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## A *CurtainUp* Los Angeles Review

By [Evan Henerson](#)

*"You know how people are when they find out you have money."*  
mdash; Euclio



Sal Lopez. (Photo: Grettel Cortes)

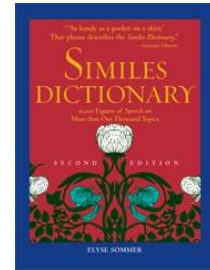
Here's a truism that applies equally to inhabitants of ancient Rome and performers in a 1950s era Mexican-run Los Angeles night club: it sucks to have bucks.

Didn't quite expect that one, did you? Oh sure, poverty is no day at the Four Seasons either, but when you have wealth, everybody wants a piece of it, and of you. People treat you differently. You've got to worry about where you're

going to stash your loot (before the days of Swiss bank accounts, presumably) to keep equally greedy souls from stealing it out from under your nose. Honestly, how does a suddenly wealthy, two-bit actor get even a moment's rest?

Answer? He doesn't. Nightclub performer Euclio gets a lesson in these evils of cash-begotten angst in Evelina Fernandez's *La Olla*, a new version of Plautus's *A Pot of Gold*, and, alas, it's Euclio's joylessness that permeates this world premiere adaptation. Fashioned as a comedy but offering only a limited amount of farcical mad-cappery, Jose Luis Valenzuela's production for the Latino Theater Company at LATC is consistently off the mark.

Our setting is an L.A. music hall in the 1950s. We learn via a prologue spoken by Patron Saint Genesisius (played by Fidel Gomez) that the semi-famous La Olla nightclub has passed out of the hands of Euclio's family and that Euclio's daughter, Phaedria (Esperanza America), has actual talent. Euclio (Sal Lopez), the joint's second banana and stage sweeper? Not so much.



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As a parade of divas, ventriloquists and dancers move on and off the tombstone-shaped revolving stage designed by Yee Eun Nam, the plot unfolds. Euclio tries to figure out how to keep, and profit from, the stash of stolen money he has found. Phaedria needs to secure a husband before anyone gets wise to the fact that she's in the family way. Meanwhile, a trio of disguised gangsters are trying to get into the act as they search for the sack of cash they ditched backstage.

The sexually ambivalent club owner, Megadorus (Geoffrey Rivas), asks Euclio for Phaedria's hand. Lyconides (Sam Golzari), *La Olla*'s male ingénue, would also like to marry her, which is fitting since he's the guy who knocked her up at the cherry festival nine months ago. Emcee Sobersides (Castulo Guerra) is greedier and more ambitious even than Euclio. And the tequila-swilling stagehand Staphyla (played by the playwright Fernandez) watches over all the proceedings with a world-weary expression on her pinched face. She has perhaps the production's best moment, dancing to a rumba beat while controlling a pair of puppets (designed by Camille Villanueva) fastened to her via a harness. The cigarette eternally dangling from her mouth never moves.

Valenzuela tries to meld the assorted variety acts with the Euclio/Phaedria/Megadorus plotlines, but it's not a particularly smooth mix. The performance bits are sporadically funny but they feel like they are interrupting the story or vice versa. Charismatic character actors though they both are, Lopez and Guerra spend a lot of time monologuing their way through dead space. When Lopez ultimately moves out into the house to demand information from the audience, the bit is labored rather than seamless farce.

America possesses no shortage of gusto playing both the spinster-turned-star Phaedria and the upstaged, opera-singing *La Olla* Diva. Wearing a sparkly gold suit (designed by Naila Aladdin-Sanders) that Liberace might envy, Rivas's genial Megadorus gets a few yuks particularly when he's bantering with Fernandez's Staphyla and dutifully delivering the play's lessons about the danger of greed. Golzari, Gomez and Xavi Moreno work some capable buffoonery as the trio of gangsters.

