A Human Interest Story

by Carlos Murillo

Study Guide

University Players

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How *A Human Interest Story* Came to Life

The following are excerpts from the article written by playwright Carlos Murillo, "The Voyerism of Consent." *TheatreForum* 26 (2005): 32-37.

THE DIVING BOARD

The jumping off point, strangely, was an incident I had seen on television a few weeks earlier. The incident occurred during an episode of the reality television show *Survivor: Australia.* I’d never watched the show, but happened to catch the episode in question while killing time in a bar in Chicago before going to see a friend in a play. I had a book with me, but I kept getting distracted from reading by the dozen or so television screens in the bar, all tuned to that evening’s broadcast of the show. Between paragraphs, I caught glimpses of the hungry, exhausted, filthy, and excruciatingly bored-looking contestants as they whiled away their time on the bank of a river deep in the Australian Outback. At one point, when the book was winning the battle for my attention, I heard the bartender gasp in response to something on screen. I looked up. From the shaky camera work, the looks of horror on the faces of the contestants, and the sound of a man—out of frame—bellowing in agony, it was clear something had gone horribly wrong. What, exactly, remained a mystery for a few seconds. Then it all became clear. At first the image was blurry, but the cameraman had the presence of mind to adjust the focus: one of the male contestants, face contorted in pain, stood immersed up to his chest in the river. Slowly, he raised his hands above the surface of the water. They were a grisly sight: bloody, blackened and deformed—ribbons of dead, melted skin dangled from his palms and his fingers. While building a campfire, the contestant had inhaled smoke, causing him to black out momentarily and fall into the flames, immediately regaining consciousness when he felt his hands burning. I watched in horror as the normally invisible television crew broke the fourth wall (what do they call it in television?) to come to the man’s assistance, and as a helicopter landed on the riverbank whisking the burn victim to safety.

I felt simultaneously horror and fascination. I wanted to turn my eyes away, yet I had the equally strong impulse to keep my eyes fixed on the screen to see what would happen next. I couldn’t believe this was airing on network television. I couldn’t bear to watch, yet I couldn’t bear not to. I experienced directly the conflicting feelings the creators of the show intended to provoke when they placed voyeurism at the center of television drama: pleasure and guilt, satisfaction and disgust, astonishment and indignation.

It would have been easy to take the Puritanical highroad and use the *Survivor* incident to dismiss the rabid hunger for this kind of entertainment as evidence of the decline of Western civilization. But to do so would ignore what I perceived to be the real significance of the incident, namely, that it illustrated perfectly a radical paradigm shift in the way dramatic narratives are made and seen in contemporary, media-dominated American culture. In the
reality show genre, the author becomes a vestige, replaced by the editor and scenarist. The lines between fact (the show is cast with ordinary people playing themselves) and fiction (the artificial given circumstances in which they are immersed) vanish. The contract between entertainer and audience is radically redrawn so that the entertainer consents to becoming the object of the audience’s voyeurism. And most significant in relation to *Human Interest*: the unspeakable subtext of the reality genre is the tantalizing possibility of the “characters” suffering actual injury or death. These notions seemed ripe for theatrical exploration, and with this jumping off point, I flew to Seattle.

**THE PROCESS**

I didn’t talk at all to the actors about the *Survivor* incident or its implications. Doing so would certainly have triggered a spirited discussion, but there also was the danger that talking about it might lead to a thesis but not to a play. Working with my director, Ken Judy, we conspired to explore the ideas experientially, keeping theoretical discussion to a minimum. We decided to approach the workshop as voyeurs ourselves, as if the circumstances of Hothouse were a kind of reality show scenario and our cast members were contestants. Towards this end we crafted a series of experiments modeled on elements commonly seen in the genre. One such experiment was built around a reality show staple, the “confessional,” in which contestants address the camera (i.e. audience) in private to air grievances about fellow contestants, reveal feelings impossible to express in front of everyone else, and secretly outline future strategy. Ken had recently moved his family to New York and had access to his empty former home. We created a scenario based on the “confessional” model in which each of the actors would come to the house for a private interview in an empty room on the second floor. The sparseness of the room gave the sessions an atmosphere of an anonymous interrogation chamber. We came up with questions that ranged from the mundane (e.g. How do you like your day job?) to the potentially invasive (e.g. What do you feel when you hear people having sex in another room?) and recorded their answers. The experiment exposed astonishing insights into the way each actor used language and told stories. In addition, observing the unique reactions and attitudes of all six of the actors in the ensemble to the circumstances of the interview and the nature of the questions themselves was revelatory—one actor was evasive and suspicious, answering the questions vaguely and with a minimal use of language, another spoke very freely about deeply personal experiences with very little prompting, another appeared nervous as if she had been caught in some wrongdoing. These insights proved invaluable as I began to write as they provided a framework for me to write specifically for each actor. It is important to note that nothing from the interview session was used directly in the play; rather the material provided prompts from which to begin writing.

