

ASBURY & PARK PRESS

Celebration of Latino theater returns to Red Bank



By Tom Chesek

It's been a crucial component of the programming at Red Bank's Two River Theater, during the summertime "border" interval between one mainstage season and the next. And — in the midst of an overheated election season, in which issues of American identity and the immigrant experience have once more been brought to the fore — there's no better time for "Crossing Borders," the celebration of Latino theater voices that returns for a sixth annual edition, beginning Aug. 3.

Kicking off with a now-traditional Neighborhood Party event (boasting food, dance and live music) on the Bridge Avenue arts center's outdoor patio area, the festival arrives in 2016 with a new curator: Stephanie Ybarra, a native of San Antonio, Texas, whose many credits in the New York stagescape include service as Director of Special Artistic Projects at The Public Theater, where she leads the Mobile Shakespeare Unit and produces the Public

Forum series. The producer will be presenting readings of four new plays that “explore questions of individual and national identity, and what it means to be a part of the Latino diaspora.”

As has been the case from its inception, all Crossing Borders events are offered free of charge, with Wednesday’s 5:30 p.m. party followed at 7 p.m. by a keynote lecture featuring writer, educator and drama critic Brian Herrera, author of the award winning “Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance.”

Aug. 4 spotlights actress-writer Melinda Lopez in the one-woman drama “Mala.” Inspired by the final days of the playwright’s Cuban-American mother, the meditation on “the heartbreak and complications of becoming the caregiver to a parent who is losing herself” is performed at 7:30 p.m. The evening of Friday, August 5 brings another new work by an actor turned playwright: Brooklyn-based Matt Barbot, whose “El Coquí Espectacular and the Bottle of Doom” is a satirical piece about a comic book artist who’s torn between a comfortable career offer creating advertising aimed at Latinos — and his secret desire to right wrongs in the guise of his own Puerto Rican superhero creation.

Aug. 6 sees two performances of “Neighbors,” a script (by LA-based Bernardo Cubria) that details the uneasy alliance between Joe and Jose, next-door neighbors of altogether different socioeconomic backgrounds. The play under the direction of Lou Moreno is performed in English at 3 p.m., and in Spanish at 7:30 p.m., with the afternoon performance followed by a talk-back session featuring artists from the 2016 festival.

The Crossing Borders slate concludes on Aug. 7, with a 3 p.m. reading of “Fade,” a comedy in which a Mexican-American TV writer named Lucia finds both unexpected friendship and unintended inspiration in her relationship with a custodian named Abel. The play pools the talents of two individuals who have each made considerable contributions to the annual festival: playwright Tanya Saracho (co-creator of Two River’s “Nosotros” community outreach program) and director Jerry Ruiz (curator for all past editions of Crossing Borders).

“Melinda, Matt, Bernardo, and Tanya couldn’t be more different artistically,” says Ybarra, who previously served as casting director for the Crossing Borders programming. “It’s thrilling to have them all in the same space wrestling with some of the biggest questions we face today.”

All readings take place inside Two River’s black-box Marion Huber performance space, with the upstairs Mastrobuono Library hosting post-show opportunities to meet the artists.

CROSSING BORDERS FESTIVAL

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

WHEN: Aug. 3 through 7

TICKETS: Free; reserve at www.tworivertheater.org or 732-345-1400