Fortunately, the universe was conspiring in my favour. After two international flights, a cross-country bus-ride, and countless taxicab fares, I arrived in Blantyre, eager to embark on a short internship with the Story Workshop and explore Malawi’s largest commercial city. I was warmly welcomed by the organization, which uses magazines, radio programs, original music, and Theatre-for-Development projects to advocate issues such as food security, civic responsibility, and women rights. Over the course of two weeks, I was introduced to each step in the communication process, from research to scriptwriting, studio recording to monitoring and evaluation procedure. After shadowing Smith Likongwe, the organization’s Theatre-for-Development facilitator, I became more comfortable with the working environment and grew in confidence. I had been hesitant about using foreign, potentially alienating theatre exercises in rural Malawian communities, but after Smith’s success with simple activities like trust falls and “one-sentence story,” I concluded that some games can bridge the most diverse cultural contexts.

After visiting the National Museum in Blantyre and the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College in Zomba, where I gained valuable knowledge about the history of Theatre-for-Development in Malawi, I returned to Lilongwe, the capital city and my personal base camp for two rural village stays. It is impossible to summarize everything that happened in the villages of Mpena and Chakhala, for I spent every minute immersing myself in the life of the communities, inquiring about various development issues, and working towards their critical, theatrical representation. However, if I were to tell one story to capture the inspiring spirit of a community engaged in positive social transformation, it would be this one…

After leading several workshops on how the community might discuss development issues using indigenous theatrical forms, I was anxious to see whether they would rise to the challenge. It is difficult to find words to express my joy and admiration when, the night before our final performances, I heard the native windo dancers approaching my compound, solemnly threshing their shields and singly, “By reason of love of money [prostitution], many people die of AIDS.” Although village life, with its deeply divisive patriarchal structure, seemingly endless run of funerals, and lax time management, posed numerous obstacles to the project’s goals, my time in rural Malawi has been one of my most enriching life experiences to date.

The final stage of my project transported me back to Blantyre and the offices of the Story Workshop, where I supervised a workshop on the principles and practice of Theatre-for-Development for a dozen new members of the Malawi Writers Union. Although I enjoyed explaining my findings, I was more interested in listening to what the participants had to say about their writing, their society, and how they might play a part in their country’s development communication movement. If these young writers can summon the courage to attack controversial issues and elucidate their complex ethical, political, economic, and cultural implications, the future of Malawian dramatic literature is in good hands.

It would be nice to say that I walked away from my project “enlightened,” elevated by my attempt to “save Africa,” but nothing could be further from the truth. While my translator Peter and I were advertising door-to-door, or hut-to-hut, about our first Theatre-for-Development session in Mpena community, we stumbled across a local youth club rehearsing a play about the dangers of Fisi (hyena), a traditional cultural practice whereby a man is tasked with impreg-