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Biography Profile Interview Gallery You were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for your drama Ruined. Could you tell us how you came to write that play? Keys to success — Courage Lynn Nottage: Ruined began as an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage. I was working at the time with my collaborator, Kate Whoriskey, and we were really interested in doing an adaptation of that particular play and began researching various wars that were going on. And the war that really fascinated me — in large part because there was some information about it — was the war that was raging on in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And the two of us decided that we were going to set the play there. And when I began reading the newspapers, I found I couldn’t find any information about what was happening to women in war. And I said to Kate on a whim, I said, “What if we bought a ticket and we went to East Africa and interviewed women who were fleeing that war?” She was a little frightened, a little worried, but she followed me there. And you have to remember at this moment we were still very interested in doing a modern adaptation of Mother Courage. But when we sat down with women who were fleeing the war, very quickly I realized that the European male frame of the story was not going to be sufficient. The stories that we were hearing from these women were so specific to the Democratic Republic of Congo — it was so specific to African women that I thought, “I need a completely different paradigm in order to enter this space.” And one of the things that really resonated when I was interviewing the women is the way in which they held the word “mother” in their mouths. I always asked each woman, how would you describe “mother courage?” and they’d always take a moment where they’d stop and they’d say, “Yes, mother courage.” And in that moment I thought, “I have to somehow capture that emotion,” and capture sort of the sadness but the resilience that was inside the way in which they held that language in their mouths. And so Ruined really came out of that. February 10, 2009: Director Kate Whoriskey, actress Sadiyah Arrika Ekulona, and playwright Lynn Nottage attend the Ruined Off-Broadway opening night after a brotly at Red Eye Grill in New York City. (Bryan Bedder and Getty Images) There’s a paradox in this play, in that a brothel becomes a kind of haven for women fleeing the war. Keys to success — Vision Lynn Nottage: I’m very interested as a whole in morally ambiguous characters. And at the center of Ruined is a woman named Mama Nadi who runs a brothel in the Ituri Rainforest. She at once provides refuge to women who have been victims of gender-specific human rights abuses, but she also exploits them. So I was really interested in that conundrum of someone who is at once sort of savior and exploiter. I think that Mama Nadi would describe herself as someone who understood that in order to save these women, she had to make some compromised choices, and I was interested in that compromised choice and the complexity of that. One of the phrases that I held onto when I was interviewing these women, was “sustain the complexity of the situation.” It’s really easy for us to condemn someone like Mama Nadi without understanding the difficulty of surviving in a war like the one that was raging in the entire Ituri Rainforest. It’s really easy for us to be judgmental without understanding the complexities of what it took to survive in that situation. In Ruined, you riveted audiences around the country with a story that the newspapers weren’t even really covering. Keys to success — Integrity Lynn Nottage: The decision to get on the plane to go to East Africa really came as a result of not being able to find any information, and that anger and that frustration. When I arrived in East Africa and began interviewing women, I became even more frustrated and angry because I thought, “These stories need to be amplified. How can so many women be experiencing similar levels of exploitation and gender-specific violence and none of us know that it’s happening?” If you remember, the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, I think by the time it ended 6.5 million people had died. It was the largest war since World War II, and half of those people who were victims were women who never picked up arms and weren’t instigators of the conflict and yet were victims. 2017: Lynn Nottage is the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice. (Nathan Bajar for The New Yorker) What was that like for you, to listen to these stories? Keys to success — Perseverance Lynn Nottage: I think back specifically to some of the stories that I heard. I remember, in fact, the very first woman who we interviewed began telling her story and I was so overwhelmed by emotion I literally felt like my heart was going to leap out of my body. And I thought, “There’s no way I’m going to continue.” But I realized that if I didn’t continue, and if I didn’t bear witness, there was a possibility that there wasn’t going to be someone else who would listen and someone else who would take the time to really invest in their stories not only being heard but their stories being told. I remember sitting down with the women, and I always began by saying, “I’m not a human rights activist, I’m not a lawyer, I’m not a journalist. But what I can do that many of them won’t do is that I can listen to your story from beginning to end and I’ll do it with patience and I’ll do it with compassion.” Watching the play is a shattering experience. You showed a lot of courage in taking it to that point, which you knew was going to create a lot of emotion in your