

Live at last at GALA, a boldly comic 'Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter'

The first local theater allowed to reopen returns to radio's golden age.

By **Susan Galbraith** - April 26, 2021

Trudging up the two flights from the rainy street-level pavement to GALA Hispanic Theatre's auditorium entrance felt like a pilgrimage. (Yes, I could have taken the elevator, but who would have wanted to miss the *approach*, that special readying that we theater lovers use pre-performance to drink in the atmosphere, the set details, and our fellow audience members?) To be part once again of the magical experience of LIVE theater! For many, this was the first time in over a year. My companion whispered fervently, "To be back at GALA, I feel I have come home."

Cofounders Hugo and Rebecca Medrano were on hand, beaming. They had persisted and come through. The Medranos had raised the funds to retrofit a state-of-the-art air system and gambled on coaxing back an audience understandably reluctant to risk close encounters during a pandemic. Thus, GALA was the first indoor theater in the area granted dispensation to reopen, by also severely reducing audience numbers (and therefore revenues.)



Carlos Castillo, Luz Nicolás, and Víctor Salinas in 'Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter.' Photo by Daniel Martinez

The GALA team has brought us *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. The show had been delayed and postponed three times, but the ensemble stayed the course. Many in the cast were company members. I am reminded that the idea of a stable repertory

company has been historically another one of the “bennies” of being a theatergoer — to return repeatedly to what feels like family — and it likewise demonstrates the mutual loyalty of GALA actors and producers, a model that has all but vanished in the business-of-theater locally.

The play is a bold choice. The book on which it is based, *La Tía Julia y el escribidor* by Nobel Prize–winning Peruvian writer and international superstar Mario Vargas Llosa, is a witty rambling comedy peopled with a fantastic host of creatures, many who appear in odd dizzying cameos then disappear in bizarre cliffhangers. Reading Llosa’s style in *La Tía Julia* feels like a dive into one of Nabokov’s language-drenched feasts mixed with Virginia Woolf’s thinly veiled, sexual-confessional stream-of-consciousness in her romp *Orlando*.

Playwright Caridad Svich has found several successful solutions to re-envisioning the story dramatically by anchoring the setting in a broadcasting station during the Golden Age of Radio. She establishes a reality and draws a parallel of lead character-narrator Mario to writer Llosa, who also worked at a radio station in Lima for a time. Svich makes the cameo material indisputably part of the serialized soap operas by a new hire at the station, fellow writer Pedro Camacho.



Luz Nicolás, Víctor Salinas, Pablo Andrade (center), and Carlos Castillo in 'Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter.' Photo by Daniel Martínez.

Company member Carlos Castillo plays Camacho, one of the most devilishly challenging characters to bring successfully to dramatic life. Described as “a miserable little dwarf,” a man with the hands of a six-year old child, Castillo, in a disheveled dark suit and

Charlie Chaplin bowler hat, draws in his arms to hover and dart like flies right around his waist. Part clown, part Wizard of Oz, Camacho not only writes the soap operas; he directs them and performs the sounds from a classic radio effects' table. Castillo runs around the stage to embody Camacho's prodigious, ever changing family of characters and their stories by transforming himself physically into males and females alike, only pausing to rant midstream against Argentinians (a running joke, to the howling satisfaction of Latinos in the audience) and actors. His physical transformation alone is impressive, but Castillo dares emotionally to go *over* "over the top" and carries us with him.

In any other production, the character and performance would fully eclipse others. Director José Zayas wisely asks all the actors to up the amperage of their performances for the show to feel of a whole. There is more than a little of cartoon caricatures in their comic realizations. Ariel Texidó lights up the stage with his impersonation of a macho, loquacious uncle (Lucho) originally from Arequipa, the moment he leaps onto a chair and rants at his nephew Mario, "No one in this family is a *fly*. We squash flies!"

And take Luz Nicolás playing dual roles. She barely reins it in as Mario's more traditional family aunt, but as the radio soap opera star, she turns into a cigarette-sucking, smarting and ranting diva whose days as a believable ingénue were long left behind. Víctor Salinas plays her radio costar and, targeted by Camacho for special insults, suffers the slings and arrows as only an oversensitive, ego-driven actor can, with hilarious results. Delbis Cardona gives us Genaro, the radio producer, as a cigar-chewing and spewing stock comic villain, who stalks in-and-out of his already crumbling radio kingdom, fixated on ratings.

