How Ndahayyo filmed his

Gilbert Ndahayyo (GN) is a Genocide survivor who, literally, left with nothing to live for after losing his parents, relatives, neighbours and friends in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. However, all hopes were not lost for him, his loss turning into a quest to dignify the lives of those who were ruthlessly murdered in the Genocide. Now he is among the first Rwandans to walk their way to the helm of the global film industry. Ndahayyo owns "Rwanda: The Movie", a film company that produces award-winning documentaries about Rwanda. His work has featured in a YouTube produced documentary "Life in a Day" with Ridley Scott and Kevin Macdonald (The Last King of Scotland). Ndahayyo is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Fine Arts at Columbia University in the City of New York. His latest film, "The Rwandan Night" won the 2013 Silicon Valley African Film Festival Best Documentary Feature film award. In an interview with The New Times' Edwin Musoni, Ndahayyo narrates his life from the dark days to Hollywood screens.

TNT: When did you venture into the film industry and where do you derive your passion from?

GN: In 1994, the stories about the death of our people were too much and yet too little but still, I wanted to know details about the brutality, to know the names of the killers and other details to determine the last hour of my loved ones. The absence of such important details hindered the understanding of the Genocide.

First, I wanted to write a book about my experiences, but my feelings didn’t allow me to write. For five years, I tried to write. In November 2005, I attended a film workshop conducted by two Swedish filmmakers, Goran Kaptalovich and Martin Widberg. It was hosted by Rwanda Cinema Centre and funded by Swedish Film Institute. For three months, we learnt about the use of camera and watched short films. I was offered to direct my first film "Scars Of My Days", a fiction story by Omar M. Silomano who also starred in the film. We filmed for two weeks. At night, I would stay at Rwandan Cinema Centre and edit the film. By the end of December, "Scars Of My Days" was ready for the festival. It was the best Christmas gift ever - my first film.

In January 2006, I was offered to play the leading role in "The Graduation Day" a short film written and directed by Ayahus Kasana Maga. I acted as a recent university graduate who is addicted to sex and drugs. We actually filmed in my parents’ home, which was still a ruin. I also edited the film.

In April 2006, I attended the Genocide commemoration event. We spent the first week of April at home with fellow survivors and nuns. An important decision had been made. We had to re-humec the remains of our family members that were killed during the Genocide and re-bury their bodies at Kigali Memorial Centre. I decided to capture the moment on video. I recorded a series of actions: the exhumation of the victims’ bodies, the nuns and our neighbours washing the homes and drying them in the sun. It was a long, tedious week of filming, I wanted to make a video diary of those moments.

TNT: What have been your achievements ever since you joined this film industry?

GN: I started traveling to film festivals since 2006. "Scars Of My Days" was well received by the Rwandan community and the film in general. In May 2007, I traveled with President Paul Kagame for an event called 'Three Voices' organised by Tribeca Film Festival. We celebrated the first Rwanda Film Day and promoted our cinematic culture overseas.

My debut documentary "Behind This Convoy" (66 min) received the Verona Award for Best African Film and Signis Commendation for Best Documentary Film. It is now titled "Rwanda: Beyond The Deadly Night" (100 min) and has been nominated for over 10 Best Documentary Feature Film Awards, including the prestigious African Movie Academy Awards. The film documents my journey in an attempt to find forgiveness to my parents’ murderer and honour the victims of the Genocide.

In 2011, I received a production grant from Friends Of Rwanda (FORSA) in California to produce "The Rwandan Night", featuring three Rwandan poets who provided original music of commemoration for the film. The estimated budget for "The Rwandan Night" is $75,000. Amb. Mahilde Moukabana, Rwanda’s envoy to the United States, and Ms. Olive Mukabakiza, a genocide survivor living in Missouri, helped raise the funds. My current film projects include documentaries; "The Rwandan Day", "The Rwandan Silence" (now titled "La Parole") and an action short action film, "The Girl In The Diet". I set to be released ahead of the 20th commemoration of the Genocide next year. I also intend to publish a book on filming the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

TNT: In "The Rwandan Night", are there specific scenes we should know about?

GN: The opening shot is of two men digging a pit in my parents’ backyard. The shot is a deep visual in my narration. I do not reveal my father’s dead body but only reflect on the releasing of my debut documentary "Rwanda: Beyond The Deadly Night", it is my first time I am working with fellow Rwandan artists. Mighty Popeo’s "Nabirize" (Tell Me) draws out of rhythmic whispering style in use by " transfers" players (string instrument).

In one scene, I instruct my cameraman to switch off the camera, which is an order he should obey in any form or fashion. The scene plays with Suzanne Nyiranyimbwe’s famous song "Ibuka" (Remember). In this specific scene, the character gets emotional. Suzanne’s voice is beautiful and her poem captures the essence of the documentary. The survivor has a scar on her forehead where he was hit with a club studded with nails (known as Msingapamgwa or "without pity") during the Genocide. The "Rwandan Night" demanded an appropriate writing, and also a writing of muted gestures and no spoken dialogue. Often you would see people hug each other, survivors closing the eyes of the victims of the genocide, women carrying low and nuns hands making the sign of the cross. The moments of silence; a sound and punctuation of challenge personal connection to the film.

Despite the prevailing silence, the text on the screen is an image too. Text is used as a cinematic transition to the monologue.

Bon Ki Moom (UN Secretary General) and Bill Clinton’s (former US President) appearance in the film have more power in the film and are used as a book end before final credits. The ending sequence titled "Voice of God" in a soul-wrenching cry. A young lady laments her mother’s death, "God didn’t see us digging out the bones in the pit? God, why did you allow the genocide against the Tutsi? If I got married, what will I tell my children?" This is a bone chilling end – it is a night, it is the "Rwandan Night".

To those emotions, the camera says "Humura" which means ‘the coward’ as the song of Ameable Tshiwiri play and the handheld camera moves from the middle of the crowded stadium of "Hammer" to the traumatised survivors. What the shots are here is a transformation that engages the film.
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I decided to capture the moment on video. I recorded a series of actions: the exhumation of the victims’ bodies, the nuns and our neighbours washing the homes and drying them in the sun. It was a long, tedious week of filming. I wanted to make a video diary about those moments.

TNT: What have you done?

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Ben Ko Moon (UNV Secretary General) and Bill Clinton’s (former US President) appearance in the film have more power in the film and are used as a book end before final credits. The ending sequence titled “Voices of God” in a god-screaming cry. A young lady laments her mother’s death, “God didn’t you see us digging out the bones in the pit? God, why do you allow the genocide against the Tutsi? If I get married, will God kill my children” This is a bone chilling end it is a night, it is “The Rwandan Night”

To these emotions, the camera says “Humura” which means “bearable” as the song of Amable Tawhima plays and the handheld camera moves from the middle of the crowded stadium of moment to moment to the traumatized survivors. What the shots are here is a transformation that enganges us.

TNT: Why have you been your life from the dark days to Hollywood screens.

I hope my life story will give hope to the survivors and show the world that Genocide is a crime against humanity. I want to see a world where there is no more war and everyone has the right to live in peace and dignity. I hope my films will inspire others to take action and make a difference.

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TNT: How do you feel about your achievements since this film industry?

GN: I have been blessed with many achievements in the film industry since the start of my career. I have been recognized by various organizations for my work and have received numerous awards. One of my proudest moments was when I received the Verona Award for Best African Film.

I am grateful for the support and encouragement I have received from family, friends, and fellow filmmakers. I am determined to continue telling stories that matter and aiming to reach the highest level of excellence in my craft. I hope that my work will continue to inspire others to pursue their dreams and make a difference in the world.