

British Theatre Guide

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The Overwhelming

J.T. Rogers

National Theatre/Out of Joint

West Yorkshire Playhouse and touring
(2006)

Between May and August of 1994 an estimated 800,000 people, members of Rwanda's despised Tutsi minority, were slaughtered by their Hutu neighbours. It was a meticulously planned act of genocide, alluded to quite openly in radio broadcasts, and took place under the very noses of foreign diplomats and UN peacekeeping forces. How could such an atrocity have been allowed to happen, and what - if anything - could concerned individuals have done to prevent it?

Out of Joint is of course no stranger to topical plays. *The Overwhelming* follows hard on the heels of [The Permanent Way](#) and [Talking to Terrorists](#), but unlike those interview-based and rather static works it is as much thriller as agitprop. During the interval I overheard several audience members make comparisons between the play and the recent film version of John le Carre's *The Constant Gardener*, and there is indeed a resemblance between the two stories of well-meaning but naive foreigners hopelessly out of their depth in post-colonial Africa.

Rogers' American innocents abroad are Jack Exley (Matthew Marsh), a white academic in search of material for a new book, his black wife Linda (Tanya Moodie), also a writer, and Geoffrey (Andrew Garfield), Jack's seventeen year old son by his first marriage. The family arrives in Kigali shortly before the massacre and are immediately plunged into the murky waters of Rwandan politics. Jack's old college friend Joseph Gasana (Jude Akuwudike), a Tutsi doctor who was to have provided him with vital information for his book, has mysteriously disappeared. Linda is taken under the wing of Rwandan government official Samuel Mizinga (Danny Sapani), Geoffrey strikes up a friendship with the family's Hutu servant Gerard (Babou Ceesay), and a supporting cast of politicians, soldiers, diplomats and ordinary Rwandans bombard the Exleys with a stream of conflicting information.

When the terrible day of reckoning finally arrives Jack and Linda, both of whom firmly believe that "we're the ones who have to be willing to stand up and make a difference. One pebble redirects the river," are given an opportunity to put their principles into practice. Their utter failure to do so makes for one of the most harrowing scenes I've seen in the theatre for a long time.

The Overwhelming is particularly successful in its depiction of way in which the Tutsi were turned into scapegoats for Rwanda's economic and social ills. When Linda goes shopping in the market she asks a friendly local man for help in buying a cabbage from a woman vendor. The man politely advises her to shop elsewhere because "She is a filthy Tutsi whore, miss She will poison you and you will die". Jack attempts to report the disappearance of Dr Gasana, an AIDS specialist, to a policeman who informs him that "Hutu do not get AIDS. AIDS is a Tutsi sickness". Not that Rwanda is unique in its delineation of worthy and unworthy victims - a Bangladesh Major from the UN peacekeeping force reminds Jack that that whilst the slaughter of eighteen American soldiers in

Somalia was front-page news all over the world, the deaths of the ninety Pakistani and Malaysian UN soldiers killed in the attempt to rescue them went unreported in the West.

The excellent ensemble cast, all of whom are called upon to juggle a wide variety of accents and snatches of French and Kinyarwanda, also includes William Armstrong (Charles Woolsey/British Doctor), Nick Fletcher (Jean-Claude Bisson/Jan Verbeek), Lucian Msamati (Rwandan Politician/UN Major), Chipso Chung (Rwandan Doctor/Joseph's Wife) and Adura Onashile (Woman in Club/Market Woman). Director Max Stafford Clark ensures that the play zips along at such a pace we barely notice the occasional lapse into melodrama and soap opera sentimentality, and Tim Shortall's all-purpose set springs an unforgettably nasty surprise on the audience to give the play its chilling final image. Out of Joint has once again come up with a production as gripping as it is thought-provoking.

At the West Yorkshire Playhouse until 16th September, then touring to Southampton, Liverpool and Manchester. Tour ends on 7th October.

Philip Fisher [reviewed](#) this production at the National Theatre.

Reviewer: [J. D. Atkinson](#)