

THE FANTASTICAL REALITY IN *PINKOLANDIA*

BY HANK WILLENBRINK

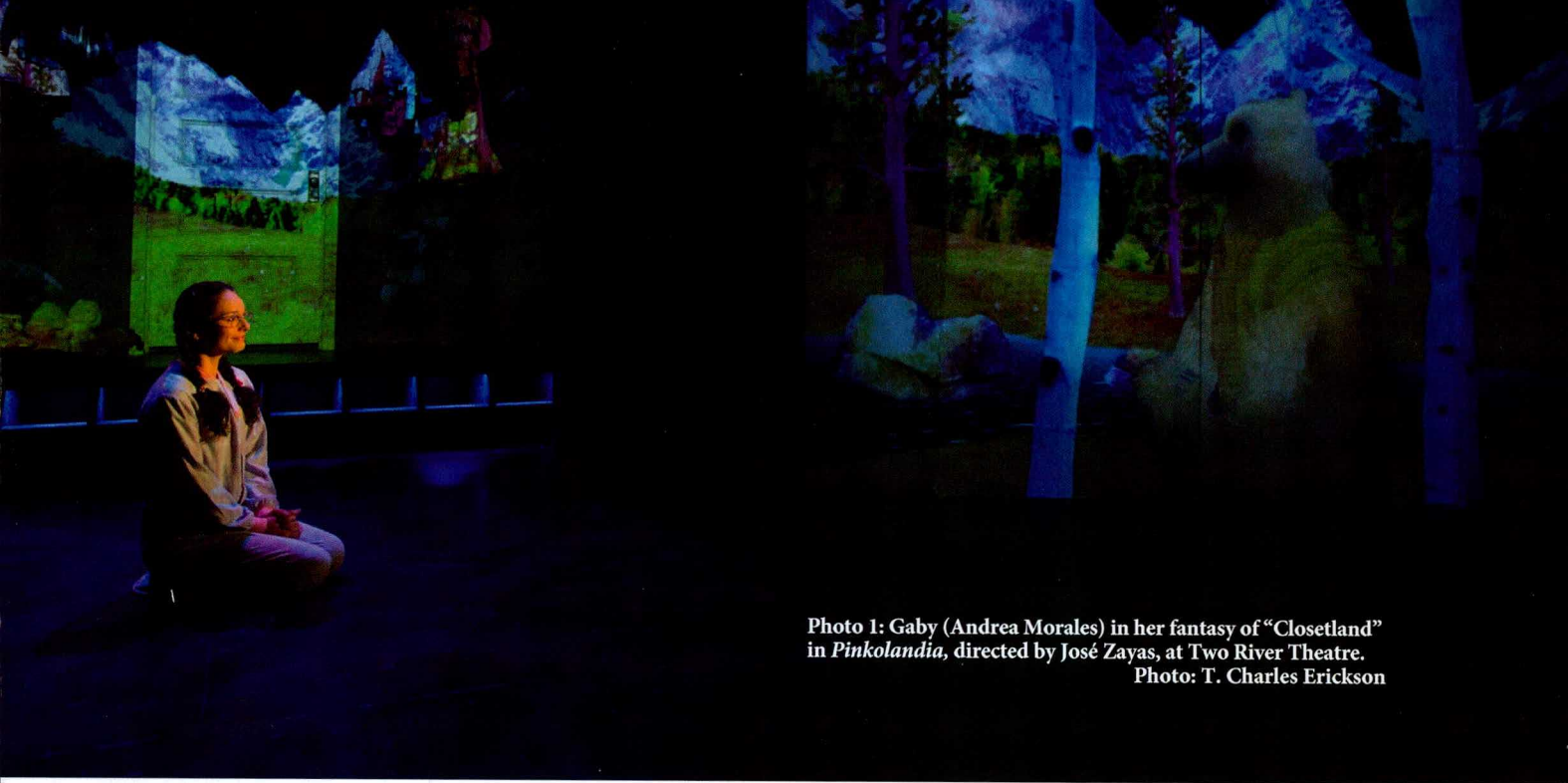


Photo 1: Gaby (Andrea Morales) in her fantasy of “Closetland” in *Pinkolandia*, directed by José Zayas, at Two River Theatre.

Photo: T. Charles Erickson

Atop the Polar Bear, Gaby rides into the melting tundra of Closetland as her older sister, Beny, meets a curious stranger on a train. Beny and the Old Man share a secret, revealed by the yellow stars sewn onto their jackets, but Beny is hiding something else. Inside a stuffed llama, she carries the “Tears of Sorrow.” “They come in black cars in the middle of the night,” the Old Man tells her.

