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*Mariela en el desierto / Mariela in the Desert* by Karen Zacarías

Jane Barnette

In April 2014, Teatro del Sol<sup>1</sup> produced the regional premiere of *Mariela in the Desert*, by Karen Zacarías, an award-winning playwright based at Washington, DC's Arena Stage.<sup>2</sup> Directed by Tlaloc Rivas, one of the founders of the Latina/o Theatre Commons, *Mariela* tells the story of two aging midcentury artists whose creative potential has run dry. In their younger years, when they associated with the likes of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, they moved from Mexico City to start an artists' commune. Now that they no longer paint, their desert home functions both literally and figuratively as a source of conflict in the play. Mariela (Blanca Agüero) despises the place while her diabetes-stricken husband José (Anthony P. Rodríguez) fervently believes that "the desert is God's canvas." Their thirst—for creative inspiration, for recognition, for healing from the tragic fire that took the life of their young son Carlos (Ricardo Aponte)—stems from the aftermath of José's most celebrated work, "The Blue Barn," a painting that remains shrouded for most of the play.

Upon entering the intimate auditorium, my eyes are immediately drawn to the left upstage corner, where the distorted exterior of a house partially lit in blue rests precariously on its side. The rest of the stage is sparsely furnished (by Regina García) and realistically lit (by María Cristina Fusté), with the covered painting down right. Eventually we realize that the distorted house *is* the blue barn, the subject of the mysterious painting, and that the symbols in the painting are the artists' children. These visual metaphors are useful guideposts for English language spectators, and the "paintings" Rivas creates onstage artfully complement the playwright's cautionary tale about the importance of passion and creativity. Less effective is the rhythm of the performance, especially for those of us reading the supertitles. Although Zacarías wrote "for an English-speaking American audience," the Spanish



Photo by Chris Bartelski, courtesy of Aurora Theatre.

[L-R] Anthony P. Rodríguez, Blanca Agüero, Ricardo Aponte & Julissa Sabino “It is so open and beautiful here. The desert is God’s canvas,” José (Rodríguez) exclaims in one of the memory scenes, while his wife Mariela (Agüero), son Carlos (Aponte) and daughter Blanca (Sabino) listen.



Photo by Chris Bartelski, courtesy of Aurora Theatre.

[L-R] Blanca Agüero & Ricardo Aponte Mariela (Agüero) paints while her son Carlos (Aponte) watches in this memory scene that begins to unravel the mystery of the masterpiece, “The Blue Barn.”



Photo by Chris Bartelski, courtesy of Aurora Theatre.  
[L-R] Luis Hernández & Blanca Agüero Adam (Hernández), an art history professor who is dating Mariela (Agüero)'s daughter, analyzes the famous painting, "The Blue Barn." He points to the empty easel where the painting sits, shrouded, for most of the play.



Photo by Chris Bartelski, courtesy of Aurora Theatre.  
[L-R] Blanca Agüero & Julissa Sabino Mariela (Agüero) listens to her daughter (Sabino)'s tales about living in Mexico City and her dreams of becoming an artist.

translation for this production (a collaborative effort of the bilingual cast) required re-translating the supertitles into better English equivalencies (Miracle 10, Rivas). Despite these translation oddities, the production gels after intermission, when Mariela's daughter Blanca (Julissa Sabino) returns home with her boyfriend, Adam, a Jewish-American art history scholar (Luis R. Hernández) who was once her professor.

As the veil covering the painting is lifted, it reveals a play that is about sacrifice as much as it is about thirst. Frustrated that Mariela painted what critics believe to be his masterpiece, José burns his studio in a fit of rage. Regrettably, his studio is also the barn where their troubled son Carlos goes to hide from the world, and he remains trapped inside during the fire. This unintended sacrifice has dried the well of inspiration for years. Ultimately, in order to reclaim her creative potential, Mariela must gain closure on her son's death, even if it means allowing her husband to die. After emptying the syringe of insulin onto the floor instead of administering it to her husband, she finally allows her tears to fall. Her release is tragic rather than triumphant, but the catharsis leaves us with hope that her thirst will finally be quenched.

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## Notas

<sup>1</sup> Teatro del Sol, "a Spanish language theatre initiative whose main goal is the preservation of Hispanic cultural heritage," stages professional productions at the Aurora Theatre in Lawrenceville, a Gwinnett county town located about 35 miles east of Atlanta. As their description notes, "According to the Atlanta Regional Commission, Gwinnett is the most diverse county in the Southeastern United States and many cultures whose native language is Spanish are represented in the community" (Putnam). Since 2011, as part of Aurora's Lab Series (sponsored by Georgia Gwinnett College), Teatro del Sol has produced contemporary Hispanic plays in Spanish with English supertitles. The initiative took root in 2004, when Aurora produced *La vida es sueño* with a bilingual cast, playing in Spanish on Sunday evenings (and in English other nights of the week).

<sup>2</sup> The Aurora/Teatro del Sol production will be remounted for the 2014 Encuentro: A National Latino/a Theatre Festival hosted by the Los Angeles Theatre Center, October 12-November 10.

## Works Cited

- Miracle Theatre Group Study Guide. *Mariela in the Desert*. Aug. 2007. Print.  
 Putnam, Judy, editor. "Aurora Theatre Seeks Spanish Speaking Actors for Teatro del Sol." *Johns Creek Patch*. 22 Dec. 2013. Web. 2 June 2014.  
 Rivas, Tlaloc. Personal Interview. 2 June 2014.