



## Ruined

*Lynn Nottage*

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**Ruined Lynn Nottage**

**Winner of the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama**

“A powerhouse drama. . . . Lynn Nottage’s beautiful, hideous and unpretentiously important play [is] a shattering, intimate journey into faraway news reports.”—Linda Winer, *Newsday*

“An intense and gripping new drama . . . the kind of new play we desperately need: well-informed and unafraid of the world’s brutalities. Nottage is one of our finest playwrights, a smart, empathetic and daring storyteller who tells a story an audience won’t expect.”—David Cote, *Time Out New York*

A rain forest bar and brothel in the brutally war-torn Congo is the setting for Lynn Nottage’s extraordinary new play. The establishment’s shrewd matriarch, Mama Nadi, keeps peace between customers from both sides of the civil war, as government soldiers and rebel forces alike choose from her inventory of women, many already “ruined” by rape and torture when they were pressed into prostitution. Inspired by interviews she conducted in Africa with Congo refugees, Nottage has crafted an engrossing and uncommonly human story with humor and song served alongside its postcolonial and feminist politics in the rich theatrical tradition of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage*.

**Lynn Nottage**’s plays include *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, *Fabulation*, and *Intimate Apparel*, winner of the American Theatre Critics’ Steinberg New Play Award and the Francesca Primus Prize. Her plays have been widely produced, with *Intimate Apparel* receiving more productions than any other play in America during the 2005-2006 season.

## Ruined Details

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## From Reader Review Ruined for online ebook

### **Elizabeth? says**

This play deals with war-ravished Congo. We get the voice of the women affected by the war and how it damages the soul and the spirit.

I didn't find this one as powerful as the first play I read by her, *Sweat*, but it is an important play.

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### **Sarah says**

*Ruined* is an example of writing trying to expose a part of the world without casting a judgement on it. *Ruined* takes place in a whorehouse in Congo, where daily life is a struggle for survival on the most basic level. There are warring factions that waver in their power, and to survive, people must play both sides. Mama Nadi is the proprietor of the house, and the play opens on a day when her friends brings his niece and a few other girls to the house to work. Only his niece, Sophie, has been "ruined": whether that means she was a victim of female castration, or that she was raped so many times by all manner of instruments that she can no longer have sex. She is the beauty of the bunch, and the lengths that Mama Nadi (a hard woman) goes to protect Sophie is really very heart breaking. The whole situation there is hard and I think it took a certain sort of bravery to even attempt to write something like this considering the sensitive subject matter, and the fact that most governments do not want to face the problems that abound in many African countries.

The other female characters are victims of all sorts of abuse. One was made a sex slave in a rebel camp, and when she was released, her husband and her village rejected her. Because there are not a lot of opportunities for women, or in general for that matter, she had no choice but to turn to prostitution, which is not the worst profession in her situation.

Rebel leaders and government soldiers make their way through this place, and there is constant tension throughout the play on whether Mama Nadi will get caught playing both of the warring factions. The men that come through are also at risk of getting caught up or recruited in the conflict. The tales of brutality the characters tell are probably true because they are so shocking. The power of words really shines through in the monologues - so descriptive that you don't have to see the atrocities to feel repelled and horrified by them.

Very powerful drama. I liked the development of the characters and the constant tension permeating the play. Although the country's outlook is bleak, there is still a feeling of hope that shines through the characters. So so good.

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### **Chuck O'Connor says**

I needed to read this for a writing class concerned with dramatic structure. This is a devastating play with air-tight structure. I loved it on many levels.

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### **Emma Getz says**

Incredibly powerful piece on the lives of women during the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a topic western media completely ignores. It was fascinating and devastating. I only give 4 stars though because there is something that bothers me a little bit about the fact that Nottage went to the Congo and interviewed these women about their deeply personal stories about sexual assault during war time and then profited on them in a play that graphically depicts said assault multiple times. I'm not condemning her either way as the play is very informative for a Western audience, it's just a very gray area to me. Regardless, the play was very good and definitely deserved it's Pulitzer prize.

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### **Elizabeth A says**

The winner of the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, this play is a difficult yet important read.

