

Pregones Theatre's 2003 Asunción Playwrights Project

Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes

Readings and discussions of four new gay Latino plays were held in New York City in May of 2003 as part of Pregones Theatre's new Asunción Playwrights Project, which "showcases the work of Latino playwrights exploring issues of difference and transformation at the limits of queer identity... especially... works that challenge assumptions about gender and sexuality" [program notes]. The four winning plays were *A Cherry Tree Dies in Washington Heights* by Nicholas Rodríguez (May 14), *Querido* by Ricardo Bracho (May 15), *Tiembra* by Gonzalo Aburto (May 17) and *¡Escándalo!* by the author of this review, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (May 17). The readings were held at Pregones's Casa Blanca (White House) in the Bronx, and directed by Artistic Director Jorge Merced, who also oversaw group and individual actor rehearsals of these works-in-progress. Each reading was followed by a conversation between Merced, the author, the audience and a guest panelist, including the Nuyorican playwright Edwin Sánchez (May 14) and the Puerto Rican theatre scholars and practitioners Alberto Sandoval Sánchez (May 15) and Ramón Albino (May 17). Funding for this project came from the New York State Council on the Art-Special Arts Services, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, and from Pregones Theatre's other sources of general support. Winning playwrights received no financial remuneration while actors and invited speakers received a nominal stipend.

The first play in the series, *A Cherry Tree Dies in Washington Heights*, centered on the interpersonal dynamics between three family members: Lydia Boca Smith (Brenda Currin), her now-gay ex-husband Bert Boca (Manny Alfaro), and their gay son Jimmy Boca (Carlos Alberto Valencia). The play begins with a stunning monologue by Lydia in English in which she talks about being abandoned and surviving cancer. As the action progresses, we

learn that she has remained alone in the family apartment in northern Manhattan (Washington Heights), while her husband moved with his male lover to Washington, DC, and their son went to Seattle, Washington, where he became a hustler. All characters are tied by this uncanny geographical name coincidence, which is further expanded as we learn that Lydia frequented the George Washington Bridge, spanning from New York across the Hudson to New Jersey, where she is originally from, and where the factory that most likely provoked her illness after many years of employment is located. The play ends with the reunion of all three family members in the nation's capital after many years apart; it is unclear what the final outcome of their encounter will be. Varín Ayala was the narrator for this and several of the other plays.

The second play, *Querido*, is a queer Chicano rewriting of Jean Genet's *Querelle*, particularly of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film adaptation of the French novel. It is in English with a liberal sprinkling of Spanish and Chicano and Spanglish slang. In Bracho's version, *Querelle* becomes *Querido*, interpreted wonderfully by Carlos Alberto Valencia, who starred in Bracho's *A to B* at INTAR in Manhattan in 2002. The murderous sailor engages with different men (three characters—Arabe, Víctima, and Pollito—all effectively performed as effeminate, ghetto-fabulous queens by Janio Marrero), as well as with the denizens of a seaside bar: his brother Chulo (Johary Ramos), the bar owners Midnight (Bonnie Barrios) and Chingón (Bill Blechinberg), and the stunningly handsome Narcotraficante (Ken Mayo), who wears leather jacket, jeans and aviator glasses. The actors, many of whom played several parts, dressed for their parts in sexy outfits and very effectively conveyed the sultry, dangerous yet attractive world of sailors and hustlers in Los Angeles. According to the program notes, "*Querido* was commissioned by the Latino Theatre Initiative of the Mark Taper Forum in 2001 and will receive a staged reading in June [2003] as part of the National Queer Arts Festival in San Francisco."

The third play, *Tiembla*, is a monologue in Spanish focusing on a young man (played by Mario Golden) who seems to have survived the devastating 1985 Mexico City earthquake. In this brief, one-act play, the character retells the experiences of living in the poor outskirts of the city (Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl) and interacting with individuals from wealthier parts, highlighting the deep class differences which structure Mexican life. All become equals, however, after their buildings collapse and residents have to rely for help on spontaneously-constituted, neighborhood-based citizen networks of solidarity. Aburto portrays this world in a very rich colloquial

language that incorporates 1980s urban slang made familiar for US audiences through films such as *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también*; he also carries out a scathing critique of the government's inefficiencies and of the media's penchant for tragedy and melodrama. Of all of the works presented in Asunción, this play is the one which most indirectly focused on queer issues: we only learn at the end that the protagonist's monologue is addressed to a man who picked him up at a bar and with whom he has been having sex. As such, the character's sexuality is not focalized but rather becomes just one more element in a narration set between life and death amidst the ruins of a building. During the post-play discussion, Aburto explained that he wrote this text as a short story or chronicle shortly after the events occurred and was later encouraged to make it into a dramatic monologue.

