Meet the Playwright: Jose Rivera

Jose Rivera was born on the island of Puerto Rico and lived in Arecibo until he was 4 years old. In 1959, his family immigrated to a small town on Long Island in the state of New York. His family was devoutly Catholic and the only book in the household was a Bible. Jose was influenced by the family’s reading of the stories and parables and also by watching television suspenseful television series such as “The Twilight Zone” and “The Outer Limits.”

Rivera was educated in public school and first became aware of his desire to be a playwright in 1968 when he saw a visiting theater company perform “Rumplestiltskin.” The 12-year-old so enjoyed watching the audience’s engagement with the material that he began to read plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen and Moliere. He read well within the Canon of Western Literature (white, male writers) and was not introduced to Latin American writers until after he graduated from college.

Rivera’s style was eventually shaped after he read the work of playwright Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Marquez received the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature and, after Rivera read his “One Hundred Years of Solitude,” he enrolled at the Sundance Institute where Marquez was to become his mentor.
Jose Rivera writes his plays based on his personal experiences with themes of family values, sexuality, spirituality and the occult in the style of “magic realism.” Besides “Marisol,” which is loosely based on the experiences of his homeless uncle, he wrote “The Promise” and “Each Day Dies with Sleep” which center on themes and the conflicts of Puerto Rican families in small town America. His play “Cloud Tectonics” was featured in the 2003 Festival of Puerto Rican Theater and he has won two Obie Awards, a Kennedy Center Grant, a Fulbright Fellowship, a Whiting Foundation Writing Award and a McKnight Fellowship grant.

Meet the director: **Edgar Landa**

Ovation Award-winner Edgar Landa is directing the University Players production of Jose Rivera’s play “Marisol.” Landa was trained and worked as an actor before he began directing and his credits include both performance and directing at the Sons Of Semele Ensemble where he is the managing director. He won an Ovation Award for Best Director of a Musical for *Animal Farm* and co-directed *Film Is Evil: Radio Is Good*. Other credits include The Ricardo Montalban Theatre, Shakespeare & Company, Vox Humana, Arizona State University and here at CSU Long Beach. He has also acted as the assistant director at The Mark Taper Forum. Landa is also a fight choreographer where his violence has pleased audiences at The Mark Taper Forum, South Coast Rep, The MET, Tulane Shakespeare Festival and Shakespeare Orange County, the last of which was nominated for the 2004 NAACP Theatre Award. He studied at the Lincoln Center Theater Directors Lab and is a graduate of the USC School of Theatre.

Source: The Sons of Semele News Archive

**A Brief Interview with Edgar Landa**, April 30, 2007

*How did Jose Rivera’s playing around with the conventions of magic realism influence your choices?*

Not too much. I think reading Rivera goes beyond the labeling. The play was not written as a magic realism piece but gives its due to theatrical license.

*I noticed the play has very little stage combat. Are you disappointed?*

No. I’m much more interested in physical theater. I’m more comfortable working on a piece with big physicality.

*CSULB embraces themes of cultural diversity. Are there any specific choices you made to push or pull the themes of diversity against the themes of adversity?*

The academic setting is important. I work to honor the text and the playwright. I consider the students and how this is a learning experience for them. It’s important to
allow students to grow. I did use different parameters for casting than I would in a
typical professional production.

*Are there any major challenges you’ve had directing an undergrad production from those
at a place like the Sons of Semele Ensemble or the Mark Taper Forum (and not just the
obvious financial limitations)?*

I have to teach and direct at the same time. The cast and crew are, for the most part, at
the beginning of their artistic careers.

*What do you hope the students will take away from seeing the performance and also from
acting under your direction?*

I hope they can follow the story! I hope that the students in it have been challenged to
make decisions for themselves and not wait or rely on a director. I hope they’ve learned
to be proactive in their creative choices.

**Meet the Style: Magic Realism**

Magic Realism in fiction reflects characters in a normal reality but with elements of
fantasy, magic and the supernatural occurring as if they were just another ordinary part of
existence. The characters don’t react as if these elements deserve any special attention.

"For example, Harry Potter is not magical realism, because characters understand magic
as something apart from everyday reality - at least for some characters (Muggles). In
works by Garcia Marquez, though, extraordinary things happen, and no one seems to
notice that they are physically impossible."