I use a cell phone. Maybe you do too. There are so many ethical issues concerning how and where and by whom our gadgets and products are manufactured. Coltan, a mineral mined in the Congo and used in cell phones, is partly the cause of the ongoing war in the region. This play sheds some light on the collateral damage of devices upgraded often, and one we take for granted.

Inspired by interviews the author conducted in Africa with Congo refugees, this is both an engrossing and horrifying read. The setting is a bar/brothel at the edges of the war in Congo, and the diverse cast of characters each illustrate a different perspective on the war. If you are a sentient being you already know that rape is a weapon used by all sides, and this play gives us a glimpse into the lives of Congolese women in this particular war.

It's my opinion that plays are better seen than read, and that was certainly true in this case. For example, there were a couple of women whose names both started with S, and I often had to pause to remind myself which one was talking as I was reading. I'll be on the lookout for a production near me, and would highly recommend this one.

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### **Marwin Fernandez says**

It was such a tragic drama to read. Every word of dialogue and stage direction hit me like a staccato. It was about human trafficking in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I wished I had the privilege to witness this great drama on the stage. And also listen to the music. I loved how they provided the whole package.

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### **Megan says**

In a small mining town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mama Nadi reluctantly agrees to take on the responsibility for two girls, Sophie and Salima, because her favorite traveling salesman Christian begs her to. He bribes her with Belgian chocolates and tells her their backstories: Salima was the concubine of rebel soldiers, ripped away from her husband and family and village. Sophie is "ruined," which means her genitals are mutilated from a violent rape. Mama Nadi runs a brothel/bar that's struggling to stay afloat as the

world outside is being torn apart by civil war, and she plays a dangerous game as she welcomes soldiers from opposite sides of the fighting as paying customers. Things get more tense as we realize Sophie and Salima are taking bits and pieces of Mama Nadi's money and hoping to escape; Salima is desperate and depressed because she misses her daughter and also because she realizes she is in the early stages of a pregnancy as a result of the violent months she spent with the rebel soldiers. Christian keeps trying to woo Mama, but she isn't having it. The soldiers start catching on to her "aiding" the rebels and are increasingly threatening. Salima's husband returns and is trying to find his wife; Salima is troubled--she loved her husband, but he turned her away because she was essentially "defiled" by other men.

I'm impressed because Nottage went and interviewed women and put those stories to the page in a way that feels authentic and heartbreakingly, but also incredibly hopeful at the end.

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### **Nicholas Armstrong says**

I don't like horrible things -- they make me cringe. I acknowledge what goes on in the rest of the world but if I try to bear the weight too long then I know it will crush me flat. I don't understand, then, what is very positive about story.

There is only one moment of anything positive in the whole play and it comes at the very end, the rest of the story has moments of levity from the horror but the horror is always there. Ultimately where will Mama's business go? She is broke and no one comes to her business so what does she have?

I don't know, it seemed more realistically positive about the situation than many could be but what is the point? Is there hope for most of the people in Congo? Darfur? The Gaza Strip? Most of the world is, in the harshest terms possible, fucked. They are ruled by dictators, they are told what they can and can't do, and often times they are punished for no reason. They have their families taken, their limbs, their lives, their pride. What is going on in the D.R.C. is horrible, but only in scale, it is nothing new. The horrors abound and if I look at my experience reading *Ruined* and ask, 'how was it?' I can answer that it was mostly horrible -- not written, as an experience -- and that it was mostly depressing.

Structurally it was well done and the characters were pretty sound, but reading is a different experience than just that for me; it is an emotional trek, an undertaking into the shadowed vales of my mind to see where they take me. Sometimes I find a bit of beauty and I want to return, sometimes I find only horrors. *Ruined* is about horrors, and it took me to a place of my mind I dislike for too long. I address terror too much in my busy time, it is unlikely I'm going to subject myself to it in my free time.

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### **Laura says**

This play is far more powerful in production than on the page, yet reading it still gives a searing glimpse into the difficulties Congolese women are facing in their country's civil war, a convoluted, vicious conflict in which rape is systematically -- and pervasively -- used as a weapon. Drawing on her extensive interviews

with victims/survivors, Lynn Nottage presents a tale of such suffering that it seems like a warped horror story from another time period or, we could wish, another planet. Yet it's a frighteningly immediate story – variations of the drama are being enacted in real life every day. Also, the mineral at the center of the war, coltan, is fought over partly because it's an essential component of cell phones. In an oddly disconcerting way, every one of us has a piece of the Democratic Republic of the Congo sitting on our desk or in our purse. I'm not prone to displaced guilt, but you have to admit it gives one pause.

