

## THEATER

# Scarves and spiders

Openly gay Hispanic actor takes on a familiar role

BY ANDY MANGELS

For many readers, the title *Kiss of the Spider Woman* brings to mind the 1986 film starring William Hurt and Raul Julia or the 1992 Broadway musical. Both productions were adapted from the 1979 novel by Manuel Puig, an Argentinean native who went into self-imposed exile the year Juan Peron came into power.

This month, Miracle Theatre/Teatro Milagro is presenting the nonmusical version of *Spider Woman* as part of its 16th season. Unlike the musical and film, this drama will be a two-man production: Rafael Untalan as Marxist student revolutionary Valentin and Andres Alcalá as flamboyant, movie-loving homosexual prisoner Molina.

"There are just two people in the play," Alcalá says. "There is no guard bringing us in or throwing us on. Once we are in the cell, we never leave the cell. Everything has to take place with our interaction, with everyday life in this prison cell."

After some time as an actor at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Alcalá moved in 1997 to Portland, where his work in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* got him noticed by audiences and critics.

He won a Drammie Award in 1999 for his role in *Deporting the Divas*, a play about "cross-gender, cross-border people trying to stay in the United States." The actor portrayed a transvestite beauty queen and another role in which he got to seduce a male border patrolman.

*Divas* was written by Guillermo Reyes, who also wrote the one-man show *Men on the Verge of an Expanding Breakdown*. Alcalá has toured the country performing that show, which is about "eight Latino gay men dealing with their sexuality, with their Hispanic background or their suppression or ambiguity in sexuality."

Having played a number of gay roles on stage, Alcalá is also openly gay in his personal

life. "If someone asked me if I was gay, of course I would say yes," he says. "I'm not very flamboyant...I'm kind of a low-key person, actually. I kind of let it all out on stage. I don't have a problem with playing gay or playing straight."

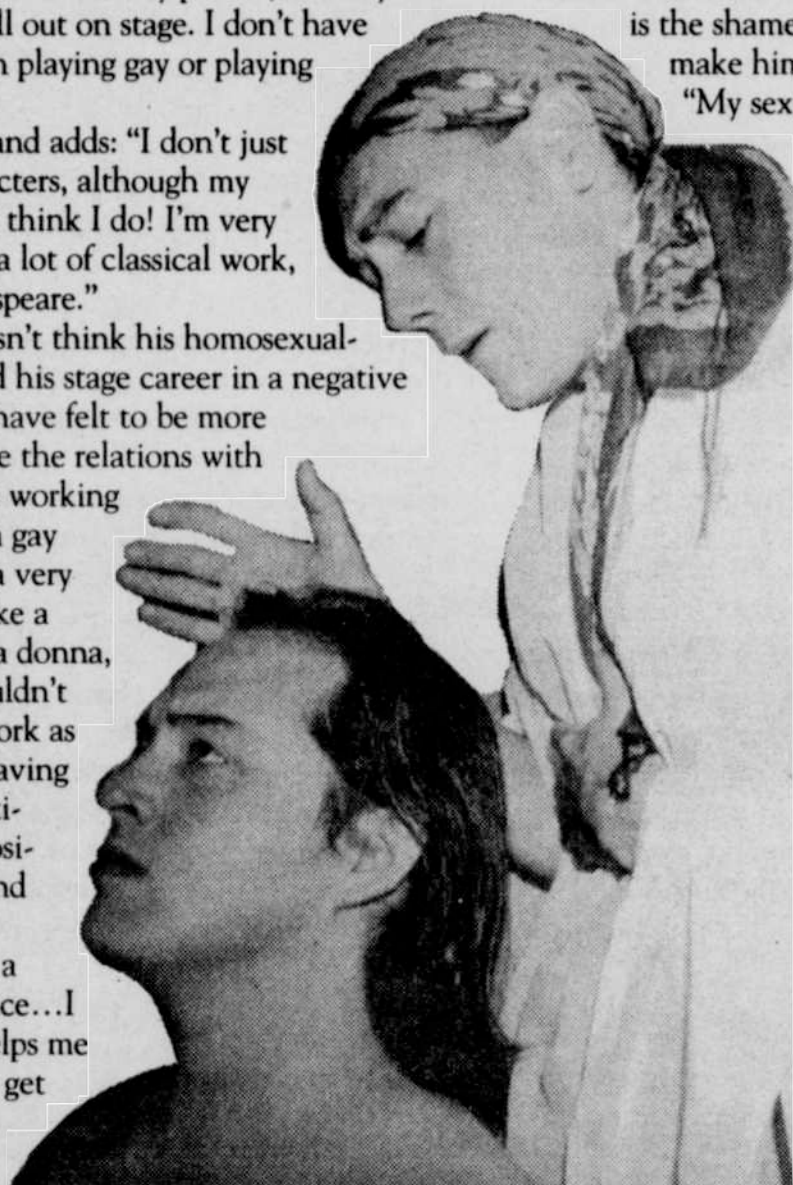
He smiles and adds: "I don't just play gay characters, although my mom seems to think I do! I'm very versatile. I do a lot of classical work, a lot of Shakespeare."

Alcalá doesn't think his homosexuality has affected his stage career in a negative way. "What I have felt to be more important were the relations with the people I'm working with. If I was a gay man and had a very big attitude, like a diva or a prima donna, I probably wouldn't get as much work as I'm getting. Having a very solid attitude, a very positive outlook and coming into rehearsal with a smile on my face...I think really helps me to continue to get work with the

same theater companies."

One obstacle he has faced—something he shares with his character in *Spider Woman*—is the shame his family has tried to make him feel as a homosexual.

"My sexuality and my ethnic background—those two collide. My father doesn't speak to me because of my sexuality. That is because of his



Rafael Untalan (left) and Andres Alcalá share a cell—and their souls—in *Spider Woman*

pride and his background. He once said that there was nothing uglier that I could possibly be in the eyes of the Hispanic community."

In the play, Molina has been thrown in jail for the crime of gross indecency. "What really gets to him is when he is convicted, his mother is shamed because he's inside and everybody knows about it."

Alcalá says he sees Molina almost as a transsexual, although not in a medical sense. "I'm playing Molina as this very effeminate character who believes that she is a woman. She gets lost in these film noir movies, so she has this ideal perception of what type of woman she is, and it's a very glamorous movie star kind of image. She has to be able to feel that and live that in this grungy cell with no clothes—nothing glamorous except a couple of scarves that she's been able to smuggle in."

Alcalá says the odd essence of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is "two people with everything stripped from them, trying to find the dignity and the love inside of each other that can never be stripped by anybody else. It's the struggle of the human soul between two people, and they're at the very end of their ropes. It's very different from the film and from the musical. It's going to be a good show." 

KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN runs through March 17 at Miracle Theatre/Teatro Milagro, 525 S.E. Stark St. For tickets call the box office at 503-236-7253.

As a comic book writer, ANDY MANGELS thinks of a sultry superheroine every time he hears the title *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. You can write him at AMangelsSW@aol.com.



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