

'This Land' is whose land?

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By Don Shirley | November 12, 2017 8:13 PM



"This Is Your Land." Photo by Grettel Cortes Photography.

Neighborhoods change. Change often causes conflict. Conflict is usually an important ingredient of drama.

So it isn't surprising that modern dramatists sometimes reflect on changing neighborhoods, from "The Cherry Orchard" to "Clybourne Park" to... "This Land."

In "This Land," at the new Company of Angels home in northeast Los Angeles, Evangeline Ordaz takes a very long view of the changing occupants of one particular parcel of turf, located in what is now known as Watts.

The story begins in the 1840s, as the Tongva inhabitants are being displaced by a Mexican land grant property, Rancho La Tajauta. The narrative skips the brief period (1907-1926) when Watts was an incorporated city with a mostly white population, before its annexation by Los Angeles. But it covers the post-World War II era of the "Second Great Migration," when Watts became mostly African-American, and one of the characters in those scenes is a longtime white resident who isn't eager to join the white flight. The play also moves to 1992, as the area was becoming predominantly Latino, and 2020, as yet another chapter might be underway.

Ordaz shuns chronological order in her storytelling. Instead, she intersperses scenes from six different eras, creating characters in each era who are at least somehow related to other characters in other eras.

She's illustrating the commonalities as well as the more obvious differences among her characters. Achieving this

goal is helped by using six of the seven actors in two or three roles each, from different time periods. The transitions between scenes set in one decade and those in another include moments in which similar gestures or other movements help make the connections.



Niketa Calame and Richard Azurdia in "This Is Your Land." Grettel Cortes Photography.

This dramatic structure is remarkably ambitious, and it works remarkably well in Armando Molina's staging. Although there might be a few moments of initial doubt about who's who or when something is happening, clarity emerges.

This is not a dry experiment in dramaturgy and history. The human passions within scenes also become clear. Two marriages cross racial lines. Riots erupt. Culinary tastes change. The century-spanning, epic qualities are supplemented by nuanced human touches, all of it compressed into a running time that doesn't exceed the usual running times of more conventional realistic plays.

Center Theatre Group, which decades ago became known for its acclaimed multi-part epics such as "Angels in America" and "The Kentucky Cycle," commissioned "This Land." If a larger CTG production isn't already in the works, CTG should immediately start those wheels turning. This is a shining example of the kind of script that the last decade of CTG productions has been lacking - a fresh story that's grounded in LA, past and present, but which could easily touch wider audiences far from LA who might see their own local neighborhoods and cross-cultural conflicts reflected in its characters. A production at CTG's Mark Taper Forum would greatly facilitate that journey.

Meanwhile, the Company of Angels premiere is playing through November 20. This company, which has wandered through several changing neighborhoods within LA over the past five decades, is now producing on a surprisingly expansive stage near the County/USC medical complex, inside the Hazard Park Armory - the home of Legacy LA, a nonprofit that focuses on youth development in Boyle Heights. Judging from "This Land," I hope that the Angels will inhabit this land for a long time.

Also in Boyle Heights, one of the most conspicuously changing neighborhoods in LA, Casa 0101 recently produced

Oscar Arguello's "Sideways Fences," a realistic family drama set in Boyle Heights itself. It focuses on an unmarried couple who face imminent parenthood as well as looming eviction from their apartment, which was converted from a detached garage. Although much more limited in its range than "This Land," "Sideways Fences" paints a grim picture of the challenging economic pressures that exist for low-income residents of neighborhoods that are becoming more upscale. It would be worth reviving in a year or so.

That sense of a very immediate connection to local concerns is missing from Casa 0101's current production, "An Enemy of the Pueblo," which is inspired by and loosely based on Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People." Playwright Josefina López took Ibsen's 19th-century tale of an upright doctor, who warns against the contamination of the local springs that serve as the headwaters of the local economy, and relocated it to "Milagros," a fictional Mexican border town. López transforms Ibsen's crusading doctor into a crusading *curandera*, who warns against similarly contaminated springs, even though she doesn't seem to care much about obtaining scientific proof of the pollution.

