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I Am Here ...

by SANDRA HOSKING

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Playwright: Catherine Filloux

Place of Residence: New York City

Hometown: San Diego, Calif.

Web site: www.catherinefilloux.com

Education: French Baccalaureate in Philosophy, Toulon, France; MFA, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Dramatic Writing Program.

Selected Titles & awards: *Killing the Boss*, *Lemkin's House*, *The Beauty Inside*, *Eyes of the Heart*, *Mary & Myra*. PeaceWriting Award (Omni Center for Peace), Roger L. Stevens Award (Kennedy Center), Eric Kocher Playwrights Award (O'Neill), Callaway Award (New Dramatists), Fulbright Senior Specialist (Cambodia and Morocco).

Upcoming Productions: Librettist for Khmer-American rock opera *Where Elephants Weep* (Composer Him Sophy), commissioned by Cambodian Living Arts, to premiere in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 2008; *The Breach*, a collaboration with playwrights Tarell McCraney and Joe Sutton about Hurricane Katrina; Reading at the Public Theater in NYC.

For more than 20 years, Catherine Filloux has been writing plays, confronting the topics of genocide and oppression.

In the late 1980s, Filloux began writing a play about a group of Cambodian women who suffered from psychosomatic blindness after witnessing violence during the reign of the Khmer Rouge.

"I have been listening to survivors since," she says. "My own journey has been to 'never forget' and to uphold the promise of 'never again' through my work. Parallel to this journey is the reality of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Trauma is the legacy of genocide and human rights violations. We can change the world through compassion and through the understanding of suffering. Waking up every morning one might say, 'This kind of violence cannot go on for another day.' And so, writing might leave a trail. And with the writing comes engagement."

Her newest play, titled *Dog and Wolf*, centers on political asylum in the U.S. and the Srebrenica Massacre, in which thousands of Muslims were killed. The play will receive a staged reading on Oct. 6 at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis.

In *Dog and Wolf*, an American asylum lawyer fights to protect his client, Jasmina, a human rights worker and refugee from Bosnia. When she destroys his case and disappears, he is drawn across an emotional border where he discovers that one's own destiny can't be put in front of family.

"The play is based on the French expression *Entre Chien et Loup*, 'Between Dog and Wolf,' which refers to a time between night and day," Filloux says. "I'll tell you, there's also 'Long Day's Journey Into Night,' and I feel that when one is traumatized, it is a long day's journey into night, and night isn't so great either!

It is hard to wrestle between badly needed sleep and the life of day. Nightmares

and daily living merge. I went to Srebrenica in 2007 and saw the memorial there. The play is

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somewhat inspired by that life-changing experience. I looked into a muddy trench, a mass grave. America, which provides a legal basis for asylum, has made it harder for immigrants and refugees since 9/11. The style is a subtle love story, where the yearning keeps going."

The reading is part of the Center's Ruth Easton Series, which also will include readings of works by Kira Obolensky, Susan Miller, Carlyle Brown, Aditi Brennan Kapil, Dan O'Brien, Lonnie Carter, and Vincent Delaney.

But how does one tackle big issues like genocide without sounding like a lecturer?

"Playwriting is a craft. One keeps trying to tell a story on stage, and finding the dramaturgy of each story. Actually the opposite of the expected 'message' or 'issue' might be revealed," Filloux says. "Asylum is a refuge, but it is also the name of the place where 'insane' people go. What kind of refuge is that? What is asylum when you can't do your work? And you can't bury your dead? Doctors are supposed to cure people, but what if no amount of tests can reveal why a woman is blind? Sometimes what the story reveals is the unknown. How do you tell a story about the 'unknown'? Or perhaps the unknown is the only reasonable answer. Women lost their sight because they didn't want to see anymore? How is that story told? We might be very sure that 'honor killing' is a bad practice. And yet it happens all the time. Violence against women is the best kept secret in this world and it's not even a secret, yet it doesn't matter. The lawyer in my play *The Beauty Inside* loses her own family in her mission to 'save' a survivor of an honor killing. To save is to be saved."

As Jasmina says in the play, "Everything we do is right before the bullet. Right after the fall that saves us from ourselves."

Filloux helped found Theatre Without Borders, an informal network that works to build connections between artists and theaters worldwide. "TWB does not represent any political ideology. TWB was created to recognize the universality & diversity of theatrical expression and the need for international artists to maintain dialogue across political boundaries," says its Web site at www.theatrewithoutborders.com.

Says Filloux, "We are working with the Coexistence Program at Brandeis University on an anthology surrounding Theatre and Peacebuilding, through case studies, in which I have written about my playwriting work in Cambodia: and three remarkable Khmer artists there: Morm Sokly, Him Sophy and Ieng Sithol."

Born to a French father and a French-Algerian mother, French was Filloux's first language, and she says she found her own language through theater and playwriting.

"Perhaps the most important thing I learned about playwriting was being on stage as an actor. How can one write for the stage without knowing how that feels? I love and revere the actor. I played the Fortune Teller in *Skin of Our Teeth* in high school. From then on I loved the theater and wrote poetry; I was a bad actress."

She admits that she is a playwright who is still trying to fly.

"I have no idea how to teach anyone to fly because I can't give the recipe," she says. "A teacher at NYU, Milan Stitt, told us something on the first day. Paraphrasing, it was: It's the people who need to write who are/become playwrights, not those who want it. It's hard to tell anyone what they need. That comes from inside as a hunger, a sickness, a miracle, a primitive and physical impulse, and as one's sanity. It's sacred to speak about one's sanity, especially if one has ever lost it. Knock on wood. I'm superstitious, too."

Filloux also credits the late NYU professor Lawrence B. Marcus for influencing her work.

"Marcus wrote screenplays for *Petulia*, *The Stunt Man*, and *Witness for the Prosecution*. He passed me on to his agent and saw most of my work, until he died. He was very funny and very honest. I still think I see him sometimes, on a street corner. He was a force in my writing life."

Lately, Filloux has seen several plays in New York that have impacted her, including Christine Toy Johnson's *Paper Son*; Susan Bernfield's *Stretch (a fantasia)*; Cassandra Medley's *Noon Day Sun*; *the Maharabata*, and *Hair* at the Public in Central Park.

In addition, she's been lucky enough to have some "perfect" productions.

"Lou Jacob directed *Mary and Myra* at Contemporary American Theater Festival. All my work with Jean Randich has been thrilling. There are too many actors to name who have rocked my world and my plays. Come see them," she says.

"There's an invisibility in being the kind of writer I am. But I am, in fact, actually here. And the plays live and have lived. 'If it adapts itself to what the majority of our society wants, art will be meaningless recreation.' Albert Camus."

Sandra Hosking's plays have been produced in New York City, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Canada, and elsewhere. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild of America and the International Centre for Women Playwrights. Please send comments, story ideas and essays to sandrahosking@hotmail.com.

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