

Ruined: Congo is setting for prize-winning play on wartime violence against women

By Fred Mazelis
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Ruined, by Lynn Nottage, is set in a Congolese brothel during the civil war that has raged for most of the past decade in that impoverished African nation. The play, which won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for drama, was commissioned by Chicago's Goodman Theater, one of the more prominent regional theater companies in the U.S.

A co-production with the Manhattan Theater Club, *Ruined*, after a brief run in Chicago last year, opened in New York this past February to very strong reviews, and has had its limited run extended several times since.

The play focuses attention on the tremendous human suffering caused by the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The playwright has said she decided to center the story on the particular suffering of women, noncombatants who have been the victims of systematic rape and murder.

In 2004, Ms. Nottage went to Africa with her director Kate Whoriskey, with whom she has worked previously, for research purposes. They interviewed Congolese women refugees in neighboring Uganda. "We were expecting horror stories, but we weren't prepared for this extent of brutality," Nottage said recently.

Nottage has said that she was partly inspired by Bertolt Brecht's classic *Mother Courage and Her Children*, which takes place during the Thirty Years War in 17th century Europe. The "mother" in *Ruined* is Mama Nadi, who runs her establishment with an iron hand and who watches over her "girls," offering them some protection from the grim fate they face in their own villages on the outside.

Mama Nadi is a no-nonsense survivor who understands when to talk tough and when not to cross the line. She tells rival killers that they must leave their ammunition outside when they enter her whorehouse. She is all business, but also knows just how far to go when dealing with the brutes who patronize the brothel.

Much of the play is centered on the relationship between Mama Nadi and Sophie, a bright and beautiful young girl who has been sexually "ruined" after being raped by a bayonet. Though Sophie cannot work as a prostitute, Mama Nadi is prevailed upon to take her in, and she becomes the bookkeeper and bar singer.

In one of the play's most effective scenes, Christian, the salesman and supplier for the brothel, pleads with Mama Nadi to take Sophie because she is his niece. Sophie walks with the gait of someone in obvious pain from her injuries. Sophie and Salima, another young woman from her village, stand wide-eyed with a mixture of emotions—fear, anticipation and hope—as they grasp the possibility that they may be "saved" from further suffering and even death by the chance to work in a brothel, an opportunity they are desperate to accept.

For the most part, the play is swiftly paced and effective in presenting the major characters. They communicate the uncertainty and fear with which they live, but also the courage and determination of which ordinary people are capable. The performances are generally excellent, especially those of Portia (the actress uses one name) as Mama Nadi, Condola Rashad as Sophie and Russell G. Jones as Christian. Cherise Boothe as Josephine, another prostitute, and Quincy Tyler Bernstine as Salima are also fine. The production is aided by original music, by Dominic Kanza, which is performed onstage.

There are some obvious weaknesses, including occasionally stilted dialogue designed to supply some of the context for the civil war. The ending is far too tidy and somewhat unlikely, as if to underline a message of hope that does not necessarily flow from what we have seen. One might add, as well, that the African accents of the American cast are not always convincing.

However, these are relatively minor defects. *Ruined's* more serious problem—a problem one encounters in many films or plays about such global tragedies at present—goes

deeper than the current production and its performances.

The drama provides only a small fraction of the historical context needed to make sense of the suffering that we witness or hear about. There is some talk in the play of Congo's mineral wealth. The brutality, ruthlessness and unprincipled character of the competing armies are indicated. There is a brief mention of Mobutu (1930-1997), the longtime dictator of the country, named Zaire during his reign.

Almost entirely missing, however, is the international context of the Congolese civil war, especially the role of the Western powers, which have intervened to defend their imperialist interests in the country ever since they organized the assassination of its first legally elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, in January 1961.

The Pulitzer Prize citation for *Ruined* calls it "a searing drama set in chaotic Congo that compels audiences to face the horror of wartime rape and brutality while still finding affirmation of life and hope amid hopelessness."

The theme of hope, however, is based only on a vague humanism, and it is greatly outweighed by the sense of futility. One comes away with the conception that the suffering cannot be understood, that rape, war and killing will always be with us. Perhaps there is a way to survive, but the only solution seems to be to somehow clutch at the last strands of humanity and hope.

Ms. Nottage is a former national press officer for Amnesty International, and this work is clearly influenced by the general outlook of that noted human rights lobby. The playwright herself has said that her husband told her, "This play is sort of a perfect marriage of the two sides of your brain." The experience with Amnesty perhaps explains the playwright's reluctance to deal more concretely with the fundamental causes of the conflict. While Amnesty has often exposed the facts of unjust imprisonment, torture and war crimes, it has also avoided dealing with the overriding political issues. Thus, we are left with something that obscures the objective causes of the suffering in the Congo and elsewhere.

Nottage has also said that "the situation in the Congo is so complicated and chaotic that...I decided to focus on one war: the war against women. There are many wars being fought, but this seems the most inexplicable—and the one most easily stopped—and yet it continues."

Stopped by whom? The conception here, clearly, is that through UN intervention or via the Western powers directly, some improvements can be achieved. The historical record, however, shows exactly the opposite. The appalling suffering of Congolese women (and the

entire population) cannot be ended by a single-issue campaign, nor can the barbarity of the civil war be halted apart from the struggle to organize the masses of people to change the conditions under which they live.

It is also instructive to compare *Ruined* with *Mother Courage*. The playwright has explained, "I went to Uganda thinking, 'Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful to do a modern adaptation of *Mother Courage* set in the Congo?'...but when I got there and discovered there was a story going on there that had not reached the light of day—a story that's so specific to that region—it seemed wrong for me to overlay some sort of European construct on it. That's why a strict adaptation of *Mother Courage* was no longer appropriate."

Whether or not an adaptation of *Mother Courage* was called for, the use of the term "European construct" suggests something else. The idea that Brecht's fable deals only with Europe and has no broader significance is simply false.

Nottage's treatment of her leading character is different from that of Brecht's in an interesting way. For Brecht, *Mother Courage's* fate illustrates the futility of opposing war on the basis of individual resourcefulness. Courage thinks that through commerce she can escape or evade war's ruthless consequences, but despite her struggles and determination (and ingenuity) she pays with her children's lives.

In *Ruined*, on the contrary, Mama Nadi is a primarily a survivor who outwits the killers. This is at least partly the source of the hope that the Pulitzer jury found, and it is partial and inadequate. One of the strengths of *Mother Courage* has been turned on its head in this work, and results in a drama that is inevitably limited in its impact.

The author recommends:

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