

Dialogue:

An
Interview

with

Catherine FILLoux

THE
PLAYWRIGHTS'
CENTER

SEASON 08-09
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playwright interviews

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Catherine Filloux's plays masterfully fold political ideas into dynamic characters, creating engaging stories that defy expectation. In *Dog and Wolf*, Catherine carefully reveals the complex relationship between a Bosnian refugee and an American asylum lawyer. The play examines identity, law, sexuality, family and the choices that we make to achieve asylum. Catherine is a co-founder of Theatre Without Borders, a volunteer organization engaged in international theater exchange, and she has served as a speaker at playwriting and human rights conferences and organizations around the world. Please join us as we kick off the 2008-09 Ruth Easton New Play Series!

—Polly K. Carl, Ph.D.
Curator, Ruth Easton New Play Series
Producing Artistic Director, The Playwrights' Center

The 2008-09 Ruth Easton New Play Series kicks off at 7 p.m. on October 6 with Catherine Filloux's *Dog and Wolf*.

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Catherine Filloux



What is your play, *Dog and Wolf*, about?

Joseph, a U.S. asylum lawyer, wants to win asylum for Jasmina, a Bosnian refugee; and, on some level, Jasmina wants to win asylum for Joseph. An emblem for the play might be this line from it: "Everything we do is right before the bullet. Right after the fall that saves us from ourselves." Jasmina gives Joseph opportunities along the way, but he can't see them until the end. The play creates a staggered poetry of the effort to connect and articulate. Jasmina has been to the bottom of death, through the witnessing of mass graves, and she lives in this darkness, which is ultimately her redemption. Joseph is afraid to go there, to the bottom, living in a steel cell, his wheelchair; always playing by the rules, until finally Jasmina manages to help change that. Jasmina is the rebellious wolf, Joseph is the trained dog. She is a shape shifter, not consistent. She poses the play's question: "How can you live your life in fear?" Joseph controls his world with force, through his job.

You made a reference to the title of the play. Talk a little about the title and its meaning.

Entre chien et loup [between dog and wolf] is a French expression I grew up with. The expression describes a time of day, before night, when the light is so dim you can't tell a dog from a wolf. It also speaks to the limit between the familiar and the dangerous, between the domestic and the wild. In *Naked Translations*, Céline Graciet defines it as "an uncertain threshold between hope and fear." That's what the play is about. I've written a lot about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, because for the past 20 years in my work with survivors of genocide, especially Cambodians, I've seen the various symptoms before me, often. The legacy of genocide and human rights abuses is PTSD. Inherent in that PTSD are intrusive memories that come out in the form of nightmare: memories and hauntings that are more real than actual night and day.

How did you conduct research for this play?

From a personal standpoint I have lived through "a fall that saved me from myself." The play is about survival. It's about falling so low that one questions living. I, at points in my life, have reached that level and wanted to explore it as a playwright, as well as one's struggle to climb back up, which involves transformation. *Dog and Wolf* gave me that opportunity. It's obviously a dramatic and intimate revelation, but important to talk about in terms of what you ask.

In 2007 I traveled to Srebrenica, where my play *Lemkin's House* (about Raphael Lemkin who invented the word "genocide") was performed in Sarajevo by the Kamerni Theater. I attended the annual memorial at the cemetery in Srebrenica. The visit to the cemetery was part of a genocide conference. This visit to Srebrenica changed my life and inspired *Dog and Wolf*.

I was also in Bosnia in 2004 and became very enamored of the culture and the people there. Zlatko Topcic, Artistic Director of the Kamerni Theater in Sarajevo, is a playwright and screenwriter I greatly admire and I have had the luck to work with talented Bosnian actors there. I served on the jury of a Theater Festival in Sarajevo with Bosnian professor Nirman Moranjak-Bamburac and Croatian scholar Sanja Nikcevic, who taught me more about Bosnian culture. Then in 2005 a political asylum lawyer from California, Jayne E. Fleming, introduced herself to me after a performance of my play about an honor killing, *The Beauty Inside*, in Philadelphia. Jayne had a client who feared such an honor killing. I have followed Jayne's work as an asylum lawyer, and she also contributed to me embarking on this play, *Dog and Wolf*. I was also fortunate to meet the filmmakers of the documentary *Well-Founded Fear*, Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini, who were generous and helpful to me.

At the genocide conference in 2007, Carla Del Ponte was the Keynote Speaker, and I could see the painful reality that the Bosnians were deeply disturbed by the lack of indictments at The Hague. After the Srebrenica memorial, a group of Bosnians spoke who were either involved in the genocide or had family that had been killed. I began loosely thinking about "Jasmina" then.

How do you manage the different languages spoken by the characters in the play?

When Jasmina speaks English she speaks with a Bosnian accent. When she speaks Bosnian she speaks unaccented English.