Source: Yahoo Answers.
http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20061206051041AAYEGhS

**Meet The Play: MARISOL, a play synopsis in two acts**

*Winner of the 1993 Obie Award*

**ACT I, SCENE I** “I am dead meat without my guardian angel. I’m going to be food...”

Marisol is a young, Puerto Rican woman who commutes daily from her work in
Manhattan at a science publishing company to her apartment in the just barely above
combined with the far below poverty levels of the south Bronx. The events of the play
are described as pre-millennial, however, the reality is not the same as the audience’s
reality; apples and coffee are extinct, cows produce salty milk, and the moon has left the
sky, possibly in favor of an orbit around Saturn. Her guardian angel appears as a silent
watcher of the events as they unfold for Marisol as she takes the subway home and is
accosted by an apparently schizophrenic homeless man with a golf club. He tells her how
his guardian angel kept him from being torched in the park by neo-Nazis. Just as Marisol
is poised to receive a blow to the head from the wicked golf iron, the scene is engulfed in a blinding light.

**ACT I, SCENE II  “Thank-you.”**

Marisol awakens on an empty street and thanks her guardian angel, who only looks on without a response.

**ACT I, SCENE III  “Salt?”**

Marisol is in her apartment, hearing the abusive language and conflicts of her neighbors. Marisol tries to pray and begs for the arguments to cease until an angry girlfriend of one of her neighbors mistakenly believes Marisol’s apartment is the boyfriend’s and that Marisol is her boyfriend’s secret lover. When the angry girlfriend threatens to shoot Marisol through the door, there is a flash of light and then silence. When Marisol opens the door, she finds only a pillar of salt.

**ACT I, SCENE IV “God is Great, God is Good, Thank-You for our Neighborhood...”**

Marisol sleeps as the now conversant angel speaks to her and reveals that she, with the other angels, have had enough with the aging, senile God who no longer cares about his creations and that they are planning a major military coup of His Kingdom. The icon for this version of God is a gold crown suspended in a plexiglass box. The angel asks Marisol to join the heavenly army but she refuses even with the knowledge that the angels will be too busy dying in their righteous revolution to bother with living souls. Marisol understands that if there is no protection through ritual and prayer, she is at the bottom of the Darwinian food chain. Marisol then returns to her reality as if the angel dream was only a warning nightmare. The civilization of urban New York is degenerating into anarchy all around her as a reflection of the angel’s losing battle with God.

**ACT I, SCENE V  “It’s like the universe is senile, June.”**

June, a co-worker is relieved to see her because of the news report that she had been killed on the subway. Marisol believes it was a case of mistaken identity because of the high frequency of other Puerto Rican Marisols living in the Bronx. Marisol agrees to move out of the dangerous neighborhood and into June’s more fashionable Brooklyn apartment. A desperate Man with an Ice Cream Cone enters the office and demands payment for work he did on the movie “Taxi Driver” and that he’s dangerous because he played a neo-Nazi who set a man on fire in the park and that he enjoyed it. June chases him out. Marisol looks up and consciously sees her guardian angel, who is now toting an Uzi submachine gun.
ACT I, SCENE VI  “I’m going to need a lot more money if I’m going to evolve…”

June warns her about her roommate brother Lenny who is cognitively impaired and has developed a psychologically unhealthy infatuation with Marisol, even though they had never met before. Lenny appears and warns of the tortures perpetrated by Citbank Credit on delinquent cardholders. Lenny reflects on the trip he took to Marisol’s neighborhood on the news of her death, that he saw events such as neo-Nazi’s setting a homeless man on fire. Lenny describes himself as a sculptor and an empowerment practitioner while June describes his career of unemployment and incomplete flights of fancy including publishing Smegma, the Literary Magazine of Brooklyn. Lenny also describes having a near-death experience and his meeting with the Guardian Angel even as June tells him he never had come close to dying. June kicks him out to live on the streets but soon after regrets it. June enlists Marisol as a companion because it’s too dangerous to be caught alone. Marisol heads back to the Bronx to pack.

ACT I, SCENE VII  “The street breeds new species…”

As Marisol packs the things in her apartment, she repeats to herself that Lenny will be all right, that people will throw him change. Lenny appears without her notice and describes to her the desperate reality infecting the street dwellers and that he, too, has been bitten by this rabid virus.

ACT I, SCENE VIII  “I’ve been warning people for years, but no one listens to me…”

Lenny shows up on Marisol’s doorstep brandishing his golf club and stolen flowers. He reveals that June has suffered a major head trauma by way of a golf club. He believes his psychological instability is from being a human guinea pig in a military pharmaceutical lab. He tries to make a deal with Marisol because they have God in common and she can’t refuse a gift from God. In exchange for his gift of protection, he wants Marisol to believe in him and praise him as a god. Marisol sets the condition of first finding his sister. A confrontation erupts as Lenny tries to sexually restrain Marisol on the bed. Marisol goes for the golf club in defense as Lenny pleads for compassion and that he wants Marisol to be the mother of his baby. Marisol calls him the enemy and how she realizes he is a stalker and she is little more than prey to him. Lenny admits to hitting his sister with the golf club and leaving her on the street. When Lenny lunges at Marisol again as she’s trying to leave, she hits him in the head with the golf club. She believes she has killed him.

