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### We're Somewhere

Edward Torre's production of *Marisol* questions our confidence in what we know and if we can truly believe in what we see, and I never felt myself questioning anything. These questions are commonplace in theater, as plays often explore the relationship between the audience and the actors as co-subjects of a performance. Members of the audience constantly decide if they can or choose to believe in what they see, and *Marisol* inherently toys with this struggle through its use of magical realism. Magical realism straddles the line between literal and metaphorical portrayals of the world, using what *Marisol*'s playwright José Rivera refers to in the playbill as "externalized metaphors" that incorporate physical elements to tangibly convey "an internal state of mind or emotion." Yes, Torres makes it clear that what we see onstage is symbolic albeit physically grounded, which by itself is an artistic achievement. Regardless, I could not help but struggle and fail to take the play seriously, because I felt such an enormous disconnection between what I was seeing and perhaps what I was *meant* to be seeing, or interpreting.

The use of metaphors in theater brings with it the risk of not touching the audience due to the common theatergoer's expectations for a play. Magical realist theater is not completely removed from traditional plot structures and characters, but the introduction of metaphors or elements from the imaginary realm elevates the play to an ostensibly magical reality, in which expectations can easily be disregarded for play-specific laws. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of

realistic and nonrealistic elements in a play may also confuse an observer in terms of what is real and what is not. While a play may purposefully confuse its audience, there must be some degree of respect for an observer, because someone who completely loses meaning of a play has no reason to watch it.

Torres takes no delay to inform the audience that what they are about to see is atypical. Before the play even begins, things seem unconventional, particularly the thrust stage arrangement and the stage itself. When I entered the CFA Theater, an usher encouraged me to sit as close as possible to the stage. Then I went to see that, oh, it was virtually impossible to sit far away because over half of the upper rows were unavailable in order to accommodate a larger selection of seats closer to the stage. I felt a very intimate connection to the stage, especially since the theater was busily decorated but open. Piles of trash designated the stage's perimeter, but these piles did not exceed the height of the center stage, while larger heaps resigned to the far back of the stage. The theater used a structure of design that emphasized how vast the space was by placing large draperies around the edges of the space, while the center was empty except for small objects. The contrast between the small and large design elements made the space seem larger than the empty space may have seemed by itself. Through the placement of scenic design elements and seat arrangement, Jiyoun Chang and Torres effectively made me curious as to what world I could possibly be entering.

The playbill introduced me to magical realism: while José Rivera provided his own basic definition of magical realism, Torres provided a much larger supplement that translated several of the play's possible themes into something understandable. And, in retrospect, I fully understand Torres' fascination with *Marisol*, particularly the question of what would happen if our guiding voice suddenly disappeared. I have no issue with this interpretation, because

*Marisol's* plot finds its way through disarray, where Marisol barely controls what comes next in her life and the world of the play mostly operates on senseless logic. I feel that Torres succeeded in making *Marisol* understandable, but jumped too far ahead in terms of fluidly developing the play's themes. Structurally, I saw points A and B, which led to a thematic interpretation. While it made sense to arrive at the theme, there seemed to be some missing action between the points that made the play seem logical but very loosely so.

*Marisol* makes it very difficult to link its story and symbolic elements to reality. The play begins too elevated above our universe, which means that even though I can discern experiences that relate to human beings, I cannot directly see how these ideas stem from people in the first place. I think Torres expected this issue to arise, because he directs the scenic design to make the audience feel more intimate with the actors, and to encapsulate the audience in this surreal world. Nevertheless, the style is encapsulating but excessively polished. The frequently-used serene score only works to accentuate how surreal the apocalyptic setting is, especially since Marisol acts like her job is very casual, regardless of the violent people that attack her in the first act. Furthermore, even though the play takes place in New York City, there is nothing to realistically identify this city. Torres does attempt to provide a familiar visual with the first scene within the subway, but the overwhelming set design negates any realistic depiction of New York. *Marisol* feels too remote from our world, and judging by its stark placement within a real city, I don't think the play is as effective in its unrealistic state as it could be.

