

WATTS VILLAGE THEATER COMPANY:

A L W A Y S A

IF THIS WERE *JEOPARDY!* the scene would play something like this: “I’ll take ‘Theatre Diversity Matters’ for \$500, Alex,” followed by a hush from the crowd. You, our lowly challenger, an enthusiastic theatre patron from Los Angeles, California, go for it. After all, you read *LA Stage* magazine, how hard can it be? You hit the buzzer.

Alex Trebek studies the card apprehensively, “Watts Village Theater Company,” and again the crowd mumbles, “What!? Hunh!? You mean where they have those riots and drive-by shootings all the time?” You smile, oh what good luck you have! You answer confidently, as an informed Angelino; “What do Black, Brown, Asian, White, Muslim, Mormon, Jew, Jehovah’s Witness, Buddhist, Baptist, Catholic, Atheist, Gay, Straight, Blind, Young and Old have in common?” The crowd goes wild as Alex Trebek concurs, “Watts Village Theater Company!”

Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, a giant-spirited man at five feet, five inches, helms the Watts Village Theater Company, replacing the irreplaceable Quentin Drew, the late founder whose passing nearly overwhelmed the company. “I was very sensitive to it because, you know, Quentin and his 10 foot tall frame, I’m never going to approach the sort of magnetism he had. I don’t have size 14 shoes, so what can I do? Well I can walk in that direction with my nine and a halves.”

What Aviles doesn’t seem to recognize is his vibrant, contagious vision for theatre in Watts is as stunning as the Watts Towers themselves. “When you’re far away from them, they look like grey skeletal figures,” Aviles observes. “You have to come up close to really see the color.” Aviles points to the massive bird colony nesting in the towers, back-lit by a golden sun, against the bluest of skies. “See how they sing?” Suddenly the chorus of

hundreds of birds illuminates this great treasure, these incredible spires bedecked with broken pottery and soda bottles, as this pillar of a man, rising from nothing like those famous towers, answers an artistic calling.

Aviles was changed forever when he encountered “a wild haired woman” speaking at his church in Watts, as he reluctantly stood in the back, “holding up the wall.” It turns out, that woman was Juliette Carrillo from Cornerstone Theater Company, also Director of South Coast repertory’s Hispanic Playwrights Project, Williamstown, Louisville, and so much more. “She



WATTS VILLAGE THEATER



(above) Playwright Michael Patrick Spillers with Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez

(upper right) Rosie Lee Hooks, Advisory Board Member/Director of the Watts Towers Arts Center

(lower right) WVTC’s offering of 365 Days/365 Plays’ *The Birth of Tragedy* featuring David Catanzarite, Tom Kiko Morini, MC Earl, Karen Greene, Meropi Peponides, Mary Ann Eisenberg, Chris Anthony and Deborah Kellar

(opposite page, upper left) Lynn Manning in *Weights*

(lower left) Ruben Garfias, Aaron Keith Braxton and Saskia Garel in *Up From the Downs*

AND FOREVER

Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez
Answers an Artistic Calling

By Angela Garcia Combs

Photos: Eric Schwabel, schwabelstudio.com

Makeup: Siobhan Carmody



WATTS VILLAGE THEATER





gets up and says, 'We're doing a play and we need young people to audition.' I didn't know what audition meant at the time. I was 16 or 17." From there, Carrillo talked Aviles out of entering the Marines and helped him audition (via video tape because he could not afford to travel) for the University of Utah, where he was accepted and studied with Kenneth Washington, now at the Guthrie in Minneapolis.

Aviles later received his Master's from UCSD under the tutelage of Professor Jorge Huerta, PhD, Chicano theatre scholar. Aviles has also worked with or been mentored by Athol Fugard, Bill Rauch, Lynn Manning, Suzan-Lori Parks and other social theatre greats. With Damion Teeko Parran at Aviles' side as Managing Director, the Watts Village Theater Company is alive and well.

Now, under the title of "Chance Meetings and Unlikely Bedfellows for \$300" you learn that Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, new Artistic Director of the Watts Village Theatre Company, a Latin, Catholic Angelino, met his Mormon wife in Utah, wearing a leopard-print skirt, a wig and a bra. "I was in a Tennessee Williams play called *Hello from Bertha*," laughs Aviles. "The director set it in contemporary time with male prostitutes dying of AIDS instead of working-girls dying of consumption." Aviles' wife-to-be was in charge of his hair.

Perhaps, in the category of "Unbelievable Facts for \$400" you stun the crowd on—"Michael Patrick Spillers." As you answer, "Who is the white guy, from a Missouri Jehovah's Witness clan, that moved to east LA to go to USC School of Theatre, and wrote a play about a young girl's quinceañera and journey into adulthood, via Tijuana?" And the crowd cheers.

