

World Premiere of 'The Last, Best Small Town' is World Class Theater

By Flavia Potenza

Opening night at Theatricum Botanicum of *The Last, Best Small Town* by Latinx playwright John Guerra introduces us to a pair of neighboring families in the nearby Ventura County town of Fillmore—the self-proclaimed “Last, Best Small Town in Southern California.”

Spanning the years 2005 to 2009 and narrated by “The Playwright” (Leandro Cano), Hank and Willow Miller (Christopher Wallinger and Christine Breihan) and Benny and Della Gonzalez (Richard Azurdia and Katia Gomez) have been neighbors for years.

The Millers are a perfect picture of the American Dream. Hank Miller is editor of the local paper, while Willow is a stay-at-home mom who loves fitness and her children. Their daughter, Maya (recent USC grad Jordan Tyler Kessler), excels at everything she attempts. Meanwhile, Benny Gonzalez must rise early each morning to catch a bus to work at a local car dealership, while Della spends her days cleaning houses, including, occasionally, those of her neighbors. On top of all this, Benny’s hard drinking father (Shakespearean-trained Miguel Pérez) is a constant source of frustration for the Gonzalezes, unlike their son, Elliot (Kelvin Morales), who has been named class valedictorian and seems about to make all of Benny and Della’s sacrifices worthwhile as he prepares for college.

As the early years of the 21st century unfold, we watch Maya and Elliot come of age in a world that can no longer promise them a better life than their parents had.

“I grew up in a big road trip family, and Fillmore featured prominently in many of them,” explains Guerra. “I remember watching from the backseat as Fillmore grew and grew. But by the time I was an adult, that growth seemed to have slowed considerably. It felt like a metaphor for what we, as a nation, were facing in the years following the financial crisis of 2008. So I decided to write this play.”

Like the two families in his play, Guerra grew up straddling two worlds. His mother’s family is from Mexico via Boyle Heights, while his father is Caucasian, from the Midwest.

“The play is also a way for me to reckon with my own identity,” Guerra continues. “A lot of the issues that Maya and Elliot struggle with were my own as I came of age, and the conversations about race they are forced to confront are ones that, as someone who is mixed, are constantly going on within myself.”

From the beginning, I was captivated by the characters. How easy it was to get to know them and be drawn into their lives. It seems like a simple enough play but there are so many layers and nuances that introduce social mores that entrap us in life and throw us off course.

These are the times leading up to the Great Recession of 2009. Hank finally admits to Willow that they may lose the house. The scene is a gut punch as he talks of the shame he feels.

It wasn’t until that moment that I realized I was viscerally experiencing what Hank was expressing. I was participating in the lives of

these characters who became so real on stage.

This is a production that must be close to Ellen Geer’s heart, who co-directed with Kayla Ibarra. In her Director’s Notes, she writes: “It is not often one finds a play that opens your heart and gives you room to understand and love the human condition even more. It is our deep pleasure to serve the public with this gift of writing.”

The device of “The Playwright” to narrate,

moved the story forward as he interacted with the audience, subtly made scene changes and provided props to the actors. It all worked so smoothly.

So, here we have an ensemble of a world-class cast and crew and everything that it takes to produce an evening like this where the audience didn’t need to suspend disbelief. Only a world-class playwright could have crafted this. ■



PHOTO BY REBECCA ARANDA

“I grew up in a big road trip family, and Fillmore featured prominently in many of them,” explains playwright John Guerra. “I remember watching from the backseat as Fillmore grew and grew. But by the time I was an adult, that growth seemed to have slowed considerably. It felt like a metaphor for what we, as a nation, were facing in the years following the financial crisis of 2008. So I decided to write this play.”

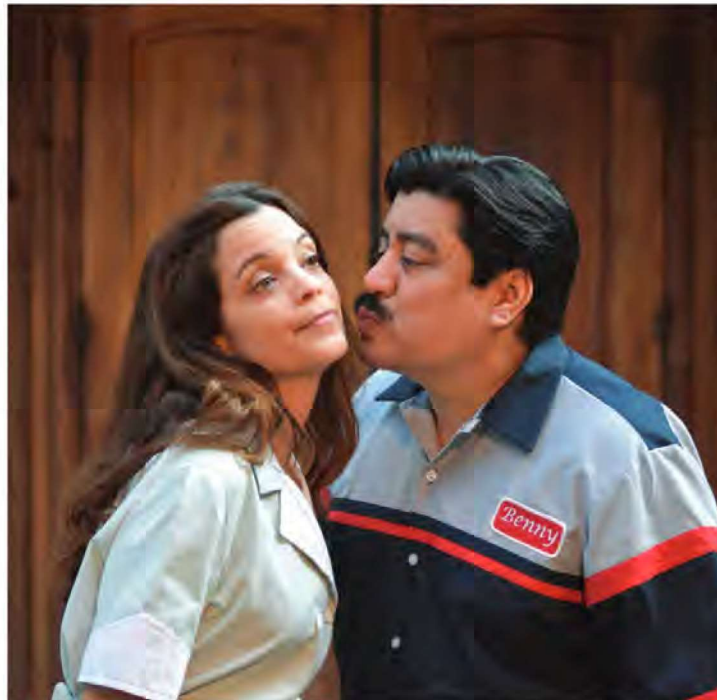


PHOTO BY IAN FLANDERS

Katia Gomez as Della and Richard Azurdia as Benny