

'RUINED' RISES AT PLAYHOUSE

BY PAM KRAGEN
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When playwright Lynn Nottage flew to East Africa in 2004 to do research for a play, her original plan was to adapt Bertolt Brecht's anti-war drama "Mother Courage" into a new play about the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. But when she visited a refugee camp in Uganda, where Congolese women told her about the atrocities they had suffered at the hands of soldiers and resistance fighters, she knew she had the makings for a new, and much different, play.

The result is "Ruined," which won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, as well as the Obie and Drama Desk awards for new play. The play — which opens Sunday at La Jolla Playhouse — is set in a Congolese brothel, where enterprising madam Mama Nadi offers the comfort of refugee women to local soldiers. Shunned by their villages after they were raped by combatants, the prostitutes do what they must to survive against terrible odds.

The International Rescue Committee estimates that 5.4 million people have died in the Congo as a result of the ongoing conflict, which first began in 1996, and as many as 200,000 women have been raped since 2000.

In her program notes, Nottage wrote: "By the end of the interviews, I realized that a war was being fought over the bodies of women. Rape was being used as a weapon to punish and destroy communities. In listening to their narratives, I came to terms with the extent to which their bodies had become battlefields."

The La Jolla Playhouse production is directed by South African native Liesl Tommy, who first staged the play last spring at the Oregon Shakespeare

"Ruined"

WHEN Previews, Thursday-Saturday; opens Sunday and runs through Dec. 19; showtimes, 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; 7 p.m. Sundays

WHERE La Jolla Playhouse at Mandell Weiss Theatre, UC San Diego, La Jolla

TICKETS \$31-\$66

INFO 858-550-1010
www.lajollaplayhouse.org

Festival. From here, the production will move to Boston's Huntington Theatre and then Berkeley Repertory Theatre in Northern California. Tommy talked about the play in a telephone interview last week.

Question: Can you explain the play's title and how the violence being done to women in the Congo is used as a weapon?

Answer: For Lynn, the title is more metaphorical than specific. It's about what this kind of violence can do to a woman's body and psyche and to a community. When you have a deeply traditional community like in this play, when a woman gets raped, the traditional response would be to separate the woman from her family because her rape brings shame on the men who should've protected her and the community.

If all the women in villages are raped and cast out, what does that do? Who's raising the children? Who's caring for the community? It's an incredibly ingenious weapon of war, because it breaks down the communities. Then the extreme violence of these acts in this part of the world destroys the woman physically as well.



The cast of the La Jolla Playhouse production of Lynn Nottage's "Ruined." Photos courtesy of J. Katarzyna Woronowicz

Q: Mama Nadi is a fascinating character. Like Mother Courage, she protects these women as if they were children, but she profits from their bodies as well. How would you describe her?

A: She's a towering character in dramatic literature. I compare her to King Lear or Willy Loman in that she carries the role on her back across that stage for two hours.

Her moral ambiguity is the beauty of the character. How can she justify making these girls do what they're doing after what happened to them in the war?

Well, that's the complexity of war. How is it different than one corporation or another that profits off of war? In any war, there will be winners and losers, and this allows us to focus in on one of those people who fly under the radar when we talk about war. It's so compellingly written that your feelings about her will flip-flop as the play goes on between understanding her, judging her, loving her and being angry with her.

Q: What were you looking for when you cast Tonye Patano in that role?

A: She's got range. She can do the drama so well, and the joyful parts are a delight to watch. I also looked for someone with a really easy charisma, who you believe has the power to make these soldiers empty their guns before they're allowed to step into her bar.

Q: Tell me about your directorial style.

A: I love to push the theatricality of an event, so I like anything that will make it feel like we're watching a vi-

brant piece of theater, not staged television.

Q: How do you connect these women's stories with American audiences who naturally disassociated themselves from a story taking place so far away?

A: I'm originally from South Africa, and am interested in investigating these sorts of stories right now, but we in the West have to understand and grasp how connected we are because we live in a global society.

Here in the U.S., we're a nation at war, and some of the experiences of these girls in this play are not atypical of what some women are going through in Iraq and Afghanistan. When you're fighting a war in a country with no democracy, things go unchecked, and that's how atrocities like this happen.

I want the audience member to ask, 'What if it were me? How would I react? Which woman would I be under those same circumstances?' Who says under these same circumstances we would behave any differently?

Q: As dark as its subject matter may be, "Ruined" has a positive message, doesn't it?

A: Yes, I'm glad you asked. The play isn't all dark. That's why she won the Pulitzer. It's not just a depressing newspaper article. It's a genuinely cathartic, hopeful piece of theater about humans and their ability to survive and triumph. Lynn's hope is that when you watch it and you experience the words she wrote and you see these women come alive, it changes your life as well.



Director Liesl Tommy at a rehearsal for "Ruined" at La Jolla Playhouse.