As I began to generate text, I noticed that the language seemed to gravitate naturally towards very detailed description of people, places, and events that the audience couldn’t possibly have the privilege of seeing with their own eyes. I also noticed that these detailed descriptions were somehow taboo to the character describing them and, by extension, to the audience listening. Despite this pattern, the characters and the worlds they inhabit seemed disconnected until I remembered the story of R. Bud Dwyer.

**TELEVISED SUICIDE**

R. Bud Dwyer, a Pennsylvania politician, committed suicide in 1986 during a televised press conference. He called the press conference shortly before he was to be sentenced for a bribery conviction. I was 15 at the time, but I vividly recalled watching the story on the news, and experiencing the simultaneous fascination and horror I felt watching the *Survivor* incident. In that regard, the two incidents seemed to me to exist on the same continuum. It seemed immaterial that *Survivor* was intended as entertainment, while Dwyer’s suicide in part was intended as revenge against the media he believed had wronged him. In the end, both cases exposed television
viewer to genuine bodily harm inflicted on an actual person. Footage of both Dwyer’s suicide (from various camera angles) and the Survivor incident is easily accessible via the World Wide Web which further erases the distinction between the two: what possible reason would someone have to download either, other than titillation?

I chose to adapt the Dwyer’s story to the present because it struck right at the heart of my inquiry. Rendering this naturally posed difficult problems. A straight reenactment would be hopelessly inadequate—it could never replicate the horror, shock, and tragedy of the real event. The audience would always remain conscious that it was an actor portraying Dwyer, and that the gun he inserts into his mouth was a harmless prop. I felt I only could approach the gravity of the event by dispensing with theatrical illusion, and relying primarily on a description of the event by a witness to it and the capacity of the words to trigger the audience’s imagination. Since this mirrored the technique of the other text I had written for the play, including the adapted version of Dwyer’s story, it served as the perfect bass line which the three other narratives could play against. It completed the matrix of voyeurism that had been emerging.

Full text of this article can be found on the library website or by logging onto your student account and going to http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=1&hid=7&sid=16a1cefe-ba95-45c9-b91e-4054281fca99%40sessionmgr4.

Interview with Playwright Carlos Murillo

As the playwright and an educator, how do you feel A Human Interest Story (or the Gory Details and All) relates to a student audience?

I wrote the play almost nine years ago in my late twenties and I was very consciously trying to figure out how to write a play that both in content and form would reflect what felt like at the time a media saturated world. Funny to think that now... compared to the present, the early part of the decade might as well be the stone age in that department. At the time I wrote the play I noticed that people, especially young people, had grown more comfortable with "multitasking" when it came to media... it seemed clear that people had a different capacity for absorbing multiple narratives (and rapidly switching between them), and I wanted to write a play that embodied a the newness with which we received stories. It also interested me that different forms of media, especially phenomena like reality television, fed a voyeuristic tendency, and blurred the lines between the viewer and the subject. Watching a reality show, for example, a viewer could easily imagine themselves into the role of contestant, because the contestant after all was not a trained actor, a movie star, a media personality, but an ordinary person who happened to be on television. I think all of this anticipated the world we live in now - where everyone is part of the media - all you have to do is sign up for twitter or Facebook or start a blog or upload YouTube videos of yourself and the boundaries between viewer and content are nonexistent. And all of those things feed both our voyeuristic tendencies as well as our living our private lives in public. In a sense, the play is quaint... it's talking about the dawn of the age we live in, but I think young people and students can recognize how the play is a kind of prototype for where we are now. At the same time, I think students are interested in the play because it resembles their experience in a way that maybe a more traditional play that takes place in a living room that unfolds in a single through line may not. I also think there is a tendency in theatre to look on other media, especially disposable electronic media as somehow lesser... or to look at it as somehow corrupt or poisoned, and there is a fear I think to embrace it fully. While the play is critical of the media-saturated world we live in, I don't see it as moralistic, or positing that good old fashioned live theatre is somehow better for you than a two minute YouTube video, or that these things are inherently corrupt....

