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Review: con flama

By Robert Faires, 4:15PM, Fri. Apr. 6, 2018

7-8 minutes

Salvage Vanguard puts us on the bus for an illuminating ride

See the bus as a gallery: each window a frame, within which is the portrait of a distinct individual, one whose features, dress, and demeanor speak to the person's specific parentage, heritage, culture, life story. That's what **Sharon Bridgforth** invites us to see in her play *con flama*, happily revived by **Salvage Vanguard Theater**.





The ensemble from Salvage Vanguard Theater's *con flama* (Photo by Erica Nix)

Bridgforth, [an eminent poet/playwright](#) and [onetime Austinite](#), grew up in Los Angeles, where for her going to school meant spending a couple of hours every weekday on a city bus. In that time, traveling from South Central to Echo Park and back, she absorbed the personalities and stories of her fellow riders – who they loved, what they hated, where they came from – and in this play, [originally written in 2000 and premiered by Frontera@Hyde Park Theatre](#), Bridgforth shares some of what she soaked up from them.

The portraits are impressionistic, bold of line and hue, with all the color and shading supplied by [the rhythmic and lyrical language for which the playwright is so beloved](#) – as in:

"grandmother smelt like sweaty stockings and day old beer. every night
i climbed into a sweet sleep encased in that smell/and
grandmother's thick
damp skin/big belly snores and covers."

The individuals that *con flama* conjures for us are sometimes represented by individual members of the production's five-member ensemble, but their personas or words are just as likely to be shared by one or more of the performers. The shifting of voices, the choral fusion of them, gives these portraits a dreamlike quality, much as we get from the wavy bus interior provided by scenic designer **Chris Conard** and the dancelike movements provided by director **Florinda Bryant**. Everything is fluid, mutable.



The ensemble of Salvage Vanguard Theater's *con flama* (Photo by Erica Nix)

Bridgforth doesn't traffic in plot, except when one of her characters is spinning a yarn. This is a journey through memory and experience, a bus ride with stops at a girlhood crush (a Japanese-American young man, eyes masked by dark sunglasses), a mother's dancing, soul and disco from the Seventies, the devastating Watts Riots of 1965. It's a ride that snakes through L.A.'s many neighborhoods defined by ethnic identity – African-American, Afro-Caribbean, Chicano, Korean, Chinese – and summons not only their sights but their smells, their music, and what was endured by their peoples before they arrived there.

"Where they came from" is a matter of special importance to Bridgforth, as she makes clear from the outset of *con flama*, recalling how, as a little girl, she pressed her grandmother with the question: Who are our ancestors? Thus, in the course of this

journey, we hear of Nisei herded into internment camps during World War II and black peoples' fingers kept by whites in a jar on the mantle. Small wonder Watts ignited.



(l-r) Dominique Cunningham, Adwoa Danielle, Mary Beyer, and Semente (Photo by Erica Nix)

The burning of that neighborhood is just one way that *con flama* is true to its title. Literal flames blaze in more than one of its stories, but there are also metaphorical fires – the burning of a heart with love for another, the inferno of rage. Whichever the case, *con flama* always generates heat and light. It illuminates one girl's experience, discovering her own heritage and self, but in the process it also illuminates the selves of many others, their cultures and their lineages and their struggles, in ways that often mirror the girl's. Traveling the line with her, we share in her discoveries and how she comes to see a brighter future, one in which a daughter has answers to the questions that she never had, is loved in ways

she never was, has a life ablaze with possibilities. The bus route between South Central and Echo Park turns out to be in the shape of the human heart.

It is beautiful to see this bus pass this way again, not least because Bridgforth's words are necessary to these times and to this community where she spent many years, but also because it is helmed by Florinda Bryant, who was a member of the cast in the original production here 18 years ago. With the show's original director and guiding spirit, the brilliant [Laurie Carlos](#), having recently passed, Bryant's presence adds a lovely thread of continuity to *con flama*'s creation, a spirit in keeping with that of the premiere. But Bryant also instills in this production a breath of its own, a voice of its own. It is as distinctive and personal in its way as those portraits of the Angelenos framed by the bus' windows, an undulating, swirling dance of humanity. In closing the piece, Bridgforth notes "there is no better place to dream/than on the bus/in los angeles." Seeing *con flama*, you may be inclined to agree.

con flama runs through April 7, Fri. & Sat., 7:30pm, at the Dougherty Arts Center, 1110 Barton Springs Rd. For information, visit [the SVT website](#).

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