

Women and

Ruined shows that we are more than what happens to us.

How do you write a play that deals with an important, yet disturbing subject without scaring off the audience?

That was Lynn Nottage's dilemma with her play, *Ruined*. Yes, it's about rape. But that's only one layer of the story. At a deeper level, it's also about how women rise above the devastation of rape and war with their strength, humor and joy preserved. And for all the challenges of its subject matter, *Ruined* has struck a nerve. *Playbill* called it "the most acclaimed play of 2009." It's won a slew of awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and four Obie awards.

In the play, Mama Nadi, a brothel owner in a small mining town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), is trying to keep her business going and her girls safe. Militia members from all sides of an ongoing armed conflict, as well as the traders that supply them, frequent her thatched-roof bar to enjoy a cold Fanta, a meal and a dance (or more) with a pliant girl. When a businessman brings the young Sophie, who has been "ruined" by mass rape, to Mama Nadi for shelter, she must decide whether she can take on another girl, particularly one who can't provide sexual services. She also has to figure out how to handle the quiet romantic overtures of a traveling salesman.

Telling women's narratives

Back in 2004, the rape of Congolese women was not well known. But Nottage, who worked for Amnesty International for four years after getting her MFA in playwriting from Yale School of Drama, knew about the problem and was frustrated that the full story was not being told. Women were being raped with bayonets and knives in a deliberate attempt to destroy their reproductive organs and break down communities.

So she, her husband, filmmaker Tony Gerber, and director Kate Whoriskey set off on what Nottage called her "African adventure," which took them to Uganda's capital, Kampala. Amnesty



Kate Whoriskey (second from left) and Lynn Nottage (far right), with Congolese women from a refugee camp in Uganda.

International and other refugee organizations helped identify refugee women to interview.

"The idea caught both our interests and we wanted to pursue it together," Nottage says. "I think as a result of Kate being there, she brought a great deal to the shaping of the play ultimately."

A year later, Nottage was back in Uganda, this time with a Guggenheim Fellowship to travel around East Africa to study the impact of war and armed conflicts on women. She also brought Gerber, her eight-year-old daughter and her father. This time, she went to refugee camps to interview women who'd fled the fighting in Congo. They visited three camps in remote areas, some containing as many as 15,000 people. With few NGOs there, getting permission to interview women was difficult. Help came in unexpected ways: One time, the manager of a local radio station overheard Nottage talking in a restaurant and pulled strings to get her access. The playwright interviewed numerous women, and heard their stories of not only being raped, but being shunned by their families and villages for bringing shame upon them. Some had contracted HIV/AIDS.

Demobilized soldiers, including some from the rapacious Lord's Resistance Army, told her "horrific" tales. "What struck me was

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By Catherine Foster

how easily they let go of culpability,” she says. “Almost as if they were speaking of an alter ego, or it was another individual committing the crimes.”

She found the larger story of the conflict in Congo huge and unwieldy, shot through with colonial history, battles over lucrative minerals, ethnic conflicts and internal squabbles in the militias.

“The conflict in Congo is fueled by the minerals dug in the rainforest and other regions,” she says. “Those minerals fuel our modern life: Coltan is used in cell phones and laptops. Copper is used in the wiring for telephones, radios and cars. As citizens of the modern world, we really do have a stake in the conflict. We’re also complicit in what happens to these girls by using these products and by not asking where the minerals come from and what price has been paid to extract them from the ground.”

Nottage says that if she were going to be true to the larger story, it would be a “12-hour-long epic” tale. She decided to limit it to her primary interest: wars against women.

“They are victims of all the military—whether government or rebel or the U.N. Basically, any man, given a gun and uniform, really poses a threat to the women in Congo. I don’t think it’s hyperbole to say that.”

The challenges, she says, were manifold. “The subject matter is so incredibly dark and difficult, so finding a way to make it palatable for the audience over 2 1/2 hours is a challenge. There’s the nature of the conflict and figuring out a way to distill a complicated situation and make it understandable to an audience who may not even know where Congo is on the map. And to find out how to juggle all aspects of the culture—humor and natural beauty, coupled with the kind of brutality and ugliness that goes on in the culture—that’s a challenge.”

Ruined required far more contemplation and research than her previous plays, like *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* and *Intimate Apparel*, which played at OSF in 2000 and 2006, respectively. Nottage says she sat with it longer before sitting down to write.

“I spent a lot of time talking with others about how to write a play that’s not didactic, but becomes universal and epic in scope. In working on material like this, the impulse is to preach, and use the tool of shame, which we did at Amnesty International. But

used here, the audience would walk out. I wanted the audience to invest in the lives of women. It was difficult to figure out how to tell the story so that they were locked in their seats and interested in what happens to the women.”

Nottage showed drafts of the play to visiting African artists and was heartened by their responses. “The women were complimentary and thankful,” she says. “They felt there was a great deal of authenticity; it resonated for them.”

Chicago’s Goodman Theatre commissioned Nottage to write the play and gave *Ruined* its world premiere in 2008, directed by Whoriskey. A coproduction with the Manhattan Theatre Club, it transferred to the off-Broadway theatre in February 2009. After eight extensions, it closed Sept. 1.

The impact of the Pulitzer

The plight of the Congolese women is now the subject of newspaper and magazine stories, as well as congressional hearings and UN commissions on human rights. Eve Ensler (*The Vagina Monologues*) has made it a big focus of her V-Day activities.

Winning the Pulitzer has also shone more light on the problem. Now Nottage gets more requests to speak on the subject. “I was sitting in the New York office of the High Commission on Human Rights and they were asking me for recommendations for a panel they’re interested in putting together to tour Congo and investigate women who’ve been victims.”

Another important impact of the prize, she adds, is that it probably lengthened the life of the play. “That pleases me. This play occupies a unique place in the theatre landscape; very few political plays pack any punch. Although it feels hubristic to say so, it has made a difference.”

Theatre can do what no other medium can. “We can context and reshape, investigate and interpret things in ways the public can’t—even journalists. I spoke to one who’d been in Congo for 10 years. He said, ‘I heard these stories every day and this is the first time I’ve actually cried.’ That means that when he returns to Congo, he’ll have a deeper sense, more compassion in relating with these women.”

When asked if she thought the issue had reached a tipping point of being on the public’s radar, she says, “I really pray it has.” ●