

Vibrancy, vigour and volume: Kesho Amahoro's got it all going on.

I went to see 'Kesho Amahoro: Peace Tomorrow' with absolutely no idea what to expect or even really what it was about. Little did I know that by the end of this moving and slick musical about child refugees struggling through the Rwandan war (an African Oliver Twist meets Chitty Chitty Bang Bang) that I'd be crying, laughing and contemplating my own existence in equal measure.

'Chicken Knitters' performance of 'Kesho Amahoro: Peace Tomorrow' explores issues of child poverty, gang violence and the strength within us all to do whatever it takes to protect our family; yet their exploration felt neither heavy nor hard-going. There was a rawness in their portrayal, a natural almost innocent feel which meant the audience didn't feel guilty about crying over the suffering of young children one minute and clapping along to the song and dance numbers the next.

The ominous entrance from amongst the audience and the dark auditorium filled with scruffy, limping orphans gave the piece a sense of foreboding from the start yet the opening number contrasted totally with this; the vibrancy and energy created a balance between light and dark. The appearance of chaos and speed was upheld during the first song, a near impossible task given the 40 children on stage all simultaneously running around singing. The slickness required to prevent this descending almost immediately into anarchy is a credit both to cast and directors. During scenes such as the food distribution in which the children are given their rations, all the cast members entered wearing plain white masks and did a synchronised routine entirely in the dark with only the eerie white faces showing. This gave the piece a fresh, modern twist preventing it from becoming a repetitive succession of songs.

But ultimately it was the talent of the cast members that really made the show such a success, with killer solos and fantastic group numbers it was clear they worked well as an ensemble and allowed each other to shine individually. Given the huge numbers of cast on stage and variations in age it was impressive that there wasn't a point when any one actor or actress wasn't truly acting; at no point did anyone wave at an audience member, giggle to themselves or start staring off into the distance. This focus made it feel like a professional production and all the cast should

be very proud of themselves. The female lead had a beautiful voice as did the male protagonist and whenever they sung, I'm unashamed to admit the hairs on my arms stood to attention.

The message of strength, perseverance and love for your family was one which rung true throughout, especially since there was such a feeling of support coming from the audience with people on all sides discussing their pride in the children on stage, the energy was truly electric. The incredible, tear-jerking, goose-bump-inducing, hilarious performances; the sheer energy and joy these children showed on stage and the talent each and every one of them demonstrated made it a real pleasure to watch. With kids like these as the next generation, 'Peace Tomorrow' looks pretty achievable! (Broadwaybaby.com 4-star review by Harriet Troup)

Thank you so much for bringing Kesho Amahoro into our lives! We had an amazing time in Kingston. The whole theatre experience was fascinating and we learnt a lot. It was a wonderful feeling to be involved in such a unique project. (Lorraine Tomes)

Kesho rocked today "more enjoyable than whistle down the wind, I'm coming back tomorrow night " was the quote from a local Kingston resident. Well done to everyone. New friendships have been forged with our overseas guests and fantastic bonds developed between everyone involved in this project. We have LOVED being part of the amazing Kesho Amahoro family. (Nicky Chapman)

I am so proud of everyone who performed today – congratulations. The kids are loving it – experience of a lifetime! (Mary-Rose Dellingle)

Such a fabulous, powerful show!! Well done to everyone, you were great. (Kim Hill)

Firstly, what an amazing show today! It reduced many people to tears (in a good way!). Fantastic, sad and yet uplifting story and music, great acting and incredible singing. One hundred children on stage giving their all was awesome and

inspiring. What an amazing opportunity for both the Nairobi and Brighton children to take part in a such an impressive, fun and worthwhile endeavour. Memories that will last a lifetime have been created in the last few weeks . On a final note, I can't wait for the DVD as the songs are going round and round in my head. (Bruce Wright)

Well I just had to post my views following the extraordinary experience that was Kesho Amahoro in Kingston. When I was asked if it was what I expected, I can honestly say "no". It was better. Better than I imagined it to be yet in ways I wasn't expecting.

I knew a little of the story having spoken to Anna Rusbatch over the years, as Kesho has bloomed and blossomed. And so, settling down in my seat, I was clutching my tissues ready for a good old cry all the way through. However, instead I found my emotions being taken on a complete roller coaster ride. I laughed, I frowned, I was shocked, I was happy, I felt there was no hope and yet I also felt hopeful. The tears I expected throughout only came flooding (and I mean FLOODING) out when the final note was played with a flourish and the audience were on their feet.