They pull you out of your house, blindfold you and take you away. They throw you in a windowless stinking room with one hundred other men. You wait like this for 37 hours. When they finally unlock the door thirteen corpses fall. They drag you through a tunnel of screams. They give you electric shocks in every hole and push you out into the blinding sun. You see that you are in a soccer stadium full of people. Soldiers in green with machine guns beat you. A man begins to sing. You recognize him, he is a famous singer. He gives you hope. They cut off his hands. (Thome 89-90)

Opening his hand, the Old Man reveals the Tears of Sorrow. Beny’s llama has been cut open, and the Tears taken. “You’ll never understand our story. You’ll never suffer enough!,” he reprimands her (Thome 90). Though Beny’s fantasy is inspired by World War II, the death described by the Old Man’s is that of Chilean singer Victor Jarra, and the Tears of Sorrow are a projection of her family’s struggles following the 1973 coup in Chile. Both Gaby’s escape on the back of a polar bear and Beny’s double-crossing, happen in *Pinkolandia*, Andrea Thome’s new play that is receiving a rolling premiere as a part of

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the Lark Play Development Center's Launching New Plays into the Repertoire Initiative. *Pinkolandia* has appeared at Two River Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey, after productions at INTAR Theatre (NYC) and Savage Vanguard (Austin, TX). The rolling premiere finishes in May 2014 at 16th Street Theater in Chicago.

Pinkolandia is set in suburban Wisconsin in 1982, nine years after the military coup that removed Chilean President Salvador Allende from power. Allende had been democratically elected in 1970 at the head of the Popular Left, a progressive political coalition. However, after only three years, Allende found himself at the hands of his countrymen and under the thumb of General Pinochet. Forty years on, the traumatic power of the coup remains in its disruption of the Chilean state, dispersing of nationals, and the human rights violations that followed. The coup's scar, Alice Nelson writes, manifests in an overturning of political process and the relationship of a generation to history and identity: "The coup meant a crisis of language and of history, for the previous ways of conceiving of historical continuity and change had failed to eclipse the possibility of violent authoritarianism that became embodied in the Pinochet regime. After the coup, many Chileans were left without a means of participation in history, and attempted to find a language with which to represent self and community in the radically altered circumstances of postcoup society" (27).

The Old Man's challenge that Beny can never understand

the suffering caused by the coup echoes Thome's impetus to tell this story. She states: "I think this is why people of my generation and younger feel such a need to tell these stories: because our parents haven't always been able to. And, fundamentally, these are our stories too. We experienced the dictatorship too—just through a different perspective" (Alker). Similarly, for Beny and Gaby (12 and 8, respectively), suffering through "Morning in America"—



Photo 2: Beny (Maria Helan) and Gaby (Andrea Morales) in *Pinkolandia*, directed by José Zayas, at Two River Theatre. Photo: T. Charles Erickson

the optimistic slogan that brought Ronald Regan to the presidency two years earlier—with their parents, Mom and Dad, is as much a matter of adapting to life in the United States as it is dealing with the ramifications of the coup.

Of Costa Rican and Chilean descent, Thome describes herself as a “mutt,” celebrating her hybrid identity. “I’m proud to be a mutt—a hybrid is a beautiful thing!” she told Red Bank Green. “We’re so many things as a country, and as individuals. I wish we were less afraid of each other... there’s no such thing as ethnic purity, or purification. We share all kinds of ideas, language with each other, and we don’t get rid of them so easily” (Cheske, “A Land of Pure Imagination”). An artistic hybrid as well, Thome has a dance background; founded San Francisco’s Red Rocket Theater Company; co-directs *FULANA*, a New York satire collective; and helped create the U.S.-México Playwright Exchange, which she has directed since 2006. Thome has translated numerous Spanish-language works into English including *Neva* by Chilean playwright Guillermo Calderón and *You Should Have Stayed Home Morons* by Rodrigo García. Thome’s ability to work across boundaries can be felt in *Pinkolandia*. The play represents a new type of American story, transnational and intergenerational, dramatizing the transmission of stories by emphasizing how a new generation makes meaning from a history and country in which they cannot participate.

The arrival of Tio Ignacio kicks off the events of *Pinkolandia*. Beny tells Gaby that Ignacio’s arrival will change the dynamic of their family. “[Mom]’ll just get in the way,” Beny states. “Of what?,” Gaby asks. “Of the truth, Gaby! God. There are things that happened in our family that Mom won’t talk about. But Tio will. He knows. He was an underground fighter” (Thome 10-11). Ignacio’s arrival, Beny suggests will not only disrupt the foundations of their fantasy worlds—Beny’s persecution by Nazis and Gaby’s *Closetland*—it will also fundamentally change the girls’s relationship to the truth of their history and revolutionary heritage.