audience. Keys to success — Perseverance Lynn Nottage: After I did the initial set of interviews with women in East Africa, I recognized that my journey was not complete, and I ended up applying for a Guggenheim grant to go back and spend more time in East Africa with women fleeing gender-specific human rights abuses. And then after that I went back a third time. And the third time I went very specifically to figure out, “How do you use theater and art as a tool for healing?” Because I thought, “It’s not enough for me to tell these women’s stories, but I want to figure out how do we process the stories in a way that moves through our bodies and leads to some sort of catharsis and healing.” It was really important when I was writing Ruined that the audience take a journey, not just through the darkness, but come out at the end with a sense of optimism, and recognize the resilience in these women. I know that I took a lot of criticism when the play was originally produced that I had a happy ending. But one of the things that I remember when I was interviewing the women is how easily they could move from despair to accessing their smiles, and I thought the smiles are the things that permit them to transcend these circumstances, and I wanted the audiences to understand that as dark as the place these women were, they were able to find their resilience. A scene from Sweat at the neighborhood tavern where most of the play’s action takes place. (Photo: Joan Marcus) The second of your plays to win the Pulitzer Prize was Sweat, and that also involved a lot of in-person research, didn’t it? How did that come about? For me, Sweat really came at the end of my journey with Ruined. It began when I was actually coming back from Chad, where I had just done a production of Ruined there, and I arrived home and I had all these emails in my email box, and one very specific email was from a neighbor of mine who was a very good friend. I opened it up that evening and I read it, and basically she was saying that she had been broke for six months, that she hadn’t been working, that she had had been hiding it from her friends, and that when we saw her smiling, that smile was covering the fact that she was in deep despair. She was a mother of two. She’s someone who I can attest to always had a smile, and it broke my heart. It broke my heart that I had not recognized the extent of her suffering. I hadn’t recognized that she was someone that was in the midst of such a struggle. The next day I called her up and I said, “What can I do to help?” and it also happened to coincide with the very first week of Occupy Wall Street. So we decided that we were going to go to Occupy Wall Street and vent our frustration. We spent about a week walking around Zuccotti Park chanting, being really angry, but at the very end I felt like nothing has happened, and I felt I need to do something much more tangible. I want to understand how economic stagnation is really shifting the American narrative, and how someone like this friend who had solidly invested in the Horatio Alger myth, someone who had been solidly middle class, could be broadsided and find herself on the verge of being homeless. That led me on a journey to Reading, Pennsylvania, which at the time was the poorest city of its size in America. My assumption is that I was going to go down to this city, interview people for one week, and it ended up being a two-year journey in which I went almost every single week to talk to people and interview people, from the first African American mayor of this city to folks who were living in shantytowns in the village. When I arrived in Reading, I had no assumption of what I was going to hear. I had no expectation that I was ever going to leave with a play. It also happened to coincide with a commission that I had received from Oregon Shakespeare Festival to write a play about an American revolution. And while I was in Reading, I decided I wanted to write about the “de-industrial revolution” because I think that this is perhaps the biggest revolution that has happened in America since the Civil Rights Movement. Lynn Nottage wrote the script for the world premiere musical adaptation of Sue Monk Kidd’s novel The Secret Life of Bees, with music by Duncan Sheik (left) and lyrics by Susan Birkenhead (right). In May 2019, Tony Award-winning director Sam Gold staged the adaptation of Atlantic Theater Company’s off-Broadway production in New York City. Perhaps you could tell us a little of the story of the play. What’s it about? Lynn Nottage: Sweat revolves around a close-knit group of friends who work in a steel factory in Reading, Pennsylvania, and it kind of tracks that friendship over the course of the year, from where they’re celebrating their prosperity to discovering that they’re going to be locked out of their plant. And it really explores the way in which that friendship fractures across racial lines. The alienation among steelworkers and others in the middle of the country is hard for people on the coasts to even fathom, isn’t it? Lynn Nottage: It was heart-breaking for me to sit in circles with steelworkers who had worked in factories — in some cases for 40 years, the same factory. They had assumed that they would retire and have these enormous pension plans and that their sons and daughters would then move into these jobs, realizing that not only would they never be able to access their pension plans and access their factories again, but that that opportunity was gone for the next generation. I remember sitting in this circle of middle-age white men, you know, this black woman, and I’m asking them questions and seeing them not just cry but weep, weep out of frustration, also weeping because they literally didn’t know what