How did you learn that Bosnian dialect?

I worked at a refugee center in the Bronx in the 1990s, primarily with a Cambodian Women's Group, but I also taught ESL to Bosnian Muslim refugees who came to New York during the genocide. I listened to the way they spoke. In Bosnia, I also enjoyed the challenge and sometimes the humor of my encounters.

How did you get involved in playwriting?

I was a bad actress in high school and college; however, I never could have been a playwright without knowing what it's like to be onstage. I love actors and feel they are the true heroes of the theater. I wrote very long "inner monologues" for my roles—backstage! I applied to NYU Dramatic Writing Program to "stay out of trouble." It's hard to know if I'm still in trouble or not!

Your plays involve a wide range of characters and situations, but you frequently return to (and are perhaps best known for) your treatment of the topic of genocide. How did that evolve as a recurring interest for you?

I guess I would say the common denominator is "human rights" not necessarily genocide. And often it includes violence against women. I seem to be led to my plays by obsessions, experiences, collaborators, and issues that emotionally grab me.

Joseph, the amnesty lawyer in *Dog and Wolf*, seems to have become somewhat jaded from the horrific stories that he encounters from his clients every day. Has working with the subject of atrocity affected your view of humanity since you started?

Joseph is skilled at his job and knows what his clients need to do in front of an adversarial judge to win asylum. His behavior is less about being jaded than it is about seeing if he has a client whose case can be won and how he can shape his client to stand up against the difficulties of winning asylum after 9/11. In order to do so he must be a tactician, not a "teddy bear." I'm more of a teddy bear because I get very caught up in the emotion of these subjects. I think sometimes I'm traumatized. But my engagement is stronger than ever. I've always been an "outsider." I grew up in Southern California with French parents who learned English late in life. As an outsider, I have a clear view.

What are your goals for developing *Dog and Wolf* while at The Playwrights' Center?

I'm looking forward to working with Michael Dixon on the reading at the Playwrights' Center and making my way through the script with him and the three actors, to see how it lives in space, off the page, and then ultimately in front of an audience. I did a workshop of my play *Killing the Boss* at The Playwrights' Center last year; and it was indispensable. During rehearsals for the production of *Killing the Boss* I kept on thinking, "What a miracle I got that workshop." Michael and Polly's words are etched in my mind—their comments were so succinct. When I think of them, their faces retain a halo of light.

Is there a play or playwright that inspires you, and why?

Albert Camus, although he was not only a playwright, has inspired me. My mother, who is also French-Algerian, and I found Camus to be an engaged human being. Unless you believe in reincarnation, we only have one lifetime to work for change. Camus speaks about the beauty of his home country and I know very well what is the loss of country and the love of country and family.

Any other comments?

I hope that the play inspires people to ask themselves: How do we negotiate living in a world that sells real estate rights for space above buildings (air rights) while below us are countless unnamed bodies strewn in muddy trenches?

Have you found a way to negotiate living in that world?

Well, come see the play!



Your membership with The Playwrights' Center should be a vital part of your theater life. It is for Catherine Filloux. She told me the workshop of her play *Killing the Boss* in Minneapolis last year was *indispensable* for the production that came immediately after. She's even taking advantage of our innovative new website. She's uploading plays, changing her bio and asking me questions to be sure she's getting the most out of her membership. All members can check out Catherine's personal profile as well as set up their own.

It took no time after starting this job a few months ago for me to see the same commitment to playwrights that Catherine sees. I take pride in keeping that promise to members, Catherine Filloux, and you.

—Anna Peterson

Membership Mgr. & Literary Associate, The Playwrights' Center

TAKE NOTE Upcoming Events

Oct. 20

The Jerome Fellows Showcase

by 2008-09 Jerome Fellows Elisabeth R. Finch, Kristen Palmer, Monica Raymond, Mat Smart, and Joy Tomasko

Some of the brightest new stars in playwriting read selections from their most recent work.

7 p.m. at The Playwrights' Center

FREE - for reservations call 612.332.7481 or email info@pwcenter.org.

Nov. 3

Raskol

by Kira Obolensky

A presentation of the Ruth Easton New Play Series

Inspired by Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *Raskol* tells the story of a young student who commits a horrific crime under the influence of a dangerous idea—that there are extraordinary people who can commit crime without any fear of punishment. Set in a timeless world that is connected both to our contemporary times and to the 19th-century St. Petersburg of the novel, the play features songs set to an improvisational jazz "soundtrack" by the Fantastic Merlins.

7 p.m. at The Playwrights' Center

FREE - for reservations call 612.332.7481 or email info@pwcenter.org.

"Sick of all the McCain raising?
Between Barack and a hard place?
Leave the Donkey and Elephant behind
and come to The Playwrights' Center
for some real drama: *Dog and Wolf*."

Catherine Filloux,
Core Writer