Chapter Six

Venus in Lesotho

Women, Theater, and the Collapsible Boundaries of Silence

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Prologue

Sex... love affairs... past deeds... condoms... incest... stealing... abortion... prostitution... Christianity... anger... shame... poverty... pain... homosexuals... sex... rape... self-esteem... parents... politics... shyness... money... HIV status... God... abuse... fear... uncles... lesbians... lying... drinking... brothers... emotionality... sex...

The words in this list aren’t unusual. What’s unusual is the setting where the list was made and the seven young women determining what should be on it.

We made the list in a large empty room of an administrative building on the campus of the National University of Lesotho (NUL). The room was destined to one day serve as a university boardroom, but had been vacant as long as anyone could remember, so we’d claimed it for the Theatre Unit and had been using it nonstop as a rehearsal space and classroom. The room is important because it was central to all our work and was an anomaly—the opposite of the school’s drab classrooms and impersonal lecture halls. It was painted butter yellow, had high ceilings, windows on three sides that let in light and air, and the floor was covered by a thin forest-green carpet. It had become known as the Venus Room, and it was ours.

I had been at the university for eight weeks when we made that list on a warm lazy afternoon in early March 2005. We were sitting in a circle on the floor, the seven young women taking turns naming
things they didn’t or wouldn’t talk about, and alternately breaking into nervous giggles or nodding in somber agreement or inhaling sharply at the words they each dared to say. This last reaction, the gasp, was usually accompanied by a rapid flick of the wrist and snap of the fingers (knuckles cracking), a combination that produced a tiny explosion of sound to emphasize shock, anger, or disdain.

The seven young women were my students, all theater majors in their final semester, required to take the Theatre for Development (TfD)\(^1\) course that brought us together. The day we made the list marked the first in a series of breakthroughs that would lead to the creation of a powerful piece of performance about the role of gossip and silence in the spread of HIV/AIDS in Lesotho. How did we get to that point—speaking the unspeakable, pulling words out of silence?

I wasn’t asking the question then, but in attempting to unravel the answer now, I believe the process began with a last-minute request that led us to *Venus*.

**Backstory**

Eight weeks earlier, I’d arrived in Lesotho from my home in New York City to teach, do research, and to create theater at NUL as a Fulbright researcher/lecturer. I’d come to Lesotho because of its rich history of activist people’s theater. True, the vivid presence of groups like Zakes Mda’s Marotholi Travelling Theatre had faded since the dismantling of apartheid in neighboring South Africa, but Lesotho was experiencing a resurgence of issue-driven drama in response to the small mountainous country’s astonishing HIV-infection rate, ranked third highest in the world (Global Policy Network Report 2006). The pandemic had prompted agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to mount an assault on the virus, enlisting the skills of health-care workers and community organizers, as well as the passion and talents of artists.

My interest in activist theater focused on the tension between aesthetics and content in socially relevant, community-focused performance: Lesotho seemed a perfect place to explore questions of art and politics with people actively engaged in the process. I wanted to seek out vestiges of the earlier wave of political and people’s theater and participate in whatever new wave was developing in response to HIV. I was particularly interested in the role women were playing, since women, especially young women aged 15–24, were disproportionately affected by the virus (Global Coalition on Women and AIDS Report 2004). I was curious to find out if there, on the front