

The Star-Ledger

'Women of Padilla' at Two River Theater is a quiet stunner



"The Women of Padilla," at Red Bank's Two River Theater through April 30, tells the story of eight women married to eight brothers who are away fighting a war. (Photo by T. Charles Erickson) (*T. Charles Erickson*)

By Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media
April 20, 2017

In just seventy-five minutes, playwright Tony Meneses's "The Women of Padilla," a world premiere now playing at Two River Theater in Red Bank, pulls off a deft trick: it manages to transition in mood from mundaneness through terrible sadness to genuinely moving tenderness.

It is an impressive feat for a delicate little play that overcomes its slow start with surprising efficiency. Little in the play's first half hour indicates that it will develop into the warm elegy that it does. But as Meneses moves his women further into darkness he finds there a rich repository of emotion.

The title characters are eight women bound as family after marrying eight brothers, all of whom are off at a war that seems aimless and interminable. Before the play opens, two brothers have already fallen; others will join them before the final curtain. The eight wives at home struggle to pass the time while each is enveloped by the horrible worry of the arrival of a messenger pigeon -- the play's haunting herald of death -- carrying to them the name of her husband.

Although buoyed to some extent by the strength of community, each must find her own way of coping with anguish: Blanca (Karina Arroyave) isolates herself from the rest; Lucha (Helen Cespedes) writes poetry; Marta (Keren Lugo) prays; Carmen (Jeanine Serralles) drinks. For the most part, the women share their homes and whatever strength they have with each other as they try not to drown in worry. The pattern seems tenuously comfortable, but the pigeons are never far.

The power of the play's latter half grows in large part out of its quotidian opening. On Arnulfo Maldonado's effectively simple set, the women tell bad jokes, worry about rodents in the house, make tortillas and gossip. Together the cast and director Ken Rus Schmoll sustain this mood well: there is tension, but no great melodrama or histrionics. Meneses suggests in one breath that this sort of slow life has become routine and is sustainable, before undercutting that security with harsh realities of war.

As funerals add up, the women's primary goal is to trudge on with a life that seems to make less and less sense. We never learn what war the men are fighting in or where they are stationed -- and certainly not why the war is being fought. The play seems to locate itself in conditions of modern life and perpetual warfare. Yet this is not a play concerned with great tragedy and heroic warfare. It is instead focused on finding strength, hope, and potentially encouragement within the personal costs of those concepts.

The Women of Padilla

Two River Theater Company

21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank

Tickets: available online at www.tworivertheater.org. Running through April 30