

Teatro Vista Stages Chicago Premiere of *In the Time of the Butterflies*

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In April and May 2016, Chicago's Teatro Vista premiered for its city *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Caridad Svich.¹ Staged in the intimate Richard Christiansen Theater at The Biograph in Lincoln Park, the play was received by an enthusiastic, predominately Latino/a audience of about 75 people, including couples, groups of friends, and students, who nearly filled the theater on the last weekend before the show's closing.

As could be expected by those familiar with Julia Álvarez's acclaimed novel, the theatrical adaptation also explores the brave actions of the revolutionary Mirabal sisters—Patria, Minerva, María Teresa, and Dedé—, also known as “Las Mariposas,” during the dictatorial regime of General Rafael Leónidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic of the 1930s-60s. The play moves between the past and the near present (1994), in which the only surviving sister, Dedé, visits with a *gringa dominicana*. An apparent fictionalization of Álvarez, the *gringa* makes a research trip to the Mirabal sisters' childhood home to aid in the writing of her novel on the revolutionaries.

Director Ricardo Gutiérrez and crew crafted a stunning performance through their use of immersive video and animation, in addition to spectacular costume design and music. The play began with a basic set comprising a Dominican house façade and white, metal patio furniture, which, as one audience member commented, evoked the feeling of “a low-budget community theater.” However, the stage soon came to life as still and moving images projected onto the set created distinct spaces, such as a government office with Dominican flags and a church with stained-glass windows. Animated images, such as dancing butterflies streaming across the stage, hinted at key themes, such as the sisters' resilient spirit. This animation proved to be distracting, however, when it went a bit too far in one scene: Patria and Trujillo

tensely discussed their relationship and her family's future while the huge, red, rolling die projected above them suggested the family's precarious fate.

One of the notable aspects of this performance was the interaction between the Dominican-American play and its pan-Latino/a audience. Throughout the play, audience members smirked and nodded, responding to scenes that evoked issues of origin/destination culture and language. This was especially apparent when the writer became exasperated over being judged for her *gringo* accent and when she clamored to Dedé, "It may not be my history, my life, but it's my blood," emphasizing her ability to write about Dominican history as a Dominican-American. The play clearly connected with its audience on immigrant themes, regardless of the spectators' Latino/a heritage.

This engagement with the audience continued as spectators left the theater. Multiple posters created by a student and faculty member from North Central College² lined the lobby walls, highlighting relevant topics: La Voz Dominicana radio, the Acción Feminista Dominicana group, Hollywood's role in the Caribbean nation, Trujillo's biography, and the Mirabal sisters' actions in the 14th of June Movement. Many audience members remained, quietly reading the posters and then left, deep in discussion. In addition to a stellar performance, Teatro Vista's staging of *In the Time of the Butterflies* succeeded in telling the story of the Mirabal sisters' heroic actions and reminding audience members of their role in remembering and telling stories.

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Notes

1 The play was originally commissioned in Spanish by Repertorio Español/Spanish Repertory Theatre in New York, NY, where it premiered in February 2011 (Dir. José Zayas). It also was staged internationally in Montevideo, Uruguay, by Utópica Producciones in 2012 (Dir. Alicia Dogliotti) and Caracas, Venezuela, under the title *Las hermanas Mirabal*. The English-language version premiered in 2013 in Santa Fe, NM, with Teatro Paraguas and was later staged by San Diego Repertory Theater in 2014. Mixed Blood Theater of Minneapolis, MN, staged a bilingual version in 2013. The Chicago premiere used Svich's English script, although it should be noted that it included several expressions in Spanish (Svich).

2 Dr. Laura Lodewyk and student Jesús Martínez of North Central College in Naperville, IL, created the posters.

References

- In the Time of the Butterflies*. Text by Caridad Svich. Dir. Ricardo Gutiérrez. Perf. Charín Álvarez, Rinksa Carrasco, Flavia Pallozzi, Sari Sánchez, Ayssette Muñóz, and Eddie Martínez. Teatro Vista. The Biograph Theater, Chicago. 14 May 2016.
- Svich, Caridad. "Review of *In the Time of the Butterflies*." Message to Regan Postma-Montaño. 13 June 2016.
- Teatro Vista. *Chicagoplays: In the Time of the Butterflies*. By Caridad Svich. Dir. Ricardo Gutiérrez. Teatro Vista, 16 April - 22 May 2016.