

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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CURRENT THEATRE REVIEWS by TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER



Photo by Jenny Graham

Antaeus Theatre Company

In 1976 when General Jorge Rafael Videla seized the weakened government of Argentina from Isabel Peron under the premise that leftists were threatening their capitalist and, of course, Christian way of life, they called it a war. As Ryan McRee, dramatist for the west coast premiere of Stephanie Alison Walker's *The Abuelas* at Antaeus, mentions in the program: "Historians today refer to it by its proper name: genocide."

This is without a shadow of a doubt an urgently important message to our country right now as our own virulent administration led by a crass and vulgar monster as potentially dangerous and evil as Videla locks children in cages and attempts to strip us all of the human rights we've fought so hard to establish—of course, their causes also thrust upon us in the name of fighting the left and saving Christianity, factors that have been at the center of preserving "righteousness" for the last 2000 years as they destroy our freedoms and our humanity.

Walker's intriguing *The Abuelas* tells the fictional tale of one of the many descendants of the 30,000 Argentinians who were murdered in the coup, including as many as 500 pregnant young women who were forced to undergo Caesarian sections after being given meds to accelerate birth while being secretly detained at ESMA (Escuela Mecanica de la Armada), the horrific prison often referred to as the Argentine Auschwitz.

These young mothers were blindfolded and tied to the bed as they delivered, after which their babies were immediately taken away and given to "politically acceptable" parents with ties to the Videla regime. The mothers were then killed to guarantee the severing of all biological ties in an effort to insure all future generations would be marching in step behind the "new" Argentina.

Those children were called "los desaparecido con vida"—the living disappeared—and here professional cellist Gabriela (Luisina Quarleri), living a comfortable though less-than perfect life in Chicago with her once-philandering husband Marty (Seamus Dever), finds her existence rocked further when she is told by a volunteer from The Abuelas, a group founded in Buenos Aries in the late 1970s by a band of courageous grandmothers seeking to learn the fate of their missing daughters and abducted grandchildren, that she is indeed one of "the disappeared."

Gabriela was raised in affluence by the overpoweringly demanding Soledad (Denise Blasor), who is visiting the couple to help care for their infant child. Soon Soledad's birthday celebration is blindsided by her own invited guest Cesar (David DeSantos), an acquaintance also visiting from Argentina, who brings along another surprise guest, a mysterious older woman named Carolina (Irene De Bari).

Walker's script is an absorbing, beautifully constructed piece of work, with special notice going to her unique ability to get extraneous characters on and offstage to leave room for a series of dynamic two-character scenes, something extremely difficult to accomplish without obviousness. The story is sure to produce a few tears, even for hardhearted and crusty old theatre critics, although there could still be some work done to more adequately explain at least one prominent plotline involving tensions in the marriage of Gabriela and Marty and also to provide satisfying resolution to the fate of Soledad as most everything falls into place for the couple and Gaby's initially challenging relationship with Carolina.

Andi Chapman directs with an even hand on Edward E. Haynes, Jr's well-appointed urban highrise set, suitably overshadowed by remarkable video projections by Adam R. Macias that made me homesick for my hometown, featuring the Chicago skyline and Lakeshore Drive as they alter dramatically in the city's ever-changing severe winter weather conditions.

Jeff Gardner's sound design is also a surprising standout, subtly energizing the story as the weather crescendos and the wind whistles. By any chance, did the good folks at Antaeus take along the vibrating underseat woofers when they moved to Glendale from Deaf West Theatre space last year?

One glaring problem with the staging and set, however, is the several oddly-shaped steps that lift the upstage kitchen area above the living space but are so fake plywood-noisy when walked upon and hard to maneuver around that too often *The Arbuelas* could be retitled *The Play About the Stairs*—or then again, perhaps even *The Play About the Stairs and Refilling Wine Glasses* might also be

Still this complex and riveting play is an exciting introduction to a vital new playwriting voice and the performances here are all golden.

Whether it be in the writing or the direction, sometimes it does seem as though Quarleri's Gabriela remains too uniformly tortured and depressed from the very first scene to just before the ending, leaving the actor nowhere to go as the character's emotions accelerate, while David DeSantos as Cesar, the intruding volunteer from *The Abuelas* who brings the shocking news of Gaby's past, is a wonderfully affecting actor but Chapman or someone needs to tell the guy he doesn't need to project his voice to the rear balcony of the Ahmanson in Antaeus' intimate 80-seat Kiki and David Gindler Theatre.

Blasor, Dever, and De Bari all offer exceptionally evocative performances that will haunt you in their ability to make us get caught up in and relate to their individual personal situations. Though we soon after the first scene may want Blasor's richly authentic Soledad to go home to Argentina and stop trying to control her daughter's life, as her command of the situation disintegrates and the character begins to beg for the future of her tightly-wound relationship with her daughter, her performance is exceptionally heartrending and brilliantly facile.

The simple, poignant performance of De Bari as the long-grieving Carolina as she possibly confronts the granddaughter for whom she's searched for over three decades is also a heartbreaker, while Dever, in a role that could easily be overlooked as the major dilemmas in the storyline leave Marty somewhat on the periphery, is remarkable here. In less skilled hands, the role of Marty could definitely be an afterthought, but Dever contributes an amazingly complex performance, especially when so many of his character's problems are left unanswered and his reactions left to the actor's ability to flesh them out in Walker's otherwise accommodating script.

"This party is always in danger of being upset," a character notes along the way and boy, that is the definition of life on this risky planet, isn't it? What Walker has done is to celebrate the resilience of the human spirit in an existence which, no matter how idyllic, might one day be subject to drastic and unexpected adjustments. What *The Abuelas*—and the organization that inspired it—makes us realize is that, as a species, we can survive just about anything with which we're faced, especially with the love and understanding of those around us since we are all in this mess together.

THROUGH NOV. 25: Antaeus Theatre Company, 110 E. Broadway, Glendale. 818.506.1983 or Antaeus.org
