

JON LAWRENCE RIVERA: A Director Who Takes Risks

By Deborah Behrens

JON LAWRENCE RIVERA MIGHT NOT WEAR a Nike swoosh but his personal credo for mounting theatre and manifesting dreams exercises the same three words. Just do it.

As if to prove his point, last year the award-winning director and Founding Artistic Director of Playwrights' Arena didn't just walk his talk—he literally ran with it.

In 2006, Rivera directed seven plays, four of them world premieres including two at the Edinburgh Fringe festival—*Conjunto* by Oliver Mayer, *References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot* by Jose Rivera, *Hillary Agonistes* by Nick Salamone, *Third from the Left* by Jean

Colonomos, *Manner of Trust* by Bo White, the Sondheim/Lapine musical *Into the Woods* and Edwin Sanchez's *Barefoot Boy With Shoes On*.

"In 52 weekends, I think there were only 10 where there wasn't a play running that I directed," admits Rivera. "It's been the most amazing year. I'd start rehearsals and just as one was about to begin performances, I'd be in rehearsal for something else."

As 2007 begins, it promises to be an equivalent marathon starting with the Center Theatre Group presentation of the Playwrights' Arena and TDRZ Productions, Inc. production of *Dogeaters* by Jessica Hagedorn at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in the third slot of its new season (Jan. 14-Feb. 11). The play is the second 99-seat production to be selected for staging at the Douglas as part of CTG Artistic Director Michael Ritchie's new partnership program to expose outstanding work from smaller LA theatres to a broader audience. The Robey Theatre Company and Greenway Arts Alliance production of *Permanent Collection* in January 2006 was the first.

Based upon Hagedorn's celebrated novel and directed by Rivera, *Dogeaters* had its original LA premiere in November 2004 as the inaugural production for SIPA (Search to Involve Pilipino Americans) Performance Space at the Temple Gateway Youth and Community Center in historic Filipinotown. Rivera was initially approached by Tim Dang to direct the play for East/West Players but ended up taking the project to SIPA when EWP decided its production costs were too prohibitive.

Set in 1982 Manila during the last frenetic years of the Ferdinand Marcos regime, *Dogeaters* features 20 actors playing 45 colorful characters. It focuses particularly on the fates of Rio, a young movie-obsessed girl from an upper-middle-class

family and Joey, a poor young Afro-Filipino hustler. Their coming-of-age stories are intertwined with the tales of generals, waiters, a soft-porn "bomba" star, the richest man in Manila, journalists, politicians, a revolutionary fugitive, a middle-aged drag queen and even Imelda Marcos herself.

Like Hagedorn, Rivera saw his personal life trajectory altered forever when Marcos came to power. Born and raised in the Philippines, his father was editor of a Manila based magazine called *Pace*. An outspoken critic of the Marcos regime, the elder Rivera became blacklisted when Marshall Law was implemented in 1972. A year later he obtained political asylum in Australia where his wife and

"If you're passionate about a piece of work"

three children joined him three years later. During the interim, Rivera's mother kept the family together by renting out rooms to stewardesses and the children's schoolteachers.

Rivera says studying the play gave him a new understanding of the efforts his parents made to keep their family out of harm's way.

"It made me really appreciate what my father and mother did to get us out of the country safely," he says, "and to find a new home for us outside the Philippines and ultimately here in LA. When Marshall Law happened, I was 12. I had a little bit of understanding that we were in danger but not to the full extent until I worked on *Dogeaters* and really explored the history of the time."

But first Rivera needed to convince Hagedorn to approve both him as a director and the bold concept he wanted to stage. He flew to New York to talk with her not knowing she had already checked out his credentials with fellow LA artists Oliver Mayer, Chay Yew and Luis Alfaro.

"Jessica didn't demand I meet her, I just happened to be going to New York," he recalls. "She was very concerned about casting. So I gave a rundown of who I thought would be able to work in LA and after that she said, 'Well you're obviously not from a different planet because those are the kinds of people I would like.' I talked to her about my idea of doing it in the round. I wanted to totally envelope the audience. She was so taken by that idea. By the time I reached my next meeting, the LA people called and told me she said yes."

