

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Boleros for the Disenchanted

BY JOSÉ RIVERA

DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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FAMILY STORIES

An Interview with José Rivera

BY DAN RUBIN

José Rivera encourages every playwright to create his or her own genre. This may be why his own dramaturgy is difficult to define. Various referred to as magical realism, surrealism, “mad realism,” and the theater of “more so,” the style of Rivera expands and contorts the ordinary into something beyond the conventionally “real,” yet still familiar. As A.C.T. audiences saw in last season’s production of Rivera’s *Brainpeople*, a simple-enough dinner party can quickly unravel into a psychological circus in which anyone—be it any of one character’s multiple personalities or the spirits of the hostess’s deceased parents—can unexpectedly grab the highest trapeze and launch themselves into metaphysical space. When asked to describe his writing, Rivera explains that he creates theater that “lives in the intersection of real and unreal and freely jumps that border in a theatrical way. The plays seek to examine some aspect of society in a way that the artist is given the permission to wander into the world of the unreal or the dreamlike.”

Rivera caught his first break on February 26, 1983—a day he celebrates as an anniversary—when *The House of Ramon Iglesia*, a play about his parents returning to Puerto Rico after living on Long Island for almost two decades, won a CBS-sponsored playwriting contest. He quit his day job immediately. He had no formal playwriting training, but he had been writing plays since high school, and in college he wrote, produced, and directed a play a year. Since 1983 he has become one of America’s most respected playwrights, earning OBIE awards for *Marisol* and *References to Salvador Dalí Make Me Hot* and an Academy Award nomination for his film adaptation of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, while consistently pushing the boundaries of theatricality. In *Boleros for the Disenchanted*, however, Rivera takes a sabbatical from his exploration of unreality in order to pay homage to the simpler, yet no less dramatic, story of his parents’ marriage.



Playwright José Rivera. Photo by Evren Odcikin.

Puerto Rico in the 1950s still suffered profoundly from the economic repercussions of the Great Depression. At the same time, the cost of air travel between San Juan (Puerto Rico's capital) and New York City dropped significantly. The outcome was a massive emigration from Puerto Rico to the u.s. mainland. Of the many pilgrims who fled poverty for the American promise were four-year-old José Rivera and his parents, Maria and Herminio. In 1959, the family settled on Long Island, where they joined the local working-class community of Italian and Irish Americans. They were not welcomed warmly: José's parents were cursed at, firecrackers and rocks were hurled through their windows, and José was beaten and bullied at school until he found sanctuary in sports and theater. Growing up in this atmosphere, he remembers, "forced me to be in my head rather than the real world. The real world wasn't very pleasant at times."

José's father worked various odd jobs, supporting his family but never realizing the American ideal of prosperity and security. After 19 years spent raising six children, José's parents returned to Puerto Rico with his three youngest siblings in the late 1970s. They came back to the States when José's father's health declined. They remained nomadic for a while, living near their children in Ohio, then Georgia, and eventually settling near the Fort Rucker Army Base in Alabama where we catch up with them in Act II of *Boleros*.

Though *Ramon Iglesia* and *Boleros* are the most obvious examples, Rivera often adopts elements of his family's personal stories for his work. Rivera explains: "My parents came over in the '50s and they struggled, and nobody in my family went to college except for my sister and I. It feels like if I don't write these stories, then nobody would know them. These are not people who get written about. Since I am lucky enough to have this ability, this is one way that this kind of person, this kind of family, will not be forgotten. They will live somewhere in the literary memory of this country."

The week before rehearsals began for A.C.T.'s production of *Boleros for the Disenchanted*, Rivera spoke to us about what it was like to recreate his parents' lifelong love story for the stage.

HOW DID THE PROCESS OF CREATING *BOLEROS* BEGIN FOR YOU?

The events of the first act are stories my mom told me over the years—how she met my father and the circumstances of her life in Puerto Rico in the 1950s. The Act II events I witnessed myself when my parents were living in Alabama. I had wanted to write a play about them for years, but it wasn't until I put the two acts together in my mind that I knew what the play should be. Once that happened, the writing process happened very fast.



Herminio as a young man. Photo courtesy José Rivera.

HOW WAS THE EXPERIENCE OF WRITING *BOLEROS* DIFFERENT FROM WRITING *THE HOUSE OF RAMON IGLESIA*, WHICH IS ALSO ABOUT YOUR PARENTS?

The plays are separated by 30 years of life and writing experience. When I was writing *House of Ramon Iglesia*, I was very aware of the great plays I wanted to emulate. I was reading a lot of

Chekhov and O'Neill. *Ramon Iglesia* took a long time because I was just learning the craft of playwriting and I was very self-conscious of what I was doing. Whereas by the time I wrote *Boleros*, that craft was already innate to me, part of my unconscious process. I didn't feel like I needed to search for form. So in that way, this play was a lot easier to write, even though emotionally the events of *Boleros* were much harder to deal with.

WHY WAS THAT?

Well Act I wasn't, but Act II—with the decline of my parents and seeing the situation my father was in—was more difficult, and because my mom is still living I knew she would see the play, so I wanted to be respectful of her yet I wanted to be honest about what really happened. I stressed a lot about what she would think about it.

DID SHE ENJOY IT?

Yes, she did. I had sent it to her first to read, and then I took her to a rehearsal and the opening at Yale [Repertory Theatre] and the opening in Boston [at the Huntington Theatre Company]. I really wanted to get her prepared. It was tough: she was literally shaking with emotion at one point in rehearsal, especially the scene where the young soldier appears on the street corner and plays the jukebox, which is the same music my father played for her. It was just a lot of emotion to deal with. And of course Act II is really hard for her to watch. But ultimately the play is a celebration of her, her strength and her commitment to being with my father.

DID SHE EVER GIVE YOU NOTES CORRECTING YOU ON THE WAY THINGS REALLY HAPPENED?

She did give me one note. I couldn't believe it: she didn't like the name "Flora" for her character. [*Laughter*] She doesn't like that name for some reason. So I asked her, "What would you call her?" And she said, "Nancy." I said, "Nancy doesn't sound very Puerto Rican!" I don't know where she got Nancy, but she liked that name better than Flora. I like Flora. It's a perfect name for that character.

THE FORM OF *BOLEROS* IS, IRONICALLY, EXPERIMENTAL FOR YOU, IN THAT IT IS MORE GROUNDED IN THE RULES OF REALISM THAN YOUR OTHER PLAYS. WHAT WAS THE EXPERIENCE LIKE CREATING A MORE "CONVENTIONAL" PLAY?

I guess you could say it has a traditional well-made-play structure, and I've always shied away from that form because it never seemed challenging enough. I've always thought that contemporary theater should be more theatrical than we normally experience it. But I found while working on it that it is much more challenging than it looks. Its simplicity is a challenge. Being able to write with more subtext and to have every moment be psychologically plausible and emotionally honest—that's not easy to get to.



Maria as a young woman. Photo courtesy José Rivera.

WERE YOU EVER TEMPTED TO ALLOW THE WORLD TO BECOME FANTASTICAL?

Not really, but I did allow, at least in some passages, the language itself to be rich and lovely and magical. There are a few (not many) passages where I just let the characters go, and they speak in a way that you wouldn't hear in real life.