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Theater: ‘Women of Padilla’ at Two River

TOM CHESEK, CORRESPONDENT Published April 19, 2017



(Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Eight brothers go to war — and in “The Women of Padilla,” we are offered a bird’s-eye look at the wives they left behind.

Now in its world-premiere engagement at Red Bank’s Two River Theater, the play by Mexican-American dramatist Tony Meneses is set in Mexico — apparently just one of countless players in an unspecified conflict that has seemingly gone on forever.



Tony Meneses’ “The Women of Padilla” is directed by Ken Rus Schmoll. (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Of greater significance is the framing of the action in various kitchens — those hearts and souls of the homestead in which so much of the business of life itself manages to take place. Hovering just overhead is the shadow of the pigeon, that ubiquitous village-plaza fixture now pressed into service as a “winged messenger” of bad news from the far-off front.

Then there are the women: a loose and unofficial sisterhood whose de facto matriarch is the widowed Mari (Jacqueline Correa), “the one who quietly leads.” She’s joined from day to day by a motley lot that includes Carmen (Jeanine Serralles), “the one who drinks”; Marta (Keren Lugo), “the one with faith”; Alejandra (Paloma Guzmán), “the one who’s expecting”; Cristina (Elizabeth Ramos), “the one who’s young”; Fidela (Daniella De Jesús), “the one who’s taciturn”; and Lucha (Helen Cespedes), “the one with poetry.”



Helen Cespedes in “The Women of Padilla” at Two River Theater. (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Keeping her distance is Blanca (Karina Arroyave), “the one on the outside,” whose self-imposed exile has not kept her from occasionally coming around in search of a handout.

All eight players in the company are making their Two River debuts, which seems refreshingly appropriate to the occasion, even as it allows Obie winning director Ken Rus Schmoll (to tap into many of the themes of grief, bonding and hope that Meneses explored in his previous Two River outing, “Guadalupe in the Guest Room.”

While the characters’ identifying taglines serve as a helpful express route to understanding them, however, it’s easy to be left wanting more from some of these women over the course of the play’s relatively brief (and intermission-free) running time.

It’s also not hard to get the sense that when it comes to conveying the author’s themes, eight is more than enough — especially in light of a cathartic final scene that does the job even with the conspicuous absence of a couple of the Padilla sisterhood.



Keren Lugo as Marta in “The Women of Padilla” at Two River Theater. (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Inspired by the work of Federico García Lorca — the Spanish poet-playwright whose vivid portraits of the common people posed such a threat to his nation’s oppressive government — “Padilla” owes a bit of a debt as well to the “magical realism” tradition, as practiced so beautifully by novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez and progeny like the cartoonist brothers Hernandez.

The heart-stopping appearances of those innocuous birds, and their (mostly) unerring way of homing in on the unlucky recipient of their ill tidings, have an almost Hitchcockian ability to change the play’s dynamic in an instant (as craftily conveyed through the contributions of creative team specialists James Ortiz and Will Gallacher).

Even more mystical is the apparent transformation of one of the women from “sister” in good standing to a harbinger of sadness whose presence becomes unsettling to the others.

Despite the encroaching thunderclouds of war and the random lightning strikes of cruel fate, “The Women of Padilla” is ultimately a play about hope — the kind of hope that can maybe transform a battle-sooted pigeon into a dove of peace, and give glorious flight to an earthbound word or thought.

Succinctly composed, artfully staged and performed with a certain melancholy elegance, it’s a production that suggests our conflict-weary selves could all learn a lesson in coping from these Padilla sisters.

THE WOMEN OF PADILLA

WHEN: Wednesdays through Sundays, through April 30

WHERE: Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Ave., Red Bank

TICKETS: \$20 to \$70

INFO: 732-345-1400 or www.tworivertheater.org