

Style

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2003

The Arts
Television
Comics

ide

Escapes: *Maryland treehouse camping*
Book World: *Ford, Lindbergh and Hitler*
Theater: *Tom Stoppard's "Rough Crossing"*
KidsPost: *These cats are just shoooffs*



by brothers: Randy Quaid, left, John Carroll Lynch and Chris Penn play town siblings in CBS's "The Brotherhood of Poland, New Hampshire."

THE NEW SEASON

TV Preview

David E. Kelley's Bloated 'Brotherhood'

DM SHALES

ington Post Staff Writer

though there may be excep-
tively attractive young women gen-
erally hook up with grouchy, old, fat
only on television shows or in
sly, old, fat men's dreams. And
Poland, N.H., it's the rule and
the exception. Maybe some-
put something in the drinking
There's a "Stepford Wife" an-
out the place.

ice grouchy, old, fat men get a
at this show, there could be
migrations New Hampshire.

"The Brotherhood of Poland,
New Hampshire" is the latest burst
of contrived weirdness to spring
from the imagination of David E.
Kelley, and except for the assembled
tonnage of the male cast, it has obvi-
ous similarities to Kelley's last
small-town saga, "Picket Fences."
Once more an illusory facade of nor-
mality conceals, though not well
enough, various oddities and per-
versities lurking beneath the sur-
face.

What CBS will air as the show's
premiere tonight (at 10 on Channel

See TV PREVIEW, C7, Col. 3

un? Hillary? Run?

nton Is One of the Few Who Say She Won't

LARK LEIBOVICH

ington Post Staff Writer

ere is a school of political
that sees the 2004 presi-
dential race in its purest form of
rational wisdom: that Wesley
the fresh-faced and thick-
skinned general who entered the
last week, is the new Demo-
cratic front-runner, stealing the fire
from Howard Dean (the old front-
runner), who stole the fire from
Kerry (the old old front-run-
ner) who himself is suddenly burn-

ing brighter than George W. Bush
(the Old Inevitable) in a recent
poll.

But that calculation ignores a
truth held fervently by many Very
Savvy (or Very Bored) prognostica-
tors: This is all about Hillary Rod-
ham Clinton.

It's always about Hillary Rodham
Clinton, the proverbial Rorschach
test for the nation's stark divisions
and creaky evolutions. Everything
else is just annoying subtext.

See CLINTON, C3, Col. 1

hibition

Folger;



The Art of Endurance

As an Imprisoned Ethiopian, She'd Seen It All. Now She's Painting It.



"To me, war is not about politics, it's about the human condition," says Ethiopian artist Kebedech Tekleab, who was imprisoned in Somalia.

By NATALIE HOPKINSON
Washington Post Staff Writer

As an Ethiopian artist, Ke-
bedech Tekleab had
seen many tragedies,
but at last it was time for
celebration. Her paint-
ings were going on ex-
hibit in "Ethiopian Passages: Dia-
logues in the Diaspora," a major
installation at the National Museum
of African Art.

Strolling into the Smithsonian mu-
seum that afternoon in late April, she
had no idea that yet another heart-
break was coming. On the way to a news con-
ference for the show, Tekleab linked arms
with two fellow exhibitors: her former How-
ard University classmate Elizabeth Habte
Wold and their well-known, influential profes-
sor, Alexander "Slender" Boghossian. Bogh-
ossian paused to offer a few words to his pro-



A detail from Tekleab's "Alghan Carpet," from the exhibition.

teges in their native Amharic. "I have brought
you to the juncture," Tekleab recalls him say-
ing. "I won't mind if I die now."

A few days later, resting at his Washington
home, he did exactly that, while nearly 2,000
Ethiopians gathered at the museum for a re-
ception in his honor. He was 65.

The master of African art, who's
taught half of the Ethiopian artists ex-
hibiting at the Smithsonian, was
gone. Yet in recalling that moment
Tekleab sees it as yet another of life's
bittersweet passages.

