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# Congo lines

*A brothel madam battles brutal realities in the Pulitzer-winning 'Ruined'*

Lansing City Pulse Review by James Sanford



No brawls, no bullets — and, if you're a miner, you'd better wash your feet and hands in the bucket outside. These are some of the rules to be followed at the Congolese brothel run by Mama Nadi in Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Ruined," which Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. is producing as its season finale.

Tough-talking, cunning Mama Nadi has designed her illicit establishment as a haven for those who want to escape the terrors of daily life, particularly the ongoing civil war that she refuses to discuss. In a country of rough men and rough diamonds, Mama Nadi is determined to maintain a place of peace and pleasure. So, in exchange for cold beer, icy Fanta and steamy trysts with her stable of girls, Mama Nadi expects her clientele to honor her high standards.

"Once you step through my door, then you're in my house," she declares. "And I make the rules here." But while Mama Nadi may be able to manipulate her customers and her employees, she can't shut out the realities of what's going on outside her door, nor can she turn away from the traumas her employees have experienced: broken families, sexual slavery and the disgrace of being "ruined" by rapists.

It's a play that addresses what Peppermint Creek artistic director Chad Badgero calls "topics that aren't talked about," which is one of the reasons he was eager to add to it to his schedule. "After reading 'Ruined,' I was overwhelmed by it," Badgero said. "I thought, 'It's not going to be done anywhere else in the area,' which was a huge motivating factor. That topicality is part of our mission, and the subject of war, both here and abroad, is definitely in our society. The show is intriguing in the way it addresses war through the specific standpoint of these characters."

Nottage's script draws inspiration from Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage," both in its theme of Mama Nadi simultaneously profiting from conflict and suffering from it, and in its use of musical interludes to add extra dimensions to the characters.

"The music brings a different tone to the production," Badgero said. "It gives the ability to set tone and atmosphere in a way you can't do solely with language. It gives a sense of locale and it evokes a lot of emotion." Badgero picked Deborah Keller (Lansing Community College's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and "American Buffalo") to direct the show.

"That was an easy choice!" he said, with a laugh. "I've worked with her before and we teach at LCC together. This play is really daunting in a lot of ways, and it posed some casting challenges in our town, as far as finding actors and directors who were willing to tackle it in a brave, respectful way. "This is the kind of material she thrives on, so this play is so well-suited to her. She's so brave; she doesn't shrink back from issues or topics in any manner. So it was a natural fit."

## ***'Ruined'***

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.

Through May 5

Curry Street Theatre, 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing

8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sunday, April 29, \$15; \$10 students and seniors

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