of a country that participated in the slave trade and the ensuing destabilization
of the continent, we Americans have colonialist residue, which we perpetuate to this day when we see our culture as the dominant or superior one.

As educators, it was imperative that we understand the cultural heritage of the kids we were teaching so that we could create art all people could enjoy. Children performing Shakespeare in Kenya in the same way that American kids do was not our goal. To us Shakespeare is but a tool—a tool for empowerment, expression, storytelling, and a springboard to tell one’s own story.

Dr. Auma saw no conflict in teaching the children to embrace the thatched roofs and kitchen gardens of their ancestors while simultaneously learning the ancient plays of a “dead Englishman.” Art is global. At the same time, we need to be aware of the legacies of certain cultures when working in different countries. To ensure that we Westerners do not colonize the artistic process, we need to pause, step back, and allow the innate creativity that has lived in the Kenyan spirit for generations to flourish. In Kenya, we needed to be open to what they had to teach us.

EVERY MORNING THE WHISTLE sounded at 5:45 a.m. We would meet the students in the soccer field for a run while the air was still dark and chilled from the morning mist. We’d break into smaller groups to play netball, basketball, soccer, and boxing. Our morning ritual concluded with yoga, co-led by SKF staff member Kevin Odhiambo, and our Shakespeare Youth Festival’s artistic director, Blaire Baron. As a palpable awareness emerged through our savasana—the gradual process of relaxing one body part at a time—the orange sun broke through the horizon to greet the songs of birds and insects.

Six of us took groups of 20 or so and split up in different areas on campus. I had
22 in mine, all about 10 to 12 years old. As I warmed up their voices using Kristin Linklater’s “Zoo Whoa Shaw” technique, they broke into laughter. When I gave them a song to learn they took to it immediately. They spoke English, but I could tell they didn’t always understand me. Thankfully my translators spoke Kishwahili, Luo, and English.

My colleagues chose to stage scenes from Hamlet and Troilus and Cressida, or in some cases to devise their own pieces. For my group, who called themselves “Green Hope,” I chose the “Seven Ages of Man” speech from As You Like It. These kids could relate, because we were taking an active part in some of those very ages in our work. I wanted to incorporate their own culture into the performance, and that could only be achieved by performing in Luo. Leah Asego, a visiting teacher from Nairobi, helped translate the speech. I gave each student a line in English and a line in Luo to memorize:

All the World’s a Stage,
And all the men and women merely players

Pinyi bende en par mar tugo

They have their exits and their entrances;
and one man in his time plays many parts

Chuo gi mon inyulo kendo tho

I gave them a madrigal composed by Henry VIII called “O My Hart,” to which we added an African beat. Young Gabriel served as drummer, and we clapped our hands in formation as their young voices lifted into the air with pitch-perfect clarity. Then we danced.

The staff and kids of Sauti Kuu have an invigorating way of honoring their teachers, or anyone who gets up in front of the crowd.

NEW FROM TCG Books

ILLYRIA BY RICHARD NELSON

It is 1958. In the midst of a building boom in New York City, Joe Papp and his colleagues are facing pressure from the city’s elite as they continue their free Shakespeare in Central Park. From the creator of the most celebrated family plays of the last decade comes a drama about a different kind of family—one held together by the belief that the theater, and the city, belong to all of us.

$14.95
978-1-55936-592-5

THE SOUND INSIDE BY ADAM RAPP

When Bella Baird, an isolated creative writing professor at Yale, begins to mentor a brilliant but enigmatic student, Christopher, the two form an unexpectedly intense bond. As their lives become intertwined in unpredictable ways, Bella makes a surprising request of Christopher. Brimming with suspense, Rapp’s riveting play explores the limits of what one person can ask of another.

$14.95
978-1-55936-977-0

TCG Books are available at fine bookstores or can be ordered at www.tcg.org/TCGBookstore.
They clapped their hands toward me and yelled, “Apewe!”, meaning “praise.” A second clap, “Tena!” (again). Clapped a third time, “Ya mwisho!” (one last time). As the receiver, I had to stand and embrace their energy with a virtual hug. It was certainly a humbling feeling to take such rapturous acclaim.