As theatre artists, what is our responsibility to our audience?
I think our first responsibility is to entertain the audience. And by entertainment I don't mean that it should be fluff, dismissible as a pop song. By entertainment I mean that a play is a collaboration with an audience... and therefore should involve them in some way as the co-author of the experience. The play and the audience play a game together, and the game should be enjoyable, titillating, thrilling, emotionally engaging, inviting... even if the content is shocking or upsetting or disturbing. I think if you create an entertaining interface - one that strives to genuinely engage the audience you can take an audience anywhere - from the wildest lightness to the most unforgiving darkness.

**Interview with Director Edgar Landa**

*As a director, how do you approach a play like A Human Interest Story (or the Gory Details and All)?*

I approached it, really, the same as any other show. I look at what’s important in the script and how I want the actors to connect with the story. I think it is a great script by a truly contemporary playwright. Carlos’ writing reminds me a little of Shakespeare, not in content but in how he puts the voice on paper. I encouraged the actors to take clues in how the words are placed on the page.

*How does working with students change the artistic process?*

When working with students, I mentor and coach them. The students are learning, so I guide them a bit more. With professionals, I hire them because they can do the work. With students there is opportunity for growth. I think it is important for theatre students to expand their knowledge and I encourage exploration.

*What themes stand out in this production of A Human Interest Story (or the Gory Details and All)?*

The play’s themes are centered on isolation and half truths. It looks at the role of mass media in how events are portrayed and how we experience events through a filter. The show looks at mass media’s portrayal and our perception of events. It also alludes to how we perceive each other and how what we see and hear is never the complete story. In our culture we are oversaturated with information from an infinite number of established media outlets, i.e. CNN, MSNBC, blogs, online videos, amateur journalism, and social networking sites. It seems anyone with access to a computer can have an opinion and that opinion can be read by hundreds if not thousands. It also seems like everyone knows everything about us, but in actual fact, we only show what we want others to see.

*What questions are raised by A Human Interest Story (or the Gory Details and All)?*

Theatre presents people with ideas and information, and it is up to the audience to react. In *A Human Interest Story* all the stage directions are read aloud, which begs the question “is information more powerful when it is seen or heard?” In the ideas of the play, we are faced with questions about media, technology, and culture. Should we trust in media, established or otherwise? Are we oversaturated with superfluous information? Do we live in a culture that sensationalizes tragedy?

**Interview with Costume Designer Azra King-Abadi**

*What images come to mind when working on A Human Interest Story (or the Gory Details and All)?*

Images of voyeurism, television and media instantly come to mind; peeking in windows, watching television or web casts. The image of a television or monitor casting an electric glow in a dark room evokes the mood of the play. In my research I was drawn to these types of images, but I also researched for grays and blues which ultimately complemented key images.

*How does your design support A Human Interest Story (or the Gory Details and All)?*

Each actor plays several characters, which means that the overall look has to be cohesive, especially since no one leaves the stage. So in my design, I honed in on the idea of projected self. Despite our voyeuristic nature, the self we project and put on display is often masked by what we want others to see. In *A Human Interest Story*, the
characters’ costumes are layered accordingly. Red, which represents the true life blood of a character, has been integrated into the sterile electronic blue/gray palette to represent honesty.

Theatre is a collaborative art form. What is the benefit of working with other artists?
I really like working with others. Having previously worked in studio arts, I find interaction and the constant exchange of ideas refreshing and enlightening. We don’t live in a vacuum, so why create art in a vacuum? I feel more enriched by the collaborative process. I get to learn more about myself and the world.

What is the challenge of working with other designers?
Sometimes individual aesthetics are not complementary. In theatre you are combining ideas from several different designers into one complete vision. Ultimately the director guides the artistic direction of a piece. We have been lucky working with Edgar: he has a clear vision and each area of design is well integrated. It is really important for the director to set the tone, so that the designs don’t feel disjointed.

