

THE DAILY TIMES

Playwright brings the marginalized front and center in ‘the strangers’



Pictured L to R: Charlotte Munson, Aaron Orlov, Jeff Dickamore, Carlène Pochette, Miguel A. Faña, Jude Carl Vincent, Emily Kicklighter, and Lauren Pennline; by Elizabeth Aaron

By Steve Wildsmith | stevew@thedailytimes.com | February 22, 2018

In figuring out a direction for an original work commissioned for the Clarence Brown Theatre, playwright Christopher Oscar Peña and director John Sipes turned to the Thornton Wilder classic “Our Town.”

What they found, Peña told The Daily Times recently, wasn’t a place they recognized.

“We didn’t see ourselves in it,” said Peña, on a writing room break from his work on the HBO original series “Insecure.” “It was a safe, straight, white world, and so we were like, ‘What is it like to be a person of color? What’s it like to be queer? What’s it like to be a woman in this world?’ Those are the things I engaged in as I wrote the play. I didn’t aggressively try to be topical, but in addressing what it’s like to be those people, those things landed.”

Peña’s original work, “the strangers,” premieres this weekend at the Clarence Brown, located on the University of Tennessee campus, and in exploring the worlds of marginalized individuals and groups, Peña found himself adding to a larger conversation — one taking place on a national level, certainly, but even on the very campus where “the strangers” will be performed, which has found itself at the center of controversy in recent weeks regarding white nationalism.

“It’s about a portrait of America, politically and culturally and where we are today and how scary it is,” he said. “For (the main character) Cris, what is most important? And the truth is, I got scared about the world and what Cris’ fate is at the end. Does he find love, and is love enough? What does it mean to have a home? What is home? Where is home? Is it a person or a place? There have been moments where I’ve written versions of the play that’s extremely hopeful at the end, and extremely pessimistic. I went back and forth every day, and the ending we landed with, quite honestly, most captures how I feel — hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.”

The play tells the story of Cris’ return to “a place he once used to know, only to find a world he no longer recognizes. As he connects with a stranger tasked to show him around town, an unexpected spark challenges all of his preconceived notions. ‘the strangers’

depicts a contemporary American world thrown into chaos,” according to a synopsis. If it sounds like there are parallels to America after the rise of Donald Trump, it’s because the election played a huge part in the crafting of the story, Peña said.

“I fully believed Hillary Clinton was going to be president, and I thought, here we are at a time when the first woman was going to be elected; possibly the most prepared, educated political figure in the history of the government, so as I was writing the play, I had hope,” he said. “Then, about a month before the election, I started to get very anxious, nervous and scared. I had a feeling things were not going to go the way they were supposed to, and if they didn’t, that we could end up in fearful, apocalyptic places.”

And so Peña poured those fears into “the strangers,” as he’s done with issues in his life since he first began crafting stage drama. His parents came to the United States from Honduras, and a high school theatrical production demonstrated the power theater had to deconstruct social boundaries; he studied the craft at the University of California Santa Barbara and continued his education at New York University, staying in the Big Apple and penning a number of acclaimed works, including “Maelstrom,” “Icarus Burns,” “Alone Above A Raging Sea,” “L(y)re,” “The Suicide Tapes” and “Awe/Struck.” His work has been presented around the country, and he and his plays have been nominated for numerous awards; the accolades, however, pale in comparison to his goal with each play — to foster conversation.

“I don’t want to talk down to anybody; I want to talk to people,” he said. “It’s not about saying right or wrong; it’s about saying, ‘Why do you feel the way you do? Why do I feel the way I do? How can we come together?’ I think that American theater has really been written for and about straight white people, and it hasn’t really given a voice to people of color.

”When white people go to the movies, they see themselves constantly in the mainstream, but people of color and minorities have had to, for most of our lives, find other ways into the mainstream. Now that we’re putting people of color there, when some white people don’t see themselves in that place they used to be, they don’t agree. It’s like, you’ve always been invited to the party, and now that someone else is invited, can you actually sit there and listen and try to understand in the way we’ve always had to?”

In the East Tennessee market, such inclusion may be welcome on a campus of higher learning, but Peña knows that the wider audience skews more conservative. However, such conversations need to be had, even if certain segments of that audience find them uncomfortable, he added — and more importantly, those conversations need to evolve into action.

“We have a character in our play that actually says, ‘We can’t just have conversations anymore,’” he said. “Some people feel safe, but for us, it’s a matter of life and death. We can’t just sit back and talk and be kind; we have to be clear and direct, because I do feel we’re at a point in our culture where lives are at stake. Black men are getting murdered, gay men are getting shot up in clubs, immigrants and refugees are being denied basic human rights. To be ambivalent is to be culpable and responsible for not standing up to these things.”

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