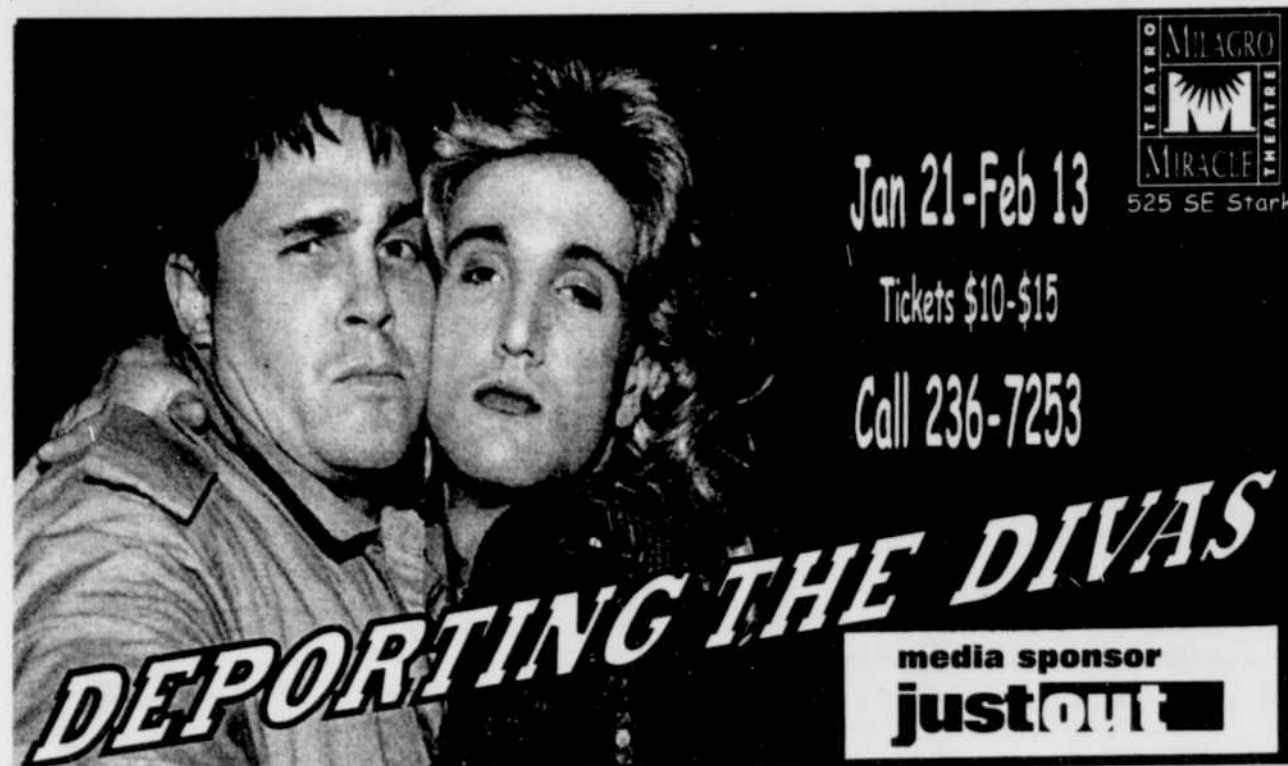




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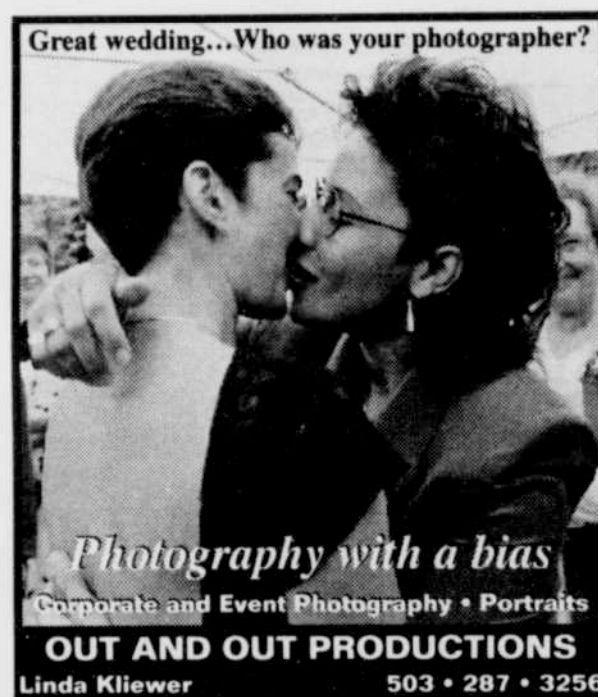
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INTERVIEW

Latino laureate

Guillermo Reyes wins accolades for his dramatic dives into a world infused with culture and sexuality

BY FLORA SUSSELY

Playwright Guillermo Reyes was born in Chile, moved to Los Angeles when he was 9, and went to college in San Diego. It is no wonder he is fascinated by how one functions in the world.

