

# “the strangers” arrives to stage with sold-out world premiere.

Neeley Moore, Arts and Culture Editor | Feb 25, 2018

Christopher Oscar Peña’s “the strangers” debuted Friday night at the Carousel Theatre. With its first preview this past Wednesday, its opening night was completely sold out the following Friday.

Peña’s original work was a world premiere and is the second play commissioned by the Clarence Brown Theatre with the students in the Department of Theatre MFA programs. Previously, Robert Caisley’s “The Open Hand” was debuted in 2016.

As with “The Open Hand,” “the strangers” was developed over a two-year period in collaboration with the playwright and UT graduate actors. Joining the team were designers, staff and guest artists.

Peña’s play was inspired by Thornton Wilder’s play “Our Town,” telling the story of American life in a small town. Peña wanted to adopt the idea and place the setting in East Tennessee, where it would be written and performed first.

“This play can be called many things: A response to, an appropriation of, a remix, adaptation, a counterpoint, an updating ... of ‘Our Town,’” Peña said in his introductory notes of “the strangers.”

In stark contrast to the 1901 setting of “Our Town,” “the strangers” addresses life in small-town America in 2018. Despite their differences, both plays serve to detail the lives of men and women in the working class, their families, their homes and the realities of their stories.

Director of “the strangers” John Sipes was drawn to the relationships within the piece; to him, it creates an invigorating picture of life in the world we live in today.

“The show is populated with characters, mostly young, who struggle to find their way in relationships and in a society in which they often feel unwelcome,” Sipes said. “They express diverse opinions and speak with a contemporary voice, sometimes raw and provocative and sometimes touching and lyrical. Some of the characters are widely recognizable, others not so, but all are part of the multicultural fabric of today’s America.”

Clarence Brown puts on dozens of plays per year, but the cast and crew were both honored to be a part of something new.

“It is rare in the theatre to work on a new play (and) even rarer to work on a play written for us,” Sipes said. “I can confidently speak for the entire creative team when I say that we are immensely grateful for the opportunity to have worked with Chris Peña on his new play ‘the strangers.’”

Jude Vincent, an actress in the play, shared that it’s hard to articulate how well “the strangers” shows everyday life.

“It’s funny when people ask how would you describe “the strangers” because it’s really difficult for me to actually put into words,” Vincent said. “I think of this piece as a world with snapshots of our reality. There are so many things and issues that we face in the world that are silenced, swept under the rug, or that we ‘try’ to not give attention or focus to, and with ‘the strangers,’ we are showing the world just a few

of those things, issues and situations.”

Because Peña wrote the characters for the MFA actors at UT, there is a special relationship between the characters and the actors. Vincent said Niegel inspires him daily.

“Niegel ... has taught me so much about myself,” Vincent said. “He’s intellectual, wise and just overall that guy that everyone needs in their life. He’s passionate about social issues, his friends, family and style. Going into to ‘the strangers,’ I would come in with an open mind, open heart and open ears. Expect the unexpected.”

“the strangers” plays at the Carousel Theatre until March 11.