

The dystopian world of 'Fango' is disturbing



September 3, 2013 | Miami Herald, The (FL)
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452 Words

When the English-language play *Mud* by Cuban-American playwright María Irene Fornés debuted in 1983, some critics labeled its heightened sense of reality “super real.” *Mud*’s relentlessly bleak depiction of rural America’s poor resonated at a time when the U.S. economy was still suffering from the crippling economic depression of the late ’70s. Now almost three decades later, director Alberto Sarraín gives the original play a new but equally gritty coat of dirt with his Spanish-language version, *Fango* .

Presented by Akuara Teatro, Teatro La Má Teodora and the University of Miami’s Cuban Theater Digital Archive at Akuara’s black box in the Bird Road Art District, Sarraín’s version pulls the audience into the dystopian world of poverty and illiteracy. Mar (Yvonne López Arenal) lives with her developmentally challenged stepbrother, Lino (Andy Barbosa). When she brings Hernán (Yoelvis Batista) into their lives, chaos and violence ensue.

Sarraín’s version is not just a Spanish translation. It turns the white trash world of the original into an equally depraved Cuban world. *Fango* contains nudity and its strong language is peppered with distinctively Cuban expletives and accents. Some of these nuances might escape English-only audience members. Supertitles were not projected at Saturday night’s performance.

Sagging clotheslines were strung up throughout the set, giving the sensation that one could be in any number of Cuba’s impoverished neighborhoods. *Mud* translates so well to Cuba, elements such as American flags and musical choices like the jazz standard *When I Fall in Love* seem awkward and oddly placed.

Fango’s talented cast members execute their roles with raw energy and skill as they luxuriate in the play’s metaphors of mud and filth. Mar hopes that by taking literacy classes at the local community college she will eventually “die clean” in a hospital wrapped in crisp white sheets. She curses Lino for his dirty ways and predicts he will die rotten and putrefied.

Andy Barbosa casts an indelible image as Lino. Suffering from an undiagnosed venereal disease, he clutches his crotch and lets out terrible screams somewhere between agony and lust. Mar and Lino are locked into a dynamic of antagonism and desire. Arenal and Barbosa have mastered a repertoire of guttural grunts and carnal body language to project the characters’ incestuous co-dependence.

From one scene to the next, Mar's hyper-masculine love interest, Hernán, is dramatically belittled and emasculated — a transition that Batista handles adeptly.

It's an interesting time to revive *Mud*. The current economic recession has sensitized the public to the ramifications of poverty; however, Sarraín sometimes directs Fango with a heavy hand toward the play's amorality and nihilism. While violence may be the inevitable outcome of abject poverty, Fango's more climactic moments carry less of a punch because the characters' cruelty eclipses their vulnerability almost from the outset.

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