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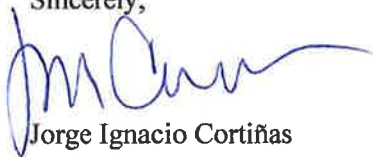
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Dear Lillian:

Here is some of the press TIGHT EMBRACE generated.

Saludos to you and your family!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jorge Cortiñas', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas

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**GAG RULE Hostage**  
Guevara, left,  
is fit to be tied.

## **Tight Embrace**

**By Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Dir. Lisa Peterson. With ensemble cast. Klrk Theatre (see Off Broadway).**

**D**aily kidnappings and executions in Latin America are frighteningly brought to life in Cuban-American playwright Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas's *Tight Embrace*. A pregnant reporter (Zabryna Guevara) and an old woman (Mia Katigbak) waiting for her son to pay her ransom are held prisoner by two paramilitary guards—the clownish Barquín (Andrés Munar) and his “bad cop” boss, Zero (Robert M. Jimenez). Prison life in this setting is decidedly farcical; Barquín allows the old woman to quiz him on rules for torturing prisoners, and she in turn offers tips on how to seduce. The reporter envisages fame by writing an article about her imprisonment.

Spectators who anticipate where this plot is headed are in for a dark,

nasty surprise. The whimsical atmosphere turns lethal when the prisoners compete to stay alive and play their kidnappers against each other. Quick scene changes bathed in the eerie sound of a blaring violin bring to mind Ariel Dorfman's similarly themed play, *Death and the Maiden*. The dialogue shifts to fiery storytelling in Act II when performers address themselves in the third person, narrating from the old woman's chaotic perspective.

By Act III, the ardent, convincing actors reveal the remaining layers of their secretive characters under the sure guidance of Lisa Peterson's direction. And Cortiñas's lyrical writing is engaging, despite his gratuitously sentimental ending. Tinged with hints of realism and suspenseful, Pinteresque pacing, *Tight Embrace* gets hold of the audience and never lets go.—*Lisa Quintela*

THEATER REVIEW

# Two Kidnapped Hostages Armed Only With Words

By ANDREA STEVENS

There is an insurgency in an unnamed Latin American country. An opposing military. Kidnapped hostages. And, of course, their masked guards. Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, a Cuban-American playwright, summons these familiar conditions and characters almost as an incantation in his drama "Tight Embrace," which

## Tight Embrace

Kirk Theater

opened on Tuesday in an Intar production at the Kirk Theater. With a dash of magic realism and flickering poetic fire, he settles down to his subject: the idea that the words and language human beings must employ to communicate — think friendship, love or, go ahead, the United Nations — they readily use as weapons, to trap and betray one another.

Mikiko Suzuki's evocative bare room, with its formidable door and palletlike bed, is the staging area for the contest of wills between the first hostage, the elderly, mysterious Adalina (Mía Katigbak), and her two guards: the young, buffoonish Barquín (Andrés Munar) and the older, menacing Zero (Robert Jiménez). Although words are forbidden, they are the real currency here, and Adalina knows how to extract them. When Claudia (Zabryna Guevara), the second hostage, is brought in, the balance changes. The younger woman is a reporter who happens to be the wife of one of the generals. Chic in her green suit and not a little in love with herself and her profession (language again), she is also pregnant.

As if to emphasize the importance of words, the author switches from dialogue to narrative for the second and middle act. Like a sudden acceleration, the device jolts the listener, demanding attention: Adalina be-

"Tight Embrace" continues through Jan. 2 at the Kirk Theater, 410 West 42nd Street; (212) 279-4200.



Carol Rosegg

Zabryna Guevara and Robert Jiménez in Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas's "Tight Embrace."

## A contest of wills in a bare room, somewhere in Latin America.

gins to speak, the other characters cutting in when she mentions them and using the third person to refer to themselves, as Adalina would if she were telling the story. The effect is to manipulate the listener, who becomes less involved with the individuals and more with the form. It's a demonstration perhaps, and smoothly done under Lisa Peterson's direction, of what happens when communication is distorted — think propaganda.