The performance was simply beautiful. Children telling a story and bringing personal experience to the forefront of everyone's minds. There were moments when the tears were welling up and then a glimmer of hope or happiness shone through from the voices of the children on stage so the tears momentarily ebbed away. Then again, another scene brought the tears welling again, only to be given another glimmer of hope and these waves continued. Incredible.

So what messages do I feel Kesho gave? That we must never forget that these children and families are real. They are real in so many parts of the world and in so many situations. They are not numbers, they are people. Within the camps they can find strength and form a sense of unity. But it should not be happening. Too many families, children and adults are living just as the amazingly talented children in Kesho showed us.

As a production it was breathtaking. As a musical experience it was a roller coaster of emotions. As a message to society, it was truly

powerful. I really hope more people get the opportunity to see Kesho Amahoro: Simply incredible. (Caroline Williams)

Fabulous final performance on Sunday. Had all of us sniffing into hankies, what a powerful story and how well performed by all the young people. Huge congratulations to all of you including those behind the scenes, a thoroughly professional production with great musicians, performers and crew! (Callie Lister)

There are things that will stay forever in your heart!!! Thanks everyone for sharing love and music. Great time all together I was proud to be part of this amazing production! (Lisa de Simone)

It was really amazing to have performed in an amazing show and be part of an amazing family. I am very much looking forward to the next performance, wherever it is. (Benjamin Jago Simonsen)

Well done for pulling off a brilliant series of performances in Kingston. The Sunday matinee was awesome. The kids were inspired, taking part in the production, which is something that they will all look back on with warmth and pride: Such a good thing for them all to have taken part in. (Jason Barrett)

A massive thank you, to you and everyone involved in the amazing musical this year. My daughter really enjoyed her first stage experience. (Nick Sell)

It was a truly memorable performance and experience. Thank you for your kind invitation . Me and my family were moved to tears by the enchanting performance. (HE Williams Nkurunziza – Rwandan High Commissioner to UK)

It was an amazing experience, which my daughter will treasure for the whole of her life. I have never seen her as happy as she has been during this project. (Thomasina Unsworth)

Thank you to everyone involved. My daughter has enjoyed it all and, so it would seem, has everyone else. (Niall Drennan)

Just wanted to say a big thank you to everyone involved in Kesho Amahoro. I'm sure it will inspire the children for a long time. The exhilaration on their faces after yesterday's performance was clear to see for all. (Chris Todd)

I just wanted to say that Kesho was such an amazing experience. (Rachel Christopher)

The children had a fantastic time and were so lucky to have been given the opportunity to be involved in such a great project. The plight of the refugee children really came across and it was very emotional. (Rosie Reekie)

The performance yesterday was truly brilliant! The story told through fine acting, wonderful lyrics and music, was inspirational and succeeded in taking the audience on a journey that was in turn heart wrenching, shocking, joyful and yet ultimately uplifting due to the wonderful nature of the human spirit.

The experience for all those involved is something that they will take with them always. The relationships that developed with the children from Kenya will be long lasting. The friendships of those involved have deepened through sharing the Kesho experience- they really felt that they were part of something quite wonderful. (Dawn Powell)

Kesho Amahoro was just amazing from beginning to end. It's been a privilege to be involved, and it's something we will always remember. (Kate Lacey)

Kesho Amahoro was a brilliant show, which I enjoyed immensely and found very moving. The kids from Kenya were fab. (Georgia Novis)

All of us who were able to see at least one of the performances will be able to marvel at what was achieved, particularly when taking into account all the logistics of

**making such an ambitious production come together.
(Giovanni Franceschi)**

It was a wonderful performance yesterday - moving and entertaining in equal measure. We drove home singing the songs! (Jenny Radcliffe)

I just wanted to say how impressed, amazed, astounded and overjoyed me and my friends & family were, at the Kesho performance. A truly professional and moving story. I was so proud that my son could be involved in it. He enjoyed himself immensely. What an experience! (Juliana Ashworth)

Just to say that the Kesho Amahoro dream became a reality and what a REALITY it has been!!! Just incredible and amazing. (Jacqui Rice)

Kesho Amahoro was truly an amazing experience. I keep thinking about the power of the story and performance and how much all the children involved have gained from the experience. I'm not sure what moved me more - the wonderful singing, telling such a complex and challenging story, or seeing my daughter having a ball both on and off stage. (Emily Barratt)

This was an amazing experience with a challenging and thought provoking story performed by an enthusiastic and talented group of young people: I highly recommend this piece of theatre. (Paul Hartley)

I wasn't sure what to expect as I entered the auditorium of the Rose Theatre for the final performance of Kesho Amahoro. Other work that I had seen as part of the International Youth Arts Festival so far had disappointed me, but it was not so with Kesho Amahoro. I thought its wonderful choral work mixed with stunning solo performance, accompanied by what I thought was a beautiful score made for a highly emotional yet entertaining spectacle.