"We had such a great time with it. It was really a wonderful community of actors. Jessica came for casting, she came for rehearsals and she came for the opening. Everyone was so united in that production."

ED KRIEGER



Jon Lawrence Rivera

Despite that afterglow, Rivera never expected *Dogeaters* to be a serious contender for the 2007 Douglas slot. Even with its costumes and sound design still intact, plus the verbal support of CTG's Associate Producer for New Play Development Diane Rodriguez who'd seen the production twice, there was the issue of paying 20 actors for a four week run in a space normally budgeted for five or six. Rivera submitted a proposal that stated if the CTG would commit to paying 10 actors, Playwrights' Arena and producing partner TDRZ Productions, Inc. would find the money for the other 10.

To Rivera's shock, Ritchie greenlighted the project the next morning. "I thought for sure they would never go for it!" he laughs. "It's too big, it's too epic, 20 actors. But they did. So we had to make

"k, just do it." -Jon Lawrence Rivera

good on our proposal! Our co-producer Ted Benito of TDRZ said OK we'll find the salaries for half the actors and he's made good on his commitment. Eighteen of the 20 actors are returning."

The Douglas is modifying its seating chart for the first time to accommodate the "theater-in-the-round" vision of Rivera's original staging. Both the first two rows and the last row of seats have been moved to sit on stage wrapping the set. The former Row C is now the new Row A with the stage raised accordingly. There's even discussion of putting ramps for the actors to move around the audience.

It's the second time in as many years that Rivera has talked a theatre company into tearing up its house. In March 2005, the Rubicon Theatre Company in Ventura gutted the former church of its pew seats and stage to transform itself into a multi-level coffee house environment for his multiple Ovation Award-winning production of *Songs for a New World*. It went on to beat several CTG nominees for Set Design.

"Of course I'm always thinking they'll never go for this!" admits Rivera. "CTG had to get approvals from the fire department and from the city to transform it. The production will have a slightly different feel since it is 300 seats versus 99 seats but I'm very excited about solving the challenges of doing it in the new space. Now the marketing people introduce me as 'Jon Rivera, the guy who made us change the whole seating plan of the Kirk Douglas.'"

Taking Risks

Rivera lives in a charming Hollywood townhouse complex called Casa de Artistes built in 1929 by Charlie Chaplin to house employees and guests of



MICHAEL ANTHONY HERMOGENO

Natsuko Ohama as Imelda Marcos in *Dogeaters*

his Gower Studios. Despite the location's Holy Grail status for a kid who left Sydney at 18 to pursue film and theatre, it was raising money to travel with *Up With People* at 21 that actually changed his life. And forged the ideology for his future theatrical career.

"When you go with *Up With People*, it's not like you get invited or get paid," explains Rivera over tea. "In 1981, it cost \$4,800 to join. I was working a full time job along with my mother supporting my younger brother and sister. She told me I could go if I could raise the funds myself. She would support the others.

"I raised the money selling T-shirts, talking with people, getting \$100 here, \$500 there. I even sold my car. The whole experience really became the model for my career. After I came back from *Up With People*, I knew if I wanted something bad enough I could make it happen. Anything is possible. So I started doing theatre. It's the same thing. We need funding so we talk to people to get money.

"Young directors and actors always come up to me and ask what should I do? Create your own path. Create your own opportunities. Don't sit home and wait for someone to ask you. If you're passionate *continued on next page*

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about a piece of work, just do it. Find the money.”

It’s the same philosophy Rivera says he applies whether for Arena projects or as an independent director. He never allows funding hurdles or commercial viability to keep him from taking risks with new works or more established pieces.

“I can’t be happy just doing the safe route,” admits Rivera. “I like taking risks. That’s just part of my nature. If we don’t commit to a piece of material and don’t take the risk, we’d be sitting here doing nothing. I always tell this to my board. Sometimes they say, ‘I don’t know, should we do this play, we don’t have all the money yet, let’s just do a reading,’ and I’m like, folks, if that was the mentality from day one, we never would have produced a single production.”

