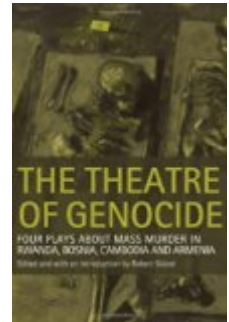


Robert Skloot. *The Theatre of Genocide: Four Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. v + 221 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-299-22474-5.



Reviewed by Eric Sterling

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Commissioned by Elisa G. von Joeden-Forgey (University of Pennsylvania)

Robert Skloot is a renowned professor of theatre and drama and a faculty member of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is a Holocaust drama scholar whose three books, *The Darkness We Carry: The Drama of the Holocaust* (1988) and the two-volume edited anthology, *The Theatre of the Holocaust* (1982 and 1999), have contributed greatly to Holocaust studies. Skloot's latest edited anthology, *The Theatre of Genocide*, is a collection of four plays that deal with mass murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia. This anthology might seem initially to represent a slight departure from Skloot's previous books in that the subjects (or victims) are not Jewish, but actually the book does not deviate from the body of Skloot's work in that this book also concerns genocide. Skloot, like other scholars, seems to be expanding the scope of his work from the genocide of Jews during the Shoah to scholarship on twentieth-century genocide. This trend derives in part, perhaps, from the complaint that in the past, the victims of other genocides were not given sufficient atten-

tion, as if their lives were not considered as important as the lives of Jewish victims. In *The Theatre of Genocide*, Robert Skloot continues his pattern of selecting powerful and poignant dramas about genocide.

The Theatre of Genocide begins with a helpful and comprehensive introduction by the editor. Skloot provides an effective overview of the four plays so that the reader can discern why he selected these particular works for this anthology, why drama about genocide is such a worthy subject of study, and why it is important for these plays to be written. Skloot notes that his intention is to help shape the discourse about theatre concerning genocide through various means: "the description of the victims' suffering and the assertion of their essential worthiness, the discussion of the perpetrators' motivation, the presentation of images of healing and compassion, the evocation of empathy, [and] the questioning of the proper use of historical knowledge" (p. 5). The excellent plays that the editor selected for this volume educate

the audience and aid in their collective memory through language and images.

The first play in Skloot's collection is Lorne Shirinian's *Exile in the Cradle*, which the author Shirinian dedicates to "all those who suffered the Armenian Genocide and for those who still feel the pain" (p. 29). This dedication is noteworthy because it foreshadows the purpose of the play—to show that the suffering during the Armenian genocide continued for many decades and still impacts people negatively to this day. It is not surprising, then, that the action of the play takes place during four different time periods, over a total of eighty-six years—April 26, 1915 through December 24, 2001 -- and in Constantinople and Toronto. Shirinian's play begins with some exposition, which is a good idea because not all audience members would be very familiar with the Armenian genocide: a nameless woman in the crowd announces that the genocide began on April 24, 1915 when the Ottoman Empire began arresting approximately 2,000 Armenian artists, community leaders, and intelligentsia, forcing them into trains, and deporting them. Popular anti-Turkish government poet Pierre Srabian and Hagop Keosserian, both Armenians, are forced onto a train while being watched by Turkish guards, and are being deported to a destination that has not been revealed to them. Shirinian pairs them together to dramatize two opposing contemporary views that Armenians held at the beginning of the genocide. Srabian is twenty-five, cynical, and pessimistic; he despises the Turks and clearly sees the devastation that is about to occur. Keosserian, a fifty-three-year-old food purveyor, is a leader in his community, a wealthy man with important government connections—until the genocide begins. Ironically, he provides food to the Turkish army that will kill him. Keosserian is optimistic because he has sworn a loyalty oath and has false hope because he is afraid to think otherwise. He expects that his close ties to the Turks will help him even if other Armenians perish; Shirinian demonstrates this callous

attitude by noting that Keosserian wears a fez (a red felt hat), a symbol of Ottoman oppression.

