

Here is Don Shirley's column, in which he reviewed both "Pity the Proud Ones" and "Hope":

Cuban Fantasies from 50 Years Ago at A Noise Within and LATC

NEWS by [Don Shirley](#) | October 31, 2011

Last weekend, A Noise Within's opening of the LA area's most impressive new theatrical venue in years coincided with the re-opening (more or less) of Los Angeles Theatre Center's largest theater space as a Latino Theater Company venue.

That was interesting enough for many LA theater observers. A Noise Within struggled through a disastrous recession to raise the money for its new building, and Latino Theater has managed LATC for nearly six years but had not done much inside the building's largest theater.

But the two companies' opening productions in these venues have something else in common. Both of the plays glance back about five decades, with one eye at least somewhat focused on a particular Caribbean island.



Clockwise: Esperanza America Ibarra, Dyana Ortelli, Keith McDonald, Dru Davis, Olivia Delgado in "Hope"

A Noise Within's opening attraction, *Twelfth Night*, is set in the late '50s in pre-revolutionary Cuba. And Latino Theater's choice for its move to LATC's Tom Bradley Theatre, Evelina Fernandez's *Hope*, is set during the Cuban missile crisis a few years later, with Fidel Castro and JFK themselves making cameo appearances.

A few caveats are necessary here:

Although A Noise Within's *Twelfth Night* is designed to conjure the more festive spirits of director Julia Rodriguez-Elliott's native country, the text is Shakespeare's, from that other island nation, without any obvious verbal allusions to Cuba of the late '50s.

In *Hope* at LATC, the characters are frightened by the possibility of a nuclear war precipitated by the Russian missiles in Cuba, and the family's youngest daughter holds fantasy phone conversations with both JFK and Castro as her way of helping solve the crisis. But the family is actually Mexican American and living in Phoenix, far from the Caribbean. At that time, Phoenix was probably also far from the top of the list of possible nuclear targets within the US.

For several years, *Hope* writer Evelina Fernandez's plays have been moving toward an integration of melancholy drama with spirited music. Her last play seen at LATC, a revival of *Solitude*, enlivened the smaller Theatre 3 during the RADAR L.A. festival last June, with a focus on dance moves instead of singing. In *Hope*, at the 490-seat Tom Bradley, the singing takes precedence over the dancing.



Sam Golzari and Esperanza America Ibarra

In fact, *Hope* bears some superficial resemblances to the dreaded jukebox musical genre. It uses period pop tunes of the type that teenagers dote on – both English-language and Spanish-language songs – but in a relatively unfamiliar context and with arrangements that don't necessarily duplicate the intent of the originals.

In an [article](#) for LA Stage Times that Fernandez wrote earlier this year, as *Solitude* was being revived, she acknowledged that the sound track of her Mexican American youth wasn't predominantly Mexican American – “I like mariachi music, but I really love soul and funk, which is what I grew up listening to. Vicente Fernandez is cool, but give me Marvin Gaye any day.” Although Gaye's prime time was a little later than the period depicted in *Hope*, he did release a cover of “Mr. Sandman” in 1962, and that's one of the songs that musical director Ben Taylor and the cast employ to great effect in *Hope*.

Most of the cast members who sing solos have voices drenched in bluesy soul – most notably 18-year-old Dru Davis. He plays the younger, quieter brother, but his emotions suddenly explode when he sings.

The story is loosely autobiographical. Fernandez herself lived in Phoenix, in a family of five kids, until she was nine, at which point her family moved to LA. The troubled family in *Hope* also moves to LA at the end of the play, although all of the *Hope* kids are already teenagers as the play begins. I'm not sure how much of the rest of it is autobiographical, but a lot happens during the course of the play. One particular event near the end still feels arbitrarily melodramatic.



Geoffrey Rivas and Dyana Ortelli

Generally, however, the play paints a vivid picture of a family struggling with its own demons, while also holding out the “hope” that JFK will somehow manage to lift up such impoverished families. At the same time, everyone is hoping that JFK can prevent the entire country from being blown to smithereens by the missiles in Cuba. It's hard to avoid the analogy to our current president from a new generation and our present-day terrors.

The entire cast is superb. But the women stand out. Perhaps it's not surprising that Fernandez pays the most attention to the perspectives of the three women – the besieged but repressed mother (Dyana Ortelli), her oldest child (Esperanza Ibarra) who feels seriously stifled and depressed and doesn't hide her feelings, and her younger daughter (Olivia Delgado) who's so moony over JFK.

I'd like to see other chapters in these characters' lives, and apparently I will. *Hope* is the middle chapter – but the first fully produced one — of a trilogy. Part one is *Hope*'s prequel and will be set in the FDR years, while part three is its sequel and will be symbolically focused on the third figure (after FDR and JFK) whose portrait is often spotted on the walls of traditional Mexican American homes – that of the Pope.

At intermission, I spoke to director and Latino Theater Company artistic director Jose Luis Valenzuela (who is married to Fernandez and has Arizona roots of his own). I learned that the main reason why his company hasn't used the Tom Bradley Theatre (except for special events or very brief runs of the company's annual Christmastime show about the virgin of Guadalupe) is because Valenzuela prefers LATC's downstairs venue, Theatre 3. However, he eventually wants to produce Fernandez's entire trilogy in repertory, and that event will require the larger Bradley.

I look forward to it.



Ben Jurand and Darrell Szenasi in "Pity the Proud Ones"; Photo by Adenrele Ojo

Also over the weekend, I saw a couple of smaller premieres within the orbit of *Hope* – Robey Theatre's production of Kurt Maxey's *Pity the Proud Ones*, at LATC's small Theatre 4, and Virginia Grise's *blu*, a collaboration between Company of Angels and La Colectiva Chorizo y Maguey, across the street from LATC at the Company of Angels black box within the Alexandria Hotel.

Director Ben Guillory and scenic designer Miguel Montalvo have devised an ingenious physical configuration for *Pity the Proud Ones* – the audience, divided into two sections facing each other, looks down at a Florida bordello circa 1915, located between the two banks of spectators. Set pieces emerge from beneath the audience and then retreat into the basement, so to speak. But the play moves turgidly, with too much of the story occurring offstage – only a convenient and climactic hurricane adds much punch to the narrative.

Across the street, *blu* is only an hour long. But its story of a barrio family wounded by family strife and by the war in Iraq feels too long and unpunctuated. It's severely unfocused, with lots of excess movement that doesn't amount to much, and with one of the dimmest lighting designs I've ever seen, as directed by Laurie Carlos.

***Hope*, LATC Tom Bradley Theatre, 514 S. Spring St., LA. Thur-Sat 8 pm, Sun 3 pm. Closes Nov 13. 866-811-4111. www.thelatc.org.**

*****All *Hope* production photos by Hector Cruz Sandoval**

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