Beny and Gaby’s fictions, Thome suggests, are not unlike the utopian ideals their parents and Ignacio once held. After his arrival, Mom and Dad throw a party. As the girls watch the festivities, Beny describes the difference between adult fantasies and their own: “grownups get to pretend whenever they want. But they pretend that they don’t pretend. Either way, you’re supposed to act like what they say is real, even when you can tell it’s not” (Thome 46). Mom, like Beny, is aware of the limits of Dad and Ignacio’s “pretending.” As Beny helps put together a shortwave radio, Ignacio plays a tape of Allende’s final speech for her. When she asks what “traicion” means, Mom interrupts: “Betrayal. [...] Like a leader who shoots himself in the head when you need him most” (Thome 74). Mom’s pragmatic view of the present contrasts with Ignacio and Dad’s connection

to the past. “You keep dreaming,” she instructs Dad. “One of us has to survive for this family” (Thome 75). These imaginary worlds, both political and fantastic, are subject to the vicissitudes of reality. For Mom, Dad, and Ignacio the trauma of the coup, disappearance of family members, and exile from their home country irrevocably wedges their political ideals apart from day to day reality. This trauma is transmuted into the inner lives of their children. As previously described, Beny’s fantasies of persecution by Nazis mix Holocaust literature and her knowledge of the coup, whereas *Closetland* provides a refuge for Gaby—“Monsters can’t go to *Closetland*”—which, nevertheless, turns sinister as the tensions in her family erupt (Thome 8).

Gaby was not born in Chile, nor alive during the coup, as Beny was, still generational transference manifests, abstractly, in *Closetland*. As Ignacio’s visit rocks the family, so too does the arrival of the Polar Bear upset the foundations of *Closetland*. The once-verdant land becomes snowy and ice-covered only to melt causing the Polar Bear (and Gaby) to try to escape. The Polar Bear’s final monologue—“I always thought it was solid, / the ground I walked on. / but then it suddenly cracked, broke off and melted away / and I was plunged into cold water / I can swim / but only for so long / before I cannot feel anything anymore. / [...] I want to know I am alive / I want to swim awake / I want to feel different parts of my body / walk on ground with my feet or they will atrophy / I didn’t want to become a floating swimming iceberg”—is a poem of exile: a creature, banished to a world in which he does not belong, desires to return to his previous home to a previous, more awake, existence (Thome 99). This lament underscores a collective yearning of the family to return spatially and temporally to a time and place which are gone, a connection which, like the Polar Bear’s icebergs, has broken and left them displaced.

Pinkolandia slides effortlessly between the imaginations of the girls and reality emphasizing the confluence of both realms and the repercussions on Gaby and Beny. After hearing Ignacio’s stories of imprisonment under Pinochet, Beny turns her project on glaciers into a political rant. Echoing the Polar Bear and Ignacio, she addresses her classmates: “There’s ice in the South. Did you know that? Did you know that when it’s winter here, it’s summer there? And when we are enjoying the warmth and good life up here—it’s because down there, in the South, people are suffering from a cold winter, hungry and sick. This land is falling to pieces because of what we are doing to it” (Thome 78). With this, Beny plays the recording of Allende’s final speech, which she’s stolen, and attacks U.S. involvement in the coup. Finally, she pulls a box of eggs out and hurls them at a montage of “tyrants,” including Regan, Hitler, Pinochet, and Rambo, to the horror of her teacher Mr. Pittman. The casting manifests the slippage between the fragile barriers of

fantasy and reality as the actor who plays Ignacio doubles as Mr. Pittman and triples in the role of the Polar Bear.

The productions at Two River and INTAR, directed by José Zayas, made ample use of projections; designed by Alex Koch at INTAR and Koch, Kate Freer and Dave Tennet at Two River; against Raul Abrego's sets. At INTAR, Koch's projections were used mainly for the imaginations of Gaby and Beny, with the projected fantasy world overtaking the family's home. At Two River, Koch, Freer, and Tennet's palate expanded. Here, Abrego's set consisted of three large panels, which opened to reveal various parts of the house. Against these surfaces Koch and company projected the girls's imaginations, as well as wallpaper, a chalkboard, and, at one climactic moment, a speech from Ignacio that Beny reworked to fit her "revolution."