This leaves the lead characters, Mario and Tia Julia, to navigate bridging the make-believe comic circus and the arc of their romance. Most readers seize on the latter as the central "spine" of the novel, in part because of its titillating parallel to the author's own romance (and marriage) to his aunt (unrelated by blood). In the play, their course of love does not run smooth and is sometimes acted out and sometimes narrated by Pablo Andrade as Mario. Andrade convinces us of his youthful fecklessness and journey from irritated adolescent, who finds his visiting, recently divorced aunt from Bolivia "vulgar," to her infatuated pursuer. Mario discovers in Julia both a lover and literary muse. However, his direct narrations to the audience sometimes interrupt the flow and reduce the character to straight man.

Kika Child embodies the character of Julia, teasing us with her changeability as she flirts with the boy-man she calls "Marito" (Little Mario). Child can paint in bold, comic strokes as she does in her entrance with red, fluffy bedroom slippers and her hair in curlers, desperate and more than ready to devour her next conquest to secure a

marriage proposal. But, as the relationship unfolds, Child keeps things alive from moment to moment, painting with many colors, to show Julia is a woman of flesh and blood and complicated needs. Her musical, legato voice holds us all captive.



Ariel Texidó, Luz Nicolás, Kika Child, and Pablo Andrade in 'Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter.' Photo by Daniel Martinez.

Despite the nod to a dramatic romance, to me the play comes down firmly as both celebrating and making fun of writers and writing. The playwright casts both Julia and Camacho as sometimes competing mentors of the young writer Mario. There is a third mentor in the foil role of Javier (Camilo Linares), Mario's friend, romantic confidant, and fellow writer, although the role seems from another dramatic universe.

Clifton Chadick's set emphasizes the collision between a writer's world and a theatrical circus, filling the proscenium with an oversized radio station and framing it with banks of curtains made of shiny white plastic strips and frames of wood filled with dressing room lights. Fellow Designer Yannick Godts shoots the space with bling lighting, adding to the circus effect, and David Crandall pulls out the stops, nostalgically recreating the sound effects of the world of radio.

Lovers of Llosa may find this theatrical adaptation lacking at times in verbal richness and quirky effanescence, but I welcome the magic of GALA *live* theater and the boldness of its invention.

Running Time: Two hours 26 minutes, including one 15-minute intermission.

Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter/La Tía Julia y el escribidor is performed in Spanish with English surtitles Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m., and Sundays at 2 p.m. **GALA Hispanic Theatre** is located at 3333 14th Street NW, Washington, DC, one block from the Columbia Heights Metro station on the Green and Yellow lines. Parking is available at a discount in the Giant parking garage off Park Road, NW.

Reservations are necessary, as only 50 patrons will be seated. Single tickets are \$45. Performances are Thursday through Sunday. Senior (65+), student, and military tickets are \$30. Purchase tickets **online** or call 202-234-7174.

Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter/La Tía Julia y el escribidor is also available to stream May 5 through June 2, 2021. Purchase tickets **online**.

To see GALA's detailed reopening plan, **click here**.

BUY TICKETS

Susan Galbraith

Susan Galbraith received a BA in English and Drama from Tufts University, graduating summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. Settling in Minneapolis for a time, she earned an MFA from the University of Minnesota, founded a theatre company, Performers Ensemble, and also collaborated with Prince on writing songs and the first draft of Purple Rain. Susan moved to Boston where she was part of Boston Shakespeare Company's acting company under Peter Sellars. Since 1991, she has made D.C. her home where she has enjoyed the opportunity to write plays, direct, act, and produce. She helped co-found Alliance for New Music-Theatre and collaborated on original works across disciplines, styles, and cultural expressions of music-theatre. For the Alliance, Susan co-wrote and directed Sandaya: Burmese Lessons and has collaborated with the Czech Embassy on several works inspired by great Czech writers, including Vanek Unleashed and an adaptation of Kafka's Metamorphosis. She has collaborated with composer Maurice Saylor on adapting Karel Capek's R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots) as a retro-futuristic cabaret musical, and, with composers Dawn Avery and Milad Yousofi and co-writer Yalda Baktash Women has developed Troy/Voices from Afghanistan, a music-theatre work featuring the stories of Afghan women and American female veterans. She is grateful to Lorraine Treanor and the opportunity of DCTheatreScene to jump into the privileged audience seat from time to time to learn from and be inspired by her colleagues making theatre and opera in the Greater Washington area.