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Staging indigenous treasures to reflect on contemporary life



By Tibebelesasse Tigabu

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia- Thomas Riccio is a professor of performance and aesthetics, an artistic director, a storyteller and in addition he is a traveler – a traveler who goes not only across nations but also cultures telling indigenous stories.

Riccio has toured many countries including the USA, South Africa, Kenya, zambia and Ethiopia and used his experience from these cultures to portray them. Through his journeys he was not only able to share his experience but also learn how others live and their cultures.

On his travels to Ethiopia SSI caught up with him where he told us his experience about Ethiopia and his experience to direct with Ethiopian artists a theatre play entitled 'the first' (Adeegna) with a theatre group called Lul globe theatre.

The theatre play portrays the history of Ethiopia from ordinary people's perspective, on how Ethiopia it is perceived by the youth and it starts with Lucy, then queen sheba, the coming of Christianity up to the current regime. In this naturalistic play, the artistes wear jeans that are paradox to the ancient Ethiopians outfit.

"In this play we used a new methodology which asks your imagination and also we wanted to show from the pedestrian's view point. At the contemporary point how do you see it, it is like sitting and imagining and also telling a story", explained Riccio.

Watching always a theatre play that is actually done in a cinema format where you see the actual people trying to bring or mimic those moments by using different makeup and outfits different from that, this theatre was refreshing.

"It is also improvisation like you can actually think those people bringing that time in this moment like imagining Emperor Thewodros wearing jeans", Riccio teased.

He worked with the different artistes for more than two weeks here in Addis Ababa and also gave them different trainings in yoga and how to bring their culture and identity and apply it on the theatre stage.

"I did many research about Ethiopian history", stated Riccio.

The group in their performance tried to cover the thousand year's stories within one hour, you see everyone interchangeably play taking one character, and a guy who played Emperor Thewodros might be a musician in the next scene. The transition is also fast with no changing outfit, they go from one scene to another without intermissions, they do everything in one stage wearing 'netela' (traditional Ethiopian scarf), jeans and a t-shirt, which make everything simple.

The group also tried to show the characteristics of each government from the perspectives of ordinary people but still there are some defects with the history like the ancient people actually referring themselves as Abyssinian people, which have a Euro centric connotation as many Ethiopian historians pointed out.

As he explained the theme of 'the first' [Adeegna] is to show ancient Ethiopia's

civilization, which was once the cradle of civilization and among the most distinguished in the world and he questions how the situation changed to make Ethiopia become one of the poorest nations.

"I want the young generation to ask questions and also they should be able to see their future. Some of their situations are darkened by poverty and they should be able to change it", stated Riccio.

By crossing boundaries, cultures he explores and finds means to tell the indigenous societies' culture and way of life to transplant into contemporary issues

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of the society.

Through his journeys across cultures he was able to find different myths, rituals, values and published his findings in journals and books such as: *Performing Africa: Re-Mixing Tradition, Theatre, and Culture; Reinventing Traditional Alaska Native Performance; Performing Body, Space and Place; Creating Indigenous Performance Chapter at Healing Collective Trauma Using Socio drama and Drama Therapy; Rhythm Reality Chapter at Rhythm Steps of Africa*; and *Body as Text: Inupiat and Yup'ik Story Dancing*.

"Understanding one's culture and values is the most important thing, what we followed when we did this theatre is the Ethiopian way and we put those elements like spirituality, ancestors, Christianity, Where as the western themes revolves around cause, rational and effect. We didn't want to incorporate western way of creating traditions. We used the unique identity of the society's traditions", explained Riccio.

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o f Ethiopia they were selective in demonstrating the whole and complicated history in a simple way where people can understand like the main characteristics of the rulers.

They did it with no budget where they used materials freely available.

Riccio stated: "The real history is our imaginative history, how we articulate things, occurrences from your contemporary point view".

Riccio creates the bridge between ancient times and the contemporary where one can cross cultures, mountains, rivers and can be wherever one wants to be without limitations and put those ideas into perspectives.

When the group played in front of audiences many people were impressed as one guy told Riccio he brought two handkerchief one to cry and another to laugh with.

"It was an eye-opening experience for me, I had a paradigm shift. We always adopt Shakespeare or many of the western writers rather than using our own writers. We see things from the western perspective. We have to use our own stories. We have to have an inward looking; we don't need the western culture. He taught us how to be ourselves, to do it in our own ways, Ethiopian way", explained Lealem Birhanu,

the assistant director of the theatre.

Riccio believes in preserving indigenous identity, which is at risk of being lost through time and also believes one can pass it to the next generation through art.

In one of his book 'Body as Text', Riccio tells the story of the indigenous Eskimo people and how they see dance.

"Dance for the Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo of Alaska was and remains to a great extent, a practical and tactile expression that allowed for the direct, psychological, emotional, physical interaction with their place.... Bodily existence was simultaneously spiritual, mental, and physical, with each aspect being an expression of the other. Dance was to be fully alive, and like its opposite, death, it brought the decomposition of the body, mind, and spirit into the elements signifying a reintegration, joining ancestors, animals, and environment in a living landscape, from which all too, are born."

In his stay in Alaska he was able to learn as the indigenous call it 'the story of dancing'.

In Zambia he was able to work with the different tribes where he brought them through his theatre play entitled as the locals refer it 'Imipashi' (the spirits) where he combined masks, dance, puppets and drums.

Through his travels was able to see and work with the many cultures like the Zulus in South Africa, which was right after the dreadful apartheid regime in his project Makanda Mahlanu (Five Heads).

"they didn't have any idea about voting because they passed through apartheid

where everything was imposed on them. So in this journey I was able to reach people who live in the city and the countryside and through theatre, music and dance we were able to pass the messages we wanted", Riccio recalled.

In Kenya also he showed a puppet show to create awareness among the community about HIV/ Aids. The multi-talented Riccio has directed around one hundred plays which got him critically acclaim from different audiences through his work 'so there', 'Orange', 'Little Caesar', 'The Conduct Of Life', 'Rubber city', 'the stranger', 'Kiss it good-bye', 'Akron', 'Christmas on Mars', 'Curse of the starving class' and 'There is never a reference point'.

Specifically in 'there is never a reference point' Riccio tells a story about a woman suffering from multiple personality disorder and all the personalities she manifests are shown on stage. To this Riccio explains how these are reflection of the contemporary society with many identities what he termed as 'performance immersion concept'.

In his Ethiopian experience Riccio said: "It was a learning process, Ethiopia has many things to offer to the rest of the world."

Despite his excitement from working with Ethiopians Riccio warned of Ethiopian theatre taking on western styles.

"when I did this theatre play I was listening to many Amharic songs, tales and I was really sad with the language barrier and I wanted to know what they were saying but some of the things will be lost in translation but I loved the songs and the rhythm", concluded Riccio.