

## Playhouse's new drama shows lives 'Ruined' by war

BY DIANA SAENGER  
Contributor

With stories of war-torn countries and savage atrocities broadcast daily by the media, it's courageous when a playwright tackles those same subjects. Lynn Nottage won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize and many other awards for her war drama "Ruined." Directed by Liesl Tommy (and a co-production with Berkeley Repertory Theatre and the Huntington Theatre Company) the play opens at the La Jolla Playhouse on Nov. 16.

**Lynn Nottage**

The story takes place in a small besieged town in Democratic Republic of Congo where a woman runs a brothel for soldiers. It's a way for Mama Nadi (Tonye Patano) to have an income, make the war an afterthought, and in some way provide for and protect the local women.

"Being from South Africa and raised among a very political family, I feel very connected to stories about women and South Africa," Tommy said. "I also feel a great responsibility to bring those stories to a western audience, so 'Ruined' felt right for me to direct." Tommy said she met playwright Nottage while working in New York



**Liesl Tommy**

### If you go

■ **What:** "Ruined"  
 ■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday; 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; 2 p.m. Saturday, Sunday; 7 p.m. Sunday; Nov. 16-Dec. 19  
 ■ **Where:** Mandell Weiss Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse  
 ■ **Tickets:** \$31-66  
 ■ **Contact:** (858) 550-1010  
[www.lajollaplayhouse.org](http://www.lajollaplayhouse.org)

and was excited to bring "Ruined" to La Jolla.

Tommy worked with casting director Elaine Alldaffer and asked her to look in unusual places for talent.

"I wanted a mix of African-American, African-Caribbean and African actors," Tommy said. "Some of them might not have gone through great schools that would allow students to be seen for something like this. What we have are amazing actors of African descent, and Tonye, the lead, is an incredible powerhouse. A TV and film star (HBO's "Weeds"), she is phenomenal and holds the cast together with her enormous warmth and power."

With the cast on board, Tommy concentrated on getting what's in her mind and heart into the minds and hearts of her actors. From her travels to Africa over the years, this story was a personal journey Tommy knew well. To help the actors understand the Africa's conflicts,

she showed them documentaries of things that have happened in places like Somalia and the Congo, on topics ranging from HIV to war and genocide. She admits some of the scenes in the films were quite brutal and extremely depressing.

"I have these voices in my head that drive me," Tommy said. "That's why I make sure the actors have a similar and imaginative space from which to work. Sometimes it's not comfortable, but it's necessary so they are working from that same brokenhearted place, and the audience gets a really deep experience."

The juxtaposition of war and rape with a cozy brothel where a soldier puts aside his weapon to spend an evening with a beautiful woman seems quite a landscape to produce on stage. But Tommy has worked on similar stories and has a passion to create memorable reflections about them. One tool for this is music, and the reason she brought Aaron Meicht (part of the Broken Chord Collective along with Daniel Baker) on board for this production.

"I felt he had a great sense of theatricality as well as a great sense of the Congolese sound," she said. "I thought it would be a fun collaboration."

Tommy learned her trade at a young age. Her family came to America when she was 15. In order to forget the horrible things she had seen in her native homeland, she sought out the fun of the theater. She began as an actress, but quickly realized she wanted more control of her projects and started directing.



The cast of 'Ruined.' Oberon K.A. Adjepong, Pascale Armand (Playhouse's 'The Love of Three Oranges') Jason Bowen, Carla Duran, Wendell Franklin, Zainab Jah, Joseph Kamal (Playhouse's 'Culture Clash's Zorro in Hell'), Adesoji Odukogbe, Kola Ogundiran, Okieriete Onaodowan, Adrian Roberts, Tonye Patano and Alvin Terry. COURTESY

Her repertoire includes productions such as "Eclipsed" "The Good Negro," "Flight," "A Christmas Carol," "Isaac and Ishmael," "Uncle Vanya," "A Stone's Throw," and many more. She taught directing at the graduate level at Brown University/Trinity Rep, and acting at NYU Tisch. She was awarded a NEA/TCG Directors Grant and the NYTW Casting/Directing Fellowship.

"My biggest fear with this play is that the American audience will sit

back and think, 'hmm, that's what life over there for these people is like, lucky for us over here it's different.'

"I want them to watch the depth of humanity and the deep exploration that myself, the cast, and the designers have gone through and feel that we as human beings are capable of amazing things and horrific things.

"And it's not about black people in Africa or white people in America; it's about 'we' human beings."