

BWW Review: Center Theatre Group Presents ELLIOT, A SOLDIER'S FUGUE and WATER BY THE SPOONFUL, the First Two Plays in Quiara Alegría Hudes' Trilogy

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by [Shari Barrett](#) Feb. 13, 2018

Quiara Alegría Hudes is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright who wrote the book for the Broadway musical "In the Heights," which received the 2008 Tony Award for Best Musical, a Tony nomination for Best Book of a Musical and was a 2009 Pulitzer Prize finalist. Her Pulitzer-nominated and winning trilogy of plays known as the "Elliot Trilogy" are now being presented concurrently, giving Los Angeles theatre audiences a rare opportunity to immerse themselves in this exciting playwright's work.

ELLIOT, A SOLDIER'S FUGUE, the first in her trilogy of Elliot plays, is being produced by [Center Theatre Group](#) at the [Kirk Douglas Theatre](#) at the same time they are presenting the second play in the trilogy, Hudes' Pulitzer-winning **WATER BY THE SPOONFUL** at the [Mark Taper Forum](#). The Latino Theater Company will present the final installment of the trilogy with their production of **THE HAPPIEST SONG PLAYS LAST** at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC) opening later this month.

Directed by [Shishir Kurup](#), **ELLIOT, A SOLDIER'S FUGUE** introduces audiences to Elliot, a young American of Puerto Rican heritage, as he begins to find his way in life, portrayed by [Peter Mendoza](#) from East Los Angeles with an emotional understanding of the character from deep within his soul, having spoken with the real Elliot upon whom the role is based. No doubt most of us have met young men in the same set of circumstances, making a choice they are not prepared to make and winding up living the kind of life they could never have imagined for themselves.



Within the play we meet the two men who greatly contributed to Elliot's outlook on life and decision to voluntarily pursue a military career: his Grandpop (Ruben Garfias) who served in Korea in order to obtain his U.S.A. citizenship, and his Pop (Jason Manuel Olazabal) who was drafted and sent to Vietnam. Yearning for a truer connection with his father, Elliot considers his own limited options outside the military before voluntarily joining the Air Force. Of course, none of the three really knew what they were getting into before they actually hit the trenches. Three generations of soldiers who battled in three separate wars for three separate reasons bring the play's anti-war message to the forefront every time their stories are shared.



Enlisting just to get out of his dead-end life, 19-year-old Elliot returns from Iraq with a Purple Heart. As he recovers from his leg injury, he consults with his relatives and learns how similar, as well as different, they truly are. Through these three men, the history of America at war in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq is brought into focus, both the good and the bad, be it on the battlefield or in the family's home once the battle-weary soldier has returned. And in fact, when Elliot decides to return for his second tour of duty in Iraq, his main reason seems to be that "it's better than working at Subway."



Caro Zeller rounds out the cast as Ginny who portrays girlfriends, wives, mothers, and nurses whose care and concern offer each of the men comfort when needed most. Zeller is adept at allowing us to see her frustration at what the war has done to each of the men in her life.



Scenic designer Sibyl Wickersheimer has created a reflective, two-story set with playing areas brilliantly lit by Geoff Korf, with sound design by John Nobori which brings the peaceful retreat of his mother's garden and the horrific reality of war into focus.

Directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, Hudes' 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning play **WATER BY THE SPOONFUL** continues through March 11, 2018 at the Mark Taper Forum. In it, we meet the women in Elliot's family, his aunt Odessa (Luna Lauren Vélez) who raised him like her own after his birth mother, her sister, gave him up. His aunt, herself a crack addict fighting her addiction on a daily basis, is now the leader of an online crack addicts support group. Online chats between the group's members are noted with overhead projections designed by Hannah Wasileski.

Taking place after Elliot returns from his second tour of duty in Iraq with a leg permanently injured on the battlefield, he is now back working at a local Subway. We meet Elliot (portrayed by Sean Carvajal much more sedate than the enthusiastic Elliot portrayed in the first play) and his cousin Yazmin (Keren Lugo) as they are attempting to get their aunt's financial support for the funeral of her sister, their biological mother. After she refuses to lend a hand, Elliot returns and breaks into her computer and uses her account to befuddle the group of crack addicts looking to her for emotional support.



You see, Odessa is now the leader of an online chat room for crack addicts, as she is one herself. Her lapse plays an important part in the outcome of everyone she comes in contact with during the play. But while in her chat room, we meet a janitor with the handle Chutes&Ladders (Bernard K. Addison), a software mogul (Fountainhead played by Josh Braaten), and a college grad paper-pusher (Orangutan played by Sylvia Kwan) who have one thing in common. Although they live thousands of miles apart, these four people share a secret: they're recovering crack addicts who have found a safe haven in an online chat room. There, with liberal doses of jokes and bullying, they help each other navigate the broken terrain of their lives.



But their safe place is challenged when Elliot and Yazmin confront the chat room's leader, their aunt Odessa (who raised Elliot as if he were her own son), in an attempt to gain her financial assistance to cover the costs of their mother's funeral. When she refuses to help, Elliot's tragedy spills over into their cyberhome when he breaks into the chat room using Odessa's handle and proceeds to confront the group members, who each go on to make decisions that will change all their lives. And all the while, Elliot is haunted by the ghost of an Iraqi (Nick Massouh) he killed in battle, Worlds virtual and real unfold onstage, challenging our notions of family, forgiveness, community and courage.



WATER BY THE SPOONFUL features set design by Adam Rigg, costume design by Raquel Barreto, lighting design by Yi Zhao, sound design by Jane Shaw and projection design by Hannah Wasileski. The production stage manager is David S. Franklin, who is



to be commended for the task of cleaning up the massive water fall onstage in the final scene after Elliot and Yazmin release their mother's ashes back into the nature she so loved.

Tickets for **ELLIOT, A SOLDIER'S FUGUE** are available by calling (213) 628-2772, online at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org, at the [Center Theatre Group Box Office](#) at the [Ahmanson Theatre](#) or at the [Kirk Douglas Theatre Box Office](#) two hours prior to performances which continue through February 25, 2018. Tickets range from \$25 - \$70. The [Kirk Douglas Theatre](#) is located at 9820 Washington Blvd. in Culver City, CA 90232. Free three hour covered parking at City Hall with validation (available in the [Kirk Douglas Theatre lobby](#)).

Tickets to **WATER BY THE SPOONFUL** through March 11, 2018, are available by calling (213) 628-2772, online at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org or at the [Center Theatre Group Box Office](#) located at the [Ahmanson Theatre](#). Tickets range from \$25 - \$95. The [Mark Taper Forum](#) is located at The Music Center, 135 N. Grand Avenue in Downtown L.A. 90012.

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