The fourth play, *¡Escándalo!*, is also in Spanish and focuses in its three acts on the going-ons at the Teatro Lírico de Muñecas, an apocalyptic televised drag variety show in Manhattan whose cast ensemble have complex and contradictory relationships: Katiria (Jhesús Aponte), the main star, is an AIDS-afflicted pre-operative male-to-female transsexual; her abusive partner Leosvaldo, the MC (somberly played with a gravelly voice by the extremely talented Dominican actress Mariluz Acosta), is a sometimes violent female-to-male transsexual man; the photographer Leocadia (interpreted by the brilliant and beautiful Puerto Rican Silvia Sierra) is secretly in love with Katiria; while two gay men, Boy (Johary Ramos) and Nene (Emanuel Loarca), constantly become other characters in a Pirandellian, Cuban opera bufa or commedia dell'arte style, as drag queen harlequins who fall in and out of love while pretending to be Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon or the Puerto Rican/Cuban singers Lissette and Gloribee; both actors won the audience over in a scene in which they pretend to be clowns and speak in rather high-pitched voices about guavas, feces, and snow in Puerto Rico and New York. This post-modern, meta-theatrical play ends with all of the characters in a hospital in limbo, seemingly oscillating between heaven and hell, as they try to come to terms with the ravages of the AIDS epidemic by restaging scenes from Federico García Lorca's best-known Andalusian trilogy, playing basketball in wheelchairs, and waltzing to Robi Dräco Rosa's version of La Pandilla's "¿Cuándo pasará?"

All four 2003 winning authors have extremely different backgrounds and experiences, which made for varied plays in terms of content and style. For example, Rodríguez's main training is in dance; Bracho is a key player in West Coast Latino theatre circles and has an impressive number of plays;

Aburto studied theatre in Mexico but is now better known for magazine editorial and video work, including directing the independent film *Amores locos* (2003); while La Fountain-Stokes is a scholar, writer, and activist. Program notes included detailed self-biographies provided by the playwrights which I reproduce below:

Nicholas Rodríguez is a Fulbright Scholar, who served as Principal Affiliate Artist at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, NJ. He earned a BFA in Dance from the Julliard School of Music in 1984 and was the founder-director of Dance Compass, which performed at BAM, Jacob's Pillow, DTW and throughout the US and South America. As a choreographer he created dances for the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, The Yard on Martha's Vineyard and for the American Repertory Ballet in NJ. He is currently producing a multi-faceted documentary about public housing, *Dancing Home*. Aside from *A Cherry Tree Dies in Washington Heights*, he has also written the play *Adios Esperanza*.

Ricardo A. Bracho is the author of the full-length plays *The Sweetest Hangover*, *July 19, 1979*, *Fed Up*, *A to B* and the short plays *Tone Memory* and *Ni Madre*. His plays have been produced at Brava Theatre Center, Theatre Rhinoceros and INTAR and have been given staged readings at Intersection for the Arts, Plaza de la Raza, Rites & Reasons Theatre, and the Edward Albee Theatre Festival in Valdez, Alaska.

Gonzalo Aburto. His work as a writer, journalist and cultural critic has been featured in *The Village Voice*, *La Jornada*, *Latina Magazine*, *Urban The Latino Magazine*, *Univisión*, *Telemundo*, *CNN*, *NPR*, as well as numerous other newspapers, television, and radio profiles in English and Spanish media. A native of México, he moved to New York in 1987. He was one of the central activists in the Latino Caucus of ACT-UP, raising awareness about AIDS and influencing many policy changes in New York. He is the editor of *POZ en Español*. He also produces and hosts WBAI's *La Nueva Alternativa*, a rock and alternative music radio show. He writes a weekly column for *El Diario-La Prensa*. He is also one of the creators and producers of *HoMoVISIONES*, a TV show for NY City's Latino Gay community. Gonzalo is the author of the book *Amores locos y los peligros del contagio* (Seven Stories Press). He holds degrees in Economics and in Theatre from Mexico's

Universidad Nacional Autónoma, and from *La Escuela de Teatro de Bellas Artes del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes* in Mexico City.

Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes is a Puerto Rican writer, scholar, and activist. He received a B.A. from Harvard (1991) and a Ph.D. in Spanish from Columbia (1999). He has taught at Ohio State and Rutgers and began at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in September 2003. His book *Queer Ricans: Cultures of the Diaspora* (to be published by the University of Minnesota Press) focuses on Puerto Rican migration and homosexuality. His work appears in *Besame Mucho*, *Chicano/Latino Homoerotic Identities*, *Queer Globalizations*, *Sissies and Tomboys*, *Tomás Carrasquilla: Nuevas aproximaciones críticas*, and *Tortilleras*, as well as in newspapers, journals, and websites such as *Centro Journal*, *Claridad*, *Conjunto*, *The Dirty Goat*, *El cuarto del quenepón*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *La Habana Elegante* and *LGNY*. His volume of short stories, *Uñas pintadas de azul*, is unpublished. *¡Escándalo!* is his first play.

Finally, it is important to highlight the rich discussions held after each reading. One of Pregones's stated objectives as part of this laboratory was to foster dialogue between playwrights, actors, audience members, and theatre experts, something particularly useful for beginning playwrights but clearly beneficial to all. Merced repeatedly stated over the three days that he saw these dialogues as an effort to deconstruct the notion that a writer operates alone, in a vacuum, and rather emphasize the communal, collective dimensions of theatre production. Eddie Sánchez and Alberto Sandoval's comments were particularly effective as they managed to engage the director, artists, and actors in a lively debate. Albino's presentations were somewhat more formal, as he brought prepared statements in which he exhaustively analyzed the written texts. Sánchez praised Rodríguez's ability to create convincing characters and his exquisite use of language, and suggested that the playwright further develop the father character. Sandoval compared Bracho's reinterpretation of a "canonical" queer text to Cherrie Moraga's rewriting of the Medea story, and encouraged the author to move further away from the filmic reference. Albino highlighted the political dimensions of Aburto's text and the intertextuality of La Fountain-Stokes, especially in terms of placing the play in the context of theatre of the absurd; audience members commented

that the play was too long and that the character of the MC lacked range of emotion.

Pregones Theatre's Asunción Playwrights Laboratory is a remarkable opportunity for beginning and well-established Latino/Latina playwrights to engage in a hands-on process with their work; it is also a very rich experience for actors, who all received a modest stipend, to meet queer Latino/a writers and other actors interested in this type of non-traditional representation. Merced described anecdotally how at least one well-established Latina actress refused a part once she realized the sexually transgressive nature of the play, while several of the actors commented how delighted they were to be able to read roles which go against the dominant grain and which thus represented challenges of interpretation. As a participant in the process of this laboratory and a relative newcomer to the theatrical creation process, I can vouch for the richness of this experience, from initial rehearsals with the artists (selected by the director after open castings advertised in print media and through professional organizations), through the performance itself and post-performance discussion. In fact, in my case, the initial reading of *¡Escándalo!* during rehearsal led to extensive cuts in an attempt to narrow the range of topics discussed and help the piece achieve more focus; it also helped to understand the enormous potential at a director's disposal, in terms of using the text but expanding it with a range of emotions and vocal effects. In this sense, Merced was a most generous director and I am very thankful for his time and the energy he invested in this project.

The main limitation of this year's crop of Asunción playwrights was the noticeable absence of any female playwrights. Hopefully, as word gets out about this project, more women will apply, yet Pregones might do well to aggressively recruit in order to ensure future gender parity. Having said that, I encourage all Latino and Latina playwrights to explore this opportunity and consult the Pregones website (www.pregones.org) for more information. Pregones is to be commended for fostering the professional development of playwrights and actors interested in expanding the meaning of Latino and Latina notions of gender and sexuality, and for broadening the New York audiences horizon of expectations, something this remarkable company has been doing in its twenty-plus years of existence in plays such as *Translated Woman* and *El bolero fue mi ruina*.

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