to do next. And what was surprising is because for so long — and forgive me for using this language — but for so long I think that these particular men saw their opportunity — their whiteness — as a superpower, and that as long as they were white men, they’d always have opportunity. And I think when that opportunity was taken away from them, they became profoundly confused. It’s like, “Wait a minute. What do we do? Who are we?” And I watched when I was sitting in the circle as these men were grappling with a sense of identity — of their identity. It’s like, “Who are we if not this?” and I found that fascinating. Lynn Nottage and her husband Tony Gerber at the 2017 Drama Desk Awards in New York City. In 2003, the 2-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, Lynn Nottage, and PGA and Emmy Award-winning film director, Tony Gerber, founded Market Road Films, a New York-based, independent production company. The company’s mission is to bring evocative, visual, and character-driven storytelling to unusual and otherwise untold stories. (Emilio Madrid) Not only have they lost their identity as workers, but they can’t support their families. Lynn Nottage: They can’t support their families. They can’t pay their mortgages. When I was talking to one of the locked-out steelworkers, he was describing not being able to do the things that he had taken for granted, like going to see a movie. He thought, “I may never be able to go to a movie theater again because I don’t have that disposable income.” And just the notion of that was quite devastating. You’ve delved into different media — TV, film — and different ways of bringing theater to people. With Sweat you went out into the community. Keys to success — Vision Lynn Nottage: When we were initially conceiving Sweat, myself and my collaborator Kate Whoriskey, we always wanted to figure out a way not to bring the play back to the people in Reading, Pennsylvania, but to take it to folks who might be very much in dialogue with the issues that were happening on the stage. So we, along with Oregon Shakespeare Festival, raised some money from the very inception to take the play outside of the proscenium and take it into communities. When we moved the show to the Public Theater, we deliberately selected that theater because the artistic director, Oskar Eustis, was very aligned with what we wanted to do with the show. We had originally planned to take it to Reading, Pennsylvania and then tour it through the prison system, but the prison system would not let us in. So after we took it to Reading, we wanted to figure out a way to keep what we experienced with that audience in Reading, Pennsylvania alive, and we came up with this notion of touring Sweat through the Rust Belt, specifically in small towns that were swing towns and voted for Obama and then voted for Trump. We wanted to go to places where we thought we could have a dialogue. We didn’t want to just go red or blue; we wanted to go to purple, those places where, we thought, after the play is done we can actually talk about some of these issues. April 23, 2019: Lynn Nottage attends the Time 100 Gala at Frederick P. Rose Hall, Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City. She was named a “Pioneer” on the annual Time 100: Most Influential People of 2019. (Taylor Hill/FilmMagic) How did that go? Lynn Nottage: The tour of the Rust Belt with Sweat was phenomenal. It really exceeded our expectations, and I think in large part due to a lot of the excellent work that the Public did to prepare people for what they were going to see. And you talk about the way in which you invite audiences across a threshold is that the Public Theater’s advance team spent a lot of time figuring out, “How do we get people who’ve never seen theater to enter into a space and sit for two and-a-half hours and watch a play?” When I got there, I anticipated that there’d be a lot of cellphones ringing, that people would be restless, but by and by large those audiences sat quiet and rapt and at the end of the play really wanted to engage in robust conversation. You know, I describe it like, almost like a traveling tent show in which the play is the sermon and the people afterward would stand up and testify. Sometimes we had to turn out the lights to get people to stop talking and we recognized that there was a real need to talk about what the folks in the Rust Belt were going through. How was the play received? You won a second Pulitzer Prize, but changing circumstances caused some people to see the play in a different light. What was that like? Lynn Nottage: The landing of Sweat was quite fascinating because when we first began the play — it’s set in 2008 — the assumption is I was writing a play about history. And in the course of producing the play, America shifted. I remember we — actually on the night that Donald Trump was elected — we were performing, and there was a tangible difference in the way in which the audience responded to the play from the night before. Something had shifted, but this play that was history suddenly became reality and became present and spoke to what was happening in America in ways that the media hadn’t seen it and many Americans hadn’t seen it. And one of the questions I was asked is, “Did you know that Donald Trump was going to get elected? Because your play seems as though it was written in response to Donald Trump.” I didn’t know that he was going to get elected, but having spent two-and-a-half years in the industrial town, I knew that there was going to be some form of revolution. I didn’t know that that revolution would be the malignancy of Donald Trump, but I knew that people wanted something very different. You followed that production with a multimedia presentation