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ARTS NEWS FLASHES

DISTANCE RUN Zimbabwe is a long way to go to perform a play. But for Brooke Ciardelli, artistic director of Northern Stage, and Kevin Loreque, who starred in the White River Junction company's production of Doug Wright's one-man play I Am My Own Wife, the trip to an unsettled nation was worth it.

In the first week of May, Northern Stage brought Wright's Pulitzer-winning play to Zimbabwe's Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA) for three performances. The trip was arranged by one of the company's producing partners, London-based Developing Artists, which works on "removing barriers for artists in the developing world," Ciardelli says in a phone interview.

Zimbabwe has been drawing international attention for the politically repressive and economically destructive practices of its president, Robert Mugabe. Ciardelli says she was surprised to find "an incredibly civilized country with incredibly proud people," rather than a demoralized war zone. Still, signs of trouble were everywhere: The company's \$10 per diem pay was 1.4 million Zimbabwean dollars, a stack of bills bearing expiration dates. Spectators had powerful responses to Wright's play, which chronicles one East German's unusual resistance to decades of Nazi and Soviet oppression. At one point, Ciardelli says, when Loreque mimed offering bread to the audience, they burst into spontaneous applause.

While in Zimbabwe, Ciardelli also held auditions for Northern Stage's upcoming summer performance of her version of Ovid's Metamorphoses, which will partner four Dartmouth students with four actors from outside the U.S. The actor she chose from 100 hopefuls is an orphan who walked 20 miles to the audition: "When they announced him, he literally fell to the ground," Ciardelli recalls.

She plans to bring "the whole company, including the Dartmouth students," back to HIFA next year. A documentary film crew based in Zimbabwe is following the exchange.

Press flock to HIFA because it's a rare point of access to Zimbabwe, Ciardelli points out. But for Zimbabweans, the festival means something else: hope. "As an artist, you say, 'I'm gonna be an artist because I'm gonna change the world,'" Ciardelli says. "But you don't need art to survive the way they need art to survive there."

MARGOT HARRISON

APPLAUSE SEEKERS NEEDED The name chosen for the "First Annual South Burlington Has Talent! Show" is cheerfully, assertively optimistic. Its organizers clearly believe there are enough stage-worthy skills among the good citizens of S.B. to keep this baby going year after year. Well, you'd be hard-pressed to find better boosters than the Rotary, who not only came up with the concept but also built the stage: the new Rotary Band Shell in Dorset Park. Talk about a consistent vision. If you live or work in South Burlington and have "Idol" dreams, the casting call has gone out for this amateur, all-ages event on June 24. But if you live across the invisible line in Burlington, fuhgeddaboutit; this is strictly about Southie solidarity. Visit www.southburlingtonro.tary.org for more info or to enter. Deadline is May 31.

PAMELA POLSTON

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