

# Dancing for life

By **JIMMIE BRIGGS**  
*Special to the AmNews*

Marie Jeanne Mukankuranga is a composer and singer. A genocide survivor in her 40s, she is also a member of the Ballet National du Rwanda, an ensemble which held center stage dur-



A dancer lying on the ground represents the more than one million killed in the 1994 genocide.

ing much of the national commemoration ceremony at Kigali's main stadium on April 7. Consisting of more than 100 members from across the tiny, lush, central African nation, the troupe performed many of Marie Jeanne's songs before millions of observers from around the world.

"My compositions now are very different than those before the genocide," she explained several days after the event. "Before, they were all songs of joy and happiness, but now the songs are of sorrow."

Four years ago, she joined the Ballet National du Rwanda

after performing in Canada with another artistic group. "They selected me because of my experience," said Marie Jeanne. "Being in the National Ballet, there's a grief you can discharge. We get sympathy and comfort through the contribution of other artists. It's a psychological comfort."

Thirty years ago, President Juvenal Habyarimana ordered the creation of the National Ballet of Rwanda in order to promote the cultural and folkloric traditions of the nation. At its greatest height, the company had up to 200 members, and was internationally recognized as the world's best folkloric dance company in 1987. Ironically, it was Habyarimana's death in a plane crash in April 1994 which preceded the infamous 100-days-long geno-



Dancers lie on the ground to represent the victims of the 1994 genocide. There were both victims and perpetrators of the genocide among the Ballet's company at the time. Today, both Hutus and Tutsis dance in the troupe. (Damaso Reyes photos)

cide.

Originally, all members of the National Ballet were required to stay in it for at least five years. It was housed in the former residential house of a Rwandan king in Butare, a place where members could come to share tech-

niques and regional influences.

Today, the ballet company is based in a yellow, decrepit, one-level building just outside the gates of the National Stadium. Its current director, Jules Musasizi, believes the group is now **(Continued on Page 30)**

## The cruelest cuts

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During those occasions when she's feeling particularly frustrated, Mukarwemego Athanasie leaves her four children to watch television in their Kigali house. "I'll be back later this evening," she tells them and goes several feet away into "the room." A little more than ten years ago, it was a bedroom which the 45-year-old shared with her husband. Now, the empty space serves a more fundamental purpose.

As a Hutu-led genocide swept through this central African

nation, Athanasie's Tutsi family was one of millions targeted for violence. Finally, a mob of angry men entered their home one day and murdered her husband. The children were locked away in another area and Athanasie was raped more times by more people than she can remember. None of her attackers ever confessed or apologized for what happened, but Athanasie is able to reclaim a small justice years later.

"It's not easy to live in the house where I was raped," she explained last week from the office where she works. "I shifted rooms in that house but my family had nowhere else to go. When I'm angry about something, I go into 'the room' and tell my attackers what I'm feeling. My legs beat the door as if I am beating the men who raped me. The power I

didn't have before is there. When I go into that room, I tell them they cannot have my forgiveness, and I fight back."

In a folded white envelope she carries in her pocketbook, Athanasie keeps a thumbnail-size photograph of herself, after the genocide. The hollow-eyed woman standing against a red brick wall bears only a passing resemblance to Athanasie, now. When the picture was taken, it was a year after the genocide and she wasn't eating much food. "I could smell their sweat and semen on me all the time," she recalled, "and even my urination was painful."

The most important hurdle in Athanasie's healing process was telling her children. "They didn't see my attack but heard the suffering I endured through the **(Continued on Page 30)**



Rollance, 46, a survivor of sexual violence during the genocide, walks to her home in the Village of Hope, where she has lived for 4 years.



Rollance, 46, was raped and infected with HIV during the 1994 genocide which also took her entire family except her eight children. She has been living in the Village of Hope for 4 years.



Rollance, 46, and Mukarwemego Athanasie, 45, display bed covers produced by the women who live in the Village of Hope. (Damaso Reyes photos)

### Those seeking more information about women survivors in Rwanda may contact the following:

1. AVEGA-AGAHOZO ASSOCIATION OF GENOCIDE WIDOWS-AGAHOZO

P.O. Box 1535  
Kigali, Rwanda  
Tel: 250-516125

Website: [www.avega.org.rw](http://www.avega.org.rw)

2. RWANDAN WOMEN COMMUNITY NETWORK DEVELOPMENT, RWANDA WOMEN'S NETWORK FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

P.O. Box 3157  
Kigali, Rwanda  
Tel/Fax: 250-83662

Website: [rwandawomennetwork.org](http://rwandawomennetwork.org)

3. SENATOR DR. NYIRAMILIMO ODETTE  
Chairperson, Social Affairs, Human Rights & Petition Committee

Republic of Rwanda  
Parliament/Senate  
P.O. Box 1423  
Kigali, Rwanda



Mukarwemego Athanasie, 45, is a survivor of sexual violence and has used her experience to help other women as coordinator of the Village of Hope in Kigali.

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