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Hair on a Ribbon That Got Away

Catherine Filloux

When it comes to international treaties, the United States is insular. In my new play *Dog and Wolf*, an American asylum lawyer, Joseph, tells his refugee client, Jasmina, that smoking is not permitted. “You Americans like to kill people with greenhouse gases, correct? No Kyoto protocol,” she answers, as she tries to light up.¹ The refugee has watched bone after bone be buried in search of a remnant of her sister, who was raped and killed during the Bosnian genocide. It is only after her mother is dead that Jasmina learns that her sister, who was pregnant, had her baby cut out from inside her as her mother was forced to watch. She tells Joseph:

We *know* where killers are and no one has courage to confront them! Storm came into my village and destroyed it! Coming home to stare into muddy trench—trying to find remains of sister who in fairness I did not know very well. How can sister be disappeared, trench filled with bodies—and the one who killed her—drinking in tavern? That is *unknown* I live with and cannot solve. Why I keep smoking while it kills me—make me more speechless.²

Writing for the theatre gives me the opportunity to create stories that affirm the beauty, humor, and depth of women’s survival, while also breaking down walls and exposing uncomfortable truths. Some of our civilization’s “best-kept secrets”—that is to say, violence against women and denial of even basic human rights—are not secrets at all. Theatre can allow audiences to become witnesses, and through this communal act of witnessing, there can be re-imagination and even revolution.

Many of my plays are about my own complicity: that of being from the United States. In terms of the Kyoto Protocol, which Jasmina refers to when she is asked not to smoke, the United States has refused to ratify this global-warming agreement, and yet is responsible for disproportionately high emissions polluting the world’s air. Also, the United States did not ratify the genocide convention, Raphael Lemkin’s treaty, until decades after Lemkin was dead. In my play *Lemkin’s House*, Lemkin tells his mother that his law is “[a] bad Polish joke. . . . Meaningless words.” His mother responds, “Your syllables. Shaping in your mouth, that can help.”³ In a play, one can reincarnate the dead, give voice to the voiceless, and write those back into history who have been excised.

Catherine Filloux is an award-winning playwright who has been writing about human rights and social justice for the past twenty years. Her plays have been produced in New York and around the world.

¹ Catherine Filloux, *Dog and Wolf*, 5–21 February 2010, Watson Arts, 59E59 Theaters, New York City.

² *Ibid.*

³ Catherine Filloux, *Lemkin’s House* (New York: Playscripts, 2007), 32.

Fifteen years after the declaration at the United Nations' World Conference on Women in Beijing that "women's rights are human rights," the concept is still novel. Just recently, I attended a global summit, "Women in the World," where Hillary Clinton, now Secretary of State, referred to an old clip of herself making this famous declaration at Beijing. "Many hairstyles ago . . .," she commented self-deprecatingly, and the audience erupted in laughter.⁴ If only there were any hair left to show for all the women who have died, and continue to die, from gender-based violence in far-too-large numbers. Lemkin asks his mother how long she lasted in the gas chamber. "Longer than the hair on a ribbon that got away," she answers, "but shorter I think than the drip of ink drying on paper."⁵ How long will these ribbons get away from us?

I have had the privilege of watching many actors play a young Cambodian woman who reveals a sacred ribbon in my play *Photographs from S-21*. The actors, Morm Sokly, Dawn Saito, and Sophy Theam among them, have performed the play in places around the globe and in idiosyncratic circumstances. Theam, for example, was the assistant director of a production in Boston, and on a night's notice stepped in to play the part. At the end of the play, the young woman holds out her fist, which has been clenched throughout. "When I am newly born in my next life, I will still remember the Khmer Rouge," she says as she opens her hand, and the young man next to her takes a child's hair ribbon from her palm.⁶ It is the ribbon of her young daughter, whose hand is reaching up to her in a photograph at Tuol Sleng—the daughter they killed before they killed her. Only the hair ribbon remains for the mother, before she is forced back into her picture frame that hangs on the wall at the Museum of Modern Art, where the Khmer Rouge pictures of the soon-to-be-dead were exhibited like art.⁷

One of the killers Jasmina refers to when she speaks of those war criminals no one has the courage to confront is Ratko Mladic. He was the top military general, with command responsibility for the Srebrenica massacre, and he is currently a fugitive. Perhaps by the time this essay is published he will be on trial for war crimes, but Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge leader responsible for the death of millions, lived out his life without being apprehended or brought to justice. In my play *Silence of God*, set nearly two decades after the Khmer Rouge genocide, an American journalist, Sarah Holtzman, uncovers that the United States has a secret plan to capture Pol Pot to try him for crimes against humanity, but he died that same year. Placing our own geopolitical priorities before of our integrity led to the United States' inaction—or else too little, too late. Holtzman tells a man in the State Department: "We could have captured Pol Pot in the early eighties. But you were too busy signing treaties with the Khmer Rouge. . . . For decades the editorials are filed like clockwork. 'Bring Pol Pot to Justice.' Each time we break out the Tuol Sleng photos, and you see the victims staring out at you."⁸

