

Review: The Latino Theater Company Presents THE HAPPIEST SONG PLAYS LAST as the Final Installment of Quiara Alegria Hudes' ELLIOT trilogy

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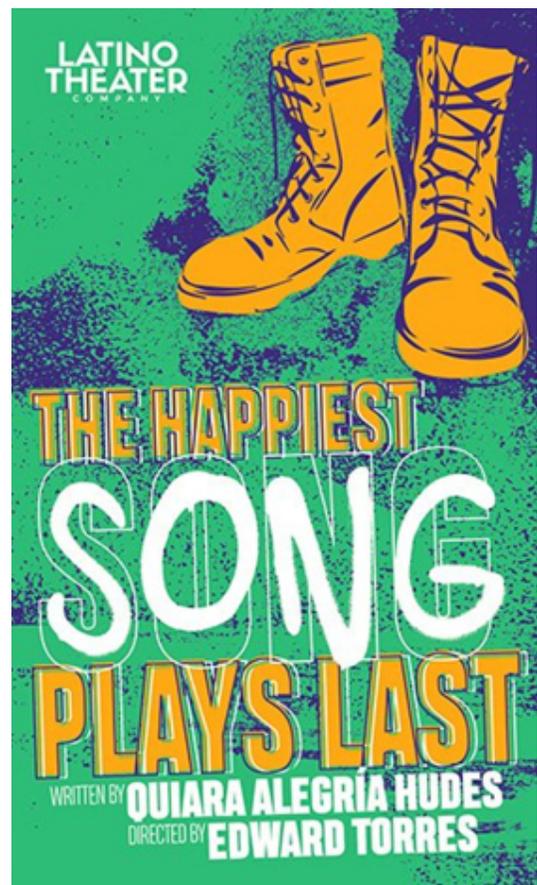
by Shari Barrett

Quiara Alegria 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 being presented concurrently, giving Los Angeles theatre audiences a rare opportunity to immerse themselves in this exciting playwright's work.

"I am marrow-deep grateful to Elliot Ruiz - my cousin, my muse, my inspiration," wrote Hudes in her acknowledgments. "When he returned from Iraq, that boyish sparkle in his eye had changed, ever so slightly. As his life story continued to unfold, I continued to write and Elliot gave me his blessing and took my creative license in stride."

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 is now presenting the final installment of the trilogy with their production of **THE HAPPIEST SONG PLAYS LAST** at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC).

I have previously posted a combination review of the first two plays in the trilogy, in which Elliot, a young Puerto Rican living in Philadelphia, decides to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and enlist in the Armed Forces. After being injured in battle, Elliot returns home a changed man, dealing with the death of his mother and his aunt's lack of willingness to help out due to her crack addicts support group taking up her time. You can read my reviews of those two



shows via this link: [/los-angeles/article/BWW-Review-Center-Theatre-Group-Presents-ELLIOT-A-SOLDIERS-FUGUE-and-WATER-BY-THE-SPOONFUL-the-First-Two-Plays-in-Quiara-Alegra-Hudes-Trilogy-20180213](https://www.bww-review.com/los-angeles/article/BWW-Review-Center-Theatre-Group-Presents-ELLIOT-A-SOLDIERS-FUGUE-and-WATER-BY-THE-SPOONFUL-the-First-Two-Plays-in-Quiara-Alegra-Hudes-Trilogy-20180213).

The third and final play, **THE HAPPIEST SONG PLAYS LAST**, is being presented by the Latino Theater Company, directed by Edward Torres with the heart and soul of Latino culture brought into crystal clear focus. "This is a once in a lifetime thing, to be able to see the full story, which is really epic in scope," says Torres, who has a long history with the project: he appeared as an actor in the Steppenwolf Theatre production of *Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue*, directed the California premiere of *Water by the Spoonful* at San Diego's Old Globe, and directed the world premiere of *Happiest Song* at The Goodman Theatre in Chicago. "It's really special to be doing it in Los Angeles because the real Elliot, the person who inspired Quiara to write the plays, lives in L.A."



Set to the joyful sounds of traditional Puerto Rican folk music beautifully played onstage by guitarist Nelson González, **HAPPIEST SONG** chronicles a year in the life of two kindred souls as they search for love, meaning and a sense of hope in a quickly changing world. At the dawn of the Arab Spring in an ancient Jordanian town, Elliot, an Iraq War veteran (Peter Pasco), struggles to overcome the traumas of combat by taking on an entirely new and unexpected career: an action-film hero.



At the same time, halfway around the world in a cozy North Philadelphia kitchen, his cousin, Yaz (Elisa Bocanegra), takes on a heroic new role of her own as the heart and soul of her crumbling community, providing hot meals and an open door for the needy. Sharing her home is Lefty (John Seda-Pitre), a mentally challenged man, whom she cares for like a son.



The dual level set designed by Se Hyun Oh allows for the action to take place simultaneously in both locations with the arid film location downstage and the homey kitchen raised behind it. Elliot and Yaz often video chat, with projections by Yee Eun Nam allowing us to experience how they see each other, projected on screens above them. It is a very effective means of allowing the audience to tune in to all the emotions going on, especially when the signal gets disrupted and communications get a bit jumbled.

This is especially true as Elliot shares how he has fallen for the multinational actor Shar (Vaneh Assadourian) co-starring in the movie with him while Yara has fallen for Agustin (Al Rodrigo), an older married neighbor. Both are hesitant to open their hearts, but as each does, their lives are changed for the better in ways so similar that when the cousins finally are reunited, the coincidence of how their lives have turned out seems almost too impossibly cute with both due to become parents at the same time.



On the film set, Ali (Kamal Marayati), a Jordanian, keeps a close eye on the process to be sure all goes according to local law and customs. Consequently, the three become good friends and trusted allies, sharing their life stories both good and bad. But when the film is halted due to political uprisings in Egypt, "just two countries away," Elliot convinces Shar to go with him there for the sheer excitement of witnessing history in the making. But when Elliot tries to convince Ali to drive them there, his confession that he cannot drive through Israel as a Jordanian citizen forces them to part ways and never meet again. It's a said separation, to say the least, that leads Elliot and Shar on a path that changes their lives forever for the better.



One aspect of **HAPPIEST SONG** that sets it apart from the other two plays - and a key element that attracted Latino Theater Company artistic director **José Luis Valenzuela** to the project - is the integration of music, which, according to Hudes, is used to explore the relationship between joyful celebration and social protest that she experienced in the communities where she grew up. It's an effective way to demonstrate how music unites us all in the many ways it speaks to our hearts and souls.



THE HAPPIEST SONG PLAYS LAST continues through March 19 on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m. and Mondays at 7:30 p.m. at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, located at 514 S. Spring Street, Los Angeles, CA 90013. Parking is available for \$5 in the lot immediately south or across the street from the theater, which is located two blocks east of the Pershing Square Metro train station. Tickets range from \$24 - \$52. For more information and to purchase tickets, call (866) 811-4111 or go to <http://thelatc.org/>.



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