

‘The Strangers’ is a play of uncharted territory

Neeley Moore, Arts and Culture Editor Feb 8, 2018

The Carousel Theatre will open its doors to a play that has never before seen the stage.

Christopher Oscar Peña’s new work, “the strangers,” will hold its world premiere on Feb. 23. Peña is a Tony Award-winning playwright who was commissioned to create the play with a very specific cast in mind.

“the strangers” is the story of a world turned upside down. The main character, Cris, returns to a place he used to know to discover that nothing is recognizable. In the middle of his confusion, he meets a stranger who has the task of explaining to him the story of the unfamiliar world he is encountering. Cris is challenged to rethink all the notions he once knew. “the strangers” aims to portray a modern America thrown into disarray and chaos.

The well-stocked cast includes Aaron Orlov (Cris), Jeff Dickamore (Dave), Emily Kicklighter, Charlotte Munsen, Carlene Pochette, Miguel A. Faña, Jude Carl Vincent and Lauren Pennline.

Underneath the mystery of this odd contemporary spectacle, “the strangers” tells a story that is relevant to our day and age. As an entirely new voice, it speaks to issues currently being debated and processed in society today.

“(The play) is important because it is a play that talks about the current societal climate as told from the perspective of those that you may not have heard from at all, or often enough, meaning the voices of minorities, people of the LGBTQ community and women,” Orlov said.

Theater has the unique opportunity to take a look at the human experience, according to Dickamore. It is a glance into stories, lives, circumstances, characters and choices that are similar or different from our own, and in turn, it causes audience members to evaluate themselves. Although such a response is possible through many forms of art, Dickamore clearly sees theater’s particular way to tackle these hard topics.

“Theater is unique because it’s happening in front of you. And even in traditional theater, there’s an interaction between what’s happening on stage and what’s happening in the audience,” Dickamore said. “I think (the play) is important because it deliberately draws from the experiences of people we don’t often hear from, especially in contemporary American theater. That means people will get the opportunity to hear voices and relate to experiences they don’t often see depicted on stage.”

The cast members believe that the energy with “the strangers” is different and exciting because it’s new material, as opposed to content that has been performed before. It’s brand new and has never been spoken to an audience before.

“These words have never been said,” Orlov said. “These characters have never been brought to life. The only thing we can draw on to create these people is our imaginations and what’s written in the script.”

“It’s uncharted territory,” Dickamore added. “We’re originating characters that have never been played before, and that gives us a lot of opportunities to figure stuff out. Second, it’s current. The issues are things we’re dealing with today — the things people are talking about right now. The stories feel like something you could overhear between classes on campus.”

“the strangers” is also personal. Peña wrote it after spending time getting to know the cast personally. Some of the material is from ideas and concerns that the cast directly shared and talked through with Peña as he was writing it. The depth of the characters from that writing experience is one of the revolutionary aspects of the production. Dickamore found that connection with his character, Dave, and the optimism and enthusiasm of his personality.

“I don’t want to give anything away, but I think it’s okay to say that there’s a monologue in the second act that Chris wrote later in the process,” Dickamore said. “It answered some key questions I had asked about Dave, which was super helpful, but it also addresses something that means a lot to me: The idea that love is possible. That it’s real. Long story short ... My parents weren’t happily married, and I never thought I would be either. But I am. I love my wife. Our family means everything to me. I love getting to express that hope, that love can and does happen.”

While Orlov didn’t find quite the same personal connection that Dickamore did, he does think his character’s place is important. He hopes that people connect with the character and the extent of his background.

“Cris is a pretty complex character,” Orlov said. “He feels lost, especially in his love life. I don’t know that I share personal experiences with that of what Cris experiences, per se, but I do think that need to love and that need to be loved the way one wants and needs to be loved is a pretty universal feeling that I think audiences will connect with.”

While “the strangers” holds a lot pertaining to the world we experience, it also is simply a love story. People should expect a story about love.

“Given the current climate of our times, I think we can use a little more love in our lives,” Orlov said.

With a lot of tackle, “the strangers” is expected to leave a lot when it leaves its first stage before being told on many other stages. Its world premiere is unmatched. However, it was written for the crew currently preparing for opening night, who ask people to expect nothing but to enjoy it and be left with a mass of material to think through.

“Again, I don’t want to give anything away, but I think it’s safe to say that people can expect the unexpected,” Dickamore said.