Always and Forever, written by Spillers, soon to be staged by the Watts Village Theater Company at the Ford Theatre in Hollywood and directed by Guillermo Aviles Rodriguez, has a truly authentic voice, dripping in Los Angeles Latin youth culture. In his examination of the universal journey towards identity, Spillers illuminates the hopes, dreams and disappointments of the main character, Alma Martinez, as she rapidly approaches the "worst quinceañera in history." Alma's older sister Celia expects her to wear a traditional old hand-me-down dress, as she desperately tries to hold the crumbling family together. Celia fights Alma every step of the way, especially in her choice of music as Alma fantasizes that her Latin teenage heartthrob, Adán Sánchez, will actually somehow come to sing at her party.

Board Member Raquel Cinat, Board Member David Catanzarite, Managing Director Damian Teeko Parran, *Always and Forever* Actor Jesus-Chima Castanos, Casting Director/Actor Jeris Lee Poindexter, Associate Producer Meropi Peponides

“I FOUND MYSELF CONNECTING WITH THE DIVERSITY OF THE CITY. MY NAIVETÉ KIND OF PROTECTED ME. I FORGOT WHAT I LOOKED LIKE ON THE OUTSIDE.” — MICHAEL PATRICK SPILLERS

Jose (Celia's boyfriend who fancies himself as Che Guevara), Boxer (whose brother was killed in Iraq), Rudy (an understated gay friend from the hood), and the lone black character Olivia (Celia's best friend from school who documents the happenings in photos) all bear witness to the journey. As this rag-tag team of friends leaves LA and drives to Tijuana in Boxer's cherry-red '56 Chevy Nomad, Mexican folk saint Jesus Malverde watches over the clan in the form of a bobble-head doll. They cross the border and back again only to discover the far greater complexity of their lives when every expectation is dashed and they are all radically redirected.

The playwright's own problematic journey from the Midwest into LA Latino culture began when he was accepted at USC. Spillers nearly was unable to attend, as his Jehovah's Witness family did not believe in sending kids to college. He quips, "I could never be a salesman. I have a particular aversion to knocking on doors." Nevertheless, he managed to persuade the college to award him the scholarships he needed. Too poor to own a car and living in the USC region of LA, he took the bus to his night job at a greasy spoon diner. "I found myself connecting with the diversity of the city." He explains, "In other cities, public transportation is a matter of convenience and here it is a matter of class. It's a cushion when you get in your car. You get to avoid so much... the people around you..."

Spillers, fascinated by the work of Father Boyle of Homeboy Industries/Jobs for a Future, became a volunteer and got entrenched in Chicano studies, both in school and life. "They called me Cowabunga because they felt all white guys surf." He smiles. "My naiveté kind of protected me back then. I forgot what I looked like on the outside." Despite his distaste for door-knocking, Spillers is deeply reverent of tradition, religion and the journey of self discovery, as explored in his play.

"You cannot divorce identity from spirituality" explains Aviles. "And religion I know is a formalized spirituality but I think it's a mistake in the arts community to react against it." Aviles speaks to the beauty of tradition and culture. "For some reason we need to believe in something greater than ourselves. From the beginning of Man, there has

been that bowing down to the elements. That light." He explains that spirituality changes form and is expressed in a variety of ways. "Like the Catholic Church adopting the Day of the Dead."

Perhaps Aviles embraces Spillers' play because it illuminates the complex contradictions they both seem to embrace in their lives. For instance, Spillers creates only one adult figure in the play, a bobble-headed Malverde, patron saint of border crossers and drug dealers. A saint for drug dealers? Yes, this is a twist of expectation, like many moments in the play. Santo Malverde speaks only to Alma, since she has unwittingly summoned him for guidance, as she approaches womanhood. Should Alma be taking advice from a bobble-headed guardian of drug dealers? Is it any more absurd that Alma should believe in something as elusive as her abandoning father's good intentions? Soon we learn the hopes and aspirations of the phantom father run as deeply as the striving teenagers, who will stop at virtually nothing to realize their dream. In the end Alma discovers the sudden death of her Latin teenage singing idol is more real to her than her own father's disappearance.

Olivia stands just on the outside with enough objectivity to capture the exciting adventure via photography. "There's something about taking a photograph," says Aviles. "You have that moment in time when you are introduced to that person. So much of our identity is determined by outside snapshots. A sliver of time." Aviles, preoccupied with the concept, reveals a sliver of time from his own childhood, illuminating his visionary sensibilities. "We were crossing an alley and there was a pregnant woman, smoking crack, squatting. I looked at that image and it looked a lot like she was praying... like what you would be doing when you ask God for help." He ruminates on the void of hope and its effect on so many. And the character of Olivia captures that moment as it rarely is, with understanding, reverence and love.

"I'll take 'New Plays' for \$500, Alex," you announce. Trebek reads amazed, *Always and Forever* as you simultaneously hit the buzzer and answer: "Most authentic play representing Los Angeles Latino Youth Culture." The crowd cheers. You are the new *Jeopardy!* World Champion! ■

ALWAYS AND FOREVER

Opens April 14
Plays Fri.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm
Sat., April 21 at 2 pm with audio description
Closes April 29
Tickets \$20
Previews April 6-8, 12-13
Tickets: \$10
Sun., April 22 at 2 pm; pay what you can
[Inside] the Ford
2580 Cahuenga Blvd. East, Hollywood
323.461.3673 or
www.tickets.com
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