



Remarks by H. E. Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo, at Ottawa University during the

premiere of *Cheers to Sarajevo*, a prelude to the Conference :

“21st Century Reflections on Sexual Violence in Wars, its Transgenerational and Transnational Impact”

13 March 2018.

Dean of Arts, Professor Kevin Kee,

Vice-Dean of Research, faculty of arts, Professor Brian Ray,

Chair, department of *Theatre* professor Sylvain Schryburt,

Chair, department of *Modern Languages & Literatures*, Professor Joerg Esleben,

Excellencies, Special guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening, Sanibonani, goienaand, bonsoir, Dobra Vece

The United Nations declaration of **Human Rights** in 1948 states that

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

More often we tend to forget that human rights are equal rights and freedoms are for anyone and everyone regardless of race, color, sex, language, religion or political affiliation. We sometimes forget that human rights are not the preserve of a select few, but the right for all.

Ladies and gentlemen it is therefore only right that I start by thanking the University of Ottawa for organising today's event, a prelude to a three day workshop aptly themed "*21st Century Reflections on Sexual Violence in Wars, its Trans-generational and Transnational Impact*". for this invitation; for an opportunity to make brief remarks on the issues of human rights and for us to be reminded of the devastating impact of human rights violations as it will be portrayed through the stage play "Cheers to Sarejevo"

Having been in Canada for almost a year this is the first stage play I will be attending since my arrival. It is my first winter, and it has been relentless. Regardless, I would not have missed this play which has received so many accolades back home in South Africa. Cheers to Sarajevo! I am informed that it is a compelling story about love at the backdrop of war and hatred; a story of human dignity in the face of ignominy; a story of hope in a sea of despair.

The story takes place in 1992 during the war in Yugoslavia when gross atrocities and violent crimes against humanity took place. The atrocities which assumed a gender targeted form of violence through the rape of women; the destruction of families; the killing of innocent people; and the obliteration of anything and everything that once was the pride of the nation.

Ladies and gentlemen, there can never be any justification for the destruction of life; the displacement of families; the emotional turmoil; the uncertainty and the anguish brought by wars or systems like apartheid which were meant to undermine or destabilise societies.

It does not escape me that the era this play is set in, was an important one for South Africa. While war was raging in Europe, we – at the tip of Africa - were negotiating our way to democracy. This, after decades of a country at war with itself. A country which had systematically introduced apartheid laws meant to completely segregate races enforcing inhuman restrictions on blacks, the majority and the indigenous people of South Africa. The apartheid system violated many guidelines of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in particular Article 1; "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". With impunity, the violations of human right were the order of the day.

So, as South Africa was negotiating its way to democracy, we remember the words of our struggle icon, the late former president Nelson Mandela who at his inauguration in 1994 when he said,

<I quote >

“Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world”. <I close quotes>

The world echoed and said “Never again!” But history rhymes. There was war in Rwanda, then there was war in Iraq, and there continue to be wars today.

The subject the play seeks to address - the disunion, and emotional and physical pain brought about by instability - is one that I and many others encountered firsthand growing up in apartheid South Africa.

However, today I am pleased that – despite *my* country’s history of a minority ruling over a majority with division and repression - I can now stand before you as a High Commissioner of a free, democratic and *united* South Africa. Indeed, ladies and gentlemen, our past was not easy.

Apartheid is now where it belongs – in a museum! But we still live with the legacies today. Legacies that remind me of what it was like to experience firsthand the cruelty of prejudice; the indignities of racism, and the impacts of a crime against humanity. I know that these experiences are sadly shared by South Africans *and* Bosnians.

“History does not repeat itself; but it does rhyme.” This is a quotation attributed /misattributed to Mark Twain which you see as you leave the apartheid museum in Johannesburg.

How do we solve this?

As a diplomat, I am – of course - firmly of the view that diplomacy can play a vital role in preventing and ending hostilities. South Africa fully supports the notion of a rules-based international order. We also feel the time has come to reform decades-old institutions so that they are more representative of today’s realities; and so that the voices of all can be heard.

But diplomacy is not the only way voices of the downtrodden can be heard. Civil society and the arts are vital to a society’s survival. The arts – and plays like this – serve as our conscience. This play of

the journey of star crossed lovers, in particular reminds us that love transcends geography, colour or race; and that love and friendships occur naturally. It is us humans who place artificial barriers before them: Patriotism; Racism; Classism; Homophobia; and Gender-based violence.

In 1990 shortly after Nelson Mandela's 27-year imprisonment, Nobel Peace Prize winner, Desmond Tutu, labelled South Africa "the rainbow nation" – because we are a diverse group of people, with every shade under the sun represented.

The diversity present in South Africa creates a melting pot of cultures: we have 11 official languages; we have wines that rival the best in Europe; and we have cuisine that seamlessly fuses African, Indian, Dutch and English. We have people from all over the globe; some of whom have witnessed or visited sites of atrocities. I am proud that out of this diverse melting pot, comes this layered story about love in Sarajevo.

So thank you to the South African team led by Aimee Mica Goldsmith for putting this play together and for inviting my conscience and I here this evening!

MANDELA CENTENARY

I cannot conclude, ladies and gentlemen, without highlighting that this year marks the centenary of Nelson Mandela, who would have turned 100 years old.

We will likely not encounter a world leader like him again in our lifetimes. A man who after 27 years of imprisonment taught us the importance of forgiveness. We can only ask that the world remember the legacies and lessons left behind by this global giant: the legacy of *peace*, the legacy of *forgiveness*, the legacy of *humanity and the legacy of humility*.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you an enjoyable and thought-provoking evening.

I thank you.

.