

Gitana Productions Puts Human Face On Darfur Crisis With Original Play

“Complacency of Silence: Darfur”

By: Lee Patton Chiles

ST. LOUIS, MO – Complacency of Silence: Darfur, an original theatrical play produced by Gitana Productions, Inc. of St. Louis, will use the power of theatre, music and dance to put a human face on the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. Gitana Productions, Inc. will present nine performances of Complacency of Silence: Darfur at the Saint Louis University Theatre from May 23 through June 8, 2008. This production will be the 10th in a series of annual “Faces of Love” cultural events brought to St. Louis by Gitana Productions.

Complacency of Silence: Darfur is an original theatrical production written by St. Louis playwright Lee Patton Chiles, which dramatizes the humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan, Africa.

The United Nations estimates that the genocide in Darfur has claimed more than 400,000 lives and displaced 2.3 million of the region’s 7 million residents. More than one million Darfuris continue to live in their villages under the constant threat of bombings, raids, murder, rape and torture.

Millions more Darfuris, mostly women and children, have fled their homes and now live in sprawling camps for the internally displaced in Darfur, and in refugee camps in neighboring Chad. There they struggle to meet basic needs: water, food, shelter and security, the most precious of all,

because without it, the other basics can’t be achieved. For example, the people in the camps can no longer cultivate food to provide for their families. To simply venture outside the camp for firewood means death for the men and rape for the women.

“Complacency of Silence: Darfur will personalize this modern-day genocide,” said Cecilia Nadal, executive director of directors of Gitana Productions. “Most of us know the Darfuri people only as statistical victims. By individualizing the stories and making them real and personal, Gitana hopes that Complacency of Silence: Darfur will inspire people to take action on behalf of their fellow men, women and children.”

The play will provide insight into the lives of the Darfuri people such as mothers struggling to feed their babies, children eager to go to school, young men and women looking towards marriage and family.

“These are remarkably courageous people who have always embraced life,” said Nadal. “They loved to dance and sing, work the land, raise their sheep and goats. They aspired to make a good life for themselves, family and community, but at a specific moment in time, without notice, their government turned them into prey.”

Playwright Patton Chiles has spent more than a year doing research for the play on Darfur, which has connected her with people all over the world including Dr. Samuel Totten, who investigated the genocide for the United Nations; Professor Ellen Ismail in Germany; Father Gabriel Nukta in Sudan; Daoud Hari from northern Darfur; and several other people who for security’s sake, asked to not be named.

Among the first people that Chiles interviewed were Brian Steidle and his sister Gretchen Steidle Wallace, authors of the book THE DEVIL CAME ON HORSEBACK, which is based on their correspondence to each other throughout Brian’s time in Darfur. The book, which exposes the ongoing tragedy in Sudan as seen through the eyes of one American witness, was made into an award-winning film in 2007.

“The research for this play has taken me places I’ve never gone before,” said Chiles. “I met several Darfur refugees here in Missouri who told me what it’s like in Darfur, how it smells, what the dirt feels like. They let me try on a toub, the gorgeous colored and patterned cloth worn by Sudanese women as their traditional outer clothing. These are details you don’t learn when you read a newspaper.”

Chiles also “met” award-winning journalist, photographer and humanitarian relief worker

Gina Bramucci through a series of encounters. Bramucci had created the Temoignages Project (Temoignages is the French word for testimony) with two colleagues in 2005 and 2006 while working on her graduate degree in Darfur. The project used photos, stories and music to make the reality of the Darfur tragedy more tangible to people in distant places.

“Gina is my ‘six degrees of separation’ contact with Darfur,” said Chiles. “She has graciously and generously shared her journal entries, e-mails, thoughts and opinions, even brutally honest observations about herself and the situation in Darfur. She is a vital thread running through this play.”

Ironically, although they met through a contact on the east coast, Bramucci is a graduate of the University of Missouri - Columbia where she earned her Master of Arts in Journalism in 2006. She has worked in the humanitarian emergency relief field in northern Uganda, West Darfur and the Central African Republic.

Gitana Productions also is sponsoring “Faces of Darfur,” a first-ever public exhibit of

Bramucci’s photojournalistic images of Darfur from the Temoignages Project at St. Louis City Hall. The exhibit of hauntingly beautiful photographs will run through May 3.

“For me, a society is judged on how well they treat their most vulnerable people,” said Chiles, who received a 2006 Kevin Kline Award nomination for Outstanding New Play for her work on “Katherine Dunham, Dancing on Air,” produced by Historyonics Theatre Company.

“The Darfur people are so vulnerable,” said Chiles. “The people being hurt the most are not the rebels, not the government but the kids, the old women, the mothers, the little boys. You can’t be a child there.”

“In this age of live satellite video from all over the world, we cannot say ‘We didn’t know,’” said Nadal. “We cannot say ‘Never again’ and have it mean anything if we allow this to happen in Darfur. How will history judge our society – by our actions or our inactions in Darfur?”

Performances of Complacency of Silence: Darfur from May 23 through June 8 are on Fridays and Saturdays at

8 p.m. and on Sundays at 2:30 p.m. Tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children 12 and under (parental guidance is suggested). For more information, visit www.gitana-inc.org or call Gitana at (314) 721-6556 or Metrotix at (314) 534-1111.

The Regional Arts Commission, the Missouri Arts Council, Arts and Education Council of St. Louis and the Employees Community Fund of Boeing St. Louis have donated \$30,000 in grants and funding to support Complacency of Silence: Darfur.

Gitana Productions, Inc. is a not-for-profit arts and education organization dedicated to increasing cross-cultural awareness and collaboration by bringing international music, dance and drama to the St. Louis community. Gitana events present a rarely seen diversity of international and local artists exhibiting an array of traditional and innovative artistic expressions. For more information, visit www.gitana-inc.org or call Gitana Productions at (314) 721-6556.