Keosserian relies on the loyalty of his friends without realizing that his so-called friends are the ones who turned him in to the Turkish authorities. Shirinian wants his audience to witness the vulnerability of those who hoped for the best and thus chose to ignore the warning signs of mass murder. Keosserian believes that the deportation is temporary—just for a few days—so he willingly boards the train, not realizing that he has no choice; he believes that he will be fine because of his great wealth and government friends; he fails to realize that the Turkish government has stolen the assets of Armenians (including his) and that his influential Turkish friends no longer care or are willing to help him. That is why he remains calm on the train while Srabian, who blatantly states that "Massacre appears to the government's preferred method of reform" (p. 37), saves his own life by desperately leaping from the train. As during the Jewish Holocaust, during the Armenian genocide, the perpetrators provided their victims with a false sense of hope in order to render them passive and subservient. Keosserian's riches are important in the play because the dramatist suggests that social class is important, that wealthy Armenians attempted to assimilate with the Turks and employ their wealth to survive, leaving the lower socioeconomic classes to try to save their own lives. Shirinian juxtaposes the honest and idealistic poet Pierre Srabian with the historical poet Ziya Gökalp, who never appears in the play but who is still important because he has employed his verse to stress the significance of nationalism and the need to rid Turkey of minorities, such as the Armenians. The nationalism is also exposed when Young Turk Salim Bey mentions the determination of the Committee of Union and Progress (the Young Turk government) to commit genocide; the name of the committee underscores the tragic irony of the mass murders because for one group of people to commit genocide against their neighbors hardly constitutes

unity or progress; the name demonstrates the hypocrisy of those in the government. Bey brags to Srabian and Keosserian that after the Armenians are destroyed, no one will know what happened to them (p. 39); they will have seemed to vanish, and the Young Turk government will not be blamed. Bey's remark foreshadows Adolf Hitler's remark to his soldiers that they should kill mercilessly and could kill with impunity because "who remembers the Armenians?" [1] However, the very existence of *Exile in the Cradle* contradicts Bey's point because the drama serves as a living testament to the remembrance of the murdered Armenians.

The play is a bit melodramatic because the Armenians are portrayed as wholly good and the Turks are wholly evil and unintelligent beings without consciences. Although it is true that the Armenians were the Turks's victims, the characters lack complexity, and the portrayal of the horrific suffering of the Armenians is made without much character development. Just before killing Keosserian, for instance, Bey confiscates a photo of the victim's family--a cruel and unnecessary action, which Keosserian points out by saying that the photo is all he has left. Keosserian's sons are supposed to be fighting for the Turkish army, which is ironic because the Turks are killing Armenians. Bey mentions slyly that his sons will soon be joining him, revealing to the audience that the Turks are murdering their own soldiers if the fighters are of Armenian ethnicity. The strongest and most able Armenian fighters were conscripted into the army, stripped of their weapons, and then murdered. When Keosserian admits that he knows that his sons have been murdered, it is telling because despite this knowledge, he still naïvely hopes that his own life will be spared. Keosserian clings blindly to his hope despite the cruelty that he witnesses on the train and despite what he has learned about his sons' unfortunate fate.

A key aim of the play seems to be to foster the memory of the genocide in younger generations of diasporic Armenians. In the scene directly after Keosserian's murder, the audience learns that Pierre, now ninety-five years old, constantly relives his escape from the train; the sole survivor, he cannot escape his dreams of the train and the horror, even seventy years later and far away from Turkey--in Toronto. Sleep has become difficult for him because he has frequent nightmares as he relives the Turkish soldiers massacring and raping Armenian civilians and committing other horrific atrocities. Pierre has miraculously survived and still writes poetry; he is proud of his family, which shows one of the reasons why his survival is so important, the other being that he can tell his story in poems and to college students. But in his estimation the Armenian language and culture have been irretrievably lost.

Ten years later, in 1995, Armig, Pierre's daughter, says good-bye to her husband Yervant at his funeral. Yervant is not a survivor, but the accounts of the genocide moved him profoundly. We see a cultural split within one family--Armig's daughter Liz is devoted to Armenian history and wishes to remember the Armenian genocide while her sister Helen wishes to ignore the genocide and pretend that it never happened. Liz believes that the people need to listen to the accounts told by Armenian victims, yet Helen is tired of the stories of the past and refuses to listen. This scene brings to the forefront Shirinian's concern that the younger generations are not interested in the past and that the horrors of the past, such as the ones that Pierre survived in order to tell, will die with the victims, although that is definitely not the playwright's only concern in the drama.