In this section, after the party, Ignacio recounts his experience as a prisoner under Pinochet and decries the dehumanizing conditions of his imprisonment. Beny creates her own reality of his words. Ignacio states: "¿Quién es menos civilizado?—el que lucha por sus ideales, usando todos los medios necesarios,, [sic] o el que mata para mantener su poder ilegítimo e imoral [sic], para robarse más y más dinero y explotar más y más gente, para ser instrumento del monstruo Yanqui imperialista

y capitalista!" (Who is less civilized?—he who fights for his ideals, by any means necessary, or he who kills to maintain his illegitimate and immoral power to steal more money and exploit more people to be an instrument of the imperialist, capitalist Yankee monster). Beny "translates": "Who is less civilized, the one who fights for her ideals by whatever way necessary, or the one who laughs at and teases and lies about other people just to hold onto their immoral power and exploit other sixth graders? They are instruments of the Yankee capitalism empire! Yes, I'm talking to you, Stacy Hanssen. You and all your creepy minions!" (Thome 59). In a riveting coup de théâtre, Beny perches atop the sofa as Ignacio holds court from the kitchen. Behind Beny, a translation of Ignacio's speech scrolls, as she reuses phrases, the text is highlighted and the rest of the speech fades. Thome's stage directions describe this as the moment where "Beny's fantasy and 'reality' merge," as she becomes, literally, carried away with revolutionary rhetoric (Thome 58). The company hoist Beny up and carry her off to the tune of "Canción del Poder Popular," a song from the Popular Left. In her imagination, Beny fashions herself as an important member of her parent's old political party though her speech, in content,

Photo 3: Pep (Gabriel Sloyer), Tio Ignacio (David Crommett), Gaby (Andrea Morales), and Beny (Maria Helan) in *Pinkolandia*, directed by José Zayas, at Two River Theatre. Photo: T. Charles Erickson



does not resemble Ignacio's ferocious rhetoric.

Similarly, Beny's fantasies of persecution blur her parents' world with her own reading and personal experience. At the outset of the play, for example, when Beny is entrusted with the "Tears of Sorrow," Nazi soldiers accost her in Spanglish-German: "Marxist terrorista! Miserable Jew!" (Thome 3). After Beny's glacier presentation, results in a suspension, she appeals to Ignacio, "I did it, Tio. I did what you said," to defend her actions to an irate Dad (Thome 80). Ignacio refuses, so Beny lashes out, destroying the tape of Allende. She, then, torments

questions you get mad or start to cry and tell me to stop, like it's my fault I don't know, but if you'd just tell me in the first place I wouldn't have to ask!" (Thome 93, 94). While Beny assumed that Ignacio's arrival would bring the truth to light, it's her tantrum which causes Mom reveal what happened: "The day of the coup, el Tio was in the car with Nachito [Ignacio's son]. They were going to La Moneda, the Presidential Palace [...]. The soldiers stopped them and forced Nachito out. When your Tío finally got away, he couldn't find where they had taken Nachito" (Thome 96). With Ignacio detained and Dad in hiding, Mom looked for

Photo 4: Beny (Maria Helan) and Mom (Annie Henk) in *Pinkolandia*, directed by José Zayas, at Two River Theatre. Photo: T. Charles Erickson



her sister to the point that Gaby flees with the Polar Bear. When Dad looks for Gaby in her closet, she is not there. While Dad searches, Mom and Beny have a tête-à-tête. "Why don't you dare talk about what happened?!", Beny demands to Mom. "Why don't you stop inventing things?," Mom retorts. "It doesn't work. It never works." "Well how am I supposed to know how things were like, when you never want to tell me?" Beny asks. "Anytime I try to ask you

Nachito, but failed to find him. She concludes: "Your father snuck out of the country and we followed him. You and Me. Your Tio—they did terrible things to him. Then they put him on a plane and sent him away. He can't go back to look for Nachito. None of us can. We never had a funeral. He was the baby of all of us cousins, you know? We left them all. I didn't want to leave" (Thome 96). This face-to-face communication between mother and daughter is salient

and charged. There are no projections or fantastical imaginings, only the deceptively simple act of transmitting a story from one generation to another. Thome places this moment after Beny has destroyed the tape of Allende, implying that, with the historical artifact gone, the onus of telling Nachito's story is on the survivors. Only after the political rhetoric has been destroyed can the truth be revealed.

