

## Living between Worlds: An Interview with Guillermo Reyes

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Dramatist Guillermo Reyes (Chile: 1962) has recently received a considerable amount of critical acclaim. While many of his plays have been produced in the United States, his two works relating to the gay Latino immigrant experience, *Men on the Verge of a His-panic Breakdown* and *Deporting the Divas*, have met with the greatest success. *Men* won two Ovation awards in Los Angeles in 1994, and received enthusiastic reviews during its run off Broadway in 1997. *Deporting* had successful runs in San Francisco and Tucson in 1996. The following interview took place April 25, 1997 in Tempe, Arizona, where Reyes is currently an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Arizona State University.

*I read one interview with you where you talk of belonging to the Post-Stonewall generation of writers in the US. What did you mean?*

Well, in the sense that I don't always deal necessarily with "coming out" in my plays. To me the "coming out" plays are very much a part of the Stonewall era. In the post-Stonewall era you don't deal with the coming out process; you deal with a variety of different themes that touch on sexuality but sexuality is not necessarily the determining factor of everything that you do; it is simply a part of who you are.

*It is clear that in your plays sexuality isn't problematized in any way. There is a sense that many characters simply do not fit in, not because they are gay, but because they are immigrants, because they are poor, because they are trying to come to terms with bicultural identity. Do you see that as a central theme to your work – this idea of finding one's place in the world?*

Living between worlds is a main issue that I deal with in my plays. Finding a space for yourself anywhere you go always requires a certain kind of

political negotiation within the society that you live in. I mean, being gay in West Hollywood is different from being gay in Arizona or in Chile, for that matter. Being gay in West Hollywood, perhaps for a long time, meant being white as well. Once you add ethnicity and other issues such as the immigrant experience to the mix, you're showing the many facets of being an outsider. I'm not exactly an immigrant either, not after 20+ years, but I can certainly relate to those experiences. These are things I remember as a child, things that a lot of my relatives such as my mom went through. She is still in the immigrant community and English is not her first language. These are the issues immigrants deal with and I'm still a part of that community.

*Something very common to Latin American theatre, as well as US Latino theatre, is the idea of the need to provoke social change. Is it important to you as a writer that someone leave the theatre after seeing one of your plays and be moved to embark on social reform?*

I don't see it really as a didactic experience. I do think that people get something out of it, that it may be educational or political. If people are seeing things that they haven't noticed before, such as gay Hispanic immigrants, then they will begin to think about these things and that's great. But I don't sit down and think "I'm going to do this play for political reason." I know that is the effect that some of my plays have had. *Deporting the Divas* is the most political play I have written, but I wasn't trying to promote a specific point of view about gay immigrants. The most important issue for me in *Divas* was that I was going to deal with the duality in this young border-patrolman's mind. He is Mexican-American, bisexual, having an affair with an illegal alien male, and my interest was in how he negotiates all of this. But I wasn't trying to say, "oh, the Immigration and Naturalization Service should be kinder to the immigrants" or anything of the sort. It was much more a complex character study.

*I get the sense that you are uncomfortable with the idea of doing any overtly political theatre.*

Maybe. I'm uncomfortable with any form of proselytizing, anything that seeks to convert you.

*Returning to the idea of negotiating through life, your characters seem to do so in a humorous and yet tragic sort of way.*

I use humor a lot and to different degrees. Both in *Men* and *Divas*, I try to use what I call a “fabulous” form of humor, something that comes out of camp, a ridiculous, wild sort of humor. I think that has always been the most successful for me and I think that is one of the reasons that *Chilean Holiday* may never have the same reception [as *Divas* and *Men*]. People are expecting the “fabulous” sort of humor from me.

*Do you think it may also be because your most well known plays deal with gay themes and Holiday does not? Is it somehow limiting that your major successes have been with the gay-themed plays?*

Yes, I think it is limiting now because some of my gay friends won’t go to see *Holiday* because it isn’t a “gay” play, just like there will be some people who will refuse to see the gay element in *Men* and *Divas*.

