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On the Bus

By Belinda Acosta, Fri., Sept. 22, 2000

12-15 minutes



Sonja Parks, Florinda Bryant, and Ana Perea in *con flama*

Sharon Bridgforth thought she was writing a play about riding the bus. The celebrated Austin poet/playwright initially approached *con flama*, the opening production for Frontera@Hyde Park Theatre's 10th season, as a vehicle for telling the personal histories of all those faces she saw on the bus as a girl in Los Angeles during the Sixties and Seventies. Traveling from her working-class, South Central Los Angeles home to her high school in Echo Park, and places in between, Bridgforth crossed borders between cultures and classes. This experience of "witnessing changing languages, smells, music, style, and protocol ..." and seeing how "communities mixed, changed, and intersected" was what she was thinking of when she wrote *con flama*.

Then, just days before the first rehearsal of the F@HPT production, director Laurie Carlos sat with Bridgforth in a Hyde Park coffeehouse, pulled herself to the edge of her seat, aimed her forefinger toward Bridgforth's chest and said, "You're not finished writing this play yet."

As it turned out, there was an absent voice in the play, the voice of a girl who had some things to say, some questions to ask her mother, and her mother's mother, about her own people and her own place in the world. The missing girl was Bridgforth, whose move to L.A. and curiosity about her own history mirrored those of the people on the bus whose stories she was trying to tell. When this girl was 'birthed' (and embodied by actress Sonja Parks), *con flama* came closer to fulfilling one of Bridgforth's original goals for the piece: to explore the social and political events of the late Fifties through the Seventies that shaped and affected her and the people around her.

When I started this piece on *con flama*, I thought I was writing a little old newspaper article about the process of putting together a new work. I suggested the article because I wanted to witness what I was sure would be an extraordinary synergy between Bridgforth and Laurie Carlos, along with musician Lourdes Pérez, and performer and UT professor Joni Jones, who served as dramaturg. But being around the production, seeing the cast and crew work with the script, and especially learning how Bridgforth and Carlos work, I came to realize that this experience was about more than writing a feature story. It was about learning about my own work, and reclaiming the sound of my own voice.

Rehearsal: Checking In

Laurie Carlos is a queen in the book of Theatre People I Admire. Her substantial contributions to American theatre, and African-American theatre in particular, are legendary. Since she had been part of the groundbreaking production of *for colored girls who considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, one of the first scripts I read that blew the top off my head and made me read/write/dream about all the performances I would write someday, I half-expected Carlos to be 10-feet-tall, with a voice to match. When you come across Carlos for the first time, it would be easy to dismiss this often quiet, moon-faced woman -- if you're a fool. And if you're a fool, watch out. I don't believe Mizz Laurie Carlos suffers fools gladly or often. (She doesn't. I asked her, just to confirm my hunch. I was still working as a newspaper writer, after all.)

Carlos started *con flama* rehearsals with a process called "checking in." Quite simply, cast and crew sit in a circle to shed what's not useful for rehearsal. It's a moment to check *in* to the performance space and check *out* of the nine-to-five that has worn you out. It's also a way to celebrate the little victories of the day and place them center stage for a moment. When everyone's had their say, good, bad, or somewhere in between, it's time to work.

I was invited to check in with the group. I thought I would say, "Hello, I'm the *Chronicle* writer," but I was surprised to hear myself say, with a catch in my voice, "I think it's destiny that brings me here ... I'm on a journey to reclaim myself ..."





Laurie Carlos, Ana Perea, and Florinda Bryant rehearsing *con flama* (Photo By Bret Brookshire)

Did I say that? 'Yes, I think I did,' the calm, dispassionate side of myself said. *Dispassionate side*? Since when have there been sides of me, and where did this other, wild but deeply familiar voice come from, and why, why, why was she in so much pain?

As the group broke into rehearsal, I dutifully took my place as newspaper writer offstage to observe -- and ponder what I said.

There's a laserlike pensiveness in the way Carlos gives direction, tender and direct, like a mother nursing her child or a seamstress deciding the absolute, most precise spot to make a stitch. That her cast would often respond "Yes, ma'am," or "Yes, mama," was more than respectful indication that they understood a piece of direction; it was a sign of deep trust in her guidance.

The body work necessary to get through rehearsal (and eventually the performance) was exhausting. Carlos asks actors to surrender their bodies to the music of the script, to feel how language sounds

in the body. The result is a distinctive performance vocabulary made of gestures, movement, breath, and sound. Her approach is a perfect complement to that of Bridgforth, a writer whose words positively sizzle. She finds the words that shimmy up your sides, around your mouth, peek out from between your legs, and purr around your shoulders. Bridgforth is a writer who found her voice and kept it, fiercely kept it, supported by a coterie of sistahs and mentors who heard her speak and said, "Yeah, that's right ... say it again." (She's fortunate, so very fortunate.)

At the rehearsal I attended, Carlos wanted an arch of the back and a step back to happen at just the right moment. It wasn't coming together. Shots of frustration stiffened the actor who couldn't get the gesture. The actor shook it off and worked the segment again, but then she missed a different gesture. She tried again. And again.

