Ghosts of the River

by Louise Adams
Monday Oct 5, 2009

Ghosts of the River, a world premiere for limited October and November runs in San José and San Francisco, delivers the absolute best of what theatre can, and should, be - personal yet universal, uplifting in the midst of pain, and simply human . . . a transcendent piece that celebrates what makes us people, despite the 3D flesh and blood bodies existing only on a flat screen in this riveting shadow puppet staging.

Often the concept of "ripped from today's headlines" translates into artistic mediums as preachy or pedantic; yet Ghosts of the River is a riveting, snapshot dissection, as well as a human face (via expert puppetry) of the consuming national immigration issue. Every local to international politician with a stake in this debate needs to see this production. Set in México, Texas, and the mysterious, sometimes terrifying, space in between, these five vignettes ponder the Rio Grande as physical, cultural and spiritual divide.

Playwright Octavio Solís has penned an astounding piece of prose, generated from interviews with various border populations (patrol guards, immigrants, natives), his own experiences (as a child, having to memorize the Gettysburg Address to prove his Americanism), and the rich mythology of the region (from chupacabras to the titular ghosts). Much like the specters portrayed, the production is unfettered by mere actor bodies, as the full-stage screen allows simple human shadows to interact with actors sporting delicate and haunting masks, Wayang Kulit (Balinese shadow puppets) that can handily span wide chasms (via leaps off a train trestle to fording the river), skillfully woven with video clips of the actual river. It's like the fantastic graphic movie "Persepolis;" a huge, live-action, back-lit picture book with humor, pathos, and enough space and time to ponder and digest how this country treats its Latino immigrants.

This "film screen with a pulse" staging - expertly designed and executed by Larry Reed (director and ShadowLight founder), Favianna Rodríguez (art direction), Balinese painter I Made Moja (shadow design), Gregory T. Kuhn (sound design), with Christine Marie, Reed and Solís creating the video projection sequence - also provides on-stage superscripts in alternating English and Spanish, perfectly capturing the Spanglish prevalent in that part of the country as well as here in Northern California. This projection device, making the stories accessible to all levels of speakers, also underscored the differences and similarities between these cultures; how it's possible to move from one to the other with ease, contrasting with the sometimes lethal trauma of a furtive border crossing. In addition to the blending of languages, the verbal and visual panoramas mingle Juárez and El Paso, from mercados to Mickey and Minnie to McDonalds (whose ubiquitous arches seem as menacing as border patrol handcuffs here).

The music by Cascada De Flores (the evocative, lyrical voice of Arwen Lawrence and Jorge Liceaga on guitar, who also wrote and composed "Mi Sueño") was an atmospheric highlight; an integrated aural component which also included the traditional instruments tres cubano, guitarra de son and jarana of Veracruz, vihuela, accordion, donkey's jaw bone and percussive dance. The ensemble delivered a multitude of characters, voices, and talents each, from actors Hugo E. Carbajal (who crossed the border from Juárez himself), Marilet Martínez, Saríta Ocón, to multidisciplinary artists Lydia K. Greer, Caryl Kientz, Gerardo P. Méndez, and Marc David Pinate, to shadow master Leonidas Kassapides and puppeteer Fred C. Riley III.

All the play's elements are about shadow and light in our lives, metaphorical and real, and simple rear projection techniques deliver stunning vistas, from the flashback of the frightened, "battered like a piñata" wife who is able to shrink to a child's size via light, as her menacing "men in green" deporters grew to fantastical, monstrous heights in the inaugural scene "Fantasmas del Río." Her pleading "no, don't take me" (back across the border to her abusive mate, whom she had deported earlier), which "fell on his shoe" was vibrant in line delivery coupled with black and white image. Her beaten body emerges as the first ghost from the river, intent on revenge for all Emilios in her path. The often comic ghost myth "Monster on the Black Bridge" had the past and present versions of Beto ("completo" and otherwise) spin the yarn of lost limbs from damaged crossers that re-form into a powerful amalgam. "Comido of the Ghosts" echoed the overall theme of illegal immigrants having to keep to the dark - "if anything was moving, it was our shadows, mostly" - and their feeling of alienation in both lands - "all guns are aimed at Méxicans."

Perhaps the most poignant and personal segment was "Adrián's Ghost," following two American-born fifth graders, playing by the river as "aqua-vatos," in a place where there are "no dainty flowers in the desert" for it "makes the desert mad." A childhood challenge - swimming from one side to the other and back - descends into fight to prove their citizenship with a taunting border agent. One 10-year-old learned (and never forgot) the Pledge of Allegiance, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address, while one slipped over the repeated lines drawn for him in the sand, into a life lost to drugs via loss of self. The final piece "Special Field Agent Fiona Banks" offered a more compassionate border agent, and her adversarial, yet respectful, relationship with eight-year-old coyote (people smuggler) Nacho, whose brown skin and red sneakers were a stark contrast to the white rocks that demarcate the border. As throughout the piece, even the pedestrian, like loogies lobbed across the fence, became magical and delightful dances of light. At the resolution, the revelation of three tears on Banks' mask face - which flow like the river for Emilio's wife, for Adrián, for Nacho - is nothing short of breathtaking in its simplicity and poignancy.

The epilogue of Ghosts of the River reminds us that "culture is in the current, not the banks," and the earlier evocation of the Gettysburg address haunts and compliments Solís's immigrant meditation here. The playwright has masterfully reinterpreted, for our current world, Lincoln's words, which pleaded, "we cannot dedicate-we cannot consecrate-we cannot hallow-this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us-that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion-that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain-that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Our immigrants are our soldiers now, risking life and limb for freedom and family. Octavio Solís gives us a gorgeous gift of reflection - walk, swim or run ... caminar, nadar o correr ... to Ghosts of the River.

Teatro Visión presents the world premiere of ShadowLight Production's **Ghosts of the River**, at the Mexican Heritage Plaza Theater, 1700 Alum Rock Ave., in San José from October 1-11, 2009; and at the Brava Theater Center, 2789 24th St., in San Francisco from October 28-November 8, 2009. Information and tickets at www.teatrovision.org

Copyright © 2003-2009
EDGE Publications, Inc. / All Rights Reserved