The play takes place in a bar/brothel at the edge of a war zone and presents widely disparate characters – insurgents, government soldiers, prostitutes, international traders, and villagers. But at the center is Mama Nadi, the commanding owner and madam. One day she might be serving the insurgents, the next she might be entertaining the government soldiers, but her establishment is a neutral zone and everyone checks his bullets at the door. Mama's forceful personality and equivocal ethics encapsulate the muddy, moral mess of war as well as the resilience of human nature. You know a world in which a brothel is a retreat, and working in a brothel a girl's best hope, is not going to be a pretty one. But however horrific and alien the circumstances, the characters in the play grab you with their humanity, and they force you to relate to that shared humanity by witnessing assaults against it and, at times, triumphs of it.

I saw *Ruined* performed in the round, which means you could see through the actors and on-stage drama to rows of other theatre goers. This had the benefit of almost superimposing the action onto the audience; I simultaneously watched the actions of people halfway around the world and the reactions of people like me. The odd unity of actors and audience was suitable for a play full of alien and shared experience. Casual references to witch doctors and spats over nail polish occur in the same scene; the foreign and familiar are not mutually exclusive, and neither are unspeakable abuse and the possibility of healing. At the end of the play half the audience was smiling and breathing an audible "Ahhh" while the other half didn't even applaud because they were still wiping their eyes...the combination of brutality and humanity is quite unsettling. However, I'd definitely wait to see it performed rather than read it – while it's powerful, it's no *Streetcar*.

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### **Andrew says**

Not bad in anyway, just not as impressive as I hoped it would be. I like the concept, but at times the execution seems a little trite. Actually, most of these "topical" kinds of plays- though sad and engaging, seem to have many of the same elements. Maybe that tells us something about mankind. I enjoyed the characters and the story is interesting, but it just wasn't all that much. Perhaps, as with most plays it is better to see it performed than to just read it.

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### **Lorma Doone says**

I read this play in one sitting. I spent most of that time with my jaw open, because it is just OVERWHELMINGLY sad. But I thank Lynn Nottage for writing a play about the violence against women in the Congo - and another play that black folk like me can be in.

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## **Margaret Sankey says**

Inspired by Brecht's Mother Courage, and researched by interviewing women in the Eastern Congo, this 2009 Pulitzer winner for drama is a searing look at the the lives and survival of women in conflict. Mama Nandi keeps a bar/brothel of women fed and alive despite the shifting and fragile authority of rebel and government forces over the miners who are systematically destroying the land to yield coltan and diamonds. Some of the women, like Salima, escaped from captivity as a sex slave in a rebel camp, only to be rejected by her family, while Sophie is the "ruined" of the title--not just raped but deliberated injured to damage her reproductive and excretory system to make her permanently disgusting to others (in a subplot, the hopelessness of access to surgery in a distant city to treat this condition is discussed).

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## **Hana Candelaria says**

My interest in this play stems from ongoing reading about women in the Congo as well as this author's (Lynn Nottage) trip to Uganda. Her interviews with Ugandan war victims not only informed the play, but tightens the distance between news reports and actual testimonials about what happens to women there.

Ruined means that a woman is so brutally raped that she cannot even turn to prostitution to support herself (which could be a 'logical' choice following the rejection by her community and family for 'letting it happen.'). The play occurs in Congolese war-territory where rape is the weapon of choice, intended not only to humiliate the victim/family/village but also to render the womb useless.

In the opening scenes, we are introduced to two teenage girls who have been brutalized, and are now brought into Mama Nadi's brothel as potential products; the charming 'pimp' has to negotiate especially hard to convince Mama Nadi to take on the ruined girl: not only is the girl ruined, but her odor implies she's suffering from untreated fistula (as would be the case with penetration by a bayonet or other rigid/sharp object).

