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, project.

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 3.4 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 came to terms with the extent to which their bodies had destroyed their narratives, I came to terms with the extent to which their bodies had become battlefields.” Being used as a weapon to punish and destroy communities. In listening to women in the Congo is used as a weapon.

The La Jolla Playhouse production is directed by South African native Liesl Tommy, who first staged the play last spring at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. From here, the production will move to Boston’s Huntington Theatre and then Berkeley Repertory Theatre in Northern California.

Director Liesl Tommy at a rehearsal for “Ruined” at the La Jolla Playhouse.