

FRONTERAS/BORDERS: SCARS ON EARTH

MORE OF CONTRIBUTING DRAMATURG LAURA HOPE'S INTERVIEW WITH *AMERICAN NIGHT* PLAYWRIGHT RICHARD MONTOYA.

LAURA HOPE: *It seems to me that American Night partially deals with the immigrant's feelings of cultural betrayal: struggling with the idea that expatriation is somehow a betrayal of your own culture. I remember reading about Ireland during the Great Famine where there were two kinds of expatriation: all those coffin ships sailing away from Ireland; and the other kind, where British Protestant missionaries would offer sick and starving Irish Catholics a bowl of soup if they would renounce Catholicism and convert. The Irish Catholics looked on this with disdain. To this day, it is an insult to be called a "souper" in Ireland. It means you have no convictions: You will sell yourself and your identity for little more than a bowl of watery soup or gruel. Is this the way Juan José's Mexican Revolutionary great-grandfather and father feel about Juan crossing the border? As I was reading the play, they seem to feel Juan José's border crossing is a betrayal. Can you elaborate a bit on this element of the play?*

RICHARD MONTOYA: Juan José's great-grandfather understands survival on a rugged level, leaving Pancho Villa's skirmish line to risk all to save a sick infant, and spirit that child into the arms of Viola Pettus, our hero country nurse. It is Juan José's father who cannot forgive his son for turning his back on family and renouncing country to come to a place that does not want him, a place that makes laws against him. But in the final fever dream the belt-wielding father is also an instrument—to jar Juan José out of his sleep because the angel of death is nigh! How many people die in their dreams? In the night, who's better: the angry father or the two LDS zealots who pour buckets of Gulf Stream crude on him for his un-asked-for baptism, which resembles waterboarding? The play and this author will leave it up to the audience to ponder.

LH: *I thought it was a remarkable cultural insight to have the LDS missionaries transform into Lewis and Clark in American Night. The missionary impulse is often so very dark, and carries the baggage of historical oppression. It can quickly become culturally predatory. It is at the heart of colonizers and explorers like Lewis and Clark, and it seems to me to be terribly perverse. We still see remnants of this today in the way our political leaders have defended military aggression by saying we should "spread democracy" to other countries. We evangelize democracy, but we don't want people to move here seeking it. This seems schizophrenic to me: We will invade you with our democracy and give this "gift" of our way of life to you, whether you want it or not. However, if you want to move here seeking it on your own: "Forget it! We don't want you here! You are stealing from us!" The way you present this on stage is funny in American Night, but scary off stage.*

RM: When LDS or Jehovah's Witness folks ring my bell I answer and I go to work! I once saw some Jehovah Witness in San Francisco looking kind of tired and dejected—walking around dazed in this epicenter of Hipsterdom. I stopped them and asked if they needed some coffee. They smiled warily, but I was serious and wanted them to know if they needed that, I was there! Then I sort of lectured and gave them a pep talk to, "Get out there and do Their Thing. There *is* a place for them in the world. If they are not 100%, then they are just going through the motions!" I put wind in their sails and sent them off! "What the hell was I doing," I thought later? No zealot am I! I simply wanted them to play their roles and do it the best they could; I could not fathom a half-hearted Shepherd approaching me. Get out there and—not so much save souls—but give it your best shot! Another part of me wanted them to brush up against the irony-drenched, ho-hum world of the hipsters in the Mission District as a counterweight to all that carefully constructed "non-caring."

