

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director Heather Kitchen, Executive Director

PRESENTS

# WORDS <sup>on</sup> 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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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUERTO RICO

BY MEGAN COHEN

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By the time that Christopher Columbus “found” Puerto Rico in 1493, the native population, whom the Spanish colonizers would name *Taino*, had developed a complex society, complete with written language in the form of petroglyphs, a functioning agricultural system, a cosmology of deities, and a series of villages, each built around a *batey*, or ball court, where they played to resolve conflicts. The Spanish named the island *Borinquen*—the land of the brave lord. They established a permanent foothold in 1508, on the arrival of Juan Ponce de León. Despite native rebellions, and although England and France coveted the colony and staged frequent raids, the strategically placed island (its position as the “key to the Indies” made it a valuable military hub for controlling trade routes) remained under Spain’s power. The islanders began to assimilate into Spanish culture, taking on its laws and institutions, including Catholicism and slavery. In the 19th century, when its control had stabilized, the Spanish crown pursued economic development of the island, boosting agricultural production, building a commercial infrastructure, establishing local government and education, and investing in new roads, bridges, and towns, leading to population growth. Throughout the century, there was pressure from inhabitants to become an autonomous part of Spain, a request granted by the Spanish government in 1897. In 1898, however, American forces landed and claimed Puerto Rico for the United States.

While some Puerto Ricans welcomed the Americans as liberators and sympathetic protectors, the separatists who had pushed for independence continued to protest, hoping to shake off American control and gain true autonomy for the island. American rule was not tremendously different from life under Spanish power. Congress made a few small adjustments to the island’s infrastructure, and then opted for what historian Arturo Morales Carrión, in *Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History*, calls a period of “benign neglect.”

However, the neglect was not entirely harmless, as U.S. sugar companies took hold in Puerto Rico, enjoying freedom from authorities that might otherwise keep them in check. The agricultural industry, primarily based on sugar (and a few other crops, including coffee), supported a growing population for some decades, but the economic stamina of the monopoly-driven agrarian system eventually began to flag. According to *Time* magazine, by 1926 “a few big U.S. companies had converted Puerto Rico into a sugar barony whose 100,000 cane cutters, paid 10¢ an hour, gladly sold their votes for \$2 to elect company lawyers to the island legislature.” The sugar industry was so dominant that in 1950, 22.8% of all workers on the island worked in sugar fields and factories. Even as they gained politi-