Despite the extreme violence that permeates the territory, it's startling to see how casually the events are played out... not only the violence that precipitated the introduction of the girls, but also the lack of morality or compassion with regard to taking these girls into the brothel. In fact, it's difficult to figure out if Mama Nadi exploits her girls or actually offers them protection. The end of the play presents a far different picture of Mama Nadi than what we see in the beginning.

There's a constant sense of the violence that surrounds the bar; how small this place is against the vastness of the land and atrocities outside. But Mama Nadi single-handedly upholds the rules about what goes on within her walls. You can't help but wonder how she accomplishes this, or where it comes from. The story reminds me of the many women of war-torn nations who remarkably and admirably manage to regain or find new strength and carry on.

I think this is a riveting read; I'm looking forward to seeing the play and hearing the music.

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### **Jack Wolfe says**

If you're a dork like me, then reading plays is really exciting, because you can like something and still feel like you've gotten only a piece of it, i.e. that additional pleasures await you should you choose to actually SEE the play performed, or even ACT in the play...

On the page, "Ruined" works. It's the kinda work of art I'll forever admire: the type that deals with "issues" of the social and political stripe, but resists pat answers and propaganda. It shows how humans DEAL with their circumstances: how they fight, but also how they are beaten down; how they feel pain and sorrow but also how they experience joy. You wouldn't expect to find much "joy" in a Congolese civil war... especially in a brothel for marauding soldiers and miners... but Nottage makes it convincing.

I don't know much of nothing about contemporary drama, but "Ruined" almost feels sort of old-fashioned... It's characters, monologues, confrontations, sympathy for the less powerful, and big, gripping choices all the way. It's a devastating thing, smart and sharp and political, but it's entertaining, too. To think I'm only getting started with it!

To think that all of these horrible things really happened to people! That they're still happening!

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### **Sookie says**

A brothel stands on the edge of the war where generals, government officers and rebels walk in and have a drink or women. The war has torn apart civilians and the villages are pillaged. Violence against women is the norm and brutal rape victims find themselves rejected by their families for no fault of theirs. One such girl enters this brothel whose life had existed within stringent village boundaries. One fateful encounter with rebels, she was "ruined". A variant of this society exists where I live and probably everywhere. The women make do with the limited freedom they get in brothel and survive a society that gives their emotional existence little to no regard.

Reading Ruined is a jarring experience since the dialogues are vaguely familiar of its atrocities in a different capacity with different set of people. But these women are real and their struggles - universal.

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### **Expanding Bookshelf says**

Ruined is a Pulitzer Prize-winning play written by Lynn Nottage about the plight of women in the civil war ravaged Democratic Republic of the Congo. The play is set in a brothel/bar run by the hard-as-nails Mama Nadi. She's a no-nonsense woman, perfectly capable of getting right into the faces of armed soldiers to make sure they follow her rules: They must take their bullets out of their guns before entering the bar. No brawls. And absolutely no talk whatsoever about the bloody war that gets closer and closer to her brothel every day.

Nothing may rattle Mama, but the girls she employs are fragile and shattered. Josephine, the daughter of a chieftain, Salima, a wife and mother and Sophie, who was raped repeatedly with a bayonet by soldiers and therefore "ruined"-unable to have sex. They work in the brothel because they have nowhere else to go and

it's not safe to travel the roads as every day more news about the war reaches the bar. And although they hate their jobs, these women consider it nice work, considering the horrors they endured before.

The play highlights the use of rape in war. It's not just to destroy the women emotionally. The women soldiers "ruin" are unable to bear children. And in areas where a woman's honor is the most important thing, being raped means being judged and ostracized in her own community. And the prostitute Salima was abandoned by her husband after she was held prisoner by soldiers for five months because she was raped and he couldn't look at her. And yet these women endure. What other choice do they have?

I really enjoyed the play, although I was surprised that it won the Pulitzer after reading lines like "You will not fight your battles on my body anymore." But for me, a theatre nerd, the true purpose of art is to challenge us, to take us into dark places previously unknown to us and make us empathize with these strangers and to extract a tiny seed of hope. "Ruined" accomplishes that.

