

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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The Last, Best Small Town



Photo by Ian Flanders

Theatricum Botanicum

There is no place anywhere in SoCal as enchanted as Theatricum Botanicum, the boundlessly prolific seasonal open-air theatre company established nearly a half-century ago on the grounds of Will Geer's Topanga Canyon mountain retreat, the place where the actor had to move in the 1950s when his blacklisting by that Trump-prequel destroyer Joseph McCarthy shredded his career in film.

There, along with many other friends facing the same fate—including Woody Guthrie, who lived out his life there in the small mud hut he built himself which still stands to greet visitors near the entrance to the canyon's natural wooded amphitheater as a testament to the indomitability of the human spirit—the Geer family established a ragtag artists' colony where

the members, made up of once highly respected and established Hollywood artists, collectively survived their life-altering ordeal by selling homegrown produce on the highway.

Through the years and thanks to the unstoppable dedication to the performing arts by Will's former late wife Herta Ware and under the scrappy artistic direction of his daughter Ellen, Theatricum has become established as one of the most unique performance arts venues anywhere in the country. Each summer, the complex presents several classic plays performed in repertory with an emphasis on the Shakespearean classics Ware and Geer championed fiercely.

Usually however, the season includes one contemporary piece—customarily a world premiere—and this season is no exception. Los Angeles-based Latinx playwright John Guerra's *The Last, Best Small Town* is a clever updating of Thornton Wilder's enduring 1938 classic drama *Our Town*, spanning the years between 2005 and 2009 all wound up in the intertwined lives of a pair of ethnically-disparate neighboring families occupying adjacent homes in the nearby Ventura County town of Fillmore.

The stuff of their lives through the years, with an emphasis on the culturally-diverse problems facing the two families, are overseen from the future perspective of the character of the playwright himself, the traditional Grover's Corners stage manager role here gratefully assigned to and in the always-capable hands of Leonardo Cano, another true LA theatrical treasure.

As the early years of the new century unfold, the storyline Cano recounts directly to the audience centers around the blossoming love between young Maya Miller and her neighbor Elliot Gonzalez (Jordan Tyler Kessler and Kelvin Morales) as they grow from bratty childhood into their coming of age teen years as they attempt to quell their teenage angst and raging hormones in a world that in the early days of our fucked-up 21st century can no longer offer them the Golden Ticket to our country's long-lost and sorrowfully lamented American Dream.

There is often at Theatricum Botanicum an oddly overlooked unevenness in the performing styles of the actors, something that can not only usually be forgiven but even embraced if it's in a production of one of Shakespeare's or Oscar Wilde's often operetic classics where overemoting and the exaggerated projecting of voices in an effort to reach the back bleachers high up in the hillside is indeed part of the charm. In more contemporary fare, this theatrical conceit instead tends to hinder the performance. Under Ellen Geer's direction, so well established on this stage over the years, the individual work is unfortunately glaringly spotty.

The pearl-clutching melancholy and wistful expressions, delivered directly above the high canyon-y place where the audience is sure to see the emotional trauma of the members of

the two otherwise highly endearing families, is overshadowed by the intensely realistic and more naturalistic work of other castmembers—particularly the amazingly simple and highly grounded performance of Cano which provides the theatrical glue holding everything together despite any inherent internal flaws in Guerra's script.

This welcoming simplicity is also true of the three actors cast as the male members of the Gonzalez family: the proud and hard-working patriarch played lovingly by Richard Azurdia, Morales as the conflicted son bursting with a need to find a new way to live without his parents' sacrificing everything to make it so, and especially a highly memorable turn by Miguel Perez as the clan's ne'er-do-well and often drunken grandfather—someone who through his troubles still appears to have more sense than any other character in the piece besides his grandson.

As with most first productions of a worthy play, *The Last, Best Small Town*, although fascinating in its look into the cultural inequities of contemporary life, is also in need of further finetuning. Guerra, of both Boyle Heights Mexican and midwestern Caucasian ancestry, surely has the beginnings of a wonderful new contemporary American classic, especially noteworthy for his crisp and often exceedingly clever tongue-in-cheek dialogue, as well as his insight into both cultures here clashing over the families' backyard fences.

There is also a rather blatant predictability in the situations unfolding in his heartfelt play and I would imagine there are very few audience members who, by the end of Act One, have not already anticipated what the surprise twist finishing the act is going to be. This is also true of the play's climatic scene, which is not only predictable but underwritten, leaving us both unsurprised by events unfolding between the young lovers and disappointed the ending is not more uniquely satisfying.

Some of this could be forgiven if indeed Guerra takes a little time and delves more deeply into the unfortunate inequitable issues fostered by the two families' societal differences instead of just hinting at them throughout the piece—and me'thinks this particular highly promising new playwright is the perfect guy to take them on headfirst.

**THROUGH NOV. 6: Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga.
310.455.3723 or www.theatricum.com**