He has explored this fascination by writing several plays, including *Chilean Holiday*; *Men On the Verge of a His-Panic Breakdown*, winner of Theater L.A.'s Ovation Award for Best World Premiere Play and Best Production 1994, as well as the 1996 Emerging Playwright Award in New York City; *Deporting the Divas*, which won the 1996 Bay Area Drama-Logue for Playwriting; and *The West Hollywood Affair*.

In Reyes' bio I read this quote: "I want to face up to my personal issues as a Chilean-born American Citizen of tainted sexuality and to do so with the style and wit of the many fabulous *Divas* who haunt the main character's imaginative escape from a challenging world, want to tackle sex and politics with the alacrity of song and dance, mystery and fantasy, and emerge a better man for it."

Wow.

In a brief telephone interview from his home in Tempe, Ariz., where he is the head of the playwriting program at Arizona State University, we spoke about being Hispanic in the United States, gay in a straight world and how it has shaped him as an artist.

We began by talking about his play, *Deporting the Divas*, which opens Jan. 22 at Portland's Miracle Theatre.

Guillermo Reyes: Basically, it is the story of a married Mexican American INS agent who falls in love with an undocumented alien. It's a comedy-fantasy.

Just Out: That's very Latin, like the writing of Isabel Allende.

Exactly! It is less...linear than what we're used to here.

I understand that this started out as a very political work, written at the time when California Gov. Pete Wilson drafted Proposition 187, a measure that would expel children of illegal aliens from school and deny them medical care. Now it is mainly a love story. What happened?

The love story is what people responded to.... It went through a lot of reworking. In L.A. it was not received well in its original form. In Tucson it was OK. And finally, in San Francisco, this is what it became—a love story.

You mentioned your mother lives in Portland. As the daughter of a Chilean father and a Mexican mother, I know the culture and I'm interested in how you came out to your mother. And how she took it.

Well, I think she knew before I told her.

She read it in my work. I couldn't write in a closeted way. I feel that is artistically and personally dishonest. I like writing about how one functions—either as Latino or assimilated, openly gay or closeted. So, when I told her, I don't think she was very surprised.

But you are also political. *Divas* started out with several issue-oriented monologues. Are you dismayed that many people in the United States clump all Latinos together? You know: *olé*, *sombrero*, *tango*...somehow ignoring the cultural differences?

No. I write about Pan-American issues.

I remember in L.A., the big controversy about using non-Hispanics to play Hispanics. How do you feel about it?

You know, that's exactly what happened to Luis Valdez, because he cast an Italian actress to play Frida Kahlo. But I don't really think it's an issue.

It kind of kills poetic license. It is art, after all, and these are actors. Speaking of art, do you feel you have a certain definitive style or voice?

No. I don't think I have a style. Every work is different.

So, what's next for you?

I have been working on a large epic play about Allende and Pinochet. They are so linked by history. My working title is *Allende by Pinochet*. And I will also write a play about Pinochet from Allende's perspective.

Will that be called *Pinochet by Allende*?

No. [Laughs.] I don't think so. But I have been reading everything I can on both of them.

Years ago, when *Evita* came out, my father was indignant that a musical glorifying Eva Peron had been written. For those who suffered under certain leaders, it is difficult to see them as a show.

Yes, and I don't think Allende and Pinochet are musical material!

Will you come out for *Divas*?

I visit Portland often to see my mother. So, yes, I will take the opportunity to see her and *Divas*. Also, Andres Alcalá wants to restage *Men on the Verge of a His-Panic Breakdown* in Portland.

■ **Miracle Theatre/Teatro Milagro** presents *DEPORTING THE DIVAS* Jan. 22 through Feb. 13. Show times are 7 p.m. Thursday and 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The theater is located at 525 S.E. Stark St. Admission ranges from \$10-\$15. For more information, call the theater at 236-7253.

FLORA SUSSELY is a Lake Oswego-based freelance entertainment writer.



PHOTO BY DEBRA ST. JOHN