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### **Si Squires-Kasten says**

Lynn Nottage is a monumental talent, and her plays provide an urgent revitalization of realism for the modern stage. She is intensely moral and political, populating her plays with characters who violently disagree about the world and forcing her audience to think dialectically. *Ruined*'s most profound achievement is its investigation of people forming personal identities from a constantly shifting political climate, and she is equal parts scientific and humane.

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### **Bella says**

Really strong writing. And the ending is such a powerful image!

That said, I LOVE reading plays, but I believe they are almost always better performed. Here, this holds true. Some of the character dynamics would likely be better explored on the stage (with physical space and spoken dialogue to play with) than on paper.

Full review to come!

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### **Brina says**

*Ruined* is the 2009 Pulitzer winning drama by Lynn Nottage. I have now read three of Nottage's plays and been impressed by all of them. What a powerhouse of a playwright exposing those who follow her work to real issues in today's world. *Ruined* is a hauntingly chilling tale of life in the Republic of the Congo during the ongoing fighting that occurs there. It focuses on the rape of young girls by soldiers on both sides of the conflict and how one woman has created a brothel as both a way station and a safe haven for these girls amidst the turmoil. Critiquing this drama will not do the writing justice, as I have not been fortunate enough to experience this drama on stage. I will continue to follow Nottage's career with enthusiasm as she is one of America's foremost contemporary playwrights.

\*5 stars\*

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## Trish says

Playwright Lynn Nottage won her first Pulitzer Prize for this play, commissioned by and premiered in November 2008 at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. The back of the book reproduces the songs created for the play, musical composition by Dominic Kanza, lyrics by Nottage. The music for “You Come Here to Forget” is fast, using lots of black keys, while “A Rare Bird” has a chord-heavy left hand and a thinly-picked out treble overlaid. The set for this play is a seedy, well-used bar in a small mining town in very close to a rain forest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Congolese government soldiers and the rebels they are fighting both patronize Mama Nadi’s bar and her “girls,” the women contracted to her because they were run out of their own families after kidnapping and repeated savage rape by one of the warring parties. All have been psychologically damaged by their experiences, but they usually try to support one another within their current confinement in Mama Nadi’s bar.

The heat is made apparent by the repeated calls for a cold drink, whether beer or Fanta is a matter of some debate. Mama Nadi makes her living offering libation to fighters, and she is proud she has managed well for so long. She does not appear to be afraid. She has regular customers, including a supplier who one day brings her some girls, including one who is “ruined.” Her captors had used a bayonet to rape her; she was in pain, she couldn’t pay her way, and her future was dim.

Mama Nadi is a businesswoman, not a bleeding heart, but upon learning that Sophia can read, sing, and keep accounts, Mama reneges and accepts her into the fold to work essentially as slave labor. The exploitation of one by another happens everywhere everyday in this patch, roiling beneath the surface, and only breaking through on special occasions, like the one that comes near the end of the play.

That occasion comes shortly after we learn of a breathtakingly grotesque act of revenge perpetrated on a nearby mission for suspected betrayal. The tension level at Mama Nadi’s skyrockets when the government troops there learn they just missed by minutes the rebel leader they have been hotly pursuing. Anything which brings on the wrath of either warring party may easily tip into something more dreadful than death.

This extraordinary play is a work of witness to the suffering of the people of the Congo who are pawns in the drama that constitutes their lives. The wealth of minerals in the Congo is paradoxically proving to be a greater curse than a blessing, and the curse has lasted for such a long time. The story is drawn from life: in the back of this book are photographs of the women whose story this is.

Originally conceived as a remake of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, the play took on an entirely different character after Nottage met a group of survivors in the DRC when she visited with collaborator Kate Whoriskey, who writes the introduction to this volume. However, the word ‘ruined’ survives from Brecht; both the meaning and the interpretation changes several times during the play.

Stage directions allow us to picture this play as it unfolds, to imagine actors, to envision our own rage. However easy it is to conjure up these images, it must be a particularly rich experience to see the work performed. Its simplicity of expression paired with a complexity of human emotion may be the thing that

raises this play above its fellows. Definitely worth seeing it performed, the work is ultimately redemptive. But read it if you must, as I have.

On my blog, I have posted YouTube clips of performances (with some music!) in Washington, D.C., Boston, and Berkeley.

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