*La Olla* was commissioned by the J Paul Getty Museum and a version of the tale was staged last year at the Getty Villa Theatre. Program notes from both Fernandez and Valenzuela suggest that the marriage of ancient Roman comedy and the Latino experience constitutes a bit of an experiment for Latino Theater Company audiences. The performers of Culture Clash have walked this very path several times before. *La Olla* could have used them.

La Olla by Evelina Fernandez  
 Adapted from the Roman comedy *The Pot of Gold* by Plautus and  
 Directed by Jose Luis Valenzuela

Cast: Esperanza America, Evelina Fernandez, Sam Golzari, Fidel Gomez, Castulo Guerra, Sal Lopez, Xavi Moreno, Geoffrey Rivas  
 Choreographer and Movement Coordinator: Urbanie Lucero  
 Set and Projection Design: Yee Eun Nam  
 Light and Projection Design: Pablo Santiago  
 Sound Design: John Zalewski  
 Costume Design: Naila Aladdin-Sanders  
 Puppet Design: Camille Villanueva  
 Musical Director: Rosino Serrano  
 Stage Manager: Henry "Heno" Fernandez  
 Plays through April 24, 2016 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St. Los Angeles, (866) 811-4111, [www.thelatc.org](http://www.thelatc.org)  
 Running time: One hours and thirty minutes, with no intermission  
 Reviewed by Evan Henerson

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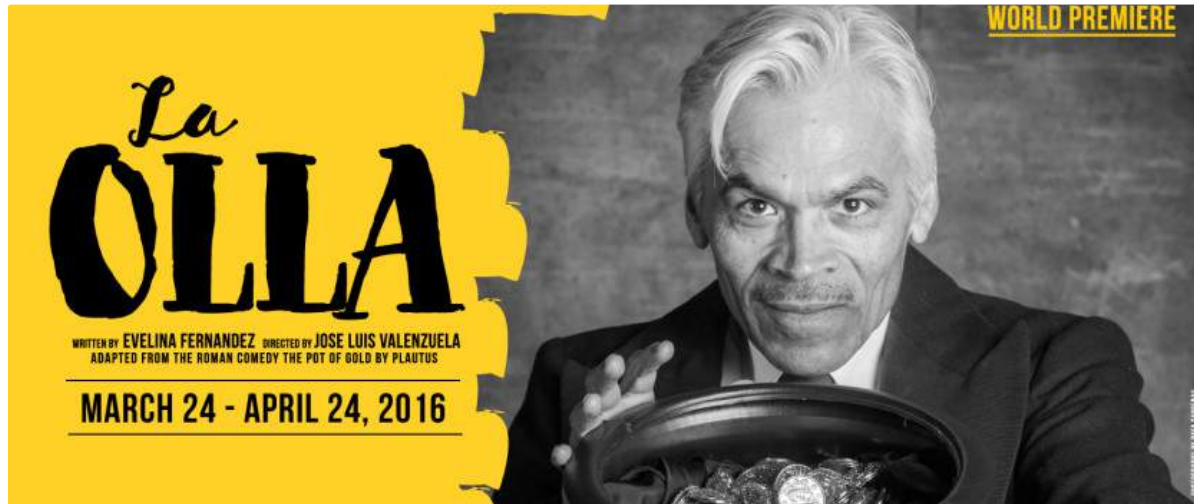
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[La Olla](#) - Evelina Fernandez's new version of Plautus's *A Pot of Gold* is fashioned as a comedy but offers only a limited amount of farcical mad-cappery . . . [Read More](#)



## LA OLLA: STIRRING THE POT

Apr 8, 2016 | Posted by [Ryan M. Luevano](#) | [Reviews](#)

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### REVIEW: *LA OLLA*

BY RYAN M. LUÉVANO

What would you do if you found a pot of gold? How would you be changed? These are the questions answered in the [Latino Theatre Company's](#) world premiere of *La Olla* by [Evelina Fernandez](#) based on the Latin play by the early Roman playwright Titus Maccius Plautus. What you get here is not a strict realization of the original, rather Fernandez creates a true adaptation that reflects her Latino roots giving us a production full of comedy, music, dance and vibrant imagery set in a seedy 1950's L.A. nightclub.



