

# A Rigid Order

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what is now Mexico City. In that period of Spanish colonial rule, there existed in New Spain (now Mexico) a rigid caste system in which one's status depended entirely on the quotient of Spanish blood one could claim.

The play centers on three young women who find themselves taking refuge in the convent: Jesusa, a Mestiza (half-Spanish and half Amerindian) who has come to care for an ailing nun; Tomasita, a timid Nahua Indian who has come to serve in the kitchen; and Manuela, a noblewoman whose arrival is occasioned by circumstances that are not immediately explained. The three are relegated to the basement storage room and are instructed not to open a locked armoire that sits in the corner.

Oppression and class fuel the story. It's clear that these young unmarried women have few options in colonial New Spain; convents functioned as a refuge for women who lacked suitable husbands, though hardly a place of comfort. But the Inquisition lurks as a threat throughout the play; the nuns impose a rigid order that is designed to keep them clear of any conflict with Church authorities. Further, though the three young women are all refugees in a sense, social hierarchies immediately influence how they assess and treat each other.

But before long, they find the keys to that locked armoire, and it contains the means to their spiritual freedom. Inside are piles of

paper and notebooks containing poems, songs, and plays of Sor Juana, hidden away because the Church considers them dangerous.

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the plays, aptly named House of Desires, assigning to themselves roles that upset the class order to which the outside world consigns them. Little do they realize that what seems harmless and joyous to them is exactly what seems dangerous to Church authorities who define what is possible in their world.

The play, commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and enjoying its world premiere run, is the work of Tanya Saracho, a Mexican playwright whose work explores a rich array of Latina voices.

Originally asked to adapt House of Desires for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival,

Saracho ultimately opted to locate this play around a story that explores Sor Juana's influence and also the complicated class differences and gender oppression that characterized women's experience in colonial Mexico.

This history feels important to know about. Oppression has a way of reverberating through later generations, a phenomenon that is evident in the nuns' varied reactions to Sor Juana's legacy.

The sisters in the play have a range of ideas about the importance of hiding or protecting her words; the Mother Superior for

embodied by Sor Juana, a brilliant thinker and writer at a time when women's education was considered dangerous and unnecessary.

The reverberation of these struggles for the women in the play--along with the insidious mechanics of the racial oppression depicted--suggest how this history continues to ripple into our current experience.

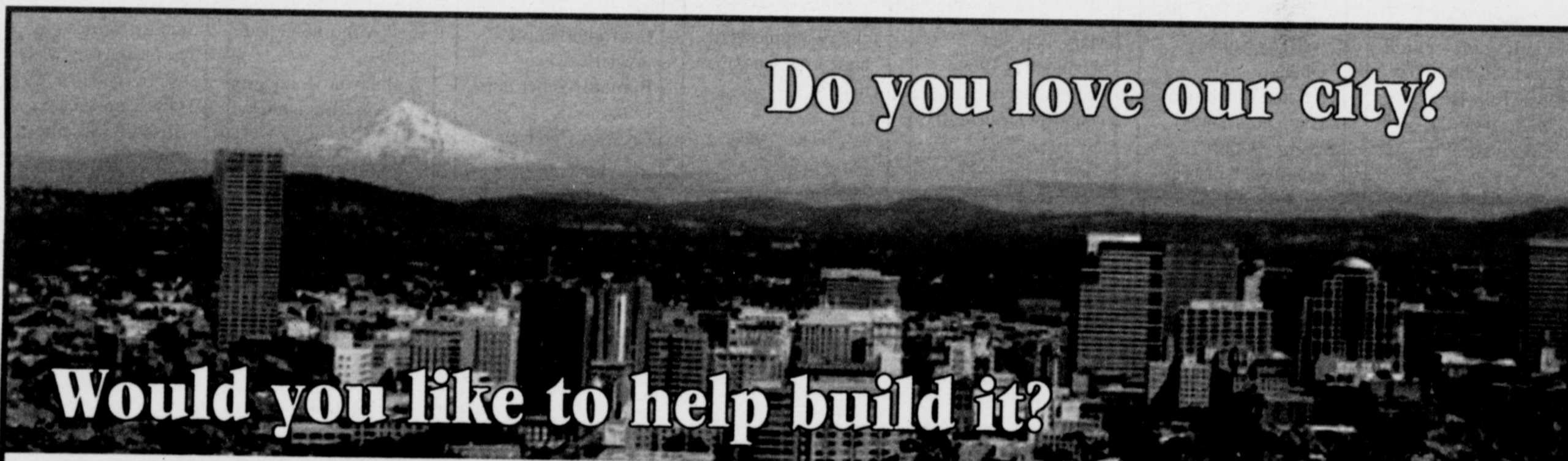
This beautiful play also wrestles soulfully with the human desire for expression and the struggle to find one's voice when expression itself is considered dangerous and threatening to those in power.

One of the sisters especially, Sor Isabel, chafes at the confines into which the sisters have retreated in the wake of the controversy surrounding Sor Juana. Her agony over the limits of expression allowed to her is treated as a kind of illness, a perversion commonly experienced by those who are awake to the losses associated with enforced silence.

For me, though, the heart of the play is Tomasita, the Indian woman who has learned to keep silent and watchful. Beneath her observant exterior lurks hard-won wisdom about her circumstances, and deep longings that she scarcely dares to acknowledge.

If you can make it to Ashland this fall, don't miss the opportunity to sink deeply in this rich history. You may find, as I did, inspiration and consolation for your current experience.

*Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. She also serves on the board of directors for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer.*



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