

THEATRE

Ruined
Until June 5
Almeida

THE STRONGER SEX

There have been plenty of plays about war of late, mainly on Iran and Afghanistan. Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama reminds us of a distant and forgotten conflict – in the Democratic Republic Of Congo, where more than five million people have perished.

It's a conflict that has been raging for years, between government-backed and rebel militia, and over the country's vast mineral wealth, on which outside forces have their beady eyes. Corruption is rampant. Nottage, though, focuses on what she sees as the war's biggest victims: women.

Mama Nadi runs a "decent" bar – okay, it's a knocking shop, but no guns, no politics, just a good time in a ramshackle corrugated iron shack in the jungle, near a mining town – so well-realised by designer Robert Jones, that you expect something green and slimy to crawl out of the dense palms and vines.



Pippa Bennett-Warner (left) and Kehinde Fadipe in Ruined

Our cunning hostess is knocking along nicely, fleeing all and sundry, until the arrival of two new girls. Sophie is "ruined" (the title works on several levels), having been raped and mutilated by soldiers. Salima has been raped, chained to a tree for five months and then abandoned by her husband. Mystifyingly, Mama takes them in.

Mama is clearly based on Brecht's Mother Courage, another cynical pragmatist who ducks and dives to make the most of what war offers. In Jenny Jules' terrific performance Mama is also an ambivalent heroine.

But in trying to play off all sides and appeal to all men, Nottage sees women as having to pay the ultimate price in a war where rape is the weapon of choice.

Thankfully, this is not without its lighter moments but the fairly upbeat ending, when Mama's life takes an upwards turn, feels a little tacked-on and unconvincing.

That said, it's an engrossing story – well told in Indhu Rubasingham's lively production. Almeida Theatre, London N1 (020-7359 4404)

Mark Cook



RECOMMENDED

Up On The Roof
May 5-22
New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich (01473 295900). Then May 26 to June 5, Anvil Arts, Basingstoke (01256 844244)

Appealing musical comedy about a group of students in the 1970s.

The History Boys
May 4-8
Theatre Royal Newcastle (0844 811 2121)

Alan Bennett's wonderful play about grammar school boys trying to get into Oxbridge.

family, he becomes a hero and a bodyguard to the family, plus a witness to tumultuous historical events that change society and his own life. While not as compelling



as some of Boyle's other work, it still creates atmosphere and empathy with deft skill.

Spooner
Pete Dexter
(Atlantic, £12.99)

In debt to John Irving, this is storytelling on a big scale, as we meet misfit Spooner and his stepfather Calmer, suffering the trials of life together. By turns funny and moving, it shows just how well fiction can reflect the craziness of life.

Doug Johnstone

children, and always seems on the verge of losing control of his life. The narrative switches between him, wife number four Trish and son number five Rusty, as each of them struggles to find a place for themselves amongst the madness of the extended family unit.

Although the Richards family are Mormon, like Udall's own upbringing, the subject of religion rears its head surprisingly seldom throughout the novel, a deliberate policy on the part of its author.

"Honestly, I'm not terribly interested in why people do this," he says. "I'm more interested in how they manage it. I find it uniquely American in lots of ways. It's oversized, it's overly ambitious, it's complicated, it's at once con-

ventional and alternative, and it comes from deep religious roots. So I see it in some ways as the quintessential American family, even though a lot of people wouldn't like to hear that.

"It was a very difficult book to write," Udall admits. "I really wanted to give it the full treatment. The final manuscript was 1,500 pages, and I had to cut it all back. I went a little overboard, but I found it all so fascinating. Anyway, I think sometimes novelists don't take long enough over their books."

Udall laughs loudly at this. The writer is, like his novels, charming and gregarious company. *The Lonely Polygamist* (Jonathan Cape, £12.99) is out May 6

THE BIG ISSUE COMPETITION

WIN A PAIR OF TICKETS TO GARDEN FESTIVAL IN CROATIA

The Garden Festival in Croatia runs over the weekends of 2nd July and 9th July and is one of the hippest, coolest and forward-thinking on the global calendar. Set on a narrow pine-shaded peninsular which juts into shimmering azure Adriatic waters, it is attended by world class DJs and live acts and party people from all over Europe and beyond.



Twice daily boat parties run on the legendary Argonaughty and there is late night action in the lovingly restored Barbarellas Discotheque club. Live acts play under the shade on the main outdoor stage whilst The Tiki Bar, where waves lap over the feet of dancers, is perfect for catching the stunning sunsets.

2010 headliners include Rob da Bank, Mr Scruff, Greg Wilson, Crazy P, 2020 Soundsystem, Terry Callier, Tensnake, Horse Meat Disco, Qool DJ Marv, The Revenge, Cuban Brothers, Seth Troxler, Jamie Jones, Sebo K, Floating Points, Filthy Dukes, Metro Area, Henrik Schwarz and many, many more.

We have a pair of tickets to give away to either the first or second Garden Festival weekend, you choose! This prize does not include flights or accommodation.

Check www.thegardenfestival.eu

To be in with a chance of winning simply answer the following question:

Q. Which tea-loving DJ is back at the Garden Festival for 2010?

A Mr. Happy B Mr. Scruff C Mr. Oizo

Send us your answer & full contact details (including email address and phone number) on a postcard to: **Big Issue Comps, 1-5 Wandsworth Rd, London SW8 2LN** or via email to: competitions@bigissue.com. Competitions close Midnight Sunday 9th May 2010.

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