



Capitalist Pigs

MIA LEONIN | JUNE 20, 2002 | 4:00AM

When a historical play has done its work, one can expect to hear one of two exclamations from audience members as they file out: the ever-popular "My, how times have changed!" or the unforgettable "Oh, how history repeats itself!" GableStage's production of Russell Lees's *Nixon's Nixon* might inspire both utterances. Starring Peter Haig as Richard Nixon and John Felix as Henry Kissinger, this 90-minute one-act takes on the subject of much conjecture: President Nixon's final conversation with Kissinger, his secretary of state.

On August 7, 1974, Nixon, under the threat of impeachment, held a last-minute tête-à-tête with his trusted adviser. Only a few hours after the meeting, Tricky Dick resigned and made that infamous walk out of the White House to the helicopter that rushed him off to a respite from the pounding of history's gavel. Nixon with arms raised, shoulders stooped, and brow furrowed is one of the nation's most memorable still shots; watching even a fictionalized version of this episode almost 30 years later is chilling, thought-provoking, and at times hilarious.

Haig's Nixon is thoroughly believable -- and funny. The script has a lot of ready-made one-liners (delivered well by Haig) that capitalize on Nixon's limitless ego. At one point he rationalizes: "Look at the count on the Civil War -- and he [Lincoln] ended up on Mount Rushmore." In another moment, he revels in his landslide presidential victory and declares: "I appealed to the Richard Nixon in everyone." Sometimes, though, the theatrical lampooning threatens to turn Nixon's "I'm not a crook" into "I don't know my head from a hole in the ground."

While often comical and consistently engaging, Felix's Kissinger is likewise sometimes too much of a caricature, especially early on in the play, undermining the diabolical and power-hungry nature of his character. Playing Kissinger so close to parody also squanders an opportunity for establishing a more complex dynamic between the two characters. Embedded in Kissinger's persona is the possibility of the audience seeing Nixon not so much as the president of the United States but as a cog in the wheel of a political machine much more influential than the president himself -- a slice of reality quite relevant in these days of rampant Rumsfelds and sequestered Cheneys.

To keep the pace of this uninterrupted dialogue engaging, the playwright has cleverly inserted

scenes in which Kissinger must indulge Nixon's megalomania and role-play the great moments of his administration -- meetings with Leonid Brezhnev, Chairman Mao, and Golda Meir. Mike Martin's effective lighting helps pull off this narrative device by calling attention to different parts of the stage.

Like the acting, Joseph Adler's direction of this piercing script at times pushes the fine line between satire and parody. While his approach sometimes brings in the laughs, it threatens to shortchange the more serious side of the script: man's struggle with immortality. Nixon and Kissinger are concerned, even obsessed, with their respective places in the history books. This is an intriguing aspect of the script that, if it had been emphasized more, could have added depth to the satire.

That said, *Nixon's Nixon* draws distressing similarities between the opportunism of the 1970s and the crises of the new century. Who can watch Nixon and Kissinger cook up an international military conflict involving nuclear arms to distract from the domestic scandal at hand and not think of current politics? When it comes to historical and political themes, the theatergoing public can rest assured that Joe Adler will consistently choose relevant, challenging, and thought-provoking plays. We need this reassurance now more than ever.

Teatro La Má Teodora opens its first permanent space, dubbed La Magagna, with the Spanish-language play *Manteca* (Lard).

Jammed between La Magagna's fifteen-foot-high, brown cinderblock walls with a hundredsomething people fanning themselves with their programs, one has the feeling of being *allá* -- or at least somewhere other than South Florida. Nothing could resemble the true chaos of a ramshackle Havana building turned pigsty more than director Alberto Sarrain's set design for Cuban playwright Alberto Pedro's *Manteca*. The clutter of old papers, obsolete tools, and the like give the audience the uncomfortable feeling of being trapped in the squalor with the actors. At center stage is a half-circle of mirrors. The mirrors serve as a sort of twisted spotlight -- grabbing the reflection of each character, distorting it to a funhouse effect, and throwing it back at the audience.

The time is the early Nineties, the beginning of Cuba's "special period," when bicycles and horse-drawn wagons replaced cars and buses on the streets of Havana. People are starving; many are left with vitamin deficiencies that cause blindness and paralysis. In the midst of this national crisis, two brothers, Pucho (Dexter Capiro) and Celestino (Pablo Duran), along with their sister Dulce (Sandra Garcia), hole themselves up in their Havana apartment, where they are illegally raising a pig. Trying to hide the smell and make sure the neighbors don't find out, the three are outrageously trapped by a plot of their own making. *Manteca* is a confirmation that the theater of the absurd has its roots in realism. As these characters search for the most basic of human rights -- food, freedom, etc. -- the improbability of attaining those rights warps the play into a disturbing *mélange* of humor, tragedy, and farce.

The play's emotional tension rises and falls so steadily throughout the first half that it could almost become hypnotic -- if not for Pedro's meaty script. We may be on a familiar roller-coaster ride of desperation, outrage, raucous humor, and affection, but morally and spiritually, we don't know where we'll end up.

The cast is equal to this challenging material. Capiro first performed in Miami in 2001 as part of the International Monologue Festival. He brings to the stage a range, mastery, and above all physicality and stamina characteristic of actors trained in Cuba. Flamboyant in a gothic black cape with white ruffled collar, his litany in act one on the virtues of *manteca* is absurd, operatic, and disturbing -- one of the theatrical high moments of the play.

A testament to the high level of acting skill on display here is how the actors can add new

meaning to the banal word *manteca* each time they utter it. One of the most intense moments of the play is when Duran's Celestino raises a butcher knife, screams "*Manteca!*" and runs offstage. It is both a war cry and an admission of defeat. For the most part, though, they all support one another well.

Garcia, as Dulce, is a driving comedic force in the play; her talent for dishing out acerbic one-liners and idiosyncratic theories is nothing short of remarkable. She anchors the dramatic triangle, mediating between the warring brothers. Luckily the triangle does not polarize characters into stereotypes. Pucho and Celestino are no Cain and Abel: They are equally disturbing and sympathetic.

Manteca is a play to be seen and seen again. As one of the most significant works from this crucial time in Cuban history, it will surely make its way into the canon. We are lucky it has found a home here.

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