⁴ Jocelyn Noveck, "'Women in the World: Stories and Solutions' Summit Draws Hillary Clinton, Queen Rania To New York," *Huffington Post*, 14 March 2010, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/15/women-in-the-world-storie_n_498842.html (accessed 14 April 2010).

⁵ Filloux, *Lemkin's House*, 32.

⁶ Catherine Filloux, *Photographs from S-21*, in *Great Short Plays*, vol. 4 (New York: Playscripts, 2007), 121.

⁷ See Wendy S. Hesford and Brenda Jo Brueggemann, *Rhetorical Visions: Reading and Writing in a Visual Culture* (Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 561–68; and Wendy S. Hesford, "MEDIA REVIEW: Rhetorical Memory, Political Theater, and the Traumatic Present: *Eyes of the Heart: A Play in Two Acts* by Catherine Filloux, and *Photographs from S-21 (a play)* by Catherine Filloux," *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 16, no. 2 (2005): 104–17.

⁸ Catherine Filloux, *Silence of God*, in *The Theatre of Genocide: Four Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia*, ed. Robert Skloot (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 104.

There is a cost for looking into the eyes of those Cambodians exterminated in the Tuol Sleng photos. The young woman in the photo says: "It is unbearable. During the day the people pass. . . . Sometimes the people come like a parade. They walk in and out. Like a stream, staring into my eyes. Their eyes are all different colors. Blue. Green. Yellow."⁹ Insularity makes the United States a nation that likes to look, sensationalize the news, and tell others what to do (like Joseph telling Jasmina not to smoke), but that never likes to acknowledge its own wrongs; for example, the carpet-bombing of Cambodia, the training of death squads in Guatemala, and the Native American genocide on its own soil.

When a friend sent me a photo in 2000 from the *Los Angeles Times* of a Turkish mother accused of an attempted "honor killing," it struck me that the portrayal in the United States of women from other countries is often sensationalized. Of course, a woman who throws her pregnant 14-year-old girl in a canal after she has been raped and who calls her a "stupid child" appears barbaric;¹⁰ and some can easily turn the page feeling as if they just cannot understand those people who do things like that "over there." But what is the mother's own history: the poverty in which she lives; the patriarchy that controls her life; the tribal customs that have been instilled through time? It seems worth noting that when I spoke to journalists about the attempted honor killing of this girl, and later about another girl who was stoned to death in Somalia, in both cases I was told that they had heard that the girls were somehow a little "off"—that they weren't very smart, that they were problematic figures. These were girls who had been violated in the extreme, and yet it was implied that *they* were at fault.

As I was writing an imagined story, *The Beauty Inside*, about the attempted honor killing in Turkey, the girl, Yalova, kept revealing herself to me as she spoke to the lawyer, Devrim, who tried to save her:

YALOVA: In the rain time there was silver on the canal . . .

DEVRIM: Stand up, now, that's good.

YALOVA: Like a million fish.

DEVRIM: One foot in front of the other.

YALOVA: Sun so bright on the silver, like blinding lights . . .

DEVRIM: Almost there, you'll rest . . .

YALOVA: Don't go in the water, it's dirty, mama told us. How could something so beautiful be so dirty, just put a foot in, a toe . . .¹¹

I became Yalova's sister, her mother; she kept pulling me further and further into a story, where "saving" a victim becomes saving oneself. I don't have children. The fire in my belly, I realized as I wrote the play, is that of making political change. At the end of the play, Devrim and Yalova are left together, alone, to build their broken lives. Devrim, which means "revolution," will not go to the United States as her father had hoped, but will instead live in what her father disapprovingly calls "the trenches," with what he considers a backward hillbilly; and Yalova, who now has a daughter of her own, the product of rape, will stay with Devrim. We don't know what their future will be.

⁹ Filloux, *Photographs from S-21*, 115.

¹⁰ Amberin Zaman, "In Modern Turkey, Women Continue to Pay the Price for Honor," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 September 2000.

¹¹ Catherine Filloux, *The Beauty Inside*, in *Silence of God and Other Plays*, ed. Carol Martin (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 76–77.

