

Crabs in a Bucket



Photo by Cooper Bates

Echo Theater Company at the Atwater Village Theatre

What is there about the human condition that keeps many of us unable to boost one another and become consumed with jealousy when someone else achieves something we have not? It's no secret that members of traditionally disenfranchised communities tend to end up fighting each other in the attempt to avoid oppression and, in the process, usually become oppressors themselves.

This is what playwright Bernardo Cubria satires with great humor and an abundance of punny *pinches* in his new play *Crabs in a Bucket*, now world premiering at the Atwater Village complex presented by Echo Theater Company.

Although the Mexican-born playwright says *Crabs* began as a metaphoric reflection of his own dealings as part of the LatinX theatre scene, as well as the continuous struggles in general facing all of us Don Quixotes trying to create something meaningful in our apathetic country, he admits his vision soon grew to skewer a whole lot more than what it means to be an artist in America's current environment of inequality and collective selfishness.

Under the direction of Alana Dietze, her quartet of perfectly cast actors literally playing four side-shuffling crabs (clad in Lou Cranch's delightfully daffy costuming) deliver Cubria's sharply insightful dialogue about what happens when crab mentality takes over and those stuck at the bottom of a shucking bucket start to work against one another instead of together—the quintessential thematic exploration right now as WGA and SAG-AFTRA members try to rally together against the greedy omnipresent film and television studio fatcats.

Inspiration came while Cubria was working on a play in New York written by Mando Alvarado and he was struck by a line referring to the LatinX community as crabs in a bucket, a condition that, when one of their number tries to crawl out, causes others to step over it and push it back down.

In his sublimely twisted farce, Cubria's bucket dwellers Amargo and Pootz (Xochitl Romero and Anna LaMadrid) become increasingly more resentful after spending 20 years stuck at the bottom, obsessing as they rag about crabs who have gotten the *shuck* out and others who have either given up or become insufferable losers. The *chit* really hits the fan when newcomer Beb (Jordan Hull) arrives on a skateboard full of optimism and quickly becomes shocked the veteran "lemmings of the crustation world" there have developed such an angry and defeatist attitude.

As she tries in vain to get the others to change their thinking and get it through their cephalothoraxes that their own bitterness is what's keeping them down, suddenly a fourth crab joins the cast—and I'm for once not trying to be clever here as, according to my recent Google search, a group of crabs is actually called a "cast."

Mamon (Michael Sturgis) is a former resident of the orange plastic Home Depot pail and has been one of the most despised escapees, especially to his former best friend Amargo. They had a pact, you see, about what they would do if one of them was able to get out and when her friend so cavalierly abandoned the bucket, Amargo nearly threw up in her carapace.

The surprise returnee is definitely not anxious to discuss how he got back there or what the mysterious unknown world outside the rim is really all about and, when he and Beb form a bond, it further infuriates his old bud, causing Amargo to accuse him that his new alliance is only a blatant means to get his thorax sucked.

Cubria, whose *The Play You Want* debuted at the Road Theatre last season and was one of my top TicketHolder Award-winners for 2022, once again offers super-smart dialogue that is continuously laugh-out-loud funny until the importance of what lurks just below the humor begins to sink in.

Dietze proves to be the quintessential partner to deliver his message, with a keen sense for physical comedy that clearly translates to her players, all of whom deliver performances not only brazenly silly and downright hilarious but brim over with the desperation and overlying sense of malaise with which anyone trying to live and stay above the rim in our mess of a world can identify.

It's considered a bad thing in the narrow confines of the long-enduring bucket-dwellers' society to be an individual or special in any way and, to them, having faith in the future can leave those *pinchy* crabs at a decided disadvantage. "It's nice to believe in nonsense," the terminally disgruntled Amargo believes, "because it makes you feel like you're in control."

And as happens in our culture when one of the most resilient and special among us is driven enough or lucky enough to make it to the top and see the sunlight, far too often the victor suddenly finds they have "none of the special left."

The Echo's knockout production is blessed with the inventive and rule-defying directorial skills of Dietze leading a virtuoso ensemble of comedic actors and utilizing a clever team of designers who, unlike the characters stuck in Bernardo Cubria's *Crabs in a Bucket*, are able to work together smoothly to celebrate what the future has in store for a very special dramatist, a guy I suspect has a *shucking* lot more to say.

THROUGH AUG. 21: Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. 310.307.3753 or www.EchoTheaterCompany.org