

Teatro macabre

Georgina Escobar talks about her new production for Milagro Theatre's Day of the Dead celebration

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Georgina Escobar, a multi-platform artist from Ciudad Juárez, México, has brought her distinguished theatrical talents to Portland as one of the artists in residence at the Milagro Theatre.

Escobar's career hit an early milestone in 2004, when she co-produced a bilingual, bicultural production of "The Vagina Monologues: Spotlight on the Women of Juárez in El Paso/Juarez." The production emerged amid the genocide in Ciudad Juárez, and starred Jane Fonda, Sally Field and Lila Aragon. The production earned her honors for "Outstanding Service to Women on The Border."

The world premiere of Escobar's newest play, "El Muerto Vagabundo," (Death and the Tramp) is in full swing right now, showing through Nov. 6, at Milagro Theatre in Southeast Portland.

Escobar's play explores homelessness through the lens of a child who learns the stories of people under bridges, real or otherwise. Born from an obituary of a homeless veteran with no friends or family, the bilingual production ties together multiple genres with a nod to the lives of the "los olvidados" (the forgotten) so that they are not forgotten.

The show honors the widely celebrated Latino holiday: El Día de los Muertos – The Day of the Dead, Nov. 1-2. The holiday is celebrated by people of Mexican descent, and focuses on gatherings of people and ceremonies to remember friends and family members who have passed away.

For more than two decades, Milagro has celebrated Day of the Dead with theater, and each year's production is crafted differently. This year the season's theme is "Home." "El Muerto Vagabundo" is the opening performance.

Artistic and metaphorical, the production is filled with charming moments in tandem with the stark realities of homelessness. The show culminates in a way that literally draws the audience into the performance.

From Ciudad Juárez, Escobar, eventually landed in Manhattan, via Zacatecas, Mexico; El Paso, Texas, and New Mexico. I asked her about the effect the cultural and physical geography of

these places have on her as an artist.

Georgina Escobar: For one, realizing that home is where you spend time. It shapes the idea of traveling light and letting go, knowing what is necessary to make you, you.

Suzanne Zalokar: You are one of the artists in residence at the Milagro Theatre this season. Can you talk a bit about your process and experience in writing this play? You met the cast on day one and then you wrote and directed the play and opening night was four and a half weeks later.

G.E.: That goes with being "desarraigado" (uprooted). It is good for me. I am a playwright by trade. We deal with deadlines all the time and with commission parameters. And so any challenge is an invitation to be extra creative.

I had written a treatment of what I thought the show could be. After meeting our cast, I adjusted and refocused my vision based on (what each of the actors brought to the production).

I spent a week getting to know them. I



PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGINA ESCOBAR

Georgina Escobar

gave them a bunch of exercises to see how much they could push their imagination. I was really adamant in having different styles of storytelling in the play and different music.

S.Z.: Music is a universal language, and is quite prominent in the play.

G.E.: That was one of the first challenges I met – None of the casted actors played an instrument or sang, and so I had to do a lot of it myself. I played every day at rehearsal and sang for them. I ended up recording the soundtrack that we used.

Music was my entry point. Given the box of tools I was handed to create this play, I came with my own paintbrushes. Those were four particular songs that I knew I wanted to see show up. More than that, I wanted to see these songs reinvented or reshaped, whether it was having a different tonality or

"In knowing that the expectation of the audiences here is that you are going to go to a Day of the Dead show, you have to see "la muerta." You have to be able to recognize theatrically that death is present."

having a different syntax – flipping the context on its head a bit.

S.Z.: I notice that you had quite a few women characters living in your camp – more than statistically would be on the street as compared to men – and that a child was a protagonist in the play. What is the significance of featuring women and child characters?

G.E.: What struck me from my research was that the amount of families and children who are homeless. These kids still go to school and function, but they live in shelters.

The idea stuck with me of the family unit not necessarily being broken up, but actually experiencing these stressors. I didn't necessarily want to put a family unit on stage, but I needed the feminine side. I also wanted to give a bit of presentation to the sister and "the Kid" who are couch-surfing and just a skip away from complete homelessness.

When we think of homeless, we often think of men. But I was trying to create characters that took care of one another.

I guess in a way for me, it was like a fantasy. I would want to see that in real life: homeless communities move into a communal sort of mentality: let's take care of each other.

S.Z.: Your characters, referred to as "los olvidados" (the forgotten), seem to be metaphorical representations of the reasons people come to experience homelessness. Is that an accurate perception?

G.E.: Because of how I approach my writing and because my strengths are in creating hyper-realistic narratives – I write a lot of sci-fi – I knew that entering the space of something so real, as is the situation of the homeless, could be a trap in a way: How do you put the exact representation on stage?

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A scene from Georgina Escobar's "El Muerto Vagabundo" on stage in Milagro Theatre through Nov. 6.

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