

# Leap of Faith

Naples-based actress, writer, and producer Leslie Lewis Sword has always had a plan.

BY JAMA DOCK

Leslie Lewis Sword began acting at age six, singing and dancing on *Sesame Street*, and later graduated with honors from Harvard University. She earned an MFA degree in acting from UCLA, and soon after, Sword got the lead role of Dorothy Dandridge, a coveted role among black actresses that had taken nearly two years to cast.

"God put me in the right place in the right time," she says of landing the role. "They went on faith." Her New York theatrical debut in the one-woman show was sold out for all performances at the National Black Theatre Off-Broadway in Harlem.

After moving to Naples in 2004 for husband Gavin's business, Sword wondered if she would ever have a successful acting career without the opportunities available in larger cities.

Not one to sit around for long, she auditioned with Naples Players the next day. She landed the role of Petra, the saucy maid in *A Little Night Music* four days later, proving to herself that with faith and hard work, an acting career was possible no matter where she lived.

While attending a conference hosted by international publishing company Hay House, Sword was inspired by the miraculous, true story of "our generation's Anne Frank," Immaculée Ilibagiza. Immaculée survived the 1994 Rwandan genocide — and the brutal murder of her own family — by hiding in a three-by-four-foot bathroom with seven other women for 91 days. She found a way to forgive the killers, through her faith in God and

commitment to life, and emerged as an international voice for peace and forgiveness.

Sword met the brave young woman, and when she heard of Ilibagiza's plans to return to Rwanda to film a documentary, she invited herself along.

"I was so moved by Immaculée," she says. "To know she experienced such a breadth and

changed and, seven months later, they returned to Rwanda and adopted daughter Savilla and son Christian. Ilibagiza and her husband, Bryan, are the children's godparents.

"We had a plan, but life intervenes," she says. "Babies need parents. They are wonderful. It's like having friends who live in."

In June, Sword will perform at TheatreZone



NANCY DENIKE

depth of faith during that time means that it was not in vain. I felt like I had to tell her story so more people could receive it."

After returning to the States, Sword created *Miracle in Rwanda*, a one-woman play illustrating the power of faith in unimaginable circumstances. In February, TheatreZone, Naples' only professional equity regional theater company, presented *Miracle in Rwanda's* gala world premiere before the play moved to New York. "It was exciting to premiere this play in Naples," Sword says. "There is a high demand for quality theater here."

Sword had visited an orphanage on her last day in Rwanda. Eager to grow their family, she and her husband had already contacted a domestic adoption agency. But the plan

in the musical *Back to Backarach and David*. But Rwanda is never far from her mind.

"We will definitely visit again and maybe adopt again," Sword says. In addition to writing a children's book to help them understand the genocide, she envisions starting a foundation or nongovernmental organization to help the hundreds of thousands of children orphaned during the 100-day massacre in 1994 and the resulting HIV/AIDS epidemic UNICEF officials call the "silent genocide."

For now, she says that the best thing we can give to the world is to forgive and be happy. "We should appreciate what we have, pass on an appreciation of the blessings we have, and be happy people with a sense of caring about the world." *NI*