The final scene concerns the redemptive power of poetry. Armig is completing her last poem for a book, continuing her father Pierre's tradition of writing poetry about the Armenian genocide. A vast majority of the survivors with memories of

the genocide are perhaps dead in 2001, eighty-six years after the tragedy, but the poetry will allow the memories of the tragedy to be sustained, even though Armig has acquired her knowledge of the genocide second-hand. Armig respects Pierre's preoccupation with the genocide and his desire to recount his ordeal, yet she is more concerned with the present and the future. Armig's ambivalence suggests that her role between generations is transitional. Some members of the later generations look toward the future, but that is not always the case. Shirinian also brings up the subject of people, such as the character Vahé, who monomaniacally focus on the genocide, in contrast to those Armenians who wish to assimilate and put the tragedy behind them. As the title suggests, the drama is about how future generations, having left Turkey, cope with the tragedy. *Exile in the Cradle* is a powerful play about how people of different generations, four generations in this drama, cope with genocide and the inevitable diaspora that follows.

Catherine Filloux's moving play *Silence of God* is about the Cambodian genocide, the Killing Fields, and the evil of tyrant Pol Pot (born Saloth Sar). Filloux concentrates on Pol Pot, who ruled from 1975-79, and the ruthless Khmer Rouge regime that took Cambodian citizens out of the cities and forced them onto collective farms while murdering and starving countless numbers of them to death. One main character, the poet Heng Chhay, was a Khmer literature student until Khmer Rouge policies forced him from Phnom Penh and transformed him into a farmer. He falls in love with the American Sarah Holtzman, a *Washington Post* reporter, whom he meets in the United States after the genocide. Holtzman acts as a narrator of the genocide, providing the statistic of 1.7 million murder victims, a number that Pol Pot, in the course of the drama, rejects. Holtzman's interview of Pol Pot is based on actual interviews of the tyrant. Filloux portrays Pol Pot as remarkably calm and apparently polite, which is surprising considering his responsibility for the

mass murders in Cambodia, but he is also quite evasive, refusing to answer any questions about his actions.

Holtzman is an idealistic reporter in love with Heng Chhay, who watched his entire family die in the genocide, after which he moved to the United States. Even though Heng lives in Nantucket, he has never fully left Cambodia because he suffers from survivor's guilt. He wants to marry Sarah but cannot because he does not believe that he deserves happiness after witnessing so much suffering. He feels terrible that he has lived while his family has died; his wife was, for instance, murdered for having light skin. Heng also suffers guilt because, while starving, he sold someone his wife's gold bracelet in exchange for food—only to see the person be attacked and blinded by a Khmer Rouge soldier because the soldier coveted the gold. The soldier murders the innocent man and then cuts out and eats his heart—demonstrating the shocking cruelty of Pol Pot's supporters. The play underscores the irony and hypocrisy of a supporter of a communist government that stresses equality amongst people and rigorously divided land into equal portions coveting materialistic wealth. Ta Mok, Pol Pot's brutal successor, informs Sarah whenever he sees her that he will help her—but always under the condition that she give him a gold Rolex watch or a state-of-the-art cell phone.