As I watched, I saw how extraordinary it is when movement, breath, and language come together, how maddening it is when it doesn't. Yes, maddening, because as I watched, I realized my body ached to pick up the gesture that the actor was struggling with and carry it. Was that impulse simply my need to shake out the stiffness from sitting, or was it the desire to dance in someone's words? Why wasn't I dancing to my own words? That unexpected question chilled me to the bone. I tucked it behind my ear so no one could see.

Performance: The Review

It's a joy to see the sweat of rehearsals pay off in performance. After two weeks' worth of shows, the cast had settled into the

piece, had taken it into their skin.

With the bus ride as an organizing metaphor, *con flama* takes viewers on a narrative ride that speeds and careens one moment, slows to a halt-and-crawl when necessary, and other times coasts along at a steady pace. It is a demanding piece for performers and for the audience. For the performers, there is almost constant movement. For the audience, there is the task to learn (as one audience member described it), the grammar of the piece. This may have been too much to ask of some audience members, particularly a woman sitting next to me at one performance who seemed exasperated when she discovered *con flama* required more of her attention than just sitting in the dark and letting the actors speak at her. To each his own.



Laurie Carlos (Photo By Bret Brookshire)

Speaking to some audience members after a performance -- their first, my second -- we agreed that when the movement, words, and gestures meshed, it was exhilarating. When a gesture was not quite in the right place, it was disconcerting. The interesting thing was that none of us had the ability to describe what was right when it was right, or off when it was off -- we knew it intuitively. And though we all had high praise for what we experienced, there were moments of disequilibrium when, in several parts of the performance, one or more actors spoke at once, causing a cacophony of sound from which nothing was heard, except, well, noise. Was that the purpose? To illustrate that the coming together of people and cultures is sometimes a collision? Perhaps so, but we wanted to hear *everything*, every breath, every word.

As with any production, a show is not about any one person or element, but how they work in concert and their commitment to the process. In what turned out to be a lesson on patience and persistence, Annette D'Armata, Lourdes Pérez's longtime partner and the show's soundscape designer, told how she and Pérez called Bridgforth early in the production process to discuss the music and soundscape. Convinced her work was done, Bridgforth deferred to Carlos ("Well, you need to talk to the director about that.") Still, they persisted, driving to Bridgforth's house, putting her in the back seat and questioning her as they drove around town. Perhaps it's no coincidence that the act of moving, as when Bridgforth rode the bus, was when some of the most interesting collaborations took place. (Note to self: The act of creation doesn't have to be in a hallowed space. You make a space hallowed by choosing to create in it.)

Although Carlos had open rehearsals, I never thanked the

performers for allowing me to watch them in their most vulnerable state. Rehearsals can be exciting, but they are also frustrating when actors are still groping for lines, movement, and other performance details. Having a newspaper writer hanging around surely didn't make it any easier. But watching them in a less-refined state was a good reminder that the act of creation does not come by magic. These people sweated to the bone to bring *con flama* to life. (Note to self: Whatever you bring to rehearsal -- whether it's revelations, missteps, or dead-end choices -- you're still bringing bread to the table.)

Ana Perea is quite wonderful when she takes on the voices of several Southern matriarchs, while twentysomething Florinda Bryant manages the hand-on-hip swagger of an elderly black woman as if she were born in an apron and house slippers. Zell Miller turns from charm, to stoicism, to head-splitting anger, to porch-swing calm on a dime with some change. Sonja Parks' spirit and little-girl spunk illuminates the Hyde Park space.

Last Words

"Laurie is a healer ... she changes your life," Bridgforth said in a public talk with the audience. "She literally birthed that little girl to life," referring to the voice missing from the original script.

"It's not like I told her something she didn't already know," Carlos responded.

This, I think, is where the beauty of the Bridgforth and Carlos collaboration lives: in the deep respect, trust, intuitive knowing, and creative generosity that these women, along with the rest of the creative team, share. It's a marvelous thing that, in my mind, is

not all that common. And without trying to make it sound all hi-falutin and hoity-toity, I do believe there is something holy in the union.

So, this is the part I didn't tell you yet. I didn't think I was going to, but here it is. I, along with a group of 20 other performers and writers, took a performance workshop with Carlos. I expected movement to be involved, maybe a little writing. Piece of cake. Been there, done that. But when Carlos started the evening with: "Tell us who you are, then tell us who you *really* are," the workshop turned into an evening brimming with poignant witnessing and sweet testifying. The gravity of this may be difficult to grasp out of context, but that workshop made me realize the why behind the pain I felt when "checking in" at the earlier *con flama* rehearsal: As a playwright, it's been so long since I've heard the sound of my own voice. At some point, my own words became tasteless in my mouth, so I stuffed them in a box and put them away. How and when that happened, I can't really say. Not yet. I hope that when I'm ready, you might come out and listen.

Near the end of *con flama*, Parks, as the girl grown up, says "And I thank mama, because she put me on the bus, where there's no better place to dream ... " To the cast and crew of *con flama*, thanks for letting me come along. It was a great ride. ■

con flama runs through Sep 30, Thu-Sun, 8pm, at Hyde Park Theatre, 511 W. 43rd. For information, call 479-PLAY.