Cástulo Guerra. Photo Credit: Grettel Cortes.

Director [Jose Luis Valenzuela](#)'s vision for the production is inspired by the *rumberas* film genre that flourished in Mexico during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema in the 1940s and 1950s. We see this immediately as audience is transported into the world of film noir when the characters first enter the stage from the street in shadow, accompanied by bluesy jazz music by [Rosino Serrano](#), reminiscent of the score for *Chimatomán*. Immediately following, there is sudden contrast as we go to the bright and energetic floorshow of the La Olla Night Club, evoking a tropical nightclub in Havana.



Sam Golzari, Fidel Gomez, Xavi Moreno, Sal Lopez, right. Photo Credit: Grettel Cortes.

A work like this, complete with a rotating set, clever double casting, cross-dressing characters, running gags, and an absurd plot, is perfectly set-up for a rollercoaster ride of hilarious hijinks and entertaining farce, *alla* Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, or a work by Molière. However, what you get is steady

physical comedy *La Olla* has the opportunity become a treasure-trove of theatrical comedy.



Esperanza America, left and Sam Golzari. Photo Credit: Grettel Cortes.



Two of the strongest performances in this production are [Esperanza America](#) (Phaedira/La Diva) and [Sam Golzari](#) (Lyconides/Sam/Eel). America fully commits to her comical roles and makes every appearance memorable; additionally her singing voice is equally superior. Golzari is a consummate actor; he masterfully transitions between the three roles maintaining each character's traits, humor and motivations.



Although only a minor character, [Cástulo Guerra](#)'s (Sobersides) performance is strong and commanding—all the motivations of his character are straightforward and consistent. Playwright Evelina Fernández takes a role as the alcoholic stage manager Staphyla. She engagingly realizes the role and lets you know she's enjoying every minute of playing this aloof character. [Sail Lopez](#) (Euclio) plays the greedy miser who happens upon the pot of gold and lets it overtake him—Lopez's performance works for the role, but longs for more dimension to make his character more relatable.



Sal Lopez Photo Credit: Grettel Cortes.

Overall, The Latino Theatre Company's *La Olla* is an entertaining and quirky theater piece that is sure to delight; it's a rare treat to see pure Latino theater in the melting pot that is the our beloved city of L.A. *La Olla* runs from March 26-April 24<sup>th</sup> at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in Downtown L.A. for more information and tickets visit: [www.thelatric.org](http://www.thelatric.org).

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## La Olla Review - A Pot of Gold Transformed

By Elaine L. Mura

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Originally commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum and first presented in their Theater Lab series in 2015, "Pot of Gold" has been rejuvenated as LA OLLA by The Latino Theater Company. Playwright Evelina Fernandez takes the comedy and transforms it into a very funny musical of Mexican proportions - with a little vaudeville and telenovela thrown in for good measure. The updated action moves from ancient Rome to 1950's Los Angeles in a Mexican night club called, very appropriately, "La Olla."



Esperanza America and Sam Golzari - Photo by Grettel Cortes

When Euclio (Sal Lopez), an untalented bit player in the club, finds a pot filled with money in a corner of the dressing room, he becomes consumed with greed and thinks that everyone wants his treasure, which isn't his anyway - but let's not quibble. Enter his daughter, the very pregnant Phaedria (Esperanza America), who is conscientious, good-hearted, and - sad to say - very plain.