How does costume design support a production?
I think costume design can support a production in several ways, however, the biggest focus is character development. This development is not only for the audience, but also for the actor. Costume is also part of the artistic concept of a show, and if an element of design is missing then the overall concept can get lost and the story becomes less composed.

Points of Interest in the Story
The following are excerpts from the script, followed by writing prompts:

MOTHER OF THE TEENAGE CYBERPUNK SEPARATIST-WANNABE
The complete and unedited video footage of the last moments of R. Owen.
Robertson's. final press conference and suicide flashes on screen - The press conference that Robertson inserted the barrel of a .357 Magnum into his mouth, and shot himself. Yes, that same one that appeared on the news recently, the one they tastefully cut off just at the moment his head began to take that funny, contorted shape before the bullet penetrated his soft-palate.

KELLY
His (Kipper Russell) segments usually air at the conclusion of the evening news as a reminder to viewers that despite the previous fifty-five minutes of carnage, brutality and mayhem, the world isn't total shit, that if you looked hard enough, past the carnage, brutality and mayhem, you would find that people are essentially good.

BRUCE
They didn’t televise any of his speech.
Not a word of it.

... The networks and affiliates stopped the tape at the moment when Robertson's head began to change shape, to contort from the force of the gun blast.

... The five o'clock news repeated the footage six. times. during their hour-long broadcast.
Do news stations portray more violence than any other subject matter?
Can suicide or any other atrocity be tastefully portrayed?
What should be reported on the news? or What is newsworthy?
Do portrayals of violence in the media desensitize Americans?
What is the distinction between news, opinion, and entertainment?

KELLY
While she's putting the shoes into the coat closet
The doorbell rings.

PAULA
Antoinette suddenly finds herself in an awkward position:

KELLY
Being at the coat closet, in such close proximity to the front door,
she would only need to make a quarter turn of her body to answer it.
But doing so might make her seem too
eager
to her visitors.

PAULA
Her visitors might think she'd been waiting by the doorway all morning long for their arrival.

KELLY
Her visitors might think that she had nothing better to do with her time.

PAULA
She had wanted to give the impression to her visitors
that their descent upon her home was nothing out of the ordinary,

KELLY
that the house always looked this good

PAULA
that staying home to take care of the kids was a choice
that she was an equal partner in a successful marriage

KELLY
that her kids were neat and well-behaved beyond their years

PAULA
that she was a physically healthy, emotionally centered, fully-realized, self-actualized human
being

KELLY
with a rich family life, an active imagination,

PAULA
and viable aspirations.

Why is Antoinette worried about how she appears?
Do you think Antoinette is satisfied with her life?
Is Antoinette ‘equal’ and ‘successful’?
ANONYMOUS

But then
there's this other kind a baboon
The Crafty Baboon.
He's like the third or fourth string male
the dead weight
the useless one
the social critic that can't keep his mouth shut
criticizes and complains about everything, the living arrangements, the food, the breakdown of the democratic process, corrects the other baboons' use of grammar, talks a lot of bullshit. But: the crafty baboon doesn't have the will, skill, courage or prestige to do anything about it, he can only talk up a storm, raise hell until one of the alphas gets sick of his yabber and knocks em one upside the head.

Why does Anonymous describe the Crafty Baboon?
What is Anonymous saying about society, through this description of the crafty Baboon?

Internet Resources
Playwright Carlos Murillo
http://theatreschool.dePaul.edu/faculty_staff.php?id=98
Articles about Carlos Murillo
http://www.actorstheatre.org/HUMANA%20FESTIVAL%20CDROM/play_dark.htm
http://www.pegasusplayers.org/artists_directory.php?id=9
Article by Carlos Murillo about A Human Interest Story (or the Gory Details and All)
http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=10&hid=7&sid=419bab1-0dbe-4c29-b8dc-59946a2c4cb1%40sessionmgr10
Full text of the script can be accessed through the library website or by logging onto you student account and going to http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=1&hid=7&sid=16a1cefe-ba95-45c9-b91e-4054281fca99%40sessionmgr4.
Director Edgar Landa
http://theatre.usc.edu/faculty/edgarlanda.html
http://www.sonofsemele.org/artists09.html#elanda