Still, *Marisol* manages to successfully craft a genuinely human, albeit idiosyncratic, character. The most enthralling character in the play is Daniel Maseda's Lenny, who is horrible, comical, and affectionate all at once. Lenny bridges the disconnect between the literal and metaphorical aspects of *Marisol* because his personality and personal motivation define his

character. Meanwhile, Marisol seems aimless, the Angel seems far too mythical, June seems inconsequential, and the various unnamed characters seem either one-sided or overly contradictory. Maseda usurps the entire cast by practicing the one fundamental characteristic *Marisol* needs to succeed: Maseda is down-to-earth. Distinctly, *Maseda* is down-to-earth, and Lenny verges on insanity. In the most bizarre circumstances, Maseda brings Lenny to life by rightfully acting as though the character were a child and should not be taken seriously. This is especially apparent when Lenny is pregnant, because the physical presence of his pregnant belly should imply an overt seriousness in correspondence to the rest of the play's tone. Yet, Maseda seems to acknowledge that this play is truly ridiculous for the most part, and in order to counteract how serious everything is, we need something inappropriately ridiculous.

On the other hand, *Marisol's* violence is unintentionally ridiculous. Violence poses the greatest onstage technical difficulty due to the necessary ethical respect for fellow actors. *Marisol* often succeeds in small displays of violence, but the repetitive and obviously fake actions are more than enough to entirely remove the audience from a scene. The most common scenario involves the swinging of a golf club, which is mostly avoided through ducking. Yet, this action is identically repeated several times and therefore reveals the theatric aspect of the play's fake violence. Meanwhile, scenes that end with unique violent gestures, such as a successful hit with the golf club, are paired with blackouts that clarify the image. Violence is depicted almost comically in the second act, specifically when June sets fire to a homeless individual and when Marisol is shot. Torres chooses to pair these actions with slow-motion acting, which is simply jarring. The slowness allows for these events to be more obvious, as June's actions may have been ambiguous otherwise, but slow-motion acting is impossible to depict as anything but holistically fake. The forced change in pace is so unnatural that it almost feels unintentional.

Several technical aspects in the production seemed either unintentional or incongruent. Early on, the Angel ascends out of the stage using an oddly mechanical system, which is paired with the alarm clock going off. The two effects are both very referential to *Marisol's* existence as a play, especially since the alarm utilizes a very recognizable sound. While minor, these details are the final touches to an already odd scene that questions what we believe in versus our senses. As the Angel verbally describes a sensory experience, Marisol feels it in her dreams as she sleeps. The technical effects negatively contrast this scene because they attempt to incite our senses but instead accentuate that the experience is fake. Regardless, the play was very technically sound except for several scenes that incorporated a window, as the window faced the only direction away from the audience. I lost several lines due to this.

*Marisol* unfortunately feels more like a step in a certain direction than a resolved production. All of the elements are there in some shape or form, but there is no achievement of balance. The play desperately needs to convince the audience of its relation to reality, because metaphorical theater has no feet without reality to stand on. Perhaps what needs to change then is a shifting of the seesaw, to tone down the forced unnatural elements of the production. Torres may not realize that reality is not necessarily muddy, and that more often than not, there must be a specific color palette to depict natural elements. This is especially true in film, where early Technicolor movies, such as *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, purposefully used unrealistic color palettes to convey a neutral set of colors that allowed for subtle, natural accents. Although the color palette is not accurate to reality, the colors effectively convey a tone that may not have been felt otherwise. Likewise, New York may be mostly muddy in real life, but even *Marisol's* distorted world needs some of the city's distinct color and light to make the play's city feel like

the real city. The key is that it needs to be obvious. As an audience member, I should not have to try to see the city as real. It doesn't have to be realistic, but it has to be real, and we have to feel it.