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Sal Lopez - Photo by Grettel Cortes

Meanwhile, the star of the show - a well-rounded diva who, unfortunately, likes her alcohol a little too much - takes a drunken tumble and can't be revived in time for her song. There are no likely candidates for her replacement, and somehow Phaedria gets elected to cover for her inebriated compatriot. Pure Hollywood then emerges - and Phaedria turns out to be a talented show-stopper. Suddenly the wealthy night club's owner Megadorus (Geoffrey Rivas) sees Phaedria as a valuable commodity and decides to marry her - even if he isn't certain if he prefers a wife or a husband. But Phaedria has her sites set on her reluctant lover/daddy-to-be Lyconides (Sam Golzari). How will this romantic mess work out? What happens to the pot of unearned riches? You'll have to see LA OLLA to find out.

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Castulo Guerra - Photo by Grettel Cortes

Acting is broad and uproarious in the tradition of slapstick. Visual comedy abounds, and actors ham it up with vigor and enthusiasm. Pratfalls for left for the three thieving strangers who took the money in the first place. This is a fun night in the theater filled with chuckles and guffaws.

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Fedel Gomez - Photo by Grettel Cortes

Latino Theater Company Artistic Director Jose Luis Valenzuela ably directs the cast with an eye to timing and laughs. Yee Eun Nam's set design is clever and creative, and Naila Aladdin Sanders's costumes add to the total effect. The entire production team does an excellent job of maximizing stage space and highlighting the relevant.





Esperanza America at after-party - Photo by Elaine L. Mura

LA OLLA runs through April 24, 2016, with performances at 8 p.m. Thursdays to Saturdays and at 3 p.m. on Sundays. On April 11, 2016, there will be a special performance at 7:30 p.m. The theater is dark on April 14 (Art Walk). The Los Angeles Theater Center is located at 514 S. Spring Street, Los Angeles, CA 90013. Tickets cost from \$26 (general) to \$42 (premium seating) with \$22 for student, seniors, and veterans. For reservations, call 866-811-4111 or go online at [www.thelatc.org](http://www.thelatc.org).

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Sal Lopez as Euclio in 'La Olla' by Evelina Fernández at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (photo by Grettel Cortes)

## ***La Olla***

Reviewed by **Neal Weaver**  
*Los Angeles Theatre Center*  
 Through **April 24**

**RECOMMENDED**

This play with music by Evelina Fernández is a modern-day adaptation of *The Pot of Gold* by the ancient Roman playwright, Plautus.

The story takes place in a Mexican nightclub in East Los Angeles named La Olla. The floor-show at the club is a catch-as-catch-can assemblage that includes an alcoholic opera singer, La Diva (Esperanza America), a tenor, Lyconides (Sam Golzari), and an untalented clown and bit-player,

Euclio (Sal Lopez). There are also a magician and a ventriloquist.

The club's manager and emcee, Sobersides (Cástulo Guerra), is deeply in debt to the wrong people, and the club-owner, wealthy Megadorus (Geoffrey Rivas), is rumored to be light in his loafers. The establishment's stage manager and general factotum, Staphyla (playwright Fernández), is a tough broad with a cigarette eternally dangling from her lips.

Presiding over all is Genesisius (Fidel Gomez), patron saint of actors and theatre folk, who serves as a sort of deus ex machina. He wants to provide a fortune to Euclio's daughter Phaedria (America again) to ensure her future happiness. He somehow arranges for a trio of low-comedy robbers to escape the police by taking refuge in the club. They hide their swag, a fortune in gold, in a large black pot among the costumes. But it's Euclio, not Phaedria, who discovers the treasure, and is instantly transformed into a paranoid miser.

Phaedria, meanwhile, is hugely pregnant (though no one seems to notice), having been seduced by Lyconides, who loves and wants to marry her. But Megadorus, Lyconides' uncle, wants to marry her too, and is already arranging a wedding. And the convoluted plot spins on.

Fernández's play is a crazy grab-bag of zany characters, nutty plot-twists, and gags that were already ancient when Plautus was a pup. It's a generic relative of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *El Grande de CocaCola*, and Euclio is clearly an ancestor of Moliere's *The Miser*. (There were some who declared that *El Grande* was racist, but here the same brand of comedy is offered by a Latino company, so you can hardly call it racist.)

