

CARDBOARD PIANO

A LIFE AND DEATH LESSON

by tony reverditto



Cardboard Piano is a spirited production at ICT (International City Theatre) that follows the tale of Chris, the feisty daughter of an American missionary who falls head-over-heels in love with another local teenage girl during Northern Uganda's Civil War. Late one night, on the eve of the millennium, the two of them secretly meet in a church to exchange vows and plot their escape from their repressive and volatile situation. The surrounding violent war zone disrupts their union and they are forced to confront the religious and cultural roots of intolerance. Will they overcome the hatred and bigotry and arise to an aftermath of forgiveness and love?

The Rage Monthly went behind the scenes to speak with JoJo Nwoko, one of the stars of *Cardboard Piano*, to find out about the message behind the script... and about him.

To get a little background, we asked Nwoko what brought him from Dallas, Texas to Los Angeles, "I went to New York University Tisch School of the Arts and got my degree in drama. During the second semester of my senior year, Alec Baldwin taught a contemporary scene study class that I was selected to be in. He took an interest in me and on the last day of class took me aside and told me he believed in my talent and thought I should move out to L.A. He gave me his information and told me to reach out if I ever needed anything. Fast forward a few months after I graduated, I was sitting in Alec Baldwin's agent's office at CAA, and the rest is history."

As to what attracted him to audition for *Cardboard Piano*, "I have been dreaming about being a part of something like *Cardboard Piano* for a long time now. When I read the play, I was shook," He said. "I am an openly gay, first generation Nigerian American from the south who also grew up going to Catholic school from the age of 5 to 17-years-old. So, let's just say that I am connected to this material."

We discussed why he thought it was important for American audiences to hear this story. "This play centers on LGBTQ issues, religion, and mental health, during an extremely violent war lead by the LRA (Lord's Resistance

Army) rebel group in Uganda. In my opinion, if you ask the average American what group or groups of people need a light shed on what they're going through in Africa, specifically Uganda, so that we can help them, the LGBTQ community would be the last on the list." Nwoko continued, "I think most Americans are unaware of the fact that it is literally a life and death issue throughout the continent of Africa. Here in 2015, same-sex marriage was legalized in all 50 states, in 2014 the Uganda Anti Homosexuality Act also known as the "Kill the Gays Bill" was put into law. I hope seeing this play starts a conversation amongst Americans on LGBTQ rights in Africa because people are dying every day."

We asked Nwoko to describe his character and the role he plays in the unfoldment of the story. "What is so interesting about this process for me is that my character, Pika, represents the religious anti-gay voice that exists amongst the Ugandan culture. The first act of the play takes place in 2000, and the second act in 2015," he offered. "The first time we see Pika, he's a 13-year-old, runaway child soldier who has had everything taken away from him and is forced to become a killer for the LRA. He suffers with PTSD and the only thing that makes sense to him or gives him any sort of hope, is his religion. He is seeking refuge and two young girls help him, but once he realizes that they are gay and are deeply in love, he makes a decision based on his religious beliefs that affect the entire show. In the second act, Pika is a pastor who believes religion has erased the awful things that have happened in his past. Someone knocks on his church doors one day, who brings back all of the demons he thought he gotten rid of. Like the saying goes, you can run, but you can't hide."

The message Nwoko hopes audiences will take away with them after seeing the show? "That it is so much easier to choose to LOVE than choosing to hate."

***Cardboard Piano* runs Friday, May 4 through Sunday, May 20 at International City Theatre, inside the Long Beach Performing Arts Center, 330 E. Seaside Way in Long Beach. For tickets and more information, call 562.436.4610 or go to internationalcitytheatre.org.**



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