The energy and enthusiasm of the entire cast was clear, each and every performer giving their all which created an uplifting atmosphere and immediately allowed the audience to engage with the cast. The vast company were united as one voice despite heralding from all corners of the globe, and this made the performance very enjoyable. Although the size of the cast, at points, made it more difficult to hear lyrics in the larger company numbers, the brilliant atmosphere created by this could not be replicated, the spirit was phenomenal. In choral performances, the movements were not always wholly together (due to the range in ages), but the high level of enthusiasm from the performers made it seamlessly professional and clean.

The height of the production for me was the monologue performed by the leading lady Mimi with such truth that I don't think many actors that I've seen in my life have been able to convey. Not only did it inform the audience of tragic events in places ran by the UNHCR but it also allowed the audience to empathise with her. The ballads in the show truly moved me (to tears), especially the song about flowers in which the counterpoint created by the angelic voices of the two women created an indescribable moment of emotion.

I had a fantastic time at Kesho Amahoro and hope that a similar project can come to fruition. I was not the only person standing at the end of this show, and this shows how this production was received. As a performer in the IYAF festival myself, it was fantastic to see some brilliant work and meet some wonderful people at the end of our show. The cast were not only brilliant on stage but also were a friendly bunch of people and it was a pleasure to meet them. (Henry Roadnight – 'Vicar' in NYMT production Whistle Down the Wind, 2013)

Kesho Amahoro was a marvellous performance. I hugely admired what you have achieved with the show, the cast, the orchestra – and the whole darned thing! I thought, a terrific evening of energy and fun and enlightenment with some really beautiful music. Hope everyone got back OK and thanks so much for giving Kingston a great treat. (Jeremy James Taylor – NYMT Founder)

What an amazing, triumphant, successful show. The pace, professionalism, diction, timing, movement around the theatre, etc. was great. After the Sunday performance you left everyone wanting more, a standing ovation with hopes of an encore!

It takes a skillful storyteller to create a plot that engages the audience so effectively and turns a tragic situation into an emotional roller coaster that concludes with a hopeful, positive ending. There was never a dull moment, so much entertainment and enthusiasm, even humour and a love story were woven in there too!

The music gave the production another dimension and helped to tug at our heartstrings, send shivers down our backbones, made our hairs stand on end and our tears stream down our cheeks. ! I can't get the songs out of my head!

So why is it so GREAT?

Well, the ghostly parade of tortured souls stumbling onto the stage through the theatre made an immediate impact - what an entrance! I could feel their vacant, accusatory eyes boring into me,

The radio commentary and freeze frame were very effective. Oh dear, we thought, this is going to be so depressing...but no, what is this lively music ? A great depiction of the chaos, bewilderment and procedures of registering at the camp and out of it came the introduction to the main family and their

plight and straight away we had a focus of interest, a group of children we could care about and share their journey as the story unfolded.

It was genius to compare Esperance's positive, hopeful attitude, growing flowers, even as her friend doubted her actions, with Haki's absence of any hope for the future which made him fall prey to the violent gang on the street: Her resilience and determination to keep the family together contrasting with his despair and temptation to go his own way - she finds love, he finds death.

The crowd scenes gave us insights into life in the camp - knitting, chicken rearing, letter writing, photographs, etc. and gave some relief from the harrowing grief felt by the siblings. All the children stayed in character, maintained their energy and enthusiasm and created a natural flow of actions even though it could have so easily resulted in collisions and confusion.

The food distribution scene made us think about the deterioration in their condition, their loss of identity and humanity. Very impressive, moving, exciting, added interest as it was so different and the kids were foot perfect!

But for me the very best part was Esperance's breaking of spirit and emotional outpouring of her memories, which she had kept hidden until that point. Now we see the full impact of the horrors of war and makes her strength all the more remarkable. WOW what a POWERFUL MONOLOGUE! What a star Mimi is! I cannot imagine a Kesho performance without her!

