Playwright injects a sense of optimism into ‘Ruined,’
a tale of wartime atrocities in the Congo

Kola Ogundiran, as Laurent, abuses Pascale Armand, playing Salima, during a rehearsal of “Ruined” at La Jolla Playhouse. The Pulitzer Prize-winning play, written by Lynn Nottage, is set in a watering hole and brothel in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It’s a moment of defiance in a place of degradation and despair: A young Congolese prostitute, a survivor of unspeakable violence, dares to speak of it to the men making war: “You will not fight your battles on my body anymore.”

Battles of all kinds — tests of wills, clashes of conscience, private fights to salvage a shred of dignity — erupt in “Ruined,” Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play about the chaos visited upon lives in Central Africa.

And combat in a more literal sense unfolds during a midday rehearsal at La Jolla Playhouse, which this week launches one of the first West Coast productions of the work. On one side of the room, performers portraying a bar girl and a menacing general run through a scene in which he roughs her up like a rag doll; on another side, two actors grapple fiercely as they play feuding soldiers.

When each take is over, though, the stressed but stoic cast members shrug off the aggression. Director Liesl Tommy gives actor Carla Duren a motherly hug. Smiles begin to break the strain. The next rehearsal scene, set around a wistfully pretty song Duren performs in the bar, eases the mood a bit more.

That sense of light shining through gloom goes to the bruised heart of “Ruined,” set in a makeshift watering hole and brothel in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country ripped apart by civil war.

And combat in a more literal sense unfolds during a midday rehearsal at La Jolla Playhouse, which this week launches one of the first West Coast productions of the work. On one side of the room, performers portraying a bar girl and a menacing general run through a scene in which he roughs her up like a rag doll; on another side, two actors grapple fiercely as they play feuding soldiers.

When each take is over, though, the stressed but stoic cast members shrug off the aggression. Director Liesl Tommy gives actor Carla Duren a motherly hug. Smiles begin to break the strain. The next rehearsal scene, set around a wistfully pretty song Duren performs in the bar, eases the mood a bit more.

That sense of light shining through gloom goes to the bruised heart of “Ruined,” set in a makeshift watering hole and brothel in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country ripped apart by civil war.

And combat in a more literal sense unfolds during a midday rehearsal at La Jolla Playhouse, which this week launches one of the first West Coast productions of the work. On one side of the room, performers portraying a bar girl and a menacing general run through a scene in which he roughs her up like a rag doll; on another side, two actors grapple fiercely as they play feuding soldiers.

When each take is over, though, the stressed but stoic cast members shrug off the aggression. Director Liesl Tommy gives actor Carla Duren a motherly hug. Smiles begin to break the strain. The next rehearsal scene, set around a wistfully pretty song Duren performs in the bar, eases the mood a bit more.

That sense of light shining through gloom goes to the bruised heart of “Ruined,” set in a makeshift watering hole and brothel in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country ripped apart by civil war.

And combat in a more literal sense unfolds during a midday rehearsal at La Jolla Playhouse, which this week launches one of the first West Coast productions of the work. On one side of the room, performers portraying a bar girl and a menacing general run through a scene in which he roughs her up like a rag doll; on another side, two actors grapple fiercely as they play feuding soldiers.

When each take is over, though, the stressed but stoic cast members shrug off the aggression. Director Liesl Tommy gives actor Carla Duren a motherly hug. Smiles begin to break the strain. The next rehearsal scene, set around a wistfully pretty song Duren performs in the bar, eases the mood a bit more.
War has claimed as many as 5 million lives

Lynn Nottage's "Ruined" is set in a small mining town in the Ituri rain forest, at the northeast corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The nation has endured what seems almost unenduring war, with conflicts flaring among a volatile, shifting mix of militias, government forces and mutually hostile ethnic groups.

By some accounts the war has claimed as many as 5 million lives, counting casualties from starvation, disease and displacement. It has also come with an epidemic of sexual violence — 15,000 cases in the affected part of the country last year alone, according to the United Nations.

The way that kind of brutality fosters a sense of moral ambiguity is a key theme of "Ruined." It is personified in Mama Nadi, who hosts both soldiers and rebels in her makeshift bar and brothel, and considers the place a sanctuary for the women she puts to work as prostitutes.

"It's something we talk about all the time," says director Liesl Tommy. "The life there is so chaotic. But life in the middle of war anywhere is chaotic. If you've never lived through war, or been put in a position to make these extreme choices, it seems like Mars. It doesn't seem like Earth."

"That's what the play is about, in making sense of this behavior." The director recalls that Wendell Franklin, who portrays the rebel leader Jerome, and Killingworth Theatre's 2008 production of "Ruined" earlier this year at the Intiman Theatre in Seattle, where she is artistic director and in Los Angeles. "Whoriskey and Nottage share a mentor and we've seen things are going to happen with this play. We've seen enough to make it incredible fund-raising around the play." To the ultimate spirit of "Ruined," Tommy allows herself some optimism as well. She has seen change in Africa firsthand: Her family is of South Africa in the 1990s, but after apartheid fell, her father was involved back as a high-ranking city planner.

"What's just amazing to me is that finally I'm feeling that American audiences and (stage) producers are recognizing this is something that has meaning and interest for them, too," Tommy says. "It's not just something about 'over there,' for people over there."

"We're connected to these greater stories — these international stories."