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Nilo Cruz's 'Bathing in Moonlight' at McCarter: A game-changer for Latino playwrights?



Playwright Nilo Cruz discusses a scene with 'Bathing with Moonlight' actor Frankie J. Alvarez. The play opens at the McCarter Theatre this fall. (Matt Pilsner)

By Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media

These are no doubt frustrating times for Latin artists and for audiences seeking representation of Latin life in American theater, especially on Broadway.

On the one hand, there is the important work of "Hamilton" composer Lin-Manuel Miranda, the son of Puerto Rican parents and the current darling of the theater world. His hip-hop re-imagination of American history is cast almost entirely with people of color.

But in the process of critiquing the white-washing of American history, "Hamilton" also throws into relief the drastically limited space for Latin voices on the biggest stages of American theater. Consider that in 2013, Quiara Alegría Hudes's "Water by the Spoonful" had only a brief run off-Broadway, despite that fact that it won the Pulitzer Prize before arriving in New York. The occasional one-man shows of John Leguizamo ("Ghetto Klown") notwithstanding, no straight play by a Latin author has made an impact on Broadway since Nilo Cruz's 2003 "Anna in the Tropics," which — after a run at Princeton's McCarter Theatre — garnered a Tony nomination for best play.

All of which makes the world premiere of Nilo Cruz's "Bathing in Moonlight," at the McCarter from Sept. 9 to Oct. 9, a must-see. The opening entry in what looks to be a very strong season for the McCarter, "Bathing in Moonlight" also stands poised to stretch the cultural reach of New

Jersey theater. And to offer a major Latino playwright the kind of space that most other theaters aren't offering.



'Hamilton' on Broadway: Even better than hype suggests

Turns out that the Clintons, the Obamas and J. Lo were right — this much-hyped show is as as wildly ambitious as it is thrillingly executed.

"This is Nilo at his best," says Emily Mann, the McCarter's artistic director. "It is Nilo at his most poetic: The language is ravishing."

The play, which tells the story of a priest who comes to the aid of a struggling Cuban-American family, is also a homecoming of sorts for the writer. The McCarter production of "Anna in the Tropics" helped accelerate him to the forefront of the theater world. In 2003, that show was a surprise Pulitzer winner — despite having previously only played at the small regional New Theater in Coral Gables, Fla., and without any of the Pulitzer jury having actually seen the production.

"Anna in the Tropics" was then staged later that year at the McCarter, directed by Mann and starring Jimmy Smits. That production transferred to Broadway, where it played for more than 100 performances.

"I think Nilo helped breakdown some of those barriers," says Mann, about Cruz's contribution to Latin theater in America. "I think he helped pave the way for the ones after. He's been championing Latin actors as well as other Latin playwrights, and I think he has lit the way for many producers to see that there is a way to be inclusive."

More than a decade later, though, barriers remain. "Hamilton" earned the 2016 Pulitzer, but two other notable Latin writers, Pulitzer winner Alegría Hudes and Pulitzer finalist Kristoffer Diaz ("The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity"), have yet to be staged on Broadway.



Frankie J. Alvarez and Priscilla Lopez in "Bathing in Moonlight" at the McCarter Theatre.
Matt Pilsner

"It's been a slow change," says Cruz hesitantly, reflecting on how the landscape of Latin representation and opportunity has evolved since the success of "Anna."

"I would want to see more plays on Broadway — especially straight plays — that have to do with a Latino subject matter." (In addition to "Hamilton," there have been a scant few notable Latin musicals, including Miranda's "In the Heights" and ")

"I just wish that Broadway would be a little bit more representative of our culture in the United States," says Cruz, "but that doesn't seem to be the case."

It is telling of the limited opportunity for Latin actors that "Bathing in Moonlight" will feature the American stage debut of Raúl Méndez, a Mexican actor with a long list of Spanish-language success on stage and screen who has not to this point found opportunity in American theater. For his part, though, Méndez is optimistic about the growth of Latin opportunity in American theater: "Everything has its own rhythm and its own time to happen. I think things are moving to a more universal way of telling stories."

But he acknowledges, "I think theater is a little bit more slow in that sense." Cruz considers that universality the heart of his play. Even though "Bathing in Moonlight" centers on a Cuban-American community in Florida, Cruz sees himself telling a widely relatable story. "I look at this family and I think, this is an American family," he says.

For Mann, it is this very universality that underscores her commitment to diversity. "The theater should be representing America," she says.

But there is reason to be optimistic. As Broadway persists in exemplifying its apt nickname "The Great White Way," New Jersey theater continues a broad embrace of diversity on its stages. Since 2011, Two River Theatre in Red Bank has become an important outlet for Latin voices by hosting its Crossing Borders festival of new plays by Latin writers, several of which have been developed into full productions.

For its part, the McCarter will continue a clear commitment to diversity. In October, the theater follows "Bathing in Moonlight" with the Pulitzer-winner "Disgraced," Ayad Akhtar's explosive play about the tensions between a Muslim-raised man and his white wife in New York City, and it closes its season with Lynn Nottage's "Intimate Apparel," about an African-American seamstress' struggle to find love and identity. Both productions are directed by women. "Part of what the theater can do is bring into the American consciousness is the story of all Americans," says Mann, "This whole season exemplifies it."

Patrick Maley may be reached at patrickjmaley@gmail.com. Find him on Twitter @PatrickJMaley. Find NJ.com/Entertainment on Facebook.