I found it interesting how the colour red was linked from the flowers she grew for the future to becoming the funeral flowers for Haki, and then the colour of the deaths in Rwanda.

Regaining her hope for the future, she inspires others to have the strength to go on and they leave us planning to return "home". I noticed the pause before the celebration, a bittersweet moment of doubt and disbelief.

But now we have so many questions - Do Esperance and JP stay together? What do they find when they get back and what sort of future did they make? What dangers did they face on their journey?

In fact can we have a sequel please?? Well why stop at a sequel, can we have a prequel too to explain how they escaped from Rwanda and what their lives were like before? Then we would have a whole trilogy!! I just can't get enough of it! (Monica Wilson)

WOW – the Kesho Amahoro performances received standing ovations from the audiences, many of whom were moved to tears by the heart wrenching portrayals of love and loss, resilience and temptation, death and survival, friendships and families torn apart, but ultimately, the uplifting message of hope and determination to build a better future. Many of the people who saw this show have used these words to describe their feelings about it: "Amazing", "Marvellous", "Inspirational", "Truly brilliant", "Professional" "Awesome", "Unbelievable", "Remarkable" and to quote the Rwandan High Commissioner "Enchanting".

One word that I would like to add is "Educational" in every sense of the word. The performers involved were given a platform from which they could perform in something that was so much bigger than themselves and learned so much about their own lives and those of others, on so many levels. Parents have reported ways in which their children have grown in confidence, become less materialistic and more appreciative. They have been sharing their homes with their Kenyan co-stars and begun a cultural exchange based on real friendships. They have been made aware of the realities of international crises, such as that currently happening to the millions of people fleeing the civil war in Syria.

So CONGRATULATIONS to all involved for their creative collaboration that produced this amazing cross-curricular, cross-cultural project that has inspired and touched so many people in so many ways. Kesho Amahoro explored real, meaningful issues and redefined the perceptions of what children can achieve in musical theatre. (Jane Holroyd)

What a truly inspiring and wonderful experience we've all just had. Looking forward to the next one! (Alice Hawkes)

Well, I've kinda been holding this off for a while. I'm not sure why, but I guess some small part of me feels that once I do this review, the Kesho chapter in my life will be closed forever. From the crazy excitement of the first day, travelling for hours on end, to meeting all the amazing people at Downs Junior School. There isn't enough space to write it all down. But in a way I don't need to because in between all of us who experienced Kesho, (from the esoteric Miss Rusbatch and Jago to the firm Mr James, the host parents, the actors, musicians, chaperones and audience), between all of us are the memories of the trip; the unexplainable feeling of belonging to a group, which runs through your veins and your very existence, and especially through our hearts and our minds forever. It seems silly, but maybe in the end we're all bonded together by something greater than physicality. Maybe it's the music which we sang, or the words we spoke, or even the soft laughter we shared with each other... In the end I'd like to think it's all of these things... it's the magic of Kesho Amahoro. (Jazz Moll, 17, Kenya – Haki)

Kesho amahoro was an incredible experience and was absolutely unforgettable. It allowed me to make new friends and have fun, while putting on a very beautiful show. It allowed us to experience the lives of different people when living with the host families in Brighton, along with giving all of us a sense of independence and responsibility throughout the entire trip. I am very proud to say that I am a part of the Kesho Amahoro cast, as the show was a massive success. Thank you so much to the teachers that put it all together x (Ammal Hassan, 15, Kenya)

This is the best school trip I've been on. The hot scorching sun in the day and the cold never ending breeze of the night. It was amazing when both schools came together so quickly, lots of fun and shopping done. Even the long walks to kill those calories! It was truly an amazing experience that I will take with me for the rest of my life. Can't wait for the next big thing, wherever it is, I'm on board! (Bryan Sunkwa-Mills, 16, Kenya)

Kesho Amahoro was an amazing show with a brilliant cast. I loved working with everyone and I was shocked how fast the Kenyan group and the Downs Junior kids became one. Personally I enjoyed myself during the whole trip from the beautiful weather in Brighton, to the walks heading to Rose Theatre and finally the remarkable performances! I believe that Kesho Amahoro cannot die in the Rose Theatre as story line must live on (that sounds very cliché but its true!) (Chidima Atueyi, 15, Kenya)