

BWW Review: LA TIA JULIA Y EL ESCRIBIDOR (AUNT JULIA AND THE SCRIPTWRITER) at GALA

Washington, DC



by Regis... May 17, 2021



In **Mario Vargas Llosa**'s novel about his early days as a writer, his main character tries and tries again to get his work right. To present a live production of that tale, "La Tía Julia y el escritor (Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter)" at the GALA Hispanic Theatre required the same patience and determination.

Canceled or postponed three times over the past year due to the pandemic, it nevertheless retained its stellar cast of actors from New York, Miami and Washington, some of whom are stars in Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, to finally present a version before live audiences.

GALA in many ways has been a pioneer in attempting to bring live theater back, having worked to stage a live performance briefly **last fall** before it all had to be shut down again. Then, as now, it involved working closely with city officials, temperature testing at the door, improved air circulation indoors, a mask wearing public in a vastly downsized theater (at 18 percent capacity) and a huge plexiglass shield between performers and audience.

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Still, it's a vast improvement over streamed and online performances theater fans have had to endure for more than a year, with the immediacy of live performers (even under glass), before a live audience creating a kind of magic pixels can't convey.

Masks couldn't muffle the laughter for a story that is only part romance, but also about the final days of radio drama in 1950s Peru.

Caridad Svich's adaptation of story by the Nobel Prize-winning author and onetime Peruvian presidential candidate, concerns Mario (Pablo Andrade), a young college student working his way through law school with a job writing news at a local radio station. He's young, but not so young that he can endure everyone in his family continuing to call him Marito. At work, he's fascinated by the work of an eccentric Bolivian scriptwriter named Pedro Comacho (Carlos Castillo), who amplifies his already overheated dramas with the usual array of studio sound effects - always a fun thing for audiences to see.

Though his pair of hired actors (Victor Salinas and Luz Nicolás, in one of her two roles in the production) complain about their extreme storylines (and the playwright's unexplained hatred for Argentines), Camancho's stories captivate the radio audience in a way Mario could only dream of for himself.

His other fascination, of course, is his Aunt Julia (Kika Child), a sleek and sophisticated visitor whom he takes to movies and engages in challenging philosophical talks. She's a widow 12 years his senior who is on the lookout for a new husband, but not willing to entertain the idea of romance with the nephew, even if he isn't related by blood.

They're both under the roof of Mario's other aunt and uncle (Nicolás again, with Ariel Texidó) who are encouraging their nephew's law studies, engage in all manner of philosophical discussions with him as well but whose screams at seeing Mario and Julia kiss create the biggest laugh of the production.

The coming of age for Mario's thinly disguised **Vargas Llosa** (who also worked in radio and briefly married his aunt) may go on a bit long. But there is no denying the excitement of being back in a theater to witness it all, particularly through the jazzy scenic design by Clifton Chadick, infused with show bizzy bulbs and golden hanging streamers accommodating everything from a home kitchen to a swanky nightclub to the radio studio, adorned with a nifty Art Deco sign signaling *Al Aire* - on the air.

The floor of the stage is adorned with what I thought was a large rendering of a compass, but what might actually be a radio dial - both would be appropriate for a writer seeking a direction and a medium for his storytelling.

Director José Zayas creates a show that's snappy and fast - good luck to English speakers trying to keep up with the witty patter as reflected in the surtitles. He adds little bits of business, such as Camacho always taking a right instead of a left when he exits the studio, as if he is so deep into his art, he never figured out the correct way out.

Yannick Godts' lighting design spotlights Mario's occasional recollections told directly to the audience, breaking a fourth wall (but not the plexiglass). Moyenda Kulemeka's costumes show a swirl and panache we've been missing with live performance. David Crandall's sound design is rich in classic South American dance music.

Because GALA's casts are often some of the best of the Spanish-speaking world, this one too is solid. Andrade, a Venezuelan actor in his GALA debut, may at first seem a little old for Mario, but his depth helps as he grows older and looks back at this period of life. Child is almost not seen enough as Aunt Julia, whose beauty and intellect bedevil Mario; she's assured in every scene.

Texidó and Nicolás seem a fleshed-out couple out to help their nephew while enjoying their lives. Castillo's cantankerous and mustachioed Camacho looks like a silent film comedian but rails like an anguished artist. Camilo Linares plays a supportive friend who advises Mario on his writing style. Even Delbis Cardona stands out as the radio boss who tries to keep things on the rails.

I suppose there's nothing like actors staying with their characters for a year to really help make them really get inside them. But let's hope that circumstances don't conspire to allow such an unexpected expanse of time for preparation during a time of closed theaters.

Running time: Two and a half hours, with one 15 minute intermission.

Photo credit: Pablo Andrade and Kika Child in "Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter." Photo by **Daniel Martinez**.

La Tía Julia y el escribidor (Julia and the Scriptwriter), performed in Spanish with English subtitles, continues through May 9 at the Gala Hispanic Theatre, 3333 14th St NW. Live performances are limited to 50 audience members. A streaming version is also available, through June 2. Tickets available **online**.

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