"His passing that day had only a
spiritual explanation for me," says the
45-year-old painter, who also teaches
art at Howard, sitting outside the mu-
seum in the Smithsonian's gardens as
the late-summer sun illuminates her
black curls. "In a way, he was ready to
go."

Tekleab has been providing a
brighter view of hard times for man-
years now, as evidenced by several of her
paintings on view through Dec. 7. In "Shack-
led," a gold-toned brew of body parts allude
to the 10 years she was imprisoned in a Somali
concentration camp. "Insulated" reveals a

See TEKLEAB, C13, Col. 1

Readings

Artist Kebedech Tekleab, Drawing on Deep Resources

TEKLEAB, From C1

series of striated circles symbolizing the network of friends who helped her survive confinement. Through metal-fence and barbed-wire imagery, "Behind the Bars I" connects her experiences with suffering around the world.

There is a singular texture and harmony to the paintings. A beauty, even. Yet she herself wonders how that can be. They reflect some of the ugliest periods of her life.

On a recent Friday evening, Tekleab sits at the back of the Unification Church in Adams Morgan. The room is abuzz with Amharic, the language of the 80 or so Ethiopians in folding chairs for a poetry reading. A poet herself, Tekleab tries to come here once a month to listen to local writers and a guest down in from Ethiopia. Tonight's guest is Nebiy Mekonnen, editor of an Addis Ababa-based weekly newspaper, a man she's known for nearly 30 years.

They share a unique, if morbid, bond. During the political turmoil in their homeland in the 1970s, he, too, spent several years imprisoned.

The Washington area boasts the largest concentration of Ethiopians outside Africa—an estimated 100,000—many of them propelled here by political turbulence in their homeland. The emigres run the restaurants, corner stores, parking garages, taxicabs, shops and nightclubs that form a very visible part of Washington's economy. Less obvious is the community's thriving arts scene here: Ethiopian playwrights, actors, singers, newspaper editors, radio personalities, filmmakers, fine artists and poets.

As a man named Meskeram Bekele takes his turn at the mike, it's clear the crowd has a character on its hands. His face morphing into Jim Carrey contortions, he flits from persona to persona, some of whom are arguing noisily in Amharic. When a poet at the head table buries his face deep in his hands, it's clear that Bekele has either struck a very funny nerve or leaped over the edge of good taste. Sitting near a table laden with Ethiopian bread and coffee, Tekleab howls with laughter when she's not greeting old friends with cheek-kisses.

One beacon here for Ethiopians has been Howard University. In the 1930s, Emperor Haile Selassie's cousin Malaksa Bayen came to study medicine there. He married a black American woman, started a family here and became a diplomat. He recruited many black Americans to move to Ethiopia and vice versa, according to Mohammed Mohammed, a Northwestern University doctoral student who is also at the poetry reading, conducting fieldwork on Ethiopian and Eritrean identity in Washington.

Over the decades, many students from elite Ethiopian families followed Bayen's trail. By the 1970s a military junta had overthrown Haile Selassie's regime, initiating a flood of refugees. During that decade of unrest, three cultural pillars arrived at Howard and began teaching: the painter Sleaner Boghossian, the