Director José Luis Valenzuela captures the free-wheeling spirit of the play, and gleefully shepherds his nimble and versatile ensemble through their various roles (Performer Xavi Moreno stands out filling a variety of smaller ones.). Lopez lends a sad-sack Chaplin-esque charm to Euclio, the third-rate actor who longs to recapture the glory of his more talented grandfather. As La Diva, America delivers a rendition of *Carmen's* "Habanera"; as Phaedria, she spends most of the play on the verge of giving birth. Golzari performs a couple of interpolated pop songs, and actress-writer Fernández wins laughter on almost every entrance.

Designer Yee Eun Nam's interesting set features the busiest turn-table since the Ziegfeld Follies. Urbanie Lucero provides the lively choreography.

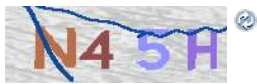
***The Latino Theatre Company at Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 Spring Street, downtown Los Angeles. Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; Mon., April 11, 7:30 p.m. Dark April 14. 866-811-4111 or [www.thelatc.org](http://www.thelatc.org). Running time: One hour and 25 minutes with no intermission.***



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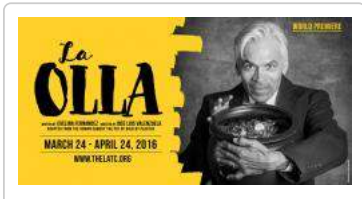
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## Entertainment » Theatre

### La Olla

by Dale Reynolds  
EDGE Media Network Contributor  
Monday Mar 28, 2016

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Adapting ancient plays -- Greek, Roman, Chinese, or Armenian -- is a valid way to examine human foibles and, by updating them, we can all learn from them. The Getty Institute commissioned Latina playwright Evelina Fernández last summer to adapt a comedy by the BCE Roman playwright, Plautus, "Aulularia, or The Pot of Gold." And "La Olla/The Pot" has been given its world premiere.

Set in the 1950s, perhaps, in East Los Angeles, the plot revolves around a poor failed actor, Euclio (Sal Lopez), finding a cache of gold coins sloppily hidden by a ridiculous gang-of-three in the backstage of a nightclub run by Megadorus (Geoffrey Rivas). Euclio has a daughter, La Fea/The Ugly, Phaedria (Esperanza America, who is not), who can sing but has hidden that talent as she is very pregnant. Megadorus is persuaded to marry her (to hide his true sexual nature), but she is loved by Eunomia (Xavi Moreno), the romantic singer at the club.

But the three goons (Fidel Gomez, Moreno, and Sam Golzari) find out where the treasure is, threatening both young Phaedria and her cigarette-addicted mother, Staphyia (playwright Fernández) to keep quiet. But by the end, mayhem is averted, sanity (of sorts) reasserted and as with most comedies, order is restored.

Would that all this meant something. The production, directed by Jose Luis Valenzuela, works hard at maintaining some sort of belief in the story, but it doesn't work. Apparently the original reading of the comedy at the Getty effectively showcased the updating, but it hasn't translated well enough at the LATC.

There's simply too much malarkey in the plot, with the simple characterizations not able to be fleshed out by the hard-working cast. There's a universal truth in art: root it in serious observation, so that no matter how flighty the story, we still believe in our character's situations. That hasn't happened here. The tale is too ridiculous in its conception, allowing too many not-thought-out lines of action -- or just not-smart-enough dialogue.

Everyone tries their damndest, but to limited effect. It's easy to enjoy the occasional line or set-up, but not enough to win us over. Even at 90 minutes, one vainly tries to anticipate the ending, until -- finally -- it happens.

Fernandez and Valenzuela need to go back to the original idea of placing it in an East L.A. venue and explore more of who these people are, and what they really want, and then write that play.

