Written by Mike Schulz
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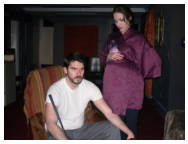


The Harrison Hilltop Theatre's latest presentation is playwright Kathleen Anderson-Curado's *La Llorona*
, and you won't be reading the review I originally set out to write, because after more than 1,000 words of trying, I couldn't find a way to finish it.

It's not that I had difficulty discussing any of the particulars of Thursday night's performance; director Tristan Layne Tapscott has assembled a rather outstanding cast, much of the staging is beautifully accomplished, and Anderson-Curado clearly possesses talents for momentum and surprise. What stumped me was trying to explain the reason that, despite so much talent on-stage and off-, I still left the production feeling discouraged and more than a little annoyed - reactions resulting from a humdinger of a mid-play plot development that not only affected my enjoyment of everything that transpired afterward, but made me question the logic of everything I'd enjoyed *previously*.

In attempting to explain my aggravation, I tried being circumspect, and I tried addressing the storyline aberration directly, yet no matter what route I undertook, it took too many words - hundreds and *hundreds* of words - to explain exactly why I thought Anderson-Curado's narrative detour was so spectacularly wrong-headed, and so fatally damaging to the piece. So I've decided instead to abandon any discussion of it altogether. (It literally left me speechless.) Put simply, if you buy the playwright's absurdist conceit that pops up halfway through the play - it involves a blindfold and an unborn baby - you'll probably have no trouble with the work as a whole. And if you don't ... well, then you'll likely understand my level of frustration.

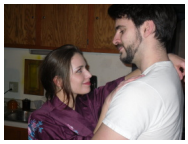
Set in modern-day Mexico City, *La Llorona* - which translates as *The Crying Woman,* the title under which this 2007 play debuted - offers a pair of young marrieds: Mexicans Carlos and Irma (Steven Quartell and Anastasiya Bauswell), struggling with Carlos' unemployment and expecting a baby, and Americans Jeffrey and Liz (Joshua Kahn and Tracy Pelzer-Timm), relocating from Houston and hoping to conceive a baby. Sent by his employers to open, perhaps unwisely, the country's first Taco Town chain restaurant - how does one sell Americanized "Mexican" food to Mexicans? - Jeffrey rents out Carlos' and Irma's home. Its owners, needing the money and with nowhere else to go, stay on as the Americans' housekeepers. And while everyone attempts to make the best of an uncomfortable situation, a fifth character routinely pops up: the ghostly La Llorona, who wanders through the house,

unseen by its residents, singing a mournful lament for her dead children. (She's played by Annie Shortridge, who directed Harrison Hilltop's fall presentation of *The Woman in Black*, and is now cast as The Woman in White.)

As you may have gleaned, *La Llorona* is a very strange piece - a blend of earthy drama and culture-clash comedy, with wild flights of theatrical fancy thrown in for good measure - and presentationally, it's quite an awkward one. Since the spectral presence of La Llorona is obviously an omen of Bad Times in Store, you'd expect her frequent appearances to instill a sense of shivery dread. Instead, her arrivals feel unnecessary and somewhat comedic, because the sequences she's interrupting aren't dramatically suggestive or evocative - they're written, and subsequently play, exactly like sitcom scenes.

Carlos and Irma are granted their dignity, but Jeffrey is presented as an uncultured, hopelessly self-involved lout - the Ugly American *in extremis* - who raises a quizzical eyebrow at the natives' weird customs and treats them rudely when he deigns to address them at all. And Liz, a bit of a snob who makes a crack about the drinking water and ignores her husband's discourtesy, is barely more tolerable. Through no fault of the actors, the Americans here emerge as complete cartoons, which nullifies whatever potential threat they may pose to Carlos and Irma; La Llorona's warnings, consequently, come off as much ado about nothing. (Sadly, the most tension I felt during the production came when a patron sitting in front of me let her cell phone ring *way* past the point of propriety.)

But if I have numerous beefs with the script (and *believe* me, I do ...), I have few very with the show's execution, and almost none with its performances; *La Llorona*'s cast frequently provides a humanity that's all too lacking in the text. Lending much-needed sense and sanity to even the most dizzying narrative detours, Pelzer-Timm gives a fully confident portrayal of a decidedly unconfident figure, and has a particularly poignant and frightening moment near the finale when you can see how devastating grief can slip, quite suddenly, into madness. Playing off Pelzer-Timm with relaxed ease, Kahn can't do much to redeem Jeffrey's obnoxiousness, but he gets to show off his dramatic chops to powerful effect, and is a pretty stellar comedian, to boot; Kahn's natural charm, especially when improvising a goofy Taco Town jingle over the phone, makes the character far more likable than he has any right to be.



Quartell and Bauswell, meanwhile, may not look or much sound like the Mexicans they're portraying (their accents have a habit of slipping), but they make a fantastically attractive pair - you watch them and think, "Irma's gonna give birth to one great-looking kid" - and deliver more than their share of emotional fire. Carlos' simmering rage and shame is made palpable in Quartell's complexly tortured performance, and he's a shrewd enough actor to know when and how to make that torture comedic; *La Llorona* is never funnier than when Carlos' tight-lipped smile suggests just how badly he's aching to give Jeffrey a wallop. And Bauswell, so beguiling in the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's recent *Anne of Green Gables*, is downright revelatory here. A Ukraine native, the actress delivers musically playful readings that are continually unpredictable, and she's so wonderfully engaging that when Irma is allowed her forceful and anguished moments, Bauswell's expressive candor in the role takes you, as it should, by complete surprise.

Given exceptionally tricky material, these four - and Shortridge, whose lilting vocals suggest an eerieness that her character's presence doesn't - bring about as much invention to *La Llorona* a s I think would be possible, and in his handling of the play's bedroom scenes, Tapscott provides even more. Employing the venue's second-floor office space, the director has his performers delivering much of their dialogue while walking in and out of view, occasionally pausing to reflect out the windows, and these gorgeously lit bedroom scenes lend the show unexpected buoyancy and naturalism; it's an insanely smart use of the venue's built-in upper tier.

I found *La Llorona* to be an oftentimes maddening play, but the Harrison Hilltop's presentation, at least, is first-rate, and the Harrison Hilltop itself - a converted bank that stands as perhaps the area's most impressively malleable stage space - is starting to seem incapable of being miscast.

For information and tickets, call (309)235-1654 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com .