

from TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

## Kiss of the Spider Woman



*Photo by Craig Schwartz*

### **A Noise Within**

There's some question whether the original 1985 stage version of Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has ever been produced in LA. I was told it might have once been presented here in its original Spanish language version, but it's something I cannot find chronicled anywhere no matter how extensively I google.

Whether or not A Noise Within's stunning new production of the two-character drama is a Los Angeles premiere or not is up for grabs but either way, I'll bet it's never been mounted as beautifully as it is here in the hands of our most visionary wunderkind director Michael Michetti.

Based on Puig's 1976 novel *El beso de la mujer arana*, written by the great Argentinian novelist and screenwriter while living in his long politically motivated exile in Mexico, the play was first produced in the West End starring Mark Rylance and Simon Callow and translated by Allen Baker.

Of course, it was the source material for the Academy Award Best Picture-nominated 1985 film version which won Best Actor honors for William Hurt as the supergay incarcerated prisoner Molina, as well as the popular Kander and Ebb musical version first mounted on Broadway in 1993, winner of Tonys for Best Musical, Best Score, Best Book for Terrence McNally, and grabbing performance honors for Brent Carver as Molina, Anthony Crivello as the revolutionary Valentin, and Chita Rivera in the title role, an imaginary character first added in Leonard Schrader's original screenplay.

I imagine one reason the original non-musical version is not done is because of the static, even claustrophobic nature of the story. Spending a couple of hours observing the day-by-day existence of two incredibly incompatible characters stuck together sharing a dank and cramped cell in Buenos Aires' notorious Villa Devoto Prison during Argentina's infamous "Dirty War" is hardly like leaving home to see *The Odd Couple*—at least not an odd couple as envisioned by Neil Friggin' Simon.

There's no director on the planet able to keep such a thing interesting and kinetic better than Michetti, who not only provides a stunning, thought-provoking experience for those gathered, but shrewdly, even poetically conquers what I'll bet is one of the major reasons the play is not often produced: a rather clumsy and anticlimactic ending where voiceover replaces live action.

Not only has he and set designer Tesshi Nakagawa found an ingenious way to make it work, they make it integral to the message Puig was trying to communicate in the first place.

For me, *Kiss* has always been one of the world's greatest love stories, something I discussed often with our Ms. Rivera, who passionately agreed with me when I was working with John Wimbs at Live Ent doing publicity for the musical's west coast premiere at the Ahmanson in 1996. It's *Shawshank Redemption* meets *Romeo and Juliet* and without innovative staging and two drop-dead performances from the actors playing polar opposites who defeat all odds, I'm sure this original play version could be deadly.

No worries here; Ed F. Martin and Adrian Gonzalez could not be more perfectly cast. Martin finds a delicate, gossamer understanding and a palpable inner strength concealed behind the camouflaging veils as Molina—and without the ultra-muliebrity of Hurt, whose obnoxiously queeny Oscar-winning performance made me want to hurl popcorn at the screen.

Gonzalez deftly manages to accomplish the same in reverse, presenting what could be a stereotypically *muy macho* male but then slowly, in tiny increments, finds the deeply sensitive humanity of Valentin, presenting a character who becomes tolerant, then intrigued, then succumbs to becoming a caring and

sweetly generous lover.

The improbable turn could seem forced and even silly without the kind of remarkable acting Martin and Gonzalez ace without leaving the audience with a moment to question the birth of love despite an improbable, if not impossible, situation.

Although we don't ever learn how long these guys have been cellmates, we do know Valentin would like Molina to stop "whining like a 19th-century housewife," while Molina believes "if all men were like women, there would be no torturers." Valentin begs him to not analyze things to death, while Molina in turn is puzzled why the guy risks himself for his radical political cause, even though he professes to respect him for it.

It's not a match made in heaven—or is it? As the prisoners' relationship begins to change drastically (kudos to intimacy coach Carly DW Bones), the *raison d'être* of Manuel Puiz's tale becomes clear: "I'm more and more convinced," Valentin confesses, "that sex is innocence itself."

I usually brake for any story, be it play, novel, or film, taking place in a prison or during a war. I don't know why, but I always wonder if there's something to this past life thing that usually keeps me away from such topics.

ANW's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has distracted me bigtime from my neurosis with its never cramped or claustrophobic design choices, Alex Mansour's infectious tango-inspired original music, Michetti's always fascinatingly enterprising staging, and a pair of truly worldclass performances in two demanding and easily misunderstood roles.

**THROUGH APR. 23: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena. 626.356.3100 or [anoisewithin.org](http://anoisewithin.org)**