Note: Parking is strange and more expensive than it should be; watch yourself.

"La Olla" plays through April 24 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring Street in Downtown Los Angeles. For tickets or information, call 866-811-4111 or visit [www.thelac.org](http://www.thelac.org).



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# Back to 'Eden' and cross-dressing in the 'Cloud'

By Don Shirley | April 17, 2016 11:21 PM



Eve, Cain, Abel and Adam in 'Children of Eden.'

On March 21, Cabrillo Music Theatre announced that it was closing, after 22 years as the resident theater company in the 1800-seat Kavli Theatre at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza - a complex that also includes the city hall. Escalating costs, declining grant income and ticket sales and "unmet commitments by the

LA Observed on Twitter

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Civic Arts Plaza box office" were cited as reasons.

An editorial in the Ventura County Star predicted trouble for Thousand Oaks. It noted that a 2007 study demonstrated that for every dollar spent at the Arts Plaza box office or on rent for theater space (by other groups as well as Cabrillo), \$8.15 was generated for the local economy. The editorial also cited Cabrillo's report that it donated more than 40,000 free tickets over the years, to disadvantaged children, seniors and military personnel.

"Now is the time for the Deus Ex Machina," wrote LA-based actress Linda Kerns in a letter to the Ventura newspaper, referring to the divine provider of happy endings in classical drama.

By April 6, Deus -- in the form of local donors - had intervened. The company announced that it will continue with its 2016-17 season, minus one of the four previously announced shows. Cabrillo's board chairman told the Star that the anonymous donations would also cover the following season.

This offstage drama happened to coincide with preparations for a remarkable onstage drama, "Children of Eden," produced by Cabrillo at the Kavli. Opening last weekend and running only through today, it ought to have attracted musical-theater fans from far outside the boundaries of Thousand Oaks.

I confess that I haven't seen many Cabrillo shows over the years, because the company usually seems to be producing a musical that I've recently seen elsewhere. But I couldn't say that about "Children of Eden." I had seen it only once, in a 1999 production by Fullerton Civic Light Opera. I missed a 2000 rendition in Long Beach, which was apparently my only chance to see a professional production of it in Los Angeles County.

The "Children of Eden" composer, Stephen Schwartz, has been quoted ranking it as his personal best. This is the same man who wrote such musicals as the wickedly popular "Wicked" and the regularly revived "Godspell" and "Pippin." He received Oscars for his contributions to "Pocahontas" and "The Prince of Egypt."

The text is drawn from what is probably the most widely read book in the world (no offense to "The Art of the Deal"). Specifically, act one is about Adam and Eve, and act two is about Noah and the flood. The stories were adapted by John Caird, whose resume also includes "Nicholas Nickleby" and "Les Miserables."

Yet "Children of Eden" has never been produced on Broadway. It has never appeared under professional auspices within the city of Los Angeles. Why don't we see it more frequently?

Two reasons usually pop up. The critical reception to a London run in 1991 frightened Broadway investors. And "Children of Eden" requires an enormous cast, which would probably become prohibitively expensive in long runs with full union contracts.

The sheer number of people on the stage for the first scene of "Children of Eden," dressed in Biblical garb, gives it the look of a religious pageant. However, as soon as the snake arrives in the Garden of Eden, asking Eve some reasonable questions, "Children of Eden" quickly turns into a more humanist drama.

God is identified as "Father," and the unifying theme is the inherent conflict between parents and their independence-minded children. Schwartz and Caird depict a world in which Father gradually retreats, as parents must learn to do in order for each new generation to solve its own problems.

Schwartz's score is eclectic and, often, emotionally electric. Despite the scale of

Lewis Wilkenfeld's staging, the lyrics are usually clear (sound design by Jonathan Burke). Noelle Claire Raffy's fanciful animal costumes for the creation and Noah's ark scenes (choreography by Michelle Elkin) help vary the visual palette.