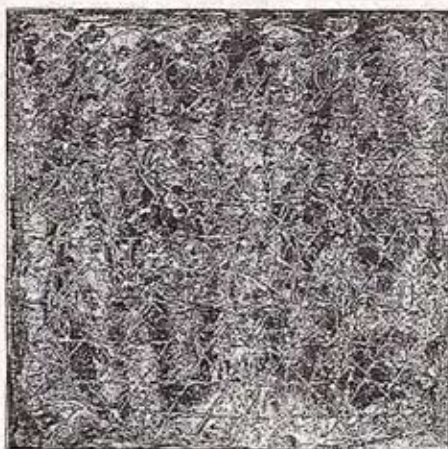


PHOTO BY HOWARD GORDON—ARTISTS MODEL BY JESSICA HILL

noted filmmaker Haile Gerima, and the founder of the school's film department, Abiyi Ford. As a testament to Howard's impact in the Ethiopian diaspora, of the 10 artists chosen for the Smithsonian's African art exhibit, six have ties to the university. (In addition to Boghossian, Wold and Tekleab, that group includes photographer Aida Maleneh and painters Elisabeth Atraxu and Wosene Kosrot.) Tekleab's friend Mekonnen was among the Ethiopian intellectual elite that remained in the country. As teenagers, he and Tekleab were members of the student movement critical of the government. He was imprisoned from 1977 to 1987 in Addis Ababa, where he drew fame for translating the entire text of "Gone With the Wind" on 3,000 cigarette packs. Tonight, he has stopped by to read a few of his poems during a visit to the United States organized by the State Department.

Mekonnen and Tekleab stand outside the church after the reading, embracing shoulder-to-shoulder with evident tenderness. A visitor asks if the two were imprisoned around the same time.

"Yes," Tekleab says. "I was in Somalia, he was in Addis."

Mekonnen nods. "It was a time when having certain associations could get you in trouble."

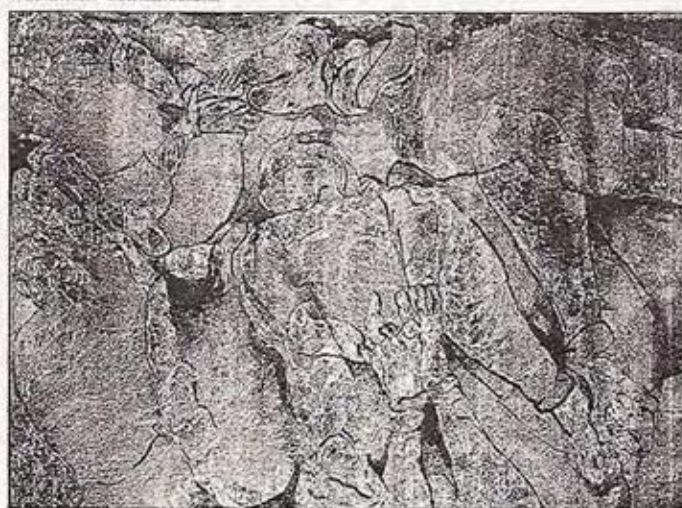
Then he gives Tekleab a competitive nudge. "I was imprisoned by my own country," he says. "I was a citizen prisoner."

"Yes," Tekleab says, smiling good-naturedly. "You see, there is a status to these things."

As a first-year art student at the School of Fine Arts in Addis Ababa, 19-year-old Tekleab had plenty of what qualified as "certain associations"—namely within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party. They were part of a leftist student movement questioning inequalities in the nation ruled by Haile Selassie from 1930 to 1974.

Tekleab's parents came from Eritrea, then a province of Ethiopia, now a separate nation on the Red Sea. Her father was a nurse, her mother a homemaker. Through many students criticized the Selassie monarchy, they opposed even more the Marxist coup that ended it in 1974.

"It was very oppressive," Tekleab recalls. "None of the civil rights were



recognized. There was no freedom of speech. If you were against the powers that be, you were doomed. Thousands were killed. A few deserted the land and became refugees."

The clampdown became so intolerable that Tekleab decided to go into hiding with several other students. By late 1979, five of them set out for the nearby country of Djibouti, but they never got that far. At the time Somalia was involved in a border dispute with Ethiopia. Tekleab and her friends were captured by guerrilla fighters with the Western Somali Liberation Front. She was eventually taken to an isolated labor camp in Somalia that would be her home for the next several years.

Her family, now scattered around the world, became concerned when they stopped getting letters. Her brother Kinfa, who had been in America studying, risked his life to return to Ethiopia to locate her, to no avail. For years family members living in the United States assiduously wrote letters to Red Cross outposts around the world.

"I came to feel like she was not alive after the end of the fourth or fifth year," recalls Tekleab's oldest brother, Girma, who also came to study in the United States in the 1970s and was living in Washington.



