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### Shared humanity is common theme in African productions

*Split/Mixed* and *A Man Like You* show the nuances of the world we inhabit in plays that focus on Rwanda and Kenya/Somalia.

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Hutu and Tutsi. Captor and captive. Who is “right” and who is “wrong”. These are some of the themes and contrasts explored in two productions coming to Hong Kong in November. *Split/Mixed* is a tale of two worlds converged in Eddy, a Belgian-born of Rwandan descent with Hutu and Tutsi parents. The play is based on playwright and actor, Ery Nzaramba’s life and explores what it means to be, quite literally, split/mixed in terms of ethnicity; what it means to have been born in Europe but to have spent part of his childhood in the country of his heritage, Rwanda, and also what it means to find himself at the intersection of these two worlds as an adult in relation to the people around him.

The play opens with Eddy, now an adult, on the dance floor in a club in London where he’s just met Chloe. She asks where he’s from and in that instant he is forced to decide who, given his complex background, he’ll say he is. If you don’t know much about Rwanda, you may at the very least have heard about the genocide. A civil war between the two main tribes in the country – the Hutus and Tutsis – that erupted after President Juvénal Habyarimana’s aircraft was shot down in 1994 killing everyone on board.

In his one-man play, writer and actor Nzaramba poignantly and, at times, hilariously sketches the complexity of the genocide from the perspective of a 15-year-old Eddy and grapples with issues of cultural identity, privilege and its relationship to power – and the global perceptions of Africa, Rwanda in particular. “*Split/Mixed* is more of a reflection on Rwanda, not Africa as a whole,” explains Nzaramba, pointing to the subtitle of the play being “A portrait of a boy and a country”. But he is aware of the historical circumstances that have made the world think of Rwanda as “another” African country “rife with intertribal wars.”

“Since 1994, Rwanda has come to be known as the country of the genocide. Indeed at the time we’d had Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and others – and Rwanda, a country the world had never heard of, became just another item on the list. With *Split/Mixed* it was important for me to ‘correct’ that image of Rwanda. It wasn’t a backward society.”



Northeast of Rwanda, in Somalia, two worlds converge in a windowless room in writer and director, Silvia Cassini's *A Man Like You*. The play, she says, was inspired by the Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya on September 23, 2013, in which armed men from the Islamist militant group al-Shabab opened fire on shoppers, killing at least 67 people.



Patrick North, a British diplomat is taken hostage by Somali Abdi, and a lengthy conversation between the two – on which the play is based – ensues. This conversation, Silvia says, illustrates the men's differences in world views, philosophies and backgrounds. "Abdi and North discuss piracy, the nature of power, God, and who is a terrorist, revealing that though they rarely agree, their basic humanity connects them, and they are more alike than we, and they, may initially think," Silvia says.



Before arriving at this conclusion, captor and hostage wrestle with critical questions. Who is the terrorist really, Abdi asks. What is the material difference between killings in cold blood and en masse at Westgate Shopping Mall and that of the United States-led invasion of Iraq? A question not too often asked of uncritical consumers of news. Cassini constructs a narrative that challenges our cherished beliefs and which enables us to comprehend that the world is neither black nor white; that there nuances that we need to acknowledge or risk being losers, on both sides, of this “war on terror”.

The common thread woven through these two productions that seemingly deal with disparate subjects, is, without sounding trite, our shared humanity. And, as encapsulates *A Man Like You*, says Silvia: “Who holds the moral right to truth?”

*Split/Mixed* comes to the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Grand Theatre on November 4 and November 5. *A Man Like You* will be showing at the Black Box Theatre in Kwai Tsing Theatre on November 4.