Playwrights’ Arena has produced three to four productions a year since its first presentation of *Carla* starring Elizabeth Shue at the Gene Dynarski Theatre in 1992. When the LA riots kept audiences away, Rivera remained determined to establish a theatre company dedicated to developing and producing original works by LA playwrights. Nearly 15 years later, his company has built a respected track record mounting such thought provoking plays as *Bill & Eddie*, *Straight as a Line*, *Sleepwalk*, *Bitter Homes & Gardens*, *Moscow*, *Beachwood Drive*, *Red Hat and Tales* and *War Music* which later moved to the Geffen Playhouse.

“*Straight as a Line* was really a landmark production for me,” recalls Rivera. “It brought real attention to my work in 1999. It was the only show of ours that got a review by a main critic on the front page of the *Calendar* with a color picture. That rarely happens now. Michael Phillips really embraced it and supported us. Luis Alfaro and Emily Kuroda and James Sie were just sensational.”

The production’s success led to a critically praised Off Broadway production at Primary Stages in 2000 with Kuroda’s understudy Natsuko Ohama and Sie in the leads. “I couldn’t believe how amazing the *New York Times* review was,” admits Rivera. “It was a love letter. That was really a shocking experience to watch unfold. Who knew this little play of Luis’ would ever go to that place?”

Despite his Filipino heritage, Rivera’s last name and close association with Luis Alfaro lead many to solicit his services as a Hispanic director. And they’d be right—to a point. “It’s not as if it’s something I can cheat,” laughs Rivera. “I always have to make sure it’s clear because I don’t want to pretend I’m Latino just to get a job. Both of my

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great grandfathers came from Spain to the Philippines and married local women. If they had come to America, I would definitely be considered Latino. Through the generations my parents are really Filipinos who came from Spanish grandfathers. So the Rivera is from Spain but I was born in the Philippines.

“I’ve been to Spain five times now because I love it. The first time I went I thought, ‘I know this place. I belong in this place.’”

On average, Playwrights’ Arena receives approximately 20 unsolicited and 10 solicited submissions per year. Rivera says his barometer for selecting someone’s script for the company or as his next independent directing project boils down to one thing—“gut feeling.”

Rivera freely admits there have been failures.

“Big failures where you go oh my god we were so wrong about this piece,” he admits. “We were so wrong! Sometimes we feel we did the best job we could. It’s interesting because a lot of the stuff that were big failures was because the relationship with the playwright was not as give and take as we wanted it to be.”

Rivera and Alfaro are currently in the process of creating a formal location for playwrights to gather to partially fill the vacuum created by the dissolution of the Center Theatre Group’s play development labs and A.S.K. Theater Project.

“Luis and I are actually developing a place where playwrights can come twice a month to develop material they already have,” he says. “We’re not going to do a Latino or an Asian version; we’re just going to invite everybody. Every two weeks, let’s read, work on the materials and see what happens. The labs at the Taper are gone. It’s unfortunate because there was money there, but even when there was money, Playwrights’ Arena was always developing material.”

At this point in his career, Rivera is clear he has a responsibility to his audience to produce something memorable in exchange for their valuable time and hard earned money.

“I don’t want to waste people’s time,” he stresses. “I really want to make sure the plays we do now have something to say. Either something new or an old idea being told in a new way that gives us a different perspective. Otherwise to just do a TV show play, they’ve seen it on TV so why are we doing it? Why should we produce it when television has so much of that and people would rather be at home watching it for free in their underwear? You know? They have to drive and find parking. So I better give them something.” ■

DOGEATERS

Opens Jan. 21;
plays Tues.-Fri., 8 pm;
Sat., 2 and 8 pm;
Sun., 2 and 7 pm; ends Feb. 11
Tickets: \$20-\$40
Previews: Jan. 14-20,
\$20 and \$30
Kirk Douglas Theatre
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Culver City
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