Kebedech Tekleab in her Arlington studio. Her canvases "Behind the Bars I," at left, and "Shackled," below, on view in the "Ethiopian Passages" show at the National Museum of African Art, draw on her years in a Somali labor camp.

"A lot of students were killed along the way. We assumed she had been killed in the desert, or forced to be married in a village and have a different identity. They wouldn't know it for 10 years, but she was alive, though not entirely well, at the camp, and settling into a new life as a nurse in the infirmary. She says less fortunate prisoners did back-breaking work in mines or rice paddies. There she cared for hundreds dying of cholera, malaria, malnutrition. Other camp survivors recall suicides and prisoners used for target practice. The dead were buried in mass graves, they say."

One Addis Ababa student was killed after a failed escape, followed by a clampdown on writing, especially in Amharic, Tekleab recalls. She kept writing anyway. One poem, "People From Two Different Worlds," was one of several prison poems published in the booklet "Where Is It?" after her release. During captivity, she had to rewrite it three times from memory, stashing it under palm leaves in the roof of her hut, away from the eyes of Somali guards.

The poem is written in "guine," a complex ancient Ethiopian poetic form that doesn't translate well, but she gives it a try in halting English: "Whose road could be the longest?"

The love of a child or that of a mother? Whose feeling could be more tender? The child's or that of the mother? Embryo or the womb?"

Over several pages, the poem speaks of struggling to hear her mother's voice. "I would imagine myself as a well, lifting myself over the ocean of tragedy," she explains. "I used to go back to her talks and the memories of her words. ... Memory is the force that still retains all of the images—not knowing what happens to those images."

In 1989, Girma Tekleab got a phone call at his Washington home from the Red Cross. His sister had been found alive in a labor camp in Somalia. Ethiopia and Somalia signed a treaty formally ending their conflict, and each side agreed to swap prisoners of war. Kebedech Tekleab was free to go.

Kinfa Tekleab, who remained in Africa, excitedly went to fetch his sister. "Luckily, she was all right, except, highly thin," Kinfa recalled recently in an e-mail from Eritrea, where he has lived since the 1994 outbreak of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. "It was a happy moment."

When Girma and his wife drove to New York to pick up his little sister at the airport, they were shocked at the sight of the 29-year-old. "I couldn't recognize her, practically,"

he recalls. "She looked like an old lady, with gray hair and her face was wrinkled. ... She couldn't smile. She could hardly smile, honestly."

The family couldn't give Tekleab back the lost decade, but they did want her to be able to at least pick up where she left off. They supported her financially as she enrolled in Howard University's fine arts department, where she was awarded a scholarship and quickly came under the tutelage of Sleaner Boghossian and film professor Ford.

Tekleab found the campus nurturing and immediately began making an impression there. Ford, who co-edited a now-defunct Amharic-language academic journal that published her poetry, says, "She had the capacity to make penetrating observations, the capacity to pierce through the thick armor of what we don't see, the inner essence of humanity."

Tekleab earned bachelor's and master of fine arts degrees at Howard, exhibited widely and now teaches a full course load at the university. She lives in an Arlington apartment with her 71-year-old mother. For now, she remains single. "I don't think I'm ready to sacrifice my passion for art for another important thing in my life," she says.

Over the years her art expanded to address not just her own past, but inhumanity around the world: "I try to learn from the situation and convert my experiences into something useful."

The paintings in her studio in Arlington reveal that broadened worldview. In one abstract untitled piece she began painting at the outset of her time in Iraq, tiny blotches of red are spattered across a dim landscape. Depending on how you look at it, they could be a touch of color brightening up a dull landscape, or fresh blood spraying in battle.

"It takes me to some of my own experiences," she says. "I see them as one and the same. The mentality. It's not only cruelty that we find in difficult times. Sometimes we find incredibly kind people. Maybe that's why I'm not bitter."

"To me, war is not about politics, it's about the human condition. It just took my mind to the situation over there. It is all connected."

Rendered through her brush, she hopes, it can also be beautiful.