

A SWORD AS MIGHTY AS THE PEN

Sword-wielding American television actress and playwright Danai Gurira invests in dramatic art in her home country Zimbabwe, telling poignant stories of African women and the uncomfortable truth.

WORDS WILHELMINA MABOJA



“ I think the world is almost ready to hear our stories, and it's a fertile moment for the African and the African woman to start taking the helm in terms of being a storyteller. ”

Photo supplied by Fox International Channel

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE DANAI GURIRA WIELDS a sword for a living.

On the small screen, she's Michonne, a swift zombie slayer in America's current hit-television series *The Walking Dead*.

Off-screen however, seeing her perched comfortably in a corner of her hotel room, stirring honey into her tea on a wet Johannesburg morning, is a slightly odd experience.

This is because there's no trace of that steely aggressiveness her character has in *The Walking Dead*. Her current choice of outfit, a gleaming fitted white dress and perfectly crimson lipstick, is also a far cry from Michonne's dirty khakis and dreadlocks.

With a strong track record of stellar roles both on celluloid and television in America, Gurira is channeling her influence into investing in the arts in Zimbabwe. This is in the hope that her home country and the rest of the continent will start to do the same, with the African woman as the main beneficiary.

"The idea of telling African women stories was [me] responding to a call I felt needed to be done, that I had to do in the course of my life," says Gurira.

"I had to do it in a way that was excellent and facilitated other people's talents, gave stories to women who often don't get to tell stories, and don't get to be the lead in a story."

Despite being born in Iowa in the United States, Gurira calls Zimbabwe home, where she spent much of her younger life with her family until the age of 19. She then returned to America and enrolled at the Macalester College in Minnesota. Since graduating and now, at 36, Gurira has received critical acclaim for her acting, but what stands out is her playwriting. Her play *In the Continuum* alone garnered the Helen Hayes, Obie and Outer Critics Circle awards. Her 2012 play, *The Convert*, also scored her a nomination from the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Writing.

"I always wanted to tell really powerful stories as an actor, but I will say there was something very powerful and interesting to me about being the creator of a story. When I get acting work, I go in, do it and it's something I have been trained in. When I get a job I embrace it, but the thing that burdens me is getting the stories out," she says.

It's no surprise then that all of Gurira's plays have the woman as the central character. This is from two women dealing with HIV in *In the Continuum* to abduction and sexual exploitation of women during wartime in *Eclipsed*. These are harrowing and poignant women's stories, intermingled with uncomfortable truths rarely talked about. Gurira nonetheless exposes them on stage.

"I have to get uncomfortable when I tell a story, and then I have to allow other people to get uncomfortable too. As a child growing up on the [African] continent, I will say I was raised in a home where I was allowed to be rather outspoken. I'm thankful I grew up in that environment," says Gurira.

"I think that that sort of discomfort of letting girls be front and center in the stories I tell is a discomfort I want people to have. There are some discomforts I pursue, because I want that story to be told. That allows for people to start to really grapple with things, and then perchance progress towards healing. So I definitely pursue discomfort in the stories I tell."



Photo by Neo Ntsona

Investment in the arts is therefore crucial for the continent, where women dominate the informal sector. According to a United Nations report, 84% of women nonagricultural workers were informally employed between 1999 and 2000 in sub-Saharan Africa, as opposed to 63% of nonagricultural male workers.

While women are at a clear disadvantage, the silver lining, according to the report, was that the lack of permanent employment pushed women towards self-employment.

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Almasi, Gurira's dramatic arts training organization in Zimbabwe, could be another platform that encourages self-investment.

It is however a fairly young organization, and will need more than just Gurira's founding name to build its theater foundations.

"I felt there was stagnancy in [Zimbabwe's] progress in this particular art form. Not music, not literature, just the dramatic arts."

Arts funding in Zimbabwe, according to Gurira, has only been trickling in despite the country's prolific literary works, from the likes of Shimmer Chinodya, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Cont Mhlanga.

With a new play on the cards, and her existing plays in the process of being dramatized in Malawi and Zambia, Gurira expects an interesting diasporic language to begin unfolding in the name of theater.

"I want Zimbabwe to have great literary work. Just like we have NoViolet Bulawayo and Tsitsi Dangarembga, we need more literary artists in the dramatic realm. I think the world is almost ready to hear our stories, and it's a fertile moment for the African and the African woman to start taking the helm in terms of being a storyteller," she says. **EW**