In Lemkin's afterlife, a house in limbo where he cannot rest, a nurse from Rwanda bursts in. "It's blades-gone-mad out there! I saw . . . breasts and vaginas hanging from the trees," she alerts him.¹² David Scheffer wrote in his introduction to *Lemkin's House*: "So much of the crime of mass rape has been documented and prosecuted before the international criminal tribunals that Filloux's focus on this previously ignored attribute of atrocity crimes is both timely and indicative of Lemkin's relevancy even for criminal conduct he may not have fully appreciated is part of the crime of genocide."¹³ In *Dog and Wolf*, Jasmina teaches, through her human rights work in Bosnia, that her country and the world need to classify sexual crimes, such as the one done to her sister, as crimes of genocide; and they need to acknowledge that this genocide happened in a UN safe area.

In the play I am currently working on, the "femicide" in Guatemala, where women are being killed in rampant numbers, can be traced back to mass rape and murder as a tool of war. In Haiti, where rape has also been used as tool of war, rapes are escalating after the recent earthquake. Prurient media and viewers alike turn their interest to rape when the interest in earthquake news has waned. In the "RapeLay" video game created by Illusion in Japan, players win by raping: "With the click of your mouse, you can grope her and lift her skirt. Then you can follow her aboard the train, assaulting her sister and her mother."¹⁴ One can hear the victim of rape in the video game emit soft murmurs. I just received an update from Amnesty International for International Women's Day: "Women and young girls in Cambodia are being systemically raped with impunity for the perpetrators and rape rates are rising."¹⁵ Human Rights Watch recently released a report saying that rates of rapes and violence against women in the United States are soaring as well.¹⁶

In my play *Killing the Boss*, Eve tells her husband: "Do you know what's so special about evil? The way people get away with it."¹⁷ Eve, a playwright, buys a gun and tries to kill the head of state, a corrupt dictator known as the "Boss." While the head of state gets to be hilarious, sings karaoke, and hands out fake maps and weird lunchboxes, he can still unleash his brutality on a dime, and Eve ends up disintegrated from acid in a well, while the Boss loses only a leg. Some audiences asked why I didn't allow Eve to succeed in *Killing the Boss*. The reason is that I think the play is about insanity—the insanity of buying a gun and trying to kill a head of state, taking action into one's own hands. But plays *are* about action—taking action into one's own hands no matter the consequences. I was told by friends that writing the play was dangerous in itself, so I did not name the country.

¹² Filloux, *Lemkin's House*, 24.

¹³ David Scheffer, "The Legacy of Raphael Lemkin," in *Silence of God and Other Plays*, 7.

¹⁴ Kyung Lah, "'RapeLay' Video Game Goes Viral Amid Outrage," *CNN World*, 31 March 2010, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/03/30/japan.video.game.rape/index.html?hpt=C1> (accessed 31 March 2010).

¹⁵ "Cambodia's Government Must Protect Victims of Sexual Violence as Reports of Rape Increase," *Amnesty International*, 8 March 2010, available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/cambodia-government-protect-victims-sexual-violence-reports-rape-increase> (accessed 9 March 2010).

¹⁶ "US: Soaring Rates of Rape and Violence against Women," *Human Rights Watch*, 18 December 2008, available at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/12/18/us-soaring-rates-rape-and-violence-against-women> (accessed 30 March 2010).

¹⁷ Catherine Filloux, *Killing the Boss*, 6–23 February 2008, Cherry Lane Theatre, New York City.

(Eve takes a revolver from the back of her pants as the Boss insists that they dance together)

EVE: The women wash their clothes in the muddy river, and the orphans dance exquisitely for the funders, and the maids leave flower necklaces in their clients' rooms, and the little boy waits, with the shirt buttoned up, with vigilance and dignity every single day to sell me his newspaper, and I give him one dollar and he never goes to school. . . . This newspaper with your face on it. All the children should go to school, you say. But half of the children in your country don't go to school at all. Why don't you teach them? Don't you see?

P.M.: I have built many schools. They all bear my name.

EVE: Mafia isn't government. How can anyone learn with a gun to his head?¹⁸

Through education, children learn that they are part of history and that, through the acknowledgment of history, they can be part of change. Plays can be educational and open hearts and minds away from the insular.

Five years after Clinton's declaration at Beijing, Resolution 1325 was adopted unanimously as the first formal and legal document from the UN Security Council that required parties in a conflict to respect women's rights. If those in power in the United States do not uphold an international resolution such as 1325, and other resolutions to guard against the brutalization of women worldwide, how many ribbons will continue to get away? In the memory of Lemkin's mother, and of so many other women, can we wait a second longer?

¹⁸ Ibid.