The vast cast is led by the powerhouse performances of Norman Large as Father and Misty Cotton as Eve and Noah's wife. She plays the more inquisitive partner in her marriage(s), so Kevin McMahon's more passive takes on Adam and Noah are appropriate in this context - but don't expect him to age to the extent that Biblical literalists might prefer.

It's certainly fitting for Cabrillo right now that "Children of Eden" ultimately emphasizes the unimportance of deus ex machinas. As some of the wealthier citizens of Thousand Oaks have demonstrated, sometimes you have to support your community, without relying on help from above.

## Quick-change artists

After three weeks away from LA last month, I returned to what seemed like a cross-dressing festival in LA's theaters. Men dressed as women or women as men in all of the following:

"A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" at the Ahmanson. "Casa Valentina" at Pasadena Playhouse. "Women Laughing Alone With Salad" at the Kirk Douglas. "La Olla" at LATC. "The Real Housewives of Toluca Lake" at the Falcon. "Cloud 9" at Antaeus. "Kinky Boots" at the Pantages. I might have overlooked some other obvious examples; I'm still catching up with what I missed during my absence.

Of all of these, by far the most satisfying production is Casey Stangl's revival of Caryl Churchill's "Cloud 9," which is playing in NoHo through April 24, with two different casts and some performances in which members of both casts appear.



I had forgotten the sheer structural audacity of this play's two acts, the first of which is set among the ruling Brits in colonial Africa "in Victorian times," followed by a second act set in 1979 London. Some of the characters appear in both acts (albeit in the form of different actors). This concept is facilitated by Churchill's conceit that the second act in London defies real time and takes place only 25 years after the first act in Africa. This is explained in one of the most important "time and place" notices ever printed in a program. Each cast member plays two or three roles in the span of the play.

If all of that that sounds complicated, rest assured that the results are remarkably coherent. Churchill uses farce and satire to examine the evolution of seemingly arbitrary gender roles and sexual orientation issues over the decades. Some of the biggest laughs, as well as some of the most piercing insights, come from the cross-dressed roles. The play rivals Shakespeare's comedies in its ability to use cross-dressing for such a wide spectrum of results.

Harvey Fierstein's "Casa Valentina," which closed recently at Pasadena Playhouse, is much more explicitly about cross-dressing than any of the other productions listed above. It's set in a resort for male heterosexual cross-dressers in the Catskills in 1962. But I didn't understand its ostensibly realistic characters nearly as well as I understood Churchill's creations, even though the "Cloud 9" characters walk along the edge of caricature.

Considering my interest in observing LA-set plays, I should note that Molly Bell's musical, "The Real Housewives of Toluca Lake" (through May 1), is all about caricature, and hardly at all about Toluca Lake. The references to Toluca Lake are so negligible that they can, and will, easily be altered to fit almost any other affluent neighborhood where the play might be produced (the place name in the title also has a fill-in-the-blank flexibility).

These "Housewives" are trapped in stereotyped straitjackets, which is supposed to be parody (of the TV franchise) but comes off as overkill. In stark contrast, the one man in the "Toluca Lake" cast, Marc Ginsburg, at least gets to briefly play several caricatures instead of just one, and he almost walks away with the play as a result.

Evelina Fernandez's "La Olla" (through April 24) also deals in stereotypes, but perhaps I should say archetypes, since the play is based on a Roman farce by Plautus. Although ostensibly set in an LA nightclub, the local sensibility of "La Olla" - like that in "Housewives of Toluca Lake" -- has a tepidly token quality. Fernandez frames the play with a noir-inspired opening that appears to refer back to her much more successful "Premeditation," but noir doesn't blend all that well with the play's dominant commedia atmosphere. Still, the actors make momentary mirth out of many of the play's hectic comings and goings.

*Lower photo from "Cloud 9" by Geoffrey Wade Photography.*

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