I saw "An Enemy of the Pueblo" last Saturday, the same day that the LA Times ran an article about action that's finally being taken against outdoor animal rendering plants that, for decades, have aggravated the predominantly Latino citizens of the communities of southeast L.A., and Boyle Heights itself. The article also mentioned the lead contamination in the same neighborhoods from the now-closed Exide Technologies battery recycling plant and other sources.

I wondered why López set "An Enemy of the Pueblo" across the border in a fictional small town when she might have adapted Ibsen's narrative to Casa 0101's own neighborhood, with its recent real-life environmental conflicts.

Leimert Park is another LA neighborhood that has gone through demographic changes over decades, and Velina Hasu Houston uses one specific chapter of that history in "Little Women," her new adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's beloved novel. The play is set in the aftermath of World War II, when Leimert Park - previously mostly white but on its way to becoming mostly black -- became a destination for some of the Japanese Americans who had returned from the internment camps during the war and found their previous neighborhoods disrupted (a topic examined in "Bronzeville," a play by Tim Toyama and Aaron Woolfolk, produced by Robey Theatre at LATC twice in the last decade).

Alcott's 19th-century style, generally maintained by Houston in this Playwrights Arena production, seems somewhat anachronistic in this context. I couldn't quite tell how seriously we were supposed to take it. Still, the performances are vivid under the direction of Jon Lawrence Rivera, in the Chromolume Theatre on Washington Boulevard in mid-city LA, not far from (northwest of) Leimert Park.



Rosie Nagasaki, Sharon Omi, Jacqueline Misaye, Jennifer Chang, Nina Harada in "Little Women." Kelly Stuart.

Lots of Latinx theater

Right now, no one can complain about a dearth of Latino theater (or "Latinx" theater, if you want to use the gender-neutral alternative to "Latino" or "Latina," as many theater practitioners do these days).

Los Angeles Theatre Center and its Latino Theater Company are in the midst of hosting a second Encuentro festival, which is presenting 14 mainstage productions from six countries, plus a variety of shorter late-evening shows and a "Latinx Theatre Commons" conference in the downtown building. It's a theater-oriented answer to Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, the current Latino-oriented visual arts-oriented festival.

As the above discussion of Casa 0101 programming indicates, Encuentro isn't the only such fare in LA. A few weeks ago, Musical Theatre West in Long Beach revived Lin-Manuel Miranda's and Quiara Alegria Hudes' "In the Heights" -- a very savvy and popular move in the wake of the arrival of Miranda's even more popular "Hamilton" in LA. "In the Heights" scales new heights every time I see it, in part because I discovered that I can now appreciate the fast-moving lyrics more easily by listening to them while reading them on the Genius website that offers the same services for "Hamilton."

I sampled five of the Encuentro shows at LATC last weekend. Judging from those, my strongest advice is to see the festival's double-barreled mini-festival that depicts the plight of DACA "Dreamers": LA's Ensemble Studio Theatre production of Alex Alphaerah's "WET: A DACAmended Journey" and "Deferred Action," from Cara Mía Theatre of Dallas, Texas.

Instead of competing, they complement each other. "WET" is a stunning autobiographically-based and mostly LA-

set solo that EST has been presenting in Atwater for several months. "Deferred Action" is a fictionalized nine-actor play, by David Lozano and Lee Trull, about a Texas Dreamer who becomes embroiled in a presidential election in unexpected but not implausible ways. Both of them are sometimes funny, sometimes moving, and about as topical as theater gets.

I'll also recommend "Culture Clash: an American Odyssey" in its Encuentro incarnation. The satirical energy of this three-man group (Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas, Herbert Siguenza), now in their fourth decade together, remains as sharp as ever. This collection of sketches and solos, some of them adapted from previous productions but others created for this occasion, produces a more consistent level of comic catharsis than many of the trio's full-length productions. Although Montoya's brief impersonation of his host, LATC artistic director José Luis Valenzuela, might be too much of an inside joke for some in the audience, most of those who know Valenzuela will find it irresistible.



"Deferred Action." Karen Almond