

Catherine Filloux: **The Dramaturg's Playwright**

by Connie Winston

Dans ce vaste pays qu'il avait tant aimé, il était seul.

Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*

Catherine Filloux is a French-Algerian-American playwright, who was raised in Southern California. Her father, Jean, was French, and grew up during the Nazi occupation of France. Her mother, Odette, was French-Belgian-Corsican, and came from Algeria for many generations before her. Catherine considers herself to be an outsider, I suspect, due to her multifarious ethnic background. As a result, multiculturalism and the international community are of paramount interest to Catherine and are reflected in the over 20 plays and 6 librettos she has written thus far.



Playwright Catherine Filloux

Although Catherine's first language was French, there is no trace of an accent except when she pronounces *baccalaureate*. (She received a French Baccalaureate in philosophy with honors in Toulon, France.) Catherine describes herself as "an idiosyncratic theater maker, with a vision as a changemaker." When I associate words and phrases with Catherine, many come to mind: brave, collaborative, facilitator of remembering (*i.e.*, storyteller), funny, hopeful, humane, humble yet proud, inspiring, intellectual, and poetic. Catherine's small frame and unassuming nature belies the fact that she is a force of nature as evidenced by her hefty body of work.

Although there are many themes in Filloux's work, one that recurs is the trauma of marginalized people, usually women. Women from Cambodia, Central America, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Sudan, and the United States. Women who are survivors of circumstances and corrupt governments. In many of her plays, Filloux hones in on the political corruption of countries with direct ties to United States military and economic interventionism. In her plays, Catherine loves to point out the "complicity" of the U.S. government and its nefarious effects throughout the world.

I first met Catherine in 2005 at New Dramatists in New York City. I had been asked to audition for *Lemkin's House*, a surreal play surrounding the life (and afterlife) of Polish-Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, who lost much of his family during the Nazi Occupation. Catherine writes about survivor's guilt and trauma in this play and about how Lemkin introduced the term *genocide* into the mid-20th century world of the geopolitical vernacular. In 1948, he spearheaded the establishment of the first Genocide Convention, which would ultimately be adopted by the United Nations.



Lemkin's House by Catherine Filloux.

Connie Winston and John Daggett.

Photo by Camille Assaf

I had no idea what to expect from the project and knew no one involved. When I arrived at New Dramatists, I found Catherine Filloux, whose name was vaguely familiar to me, John Daggett, who would play Lemkin, and Jean Randich, the play's director. I was given sides to read, which I began to study. "Rwanda...Hutus...Tutsis... Didn't Bill Clinton have something to do with 'them?' Whoever 'them' is?" I did what most actors do in the cold reading of a new script: read the lines. A few days later, I was offered several roles in *Lemkin's House*, one of which was an African woman who gives birth and another woman who is raped with a beer

bottle and shot dead at point-blank range -- all on stage.

On the first day of rehearsals, we actors were introduced to the dramaturg, Effy Redman, who presented each of us with a dramaturgy notebook. *Dramaturg? Dramaturgy notebook? What the hell?* And yes, I was a theater major and had heard the word *dramaturg* but that was as an undergraduate and I never paid much attention in those days. Working on *Lemkin's House* not only introduced me to the world of dramaturgy (*i.e.*, close readings of text, critical thinking, boundless questions, and endless research) but also reminded me of what it means to be an actor, to *live* in the theater, and to build a community with kindred spirits, all for a greater good. For me, one of the more fascinating aspects of working with Catherine on *Lemkin's House* was that she was always "in the room." She was also an excellent listener. Catherine is "an artist who finds (her) place in the theater." *Lemkin's House* helped me to find *my place* in the theater. In many, if not most of Filloux's plays, one (whether they be an actor or *spect-actor*) will find a community "casting light on multiple human actions where ... surprise is found ... and the voice of the actor." Catherine Filloux is the playwright that dramaturgs dream of and that is an actors delight.

Produced in 2004, Catherine's first play, *Eyes of the Heart*, resulted from her years of working with Cambodian refugee women at St. Rita's Refugee Center in the Bronx, New York. The focus of the piece is women who suffered from trauma-induced blindness after bearing witness to the Cambodian Genocide. Filloux often says that this initial work "changed her life." This "change" is evident in two subsequent plays, *Silence of God* and *Where Elephants Weep*, a "Khmer Rock Opera" (composer Him Sophy), for which Filloux wrote the libretto. In both projects, Filloux continues her investigation of U.S. complicity, the regime of Pol Pot, and the atrocities of his Khmer Rouge. *Lemkin's House* tells the story of Polish Jewish attorney, Raphael Lemkin, who lost all of his family during the Holocaust, except for a brother. Lemkin created the term *genocide* and worked to establish the Genocide Convention at the United Nations.

For Filloux, "the personal is political and individual trauma (is) social trauma." These are the linkages that she seeks to explore through her plays. She *activates* through her plays, which are painstakingly researched and often provide the most minute, intimate details of character or plot. Filloux strives to "create an empathic center," thereby enabling a "collaboration across difference." Other themes found in Filloux's plays focus on violence against women, civil rights, immigration, and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Through the poeticism of her words, Catherine Filloux creates characters who are able to retain their humanity and dignity against all odds. She believes that presenting trauma onstage will enable audiences to find kinship as humans. Filloux's plays are not didactic and deliver no "message." They "are prismatic, casting

light on multiple human actions where ... surprise and ... voice of the outsider” are found. To learn more about Catherine Filloux’s work, read the chapter in the recently published collection [Theatre Responds to Social Trauma: Chasing the Demons](https://www.routledge.com/Theatre-Responds-to-Social-Trauma-Chasing-the-Demons/Kaplan/p/book/9781032053219) (<https://www.routledge.com/Theatre-Responds-to-Social-Trauma-Chasing-the-Demons/Kaplan/p/book/9781032053219>).

[How to Eat an Orange](https://www.lamama.org/shows/how-to-eat-an-orange-2024) (<https://www.lamama.org/shows/how-to-eat-an-orange-2024>), Filloux’s latest play, will open at La MaMa in New York City on May 30, 2024, and will have a three-week run. *How to Eat an Orange* is a one-woman play that tells the story of Argentinian artist-activist, Claudia Bernardi, her childhood in Argentina under the military junta, and her subsequent work digging up the past. Histories are woven together in a kaleidoscopic play that depicts how both families and justice may be reconfigured. It is directed by Elena Araoz and features Paula Pizzi.

For further information about Catherine Filloux and her works, visit www.catherinefilloux.com (<http://www.catherinefilloux.com>).

Connie Winston is a performance artist, who has acted in, written, adapted, dramaturged, and produced plays in New York and nationally. She performed with The Talking Band at La MaMa; in Filloux’s play *Lemkin’s House*; and appeared on *Law & Order* and *Conviction* in her recurring role as Judge Shirley Taylor.

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