ACT I, SCENE IX  “War?”

Marisol runs to the street, where it is snowing. She sees the angel dressed in soldier regalia and carrying an Uzi submachine gun. The angel has taken off her wings and offers them to the audience. Marisol asks one question.
ACT II  “Welcome to the new world order, babe.”

The second act opens where the first left off, only the angel is gone and the wings have disappeared from Marisol’s hands. Reality has a surreal quality to it, as if it’s fractured under the strain of the revolution and the death of so many angels. The compass is no longer a reliable instrument to place Marisol in time and place. A woman in a fur coat enters and tells her of the credit gestapos of Citibank who have tortured her for overextending her credit. Marisol wants the woman to trust her so that they can stay together for protection but the woman is afraid of her and hopes to turn her in to CitiBank in exchange for redemption and a return to good credit status.

A Man in a Wheelchair appears, disturbed by the fighting. He face is covered in scar tissue from a conflagration of his skin. He discusses the karmic implications of the missing moon and Marisol still believes that even if God is senile, he still cares. The Man in the Wheelchair explains his view of the changed reality in which you can’t trust in either divine intervention or luck. He also tells Marisol that she is dead, which Marisol denies. He mocks her in her faith in a senile God and how he doesn’t want to get into the equivalent of a divine Vietnam. He wants to know what happened to his skin because it left his body when the neo-Nazis set him on fire. He leaves and Marisol begs to a silent God that she wants to believe and will spy and betray for his side as long as reality is restored.

She looks for food in a dumpster and just as she finds some leftovers, Lenny appears and tells her it’s all poisoned. Lenny is 9 months pregnant and fed up with the demands of third trimester agonies. He offers Marisol an apple to eat and explains that apples are not extinct but are extremely difficult to get as the only tree grows in the Pentagon’s central courtyard. Marisol takes a bite of the apple but spits it out because it is filled with salt. Lenny goes into labor and gives birth only Marisol discovers the child is stillborn. Lenny sobs at the loss and he and Marisol bury little Delphia in a mass graveyard of street babies, many who have no name to mark their extinguished existence. Lenny calls them angelitos or ‘little angels.’

Lenny and Marisol fall asleep when June arrives, her persona changed to a pyromaniacal neo-Nazi who is sick of compassion. With little memory of who she was before she was hit on the head with a golf club, she now seeks to protect only herself. She attempts to set Marisol and Lenny on fire as homeless rubbish. Marisol awakens in time and stops her only to be machine-gunned by the lady in the fur coat. Marisol gets so frustrated at the lack of return on her continued faith that she tells the angels to resurrect Lenny and June and that she is ready to join the doomed revolution. Only Marisol realizes that the addition of the human beings to the angels’ army changes the course of the war and, at the end, she seizes the divine crown which creates new hope and possibilities in Heaven.

Source: Marisol and Other Plays. Theatre Communications Group, 1997
SOME ODD WORDS AND TERMS:

Fulgent (adjective): Shining intensely; "the blazing sun"; "blinding headlights"; "dazzling snow"; "fulgent patterns of sunlight"; "the glaring sun."

Source: Webster’s Online Dictionary
http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/fu/fulgent.html

Carvel Ice Cream
Soft-serve Ice Cream Franchise popular throughout New York and New England. Carvel’s products are kosher and are arguably the best ice cream served in a cone, sundae or as an ice cream birthday cake (although not the grocery market brand name products which have none of the intense vanilla taste that makes it so popular). This is not a product endorsement, just the ice cream connoisseur/study guide composer’s honest opinion.

“God may be subtle, but he does not play dice with the universe.”

---Albert Einstein
PAPER PROMPTS:

1. Describe how the play either addressed or ignored the difficulties of the common person in which faith (or lack of it) informs their worldview. Why do some people see the world as beautiful and full of opportunity and others see it as rude and hostile?

2. In what ways has faith been challenged in post-millennial southern California? Can you argue that the guardian angels in our lives have found better things to do or that they never existed in the first place?

3. Discuss the significance or insignificance of babies being interred in a mass graveyard as anonymous entities. Is a name important for a stillborn child?

4. Is June an anarchist, a revolutionary or just psychologically impaired from head trauma in her desire to burn the world?

5. How might a Marxist perspective describe the relationship between Marisol, God, the guardian angels, the street people and the CitiBank Credit enforcement squads, or how would a Darwinian perspective explain the new world order?

6. A Moebius strip is a band with a half-twist in it and, if a traveler were to walk down the center, he or she would have to make two revolutions of the strip in order to return to the same place, first traveling an inner path and then an outer path without ever leaving the strip. Compare this model to Marisol’s surreal journey.