

The Travelers



Photo by Jay Yamada

Latino Theater Company at the Los Angeles Theatre Center

Entering the Los Angeles Theatre Center for the LA premiere of Luis Alfaro's *The Travelers*, Tanya Orellana's starkly surreal set, featuring candlelit mounds of dirt, delicate twinkling chandeliers, as well as a rust-stained bathtub and matching toilet, all accompanied by Joan Osato's arresting nature-oriented rear projections, immediately lets you know you're in for a ride.

True to its title, *The Travelers* debuted last winter at San Francisco's gloriously prolific Magic Theatre and, after a celebrated run there, has now been remounted at LATC under the auspices of the Latino Theatre Company featuring the original cast and creative team.

The first thing to know about any play by Alfaro, whose indissolubly Chicano-centric work falls somewhere between Beckett and Steinbeck with a little Bukowski thrown in, is that the guy doesn't let you sit back and enjoy that aforementioned ride; you have to sit up, keep your hands at 10 and 2, and stay sharply focused.

Developed within the auspices of the Magic's Campo Santo performance group and written with these particular actors in mind, *The Travelers* is a haunting, richly evocative journey of discovery about the inequities of religious devotion, about the complex vulnerabilities of our fragile species and, created by Alfaro during the height of the pandemic, about how isolation can permanently alter and even destroy the human spirit.

Predatory birds soar and giant coyotes prowl in the brush on Osato 's omnipresent projections as a nearly naked young man (Ogie Zulueta), who has been lying motionless behind the tub from the moment the audience is let into LATC's cavernous, naturally musty, equally surreal Tom Bradley Theatre, is lowered into the bathtub and four shadowy figures move into place at the front of the stage.

As if in a ritualistic dance, under director Catherine Castellanos' intensely collaborative stylistic staging, the players (Daniel Duque-Estrada, Guillermo Yiyo Orneles, Kinan Valdez, and Sean San Jose) strip off their street clothes and don tattered monastic robes, cinching them with rope belts, lifting their hoods over their heads to limn anonymity and, finally, fingering long wooden rosary beads in perfect unison.

Suddenly, the quiet and lyrical dreamscape accented by Grisel Torres' chimerical lighting and Christopher Saucedo's atmospheric sound plot is shattered by the offstage screams of a terrified intruder (Juan Manuel Amador) who intrudes upon their meditative state bleeding profusely and in obvious pain.

The unexpected guest has been shot but never once does that interfere with the hospitality of Brother Santo (San Jose, who has also restaged the play for LA audiences), the leader of their mysterious band whose actions are guided by the convictions of his tiny 936-year-old Carthusian Order despite the fact that their Archdiocese has cut the monks off both financially and spiritually.

The other three Brothers are less willing to take the man in, especially when their own resources have been so drastically reduced in their dilapidated monastery in Grangeville, California on the Central Coast, a desolate place populated mostly by itinerant farm workers with a population in the 2020 census of 324—obviously not exactly a cornucopia of agricultural abundance.

Juan quickly becomes Brother Juan and reluctantly joins their order, never quite content with his new lifestyle nor comfortable with having to take a shit on the onstage toilet with Brother Ogie looking on from his forever home in that excessively unappealing-looking bathtub.

Ogie, it seems, lives fulltime there since he has no use of his lower extremities and has been stuck there for his entire life, the origins of his sad existence unraveled as the story progresses. He blithely accepts his diminished capacities to the point where, when the poop-challenged Juan calls him disabled, he is puzzled because he's never heard that word before.

This dedicated Bay Area team is almost completely uniformly astonishing, with the exception of one overly theatricalized and presentational performance that could be easily subdued with a little cautionary guidance from someone not distracted by his own performance, impressive as that itself might be.

Everyone involved is clearly willing to walk through hot coals and follow Alfaro wherever he chooses to lead them, with particular nods to Valdez as the fiery Brother Nacho and Zulueta as the highly breakable Ogie, a quietly indispensable character who is recognizably the spokesperson for delivering Alfaro's most reassuring message.

These are heartbreakingly lonely, emotionally unavailable, confused individuals, men whose personal crises of both religious faith and ideological doubts about what this silly life means have overpowered their lives. Yet just when you think Alfaro has terminally erased any hope for the future of mankind,

the naive and sheltered Ogie, lifelong resident of his filthy old clawfoot tub, delivers a brilliantly gossamer and lyrical monologue explaining from his perspective the nature of human emotion and the profundity of love.

Like Alfaro, at least one of his characters never quite gives up hope.

I do think this jarringly honest, otherwise nearly perfect production is hampered by staging Amador's uncomfortable attempt to sit on the toilet with his (onstage) audience of one looking on without dropping his pants or by costuming Zulueta in black swimtrunks rather than presenting the character as naked and bold as the play's themes and dialogue demand, both things that for me were glaring distractions that undermine the courage and raw artistry found everywhere else in the production.

The impressive and highly stylistic body of work created by the Pico-Union born and bred playwright, a true LA treasure whose plays such as the classically inspired *Electricidad* and *Oedipus El Rey* have been performed extensively here and all over the country, are intensely idiosyncratic and unapologetically theatrical, something in the hands of less gifted artists could be difficult for an audience to grasp. Alfaro's hands-on participation in the creative process from the first rehearsals at the Magic to this current incarnation at LATC looms over the play like a seventh character.

In fact, in Alfaro's near-daily addictive online journals chronicling his daily life accessible to people such as Yours Truly who are proud to call him a friend, he mentioned the day of the play's opening here in its second city that he was still doing a Tennessee Williams and rewriting the piece right up to curtain time.

"It's been an amazing week," he admitted. "Wrestling with ideas. Making changes. Shifting rhythms. New lines. New intentions. Pure transformation. Moving as an ensemble. Breathing together."

How I wish Luis would add a wandering geriatric non-Spanish-speaking Danish Jew to his work sometime in the future before I croak, as I'd give my left *you-know-what* to be a fly on the wall and watch an amazing work of art such as *The Travelers* leap from the page to such glorious fruition on opening night.

Seeing it materialize and ripen into performance level must be the experience of a lifetime, which is why artists as brave and visionary as Castellanos, San Jose, and folks at the Magic and Latino Theater Company, as well as this dynamic cast whose characters are respectfully baptized with their own names, are drawn to the project with such obvious reverence and unswerving faith in its McArthur Foundation "Genius" Fellowship Award-honored creator.

In a fair world, Luis Alfaro, who has unswervingly shared with the world so much of his culture, his dreams, and his disappointments in his prolific career, will one day be recognized as the poetic protégé of Federico Garcia-Lorca and our current generation's most August Wilson-like chronicler of the modern-day Chicano experience in America.

THROUGH OCT. 15: Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., LA. 213.489.0994 or www.latinoteaterco.org