Similarly, at the end of the play, Heng is amazed that Pol Pot's right-hand man, Brother Number Three, a communist who is partly responsible for the mass murders, is purchasing land to build a luxury hotel by the river in order to make a lucrative living as a capitalist. It is discouraging that someone who shares responsibility for the genocide has not only been left unpunished but has also thrived even after the deposition of Pol Pot. Heng's brother is his only surviving relative, yet Heng feels uncomfortable around him because his brother, whom he calls a "[B]lack crow" (p. 99), joined the Khmer Rouge and is part-

ly responsible for the devastation to the country and its inhabitants. Filloux dramatizes the coldness and egocentricity that permeates Pol Pot's supporters when Heng comes to visit his brother, after not seeing him for many years, and tells him that he is going to marry Sarah; the brother coldly responds that he cannot meet the fiancé of his only living relative because "I must play golf" (p. 117). Yet Heng Chhay and the mass murderers of the Khmer Rouge are part of the same humanity; they have traveled different moral avenues, yet they are still human beings and they die in the same manner, which is perhaps why the actor playing Heng Chhay also plays Pol Pot. Filloux explicitly mentions in the cast of characters that the same actor should play both parts and this was the case when Ron Nakahara played both roles in the world premiere performance at the contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Sarah discovers that there is a plot to capture Pol Pot and try him in court for the murder of 1.7 million victims. Just before the capture will take place, Sarah chooses to run a story on the forthcoming arrest, deciding that freedom of the press supersedes ethics; in other words, her story in the *Washington Post* could alert Pol Pot of the impending capture and warn him. Sarah runs the story anyway because she wants the story and the publicity; she uses the cliché, "The public had a right to know" (p. 111), even though her story will prevent justice from occurring, as Christopher, the war crimes diplomat, warns her--in vain. Sarah's story is then covered on Air America, a radio program that Pol Pot listens to religiously (a historical fact). Pol Pot then escapes capture by dying and is never brought to justice; Ta Mok claims that the mass murderer died of heart failure, but the play indicates, as many suspect, that Pol Pot poisoned himself to escape a court tribunal and the humiliation it would bring him. Ta Mok's incessant and haunting laughter suggests

that he is lying about the tyrant dying of natural causes.

The Silence of God, like *Exile in the Cradle*, focuses on the redemptive--or at least healing--power of poetry. Both dramas deal with the tragedy in the present and in the past, indicating how retrospective and reflective thinking is significant. Filloux's play is set in 1998, but there are many flashbacks. When the genocide is in the past--even the distant past--people suffer and the suffering continues long after the bodies have been buried.

Kitty Felde's drama *A Patch of Earth*, which covers the trial of Croat Dražen Erdemović and war crimes in the former Yugoslavia, is a powerful, magnificent play--definitely one of the best plays written about genocide and arguably the best drama in Skloot's book. Erdemović, a Croat serving in the Bosnian Serb army, takes part in a mass murder of unarmed Muslim civilians in Srebrenica on July 16, 1995, after the Muslim victims were left unattended by United Nations peacekeepers. Erdemović, the first person to be sentenced by an international crimes tribunal in half a century, goes before the International Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for slaying some of these victims--perhaps seventy, according to his account. Although Erdemović admits his guilt--and is even the one who confesses to an ABC reporter and without whom the tribunal would not have a case--he claims, nonetheless, that he was merely following orders. This defense is similar to the one used by Nazi defendants at the Nuremberg Trials, but in this case, the defendant feels guilty and is remorseful--and even brought the case against himself by revealing information about the genocide. Felde raises the issue of whether soldiers should be accountable when they are forced to follow unethical and illegal commands. Erdemović insists that he had no choice, that his comrades would have murdered him if he had refused to shoot. The reaction to his desire to confess--being shunned by his neighbors, compatriots, and even his own family, and being

shot by Stanko (a bloodthirsty and vengeful soldier in his unit)--indicates clearly that Erdemović is telling the truth. Felde's portrayal of Erdemović is very sympathetic, which is not surprising given that after the guilty verdict is reached, even the prosecutor asks the judge for leniency toward Erdemović.

Erdemović is heroic for sacrificing everything he has--his wife Vesna, his son Nevin, his parents, his social standing, money, and reputation--when his conscience tells him that he must confess. He repeatedly is haunted by ghosts of his Muslim victims, who will not rest until he confesses and is punished. He visualizes the blood draining out of the bodies of his victims and imagines that a patch of earth will absorb the blood of three victims, but, starting with the fourth, he can no longer see the blood being absorbed, realizing that a pool of blood (and thus a trail of the crime) will forever remain--hence Felde's title of the play. He has nightmares and loses his family and friends. He is seen as a villain by the Serbs but a great hero by the Muslims for speaking the truth. The Serbs consider him a traitor for seeking out an ABC reporter and confessing the genocide. It is fascinating that he has murdered approximately seventy innocent human beings and been an accomplice in the killing of thousands more, yet he is hated and considered a traitor not for the atrocities he committed but rather for confessing them. The play serves as an effective indictment not only of the soldiers of the Serbian Tenth Sabotage Detachment who committed the atrocities but also of the common citizens who supported the genocide and protected the perpetrators.