In addition to putting together a performance, each teacher also provided a workshop of their choosing: stage combat, period dance, mask making, theatre games, improv. I directed a workshop called Playback Theatre. It was ritualistic in approach; it involved hearing someone’s story and watching it acted out—i.e., “played back” on the spot. One boy’s story involved him hunting alone in the forest for squirrels, only to be chased home by a pack of wild boars.

I then asked a girl about a scary moment she could share. She told me that one night when she was walking home, a group of men grabbed her by the side of the road and tried to rape her. Luckily she was able to escape. I was caught off guard. Instead of having the actors replay this particular scenario, I told them to make believe she had been kidnapped. The reenactment was still rather harrowing, and when I asked her if she was satisfied, she shyly said yes.

At lunch, I sat with Dr. Auma and shared with her what had happened. She has an intense presence, with the gaze of someone who really sees you when they look at you. I asked, “Should I continue asking such questions?”

“Absolutely,” she asserted, and suggested that when such personal stories are shared, I should follow up by asking, “How did you become brave in that moment?” That was a learning experience for me. This wasn’t just a dramatic exercise. We are here to instill in these students a sense of pride, to help them own their own triumphs. We were using theatre to challenge their critical thinking skills and develop their creative powers.

**EVEN BEFORE THE WEEK WAS OUT,** I could see the seeds we planted beginning to grow. The night before the performance, there was a downpour. Some of the students had to sleep in the great hall, because the tents leaked and soaked their mattresses. Young voices singing “O My Hart” rang from the great hall while I sat on the porch. Hearing that song echoing during the night storm filled me with a sense of...
comfort; that song now belonged to them.

When the clouds broke the next morning, it was as if the stage had been cleansed. Dr. Auma’s daughter, Akinyi Manners, who also teaches a class in mural painting and collage, had created colorful posters to use as backdrops. There was laughter as the students yelled “break a leg,” which clearly means something entirely different in Luo.

The villagers arrived and sat under a shaded area attentively fanning and waving. There were brightly colored dresses and head wraps, toddlers, babies, and elderly men chewing root.

Green Hope was chosen to open the presentation, with “Seven Ages of Man” followed by “O My Hart.” Next was Anniwaa Buachie’s group, Fabulous Souls; then Green Giants, led by Blaire Baron; Julia Walker Wyson’s group, the Youngsters; Esdras Toussaint’s group, Sauti Kuu Panthers; and finally J. Bailey Burcham’s group, the Jayhawks, who devised their own spoken word piece inspired by “to be, or not to be” from Hamlet. They explored the idea of choosing life even in the face of the worst despair:

To Be, or Not to Be
That Is the Question
I Choose to Live
To Be or Not to Be
I Know the Answer

This phrase was repeated several times before they invited us and the rest of the student body to join them clapping in praise. It was a mighty phrase, growing in power with the beating of our hands and the stamping of our feet. “I choose to live” was the battle cry of the show from a small village who taught us something valuable: The pulse of Shakespeare’s heartbeat resounds in us all.

After our bows, Dr. Auma invited the audience to cheer for us all with “Apewe!” “Tena!” “Ya mwisho!” A crowd of about 100 joined us onstage to greet their children and take selfies. Hugs were met with smiles. Laughter met with tears. The blending of three languages was carried so warmly from breath to breath as we embraced.

Before I left Kenya, I was able to get some takeaways from Dr. Auma about what she learned from the Sauti Kuu Shakespeare Players (she’s invited us back to teach, though we haven’t yet set a date).

“Shakespeare can be done in Kiswahili, it can be done in Luo, and it can be performed in Europe,” she tells me. “We listen to opera in Italian, in German, in many different languages, and it’s the voices, it’s the mood, it’s the sound that keeps us invested. You don’t understand the words they are singing in La Traviata, but you get a feeling for what’s going on and their actions. I think it’s possible to play Shakespeare in Luo and take it to Broadway.”

“Erokamano,” I said in Luo as we took each other in.

Kila Packett is an actor and educator based in Los Angeles. He is a co-author of Unnatural Acts, for which he received a Drama Desk nomination for outstanding play. A Eugene O’Neill Theater Center fellow, Packett holds an MFA in acting from Columbia University’s School of the Arts.