The inter-generational aspect of this transmission is particularly striking as *Pinkolandia* posits a new form of the American narrative genre testimonio. The testimonio ("testimony") genre has roots dating (at least) to the 1960s. Authors, witnesses, and transcribers involved in the project sought to fight injustice through first-person narrative accounts (sometimes orally given and written by another) where the subject claimed to be an "everyman" or "everywoman" speaking from personal experience inciting readers to join in the project of social justice. As writer, and former cultural advisor to Allende, Ariel Dorfman articulates: "Each testimony—and above all, all of them together, their extraordinary abundance—extends a certain concept of man and of woman opposite to the one exercised and cultivated by the torturers" (137). Testimonio is a way to fight the injustices, record sufferings, and, in Dorfman's

Photo 5: Dad (Varín Ayala) and Beny (María Helan) in *Pinkolandia*, directed by José Zayas, at Two River Theatre.
Photo: T. Charles Erickson



words, "inspire the other combatants in the middle of a retreat" (141). There is a particular relation between testimonio and exile, not only in the production of the text—numerous testimonios were composed by people in exile—but in the ability of the language to unite a diaspora cut off from its native country. Dorfman states: "the dispersion of the diaspora lays bare the need for culture as a network of

unity and integration for the wasted country left behind and lost" (135).

Thome illustrates this network in *Pinkolandia* through the fiesta celebrating Ignacio's arrival. As a family friend plays Victor Jara's "Te Recuerdo Amanda," Dad sings and kills the party, according to Gaby: "Now they're gonna get all quiet and start crying and breaking glasses and stuff" (Thome 47). Thome skillfully arranges Jara's somber song against the musical tastes of the girls, who prefer Duran Duran and Olivia Newton-John's "Let's Get Physical." At Two River Zayas's staging drew the division with Maria Helan (Beny) and Andrea Morales (Gaby) sitting with their hands over their ears as Varin Ayala (Dad) sang a pathos-rich rendition of Jara's song. For the adults, music is a way to connect to the past, to the language and spirit of the, in Dorfman's words, "wasted country" (135). For Beny and Gaby, the song is embarrassing. Mocking her father, Beny states, "Now you have to sing about how you lost something and you're so sad," as Gaby does a melodramatic mimicry of Dad, replacing Jara's lyrics with "Tengo un perrito perdido" ("I have a lost puppy") (Thome 47). The girls's reaction to the song underscores the difficulty of transmitting testimonies. Beny and Gaby's connection to US popular culture divides them from the experiences that unite their parents. The diaspora, which Beny and Gaby belong to, is exiled temporally as well as spatially. Unable to connect through the stories and songs that unite the previous generation, they have to set out to create stories of their own.

As Thome describes it, the creation of imaginary worlds was a personal experience. It allowed Thome and her sister to channel and interact with a homeland that they could not go back to, like Beny and Gaby. Thome told the *Asbury Park Press*: "There were very few Latin Americans in Wisconsin when I grew up there in the 1970s and '80s. [...] When you have that little contact with your heritage, you do like the girls in *Pinkolandia* and carry their country with them; their own world" (Cheske, "A Return to 'Pinkolandia'"). In the final moments of the play, Beny's parents are unable to draw Gaby out of the closet, where she imagines herself floating on an iceberg in shark-infested, hypothermic waters. "I'm jumping in the water," Beny tells her sister. "I'm swimming towards you, Gaby" (Thome 101). "You made it thorough the whole ice ocean," Gaby tells her sister once she's been "reached." "I think that means you really like me." "Yeah. I think you're right," Beny confirms (Thome 105). In these final moments, Thome offers a new vision of the girls's imaginings. Instead of filtering externalities through inner visions, Beny and Gaby's imagination becomes generative. Zayas and his production team do not employ the battery of projections

that they had previously. As with the scene between Beny and Mom, the focus is only on the girls as they imagine together, uniting the sisters through shared fantasy.

In "An Open Letter to My Grandson or Granddaughter," the late Argentine poet Juan Gelman wrote:

You are almost as old now as your parents were when they killed them, and soon you will be older than they got to be, they who have stayed twenty forever. They had dreams for you and for a world more suitable and habitable. I would like to talk to you about them and to have you tell me about yourself; to be able to recognize in you my own son and let you find in me what I have of your father—both of us are his orphans. I would like to repair somehow this brutal severance or silence that has perpetrated the military dictatorship within the very flesh of my family. I would like to give you your own history, but not separate you from what you don't want to separate from.

Gelman's elegiac letter to his unknown grandchild, unknown because that child's parents were killed before the child was born, poignantly captures the importance of stories like *Pinkolandia*. As we move further away from traumatic events, the key to memory is the endurance of storytelling. However, as Thome illustrates, this transmission of narrative is rarely simple. Her usage of fantasy and reality create a buoyant and tortured universe where a family struggles with its very definition as it attempts to transmit tales of trauma from one generation to the next in order to save both.

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