called This Is Reading. Could you tell us about that? Lynn Nottage: This Is Reading was a multimedia performance installation that was housed in the Franklin Street Railroad Station in Reading, Pennsylvania. Franklin Street Station had been the center of the Reading Railroad, which we all know from the Monopoly board game, but had been abandoned since 1981. We decided that we were going to reanimate this space, which was the nexus point between neighborhoods in downtown Reading. It came out of wanting to bring something back to the people in Reading, Pennsylvania. I spent two years there. I had produced Sweat and I was beginning to feel very much like a carpenterbagger, in that I had poached their stories and left, and I didn’t like that feeling. I didn’t like the feeling that what I had created wasn’t benefiting the people in Reading, Pennsylvania. So I thought, “What can I do to bring this fractured city into one space and bring them into conversation?” So we came up with this notion of This Is Reading, which was to fill the Reading Railroad Station with the stories of the people in Reading. And the goal was to bring the homeless guy who was on Penn Street and the mayor into the same space, and we succeeded, where they would sit side by side and both recognize that they share the same narrative. That’s pretty powerful. Lynn Nottage: It was amazing. It was. For me, This Is Reading is the single most exciting piece of theater I feel I’ve ever created, because it was theater that had immediate impact and was transformative. After we finished the piece, a space that had been abandoned since 1981 suddenly became this very attractive piece of real estate, and now there is a restaurant that has gone in there. And after we did This Is Reading, suddenly the city council wanted to be in dialogue about, “How can we revitalize downtown through the arts?” So it really had impact that exceeded our expectations. What was theatrical about that installation? Lynn Nottage: The installation was told in seven parts. The first part was animating the outside of the building with images of the people from Reading, Pennsylvania. So we went around and took these beautiful portraits of the people, which we then projected through projection mapping onto the building. This idea came about because of a jumbotron. We thought about how, when you go to a football game or you go to a basketball game, one of the things that people really love is for 15 seconds to see themselves blown up on the jumbotron. We thought, in Reading, Pennsylvania people who feel relatively invisible, how do you make them seen, is you blow their pictures up so that everybody can see them. So that was the first movement of the piece. The second movement involved interviewing the elders in Reading, Pennsylvania and, “Talk about what was Reading like when you were young.” And we called that section “Reading Was,” which we then brought actors to retell those stories. The next movement was in — God, if I can remember! The next movement was “Reading Behind Closed Doors.” One of the things we found is that the people in Reading didn’t really know each other that well, and we thought, “What if we bring people inside each other’s homes?” So we did interviews with various people inside their homes, which we then projected all over the walls. And then one of the most exciting movements of what we had was working with young dancers in Reading, Pennsylvania to tell their stories through their bodies, which was very explosive and very exciting. And then another movement was “Imagining Reading From Above.” So we wanted to do what we call “the beauty treatment of Reading” is to give people different perspectives of their city. So we flew drones all over the city so that people in Reading could see their city from a different perspective. And we ended the piece with interviews that we conducted at the very beginning of the piece, that we then used an algorithm while people were watching the show to weave all of these stories together. At the very end, we amplified these stories on these screens so that they felt like they were one continuous story, even though they were told by ten, 15 people. So the whole idea was, by the end of the piece, to show that despite race, class, that everyone shared one narrative. And the algorithm was really exciting, very complicated to build, but in the end, it worked quite well, and I think that that’s the thing that the people who came to see the show responded to most. Would you like to do something like that again in the future? Lynn Nottage: I would love to do it again, but it nearly killed me. We had to raise, or — “we” I say — I had to raise \$700,000 to make it happen, which was a herculean feat. And I would do it again, but I would need an institution behind me to help me do it. We’d like to talk about your early life, growing up in Boerum Hill in the 1960s. What was that like? Lynn Nottage: Yeah, I was born right in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement. I wasn’t born in Boerum Hill, but I moved there when I was five years old, and it was an interesting neighborhood. I always describe it as a neighborhood between neighborhoods where people who were traveling from one place to another temporarily took shelter. It was very multicultural. It was an economically diverse neighborhood. When I was growing up on my block, the majority of the houses were boarding houses. There were Mohawk Indians who lived on the block. There were hippies. There were communists. It was really a very rich place to grow up. What did your parents do? Were they artists? Lynn Nottage: My parents had created wasn’t benefiting the people in Reading, Pennsylvania. 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