

Power, not preachiness

Beauty and brutality collide in fine 'Ruined'

Lansing City Pulse Newspaper review by Paul Wozniak, May 2, 2012



Conveying the brutal honesty of war without head-splitting heavy-handedness is not easy, but Peppermint Review Creek Theatre's season closer, "Ruined," could be one of the best examples of a play that's powerful without excessive preaching. Deborah Keller directs Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer-winning drama almost as an arc of increasingly intense confrontations. Based on real atrocities of sexual violence in present-day central Africa (with fictional characters), "Ruined" will make you shudder and think without sermonizing about its points.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mama Nadi's brothel bustles with soldiers from both sides of the omnipresent, unnamed conflict. Patrons respect Mama's authority under her roof, leaving their bullets at the door, despite the brutal anarchy outside. But Mama can only remain neutral for so long until she joins the tide or risks being swept away.

Chelsea Lucas makes Mama Nadi intimidating without being physically imposing. Lucas may be shorter than virtually all of her male co-stars and most of her female costars, but her powerful voice

and aggressive stance give Mama the grisly toughness she needs.

Sineh Wurie plays traveling supply — and prostitute — salesman Christian, whose bantering chemistry with Mama anchors the entire production. Wurie's deft transformation from sober comic in Act I to dark and drunk in Act II pushes Lucas toward an explosive exchange filled with dramatic energy.

In addition to Mama Nadi, the primary exposition comes from war survivors and Mama's newest "employees," Sophie (Ja'Nay McClaster) and Salima (Danielle Nicole Mitchell). Sophie, who was raped with a soldier's bayonet and left for dead, literally embodies one of the "ruined." McClaster handles this delicate role quite beautifully, slowly blossoming from guarded and petrified to quietly confident. She shines most brightly while singing.

The role of Salima is equally challenging: She is a young married woman who fears her husband will never love her again once he discovers that she was repeatedly raped by a gang of rogue soldiers. Mitchell seems less comfortable with her character than McClaster, particularly during an important revelatory scene that she speeds through with little emotional connection.

Two of the strongest supporting performances come from Teri Brown as Josephine, the veteran prostitute with a toxic personality, and Jeremiah S. Hawkins as Commander Osembenga of the government army. Brown spits her barbs at Sophie and Salima with a fiery hiss. But Hawkins' sharp voice and menacing physicality make Osembenga absolutely frightening.

Like Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage," "Ruined" details the effects of war on civilians. Apart from the somewhat sluggish first act, "Ruined" moves quite swiftly, with several incredibly polished scenes.

Like Mother Courage, Mama Nadi justifies her operation with the belief that she is protecting her women from a worse fate outside. Of course, the question for the audience becomes, "What would you do if it was you?"

'Ruined'

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.

Curry Street Theatre 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing 8 p.m. Thursday, May 3, Friday, May 4 and Saturday, May 5 \$15; \$10 students and seniors (517) 372-0945 www.peppermintcreek.org