*And yet something that we talked a little bit about at the Latin American Theatre Today conference in Kansas was that, while you have these gay themes in some of your plays, you do not present them in any sort of jarring manner. Someone commented in the LATT plenary session that in your theatre “there are no blow jobs given.” One of the criticisms leveled against queer theatre is that it has lost its power to disrupt. It has been argued that there is a need to make the queerness more explicit by every means possible in order to recapture the radical edge. How do you feel about that?*

I don’t believe in homogenization of theatre and I also think that it is a basic question of taste. I don’t believe that sex needs to be shown explicitly. There are ways to provoke people, but I prefer intellectual provocation.

*You were saying to me before that there are not many Latino dramatists that are writing on gay themes right now. Why do you think that is?*

I think writers feel constrained under the label. For example, how many plays out there in the gay community are dealing strictly with white pretty boys in underwear? Why would I want to contribute to that just to write another gay play? I can write about so many other things. You can label things according

to identity in order to study them, but the works themselves have got to go beyond that. I wouldn't want to go see a Hispanic play just because it is Hispanic. I need to know that it is a good play, I need to know that it deals with the themes convincingly. It is the same with gay plays. There are a lot of bad plays out there. I may go to see one just out of curiosity, but I'm not always admiring of a play that wants to exploit that image.

*You see some of these "white pretty boys in underwear" plays as a type of exploitation?*

Yes, you are exploiting people's senses in the way that you are giving them a product. It's like going to see a burlesque, or a strip-tease. If people want to see it for personal purposes that's fine but that doesn't make it a good play. I think a good play has to deal with the theme of what it means to be gay in terms of society and how it conflicts with the majority culture. That, to me, is what would make a good play, dealing with the themes in a meaningful way.

*Do you see the gay theme as essential in your repertoire?*

Yes, it is important. I've written a lot of gay plays. There is a world out there that is not always comfortable with gay themes. That is what is interesting, the clash of cultures, the clash of identities. That's why it would be hard for me write a "coming out" play. It has already been done. There is a whole urban culture that has already dealt with that. Whereas it is much more interesting to deal with gay Hispanics who are coming to a country where there are so many other political issues that come into play. I am concerned with what it means to be an outsider, and how this is negotiated with the majority.

*Would you ever want to stage one of your plays in Chile?*

Yes, I would love to do one in Chile although I'm concerned about the politics. The country is still dealing with Augusto Pinochet. He is still head of the army. I'm concerned about how much influence the military still has over society. I don't know how comfortable it is for a playwright. There are some gay groups like Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis that are doing gay-themed plays and that would be interesting to do, but I don't know if it is as open now there as it is, say, in Buenos Aires. I mean, how do I deal with gay identity in Chile?

I wonder about that. I also wonder, would I really be considered Chilean? I mean I write in English and have to translate into Spanish.

*Which play, of all of the ones you've written, do you feel is your most accomplished?*

I like *Men* and *Divas*, I think they are my favorites. With *Men* there is something intimate about the way it works on the stage, meeting these characters who make you laugh and suddenly there is a twist and you see how they are very vulnerable. When I set out to be a playwright I did so in the Arthur Miller tradition, very grounded in realism and suddenly these monologues came to me from another side of my brain, I think, because they came more from performance art. They are more presentational, and there is something exciting about that. I'm not going to be writing one-man shows the rest of my life, but I am writing a one-woman show now called *Women in Need of Accent Removal*. It is similar to *Men* except it's not about lesbian themes. Well, there is one character who is gay, but most of the women are modeled after my mom and her friends.

*When you went to Kansas for the Latin American Theatre Today conference you mentioned that it was the first time that you had met with academic critics and you told me about how different we are from the usual theatre critics you are accustomed to. Can you expand upon that?*

Well, what I don't like about critics per se is that they only look at a play for the purposes of saying, thumbs up or thumbs down. They might give you thumbs down because your main actor is missing that night and an understudy is doing the part. They don't seem to know what a play is. They rarely deal with the themes of the play— or very few of them do. I just hate to read those "Oh, it's a must see production!! Four stars!!" reviews. To me they may be good to sell the show for marketing purposes, but they don't really tell me anything. Academic critics treat your work intelligently, although their writing has the danger of being very dry. The intelligent scholar should be able to write in a lively way about the themes of the play.

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