Maria Kizito is Erik Ehn's play about the massacre of 7,000 Rwandans at the Sovu convent--a massacre instigated by Benedictine nun Mari Kizito and her mother superior, Sister Gertrude Mukangangwa. Thousands of Tutsis had tried to take refuge there in April 1994 after being pursued by the majority Hutus in a genocide that was precipitated by the murder of the Rwandan Presi-

dent Habyarimana, whose plane was shot out of the sky while, ironically, returning from a peace conference. Radio announcements and proclamations even encouraged the murders of the minority Tutsis and gave instructions about killing them. Kizito tries to block the Tutsis from entering the monastery, but when they come in, she schemes to kill them. She even obtains the gasoline that will kill some of them when the convent is burned to the ground with countless refugees, including many young women with small children, inside. She claims to Gertrude:

My heart is a yellow jerrican

A jerrican of gasoline.

Red.

White.

Yellow.

Raping the bloody.

I am in God.

I know I am in God. (p. 198)

The play combines imagist language, surrealism, actual testimony from the trial in Belgium (where Kizito and her mother superior Gertrude fled after the genocide), and Catholic liturgy. The combination seems confusing initially, but the audience recognizes early in the play that this confusion correlates well with the madness within Kizito. Ehn indicates in his "Author's Note" that this drama "attempts to enter into the inner life of a perpetrator.... In the play, nuns and refugees pray out of the Bible of Genocide: all readings, psalms, hymns relate to the atrocity" (p. 178).

The play begins with the musings of American nun Teresa, who wants to explore what would incite a human being--a nun, no less--to commit genocide. What does the face of evil look like? Sarah Holtzman asks a similar question about Pol Pot in *Silence of God*. That is a difficult question to answer in general and more difficult in this case because audiences--like the judge in the Belgian courtroom--have to explore the guilt in these two

women as they look so innocent in their traditional nun habits. And the question arises about the mental stability of the women. Are they mentally fit? Is it possible that their devotion to God is so strong that it has transformed into insanity? Ehn's headnote of the play derives from John 16:2: "The hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God." The fact that Sister Maria preys on the Tutsis while not having an equal desire to murder the Hutus (she even physically separates them in the play) suggests, perhaps, that her murderous impulses derive from a social and political hatred rather than religious fervor--unless she misguidedly believes that defeating the Tutsis is part of God's plan. Ehn demonstrates how the common demarcation between genocide and religion is specious in the case of these two women of God. Sister Maria says calmly, "The sooner God, the better / The killing starts at 7:30 after prayers and breakfast" (p. 195). Perhaps Sister Maria is greatly influenced by her sympathy to Hutu Power or she is persuaded to act by the propaganda on the radio that declares, "The Tutsi, the invaders, are rising up to kill you--to take everything you have" (p. 194). However, it is also conceivable that the religious fervor is so extreme that it becomes a form of madness. The play is very poetic and imagistic, and the testimonies of the eyewitness survivors are very powerful.

Robert Skloot has put together an excellent collection of plays about the theatre of genocide, which, along with his introduction, makes for fine reading. These four superb plays provide a variety of perspectives not only because they deal with four separate genocides, but, just as importantly, because these dramas differ markedly in form and style, containing elements of realism, surrealism, and history, as well as dream sequences, flashbacks, and the supernatural. I highly recommend this drama anthology to scholars and students of literature, theatre, and history--and to anyone who wants to learn more about

how hatred, prejudice, and violence have helped to shape the world in the twentieth century.

Note

[1]. <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/persecution/pch0028.html>.

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