LH: *There is certainly no shortage of carefully constructed non-caring these days, yet theater artists are, by nature, naturally empathic: It is our job to imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes and then try out walking in them.*

I realize this is a bit like asking you to cure cancer all by yourself, but tell me: What is the place of political theater these days? Sometimes I am discouraged because plays like American Night happen at Cal Shakes, and OSF, and Yale Rep. So often this kind of work is seen by a geographically limited audience, but I want to bring my university students from New Orleans to see your play. I want my sister in El Paso to be able to take her elementary school students to see American Night. I want this thought-provoking, funny, entertaining play to colonize New Orleans, El Paso, Birmingham, Phoenix, Miami, and Topeka with its carefully constructed caring! How can American political theater stop singing to the choir and a historical narrative that is too often not heard in the vastness of the America between the major cultural centers of the east and west

coasts? *It's been a long time since The Free Southern Theatre set out to bring a different discussion of history and American identity to places and people not traditionally serviced by theater institutions near the geographical centers of American theater. I feel like we need this again, but in this economic climate, I admit I also feel despair for this particular American Dream.*

RM: For me to write a political play is to write a deeply human play. In the past, think some of us thought, “Well, if we write a political play we will burn with desire,” so it does not have to be too good, or structured, I should say—we thought we could do without this. But the best political plays are structured like a bomb and have the rich human tones—or, in my case, humor—to help carry the message.

I recall firsthand the revolutionary farmworkers' theater (El Teatro Campesino) of Luis Valdez, but what I remember most now as an adult was not so much the issue of the day, but how blazingly good the actors were: top-notch craft people. Most went on to great careers; damn they were good. I've also seen a lot of bad political theater, but I am a theater artist first: We must carry our message with hopefully better plays and better chops as actors and culture makers.

I find political theater thriving in pockets around the U.S. *All The Way*, the new Robert Schenkkan piece, is amazing, as are all Tony Kushner plays. There are new plays about the Black Panthers. I am writing plays for Campo Santo, a small company in San Francisco committed to political work, and I am co-writing with, among others, Amy Freed and Lynn Nottage *The Food Project* at Berkeley Rep, about the politics of food.

LH: *I'm fascinated by the way American Night talks about the drug cartels in Mexico “renting” people. For me, this portion of the script touched on two big problems in our culture: glorification of violence and conspicuous consumption. The global supply/demand culture has turned people into goods and services. Everyone and everything has been reduced to market value. Is that what you were getting at with the “renting” references? I thought it was a brilliant way to have the characters phrase this.*

RM: I read a *New York Times* op-ed piece from a journalist living in Mexico City. The context was in relationship to rented journalists versus those writers who are actually trying to cover the drug war and cartels. I could feel the writer's responsibility to report the truth to his readers—the ethical journalist who puts it down truthfully in Mexico is also the journalist who puts his or her life on the line. The “renting” extended far beyond newspapermen and women, to TV news reporters, government workers, cops, and entire families. Somehow the case of the writers and those refusing to be rented broke my heart—perhaps because I write from the safety of a writer's table at the Writers Guild Union Hall (with a guard and doorman) but also because I could not answer the question honestly to myself: What would *this* writer do? Me...

LH: *It certainly seems to be true that if anyone objects to the way the cartels “rent” people, unimaginable violence is unleashed. The performance of violence by the cartels has become a form of Grand Guignolesque reality theater. They really turn violence into an over-the-top public spectacle. What the cartels actually do to people is unstageable in the theater. In news reports, it reads like a Tarantino script on crack. You cannot believe what you just read while you are reading it. They cannot show it on TV. It is truly mind-blowing. Why did you decide to include the current situation in Mexico vis-à-vis the cartels in your comedy about the U.S.? How does the subversive power of comedy work for you as an effective way to present this material on stage?*

RM: I saw a particularly brutal *King Lear* last night at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival directed by our colleague Bill Rauch—oh, those pathological Lears! My point: There was ritual, and there was blood—a ceremonial dagger to the bloodletting and eye gouging (spoiler alert!). When we see this sort of ritual played in the senseless ritualistic murder of women in Juarez, for example—or the slaughter innocent farmworkers caught in the crossfire of warring cartels—it shakes us to our marrow, or it should. There is data in Mexico now strongly pointing to a desensitized society so inundated with gore. But when we see it—when we can put a real face to all those blurry photos of women in the El Paso police blotter—it should shake us in the way that Lear's dead daughter does at curtain's close. I left *Lear* feeling shaken and beat by this unflinching and brutal production, but somehow I shouted to the cast: “Long live the King! Viva el King!” As I still say, “Viva Mexico...” I'm hopeful...