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**Arts & Literature:  
Playing at Lemkin's House**

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**About the Piece**

“Playing at Lemkin’s House” talks about the author’s experience of working on Catherine Filloux’s play, *Lemkin’s House*, where she portrayed four different characters all affected by genocide. The author discusses her challenges as an actor and the opportunities presented to her during the rehearsal process.

*Genocide destroys a culture like fire destroys a house.*

—“Lemkin” in *Lemkin’s House*

**Playing at Lemkin’s House**

Several years ago, I had the pleasure of performing in *Lemkin’s House*<sup>1</sup> written by Filloux, who is a playwright-activist and has written over 40 plays, as well as 6 librettos, with several focusing on the horrors of genocide. Like her subject, Raphael Lemkin, Filloux has pursued her passion for truth, justice, and accountability with the same zeal; giving voice to those who have been unrecognized and unheard for centuries. Filloux has traveled and lived in Iraq, Guatemala, Haiti, South Sudan, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Cambodia to research and create work on genocide, conflict, and gender-based violence.

*Lemkin’s House* tells the story of Polish-Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, who coined the word *genocide*. After many years of appealing to the United Nations and U.S. Congress, Lemkin was successful in advocating for the Genocide Convention, passed by the United Nations in 1948 and entered into force in 1951.

The play starts with Lemkin reading about his death in the afterlife, which is symbolized by a dilapidated house. What follows are a series of short, fast-paced scenes infused with Filloux’s special brand of ironic humor, pathos, and humanity. While “waiting in Purgatory,” Lemkin is visited by characters representative of genocidal conflicts worldwide: the Bosnian War, Rwandan Civil War, and the gassing of Iraqi-Kurds. Lemkin is thrust *back into life* as he attempts to save each character.

I played four characters distinguished by class and political persuasion: Nausicaa, a Rwandan Tutsi nurse; Agathe, a Rwandan Hutu (inspired by Agathe Uwilingiyimana, who served as Prime Minister of Rwanda from July 1993 until her assassination in 1994); Rose, a Tutsi woman who gives birth with Lemkin as midwife, and a Serbian military guard, whose presence implies that he will soon rape a Bosniak woman imprisoned in a refugee camp.

Every rehearsal was an opportunity for me to *play* with my fellow actors (and the script), while Filloux, always “in the room,” made script changes based upon her observations and reactions to what the actors discovered. The most challenging character for me was Rose, who meets Lemkin at the moment she is about to give birth. I remember one performance when I heard a woman in the audience gasp in reaction to Rose’s excruciating screams of pain. I remarked to myself that I must have been convincing enough considering that I have never given birth. I suppose my mortal fear of childbirth is what informed *and* inspired my performance.

The trickiest part of the scene was producing the “baby” (later named “Cockroach”). After many intense-filled hours of experimenting, Jean Randich, the director, John Daggett (who played Lemkin), and Catherine had the epiphany that Rose’s baby would be represented by a scarf wrapped in swaddling clothes. What resulted was one of the most tender moments in the play; a baby being born into the world of a play, rife with grief, sorrow, and remorse.

### **Performing in *Lemkin’s House***

I viewed my role as actor passively, as actors are inclined to do. A director once said, “Actors are the most aggressively passive people one will ever meet.” It’s true. Actors always aim to please. My job as an actor is, first, to *personify* the words of the playwright and convey their ideas to the audience, second, to trust the director and their vision of the play, and, lastly, to play with my fellow actors.

While re-reading *Lemkin’s House* to prepare to write this essay, I read the lines below as if for the first time:

**Victor to Lemkin in the middle of Act II:** “Who has time for guilt? I’m an Observer.”

**Mother to Lemkin at the end of Act II:** “You’re my witness.”

There is a *rhythmic impact* that infuses Filloux’s work, guided by the playwright’s always masterful ability to juxtapose ideas within a scene or from scene to scene. In *Lemkin’s House* and other works, Filloux deftly guides her audiences through a gamut of emotions one moment to the next. Her body of work is emboldened with a courageous witness to man’s inhumanity. The rhythm of Filloux’s work impels us to move from *passive observer* to *active witness*. To feel love. To understand. To laugh and cry.<sup>2</sup>

### **Disclosure of AI Use**

No generative AI or AI-assisted tools were used in the conception, drafting, analysis, or revision of this manuscript.

### **Author Biography**

Connie Winston is an actor, playwright, director, and dramaturg, who received an MFA in dramaturgy from the University of Iowa, an MA in performing arts from Emerson College, and a BA in theater arts from SUNY/New Paltz.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Filloux ([www.catherinefilloux.com](http://www.catherinefilloux.com)) is currently working on a book *Never Again Always* with two other prominent artists/writers/international human and women’s rights advocates, Claudia Bernardi and Elizabeth Swanson about ideas and practices of human rights. Taking her readers on a journey through her playwriting and productions, Filloux shows how the phrase “Never Again” is repeated regularly in the face of atrocity, and she provides an alternative as a witness who believes in transformation.