

Marisol

By Jose Rivera

Directed by Marianne Galloway

Produced by Risk Theatre Initiative

Bath House Cultural Center, Dallas, Texas

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With its violent, dreamlike post-apocalyptic world, Jose Rivera's *Marisol* is a vehicle that suits well the mission of the Risk Theatre Initiative "to drop its participants squarely outside the boundaries of the proverbial safety net through the vitality of theatrical production" (Galloway). The company is still new, formed in 2002, and has achieved local critical attention and membership in the Dallas Theatre League and the organization of Texas Nonprofit Theatres. The Risk Theatre Initiative has no permanent venue; *Marisol* is their first performance staged in the intimate 120-seat theatre of the Bath House Cultural Center, a space known for alternative theatre offerings.

Marisol is a winner of multiple Drama-Logue awards and earned Rivera an Obie award for playwriting in 1993. Performed originally at the 1992 Humana Festival of New American Plays through a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, *Marisol* has since been produced at such regional luminaries as La Jolla Playhouse, the Hartford Stage Company, the New York Shakespeare Festival, and the Denver Center Theatre. The play now leads a Rivera collection, *Marisol and Other Plays*, published by Theatre Communications Group, Inc.

Marisol is the first Rivera play in which he does not use an all-Latino cast. While the title character distinctly reflects the playwright's Puerto Rican background, *Marisol* is ethnically alone in the New York setting where she lives and works. In exposition, she is a copy editor for a mainstream publisher. By day she works in a traditional office with supportive coworker and friend June; by night she retreats to a lonely apartment in the Bronx where she wards off the street noise with prayer before an array of Catholic religious icons hidden in a box beneath her bed. Traveling the subway between her protected worlds of office and home in the opening scene, she is threatened by a homeless man wielding a golf club. As she briefly struggles with him for control of the club, the audience sees her defensive movements mirrored in the gestures of a winged woman observing from a separate area of the stage. We learn that this woman is *Marisol*'s guardian angel, engaged in miraculous intervention.

The angel is the first sign of the playwright's use of magic realism, an interweaving of ordinary events with dreams and fantasy, adopted from Rivera's Sundance mentor, novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Galloway introduces the angel early as a silent observer, but in the inciting incident of the play, the angel visits Marisol in her apartment and delivers a single sweeping monologue, revealing her lifelong protection and coming developments: "I kick-started your heart, Marisol . . . sixty-six-thousand-six-hundred-and-three separate sexual assaults never happened because of me. Now the bad news." The angels are revolting against a senile God and her guardian must now abandon her to lead the forces; Marisol refuses to join her in the rebellion. The angelic motif in *Marisol* has invited many critical comparisons to Kushner's *Angels in America*, and director Marianne Galloway unapologetically embraces the association by revealing in pre-show announcements that all the wings are on loan from the Dallas Theatre Center's recent production of *Angels*.

The angelic revolution leads to apocalyptic events in New York City, more occasions for magic realism. The police terrorize citizens for credit card overdrafts; leather-clad neo-nazis wielding gas cans and matches burn the homeless alive; men become pregnant and bear still-born babies that they bury beneath the sidewalk beside a rosary-laden fire hydrant. The angel is still seen occasionally passing through the bedlam, but her makeup and costume transform to military camouflage. When Marisol discovers her feathers in a later scene, they are covered in blood. Disoriented and unable to find her Bronx apartment, Marisol becomes one of the many homeless victims of the rebellion.

Homelessness is a theme that resonates throughout the play (Rivera was inspired by an uncle's homeless experience), and Galloway smartly underscores this vision by staging the play minimally against a background suggestive of city alleys, a brick wall fronted by scaffolding spanning the rear of the stage. Homeless characters in dirty trench coats and stocking caps serve as stagehands, carrying out simple scene changes with the movement of a bed, a desk, trash cans, chairs or other set pieces. This minimalism is effectively introduced in the first scene with a subway created by pools of light, environmental noise, and two vertical pipes. Only two other scenic elements remain in place during the play: a small rhinestone crown hovering center stage and a phrase scrawled graffiti style across the stage floor, "The moon carries the souls of dead people to heaven. The new moon is dark and empty. It fills up every month with new glowing souls then it carries its silent burden to God."

These words are spoken in the second act by a homeless burn victim in a wheelchair, portrayed by Chad Gowen Spear, easily the most exciting performer of Galloway's strong cast. Spear is able to balance pathos and humor in each of four desperate characters, including the burn victim, the golf club menace of the first scene, a crazed man with an ice cream cone, and June's demented brother Lenny who is obsessed with Marisol. Spear is the only cast member to play multiple roles (the playwright's intention). Elizabeth Sankarsingh plays Marisol with a vulnerability always close to the surface. Christie Shane is a frank and aggressive June, allaying Marisol's fears with the practicality of a calloused New Yorker. The angel is played by Octavia Y. Thomas, a Dallas actress known for her commanding singing as well as for

her powerful stage presence. There are no songs in *Marisol*, but Thomas's voice is equally as appealing in her fluid, poetic monologues. Jennifer Youle is convincing as a fur-laden New York socialite driven to homelessness and manic paranoia. Joshua Krebs and Matt Joe Puett complete the ensemble as stagehands and homeless denizens of the street.

The displaced characters of *Marisol* join forces in the play's conclusion with the angels' revolution. This ending seems sudden and occurs primarily through narration from Marisol and her angel. In a final image, Marisol takes the crown, the symbol of God that has hung center stage throughout the play, and places it on her own head, finding in herself the strength and protection she has sought unsuccessfully in religion, home, career, and society. This pat thematic ending undercuts and weakens the play's otherwise engaging storyline and powerful images. To make the moral even more apparent, Galloway shows her hand in the director's notes of the playbill, "not until we look within, and find the utter strength inherent in the ability to stand alone, will we know true power. And peace." Rivera imaginatively uses religious iconography to symbolize all the personal "gods" that disappoint, i.e. friends, jobs, domiciles, societal convention, and religion itself; but he ultimately fails to convincingly support his thematic alternative, the power of the individual. Still, Rivera demonstrates substantial gifts with image and character in *Marisol*, and he represents a significant voice as contemporary alternative theatres such as the Risk Theatre Initiative struggle for diversity and cultural relevance.

Works Cited

Galloway, Marianne. *Risk Theatre Initiative: Jose Rivera's Marisol*. Playbill. February, 2005.

Marisol. By Jose Rivera. Dir. Marianne Galloway. Risk Theatre Initiative, Dallas, TX. February, 2005.

