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## A Discussion of *Destiny of Desire* by Karen Zacarías at the South Coast Repertory Theatre

### Jorge Huerta and Carlos Morton

Jorge Huerta: To begin this discussion, how would you synthesize the plot of this play?

Carlos Morton: Very complicated: children exchanged at birth, multiple affairs and intrigues, diverging plot lines too numerous to mention, and a roller coaster of twists and turns layered upon one another like a baroque wedding cake! It was not only engaging, but wildly humorous as well. In your estimation, as a historian and critic, how does it fit into the genre of US Latino theatre?

Huerta: Let's start with the fact that the play begins with the entire ensemble addressing the audience in unison with the following declaration: "*Destiny of Desire*: an unapologetic *telenovela* in two acts. We are here to change the social order. Deal with it." This is in the spirit of the early influences of Brecht on early Chicano theatre: mixing politics with art.

Morton: That got quite a laugh, as you would expect, and set the tone for the remainder of the performance. What did you think about the style of the production?

Huerta: Of course, there have always been sketches and brief plays that parody the *telenovela* format and Latinxs' obsession with that genre. But I know of no other play of this magnitude and professional caliber in the history of what we now call Latinx theatre that takes the parody to such extremes. Zacarías and director Valenzuela have tapped into this universally popular television form, giving the audience wonderfully stereotypical characters and situations that make us laugh while never letting us forget it's theatre and that there is a real world just outside the security of the theater with issues that demand attention. They do this by stopping the action and giving what

the playwright terms “Brechtian quotes” that reveal pertinent national facts that (progressively) contextualize the issue in the scene.

Morton: Mixing Brecht’s Epic Theater with melodrama is like going to an “Asian-Cuban” restaurant in Manhattan; you end up with a mixture of chop suey and *plátano frito*—and somehow it works. At first the Brechtian quotes startled me, because it stopped the action of the *telenovela*. However, by the end of the first act, the juxtaposition congealed into a wacky synergy.

Huerta: The style of the *telenovela* is heightened by the direct addresses to the audience. And although this stopped the action, the comments were brief and usually elicited a laugh or even comments in the audience. For example, when an actor says to the audience, “68% of women in the United States say they would have an affair if they knew they would never get caught. [*Pregnant pause.*] Orange County is in the United States,” the audience laughed uproariously. We were in Orange County, and the action continued.

Morton: In Latin America I would wager that most *telenovelas* are written by men for women, so it was refreshing to see a play like *Destiny of Desire*, written by a woman and in which the women controlled their own agency.

Huerta: At the end the women had agency, but throughout the play they did not. Remember, this is a fictional city in Mexico called Bellarica, which only the Spanish-speakers would know translates to “beautiful, rich woman.” And, as in so many *telenovelas*, the disparity between rich and poor is unapologetically appalling. But here, the play highlights these important class distinctions as we root for the underdogs, of course.

Morton: I wondered why the play was set in “an abandoned theater in Orange County, California.” Why not the city of Santa Ana, where the population is mostly Latino? When it moves to the Goodman in Chicago, will it be in a loft in Little Pilson? Also a bit confusing was the fact that we are supposed to be in Mexico, yet the players were speaking perfect English and perfect Spanish, including songs in Spanish. It was nice that the actors were completely bilingual.

Huerta: As you know, having had your plays produced in Spanish, English, or Spanglish, language has always presented its own set of problems in our theatre. Yes, the actors spoke perfect English and Spanish, which is what the script calls for. On the title page of the script, the playwright states the following about the casting of her play: “First Choice: An ALL LATINO CAST; Second Choice: A Very Diverse Cast.” Further, she says: “No fake Spanish accents. Real ones are fine.”

Morton: I loved her suggestions; it's about being inclusive and welcoming other audiences. Ninety percent of the matinee audience the day we saw the play were older white people. The elderly black lady who sat next to me not only laughed and commented during the show, but gave it a standing ovation at the end.

Huerta: She stood, along with the rest of the audience, who showed their appreciation of the excellent work they had just enjoyed. The ensemble worked very hard, and it was apparent that the company enjoyed every minute of it as well.

Morton: What do you think were the most significant aspects of the production?

Huerta: The casting of all Latinos. You and I both remember the days when, if a mainstream regional theater produced a Latino or Latin American play in translation, the casting was a nod to "multiculturalism," in which people of all backgrounds were cast. To add insult to injury, some actors could not even speak Spanish, so when they referred to a character by their Spanish name, it was grossly mispronounced.

Morton: Yes, I hate it when the director tries to get the actors to do fake Spanish accents. It's like Shakespeare in phony British. How did you like the staging? Did you notice any elements of Teatro Campesino, of which director José Luis Valenzuela is a consummate master?

Huerta: Yes, the playwright's references to Brecht recalled the fact that Luis Valdez described the early Teatro Campesino as somewhere between Brecht and Cantinflas. Furthermore, Brecht's theories and aesthetic were very influential in Latin American theatre, especially the Marxist undertones. Valdez's reference to Cantinflas referred to the man's comic genius as the Chaplinesque underdog. And now, Zacarías has merged Brecht with the *telenovela* aesthetic—a symbol of another very popular entertainment form that did not exist in the heyday of Mexican cinema.

Morton: What did you think of the design?

Huerta: Valenzuela and his design team gave us a fluidity of movement with minimal set props and scrimlike curtains and a large, scrim backdrop that was raised or lowered to indicate a change in locale. Again, the curtains that could be pulled to the side by the actors were right out of Brecht's playbook. Indeed, the fact that the actors were moving curtains and rolling set props all over the place was pure fun. Added to this movement, as the actors moved the set props they did so as if they were ballet dancers—obviously having fun and delighting the audience with their antics. The movement of the set

props was a familiar technique for Valenzuela, recalling the production of *Premeditation*, in which the characters moved set props on wheels. But this is a bigger production with all the trappings of the larger theater space at the South Coast Repertory Theatre.

Morton: Another interesting aspect of this production was its marketability and crossover appeal. It started off at the Arena Stage in D.C., where Karen Zacarías is based, and had a successful run at the South Coast Repertory in what was once solidly Republican Orange County. An often sarcastic reviewer wrote a glowing review in the *Los Angeles Times*, calling the production a “beautifully embodied humorous tribute to *telenovelas* [. . .] which shimmers here with majestic theatrical artistry.” The fact that you have a solid, professional Latino cast and director means that it will play well “in Peoria.” Which brings us to another discussion of where Latino theatre is going—back to its populist roots, a healthy development.

Huerta: Mexican-born Karen Zacarías is one of the most produced playwrights in the country, with productions in venues of all kinds, from community-based Latinx *teatros* to mainstream regional theatres.

Morton: I’d say this is progress.

Huerta: And it is.

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