While the characters are types, good performances by Ms. Guevara, who is funny, ultimately forlorn and quite believable, and Ms. Katigbak, who manages to reduce her character's unfortunate feyness, help the play, as does Mr. Jiménez. But they cannot help the ending, which seems gratuitous. The chilling coda that follows, though, is not. Mr. Munar does better here, maybe because he is no longer obliged to clown.

# THE BROOKLYN RAIL

## IN DIALOGUE Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas' *Tight Embrace* by Kristoffer Diaz

If more artists were like Jorge—cultural bridge-builders and community prophets over self-indulgence and disingenuous magicians—our theater would be a stronger, more necessary mode of communication. —Playwright Anton Dudley

The first thing that leaps to mind when I think of Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, the playwright responsible for *Tight Embrace* (along with the plays *Sleepwalkers* and *Blind Mouth Singing*, among others) is the first time I met him. We were at an informal reading of a screenplay written by a friend of a mutual friend. After reading the script, we all hung out, enjoyed some liquid refreshment and talked shop. Jorge mentioned a hip-hop theater conference he was helping to organize. In response, I mentioned my own interest in the genre. Three months later, on Jorge's recommendation, I was flying out to the West Coast to build with some of the best young minds in theater, including (and especially) Jorge himself.

He's a generous guy, to say the least.

What I remember most about Jorge's role that weekend was his willingness (if not flat-out need) to complicate our discussions about form and audience and content, to question our motives and goals and measures of success. He followed the conference up with a powerful *American Theatre* essay examining many of the same issues of diversity and aesthetic experimentation, and he did it all with an open-mindedness and willingness to listen in hopes of really coming up with some productive answers to the whole provocative set of questions. It's an admirable quality, one also found readily in his work.

*There's something missing from the way I've memorized this.*  
—kidnapped prisoner Adalina, from *Tight Embrace*

The first thing that leaps to mind when I think about the play *Tight Embrace* (currently being produced at Theater Row by the venerable and vital INTAR Theatre) is "The Rainy Season"—the play's jarring, thrilling, expectation-busting second act. We've spent Act One ("The Dry Season") meeting our cast of characters: shrewd kidnapped prisoner Adalina; young big-hearted guard Barquin; a more by-the-books guard named Zero, and recently (and accidentally) kidnapped pregnant journalist Claudia. We've met these folks through a series of short, staccato, realistic scenes, separated by tableaux and grounded in the dual sense of inherent distrust and begrudging affection only forced confinement can breed.

And then the rains come.

Suddenly we shift, without warning, without expectation, to the memory of Adalina, with all of the characters directly if distantly addressing us, retelling us Adalina's story in "her word" and from "her point of view," never stopping for breath, never slowing down to allow us to gather our bearings and compile the alleged facts and wonder, even if just for a second, whether or not what we're hearing is what actually happened.

It's a powerful moment.

*You worry so much about remembering things that you refuse to see what's actually happening.*  
—the guard Zero, from *Tight Embrace*

*Tight Embrace* is an unmistakably, passionately, inherently political work steeped deeply and inextricably in the histories of colonization, resistance, and violence (particularly, but far from exclusively) within the Latino Diaspora. Zero's admonition to Adalina carries a dual message that rings true with any oppressed peoples: remembering the past is important, but it can't be allowed to blind you to the violence unfolding in front of you right now. It's important for Adalina's story to be told, for the details to be remembered to the best of her abilities, but it's unrealistic to think that she'll keep all her facts straight. Memory doesn't work like that.

For Adalina, memory becomes a means of insulating herself from her fear, a way to maintain what little upper hand she believes she holds over her captors. She catalogues her remembrances, creating mnemonic devices to help her pass the time as much as keep track of the past. When Zero calls her out on this tendency, he draws attention to our own similar tendencies today: whether we are stuck on flashbacks to "good old days" or we dwell on the horrors of history so as to not be doomed to repeat it, we can never lose sight of the injustice, the chaos, or the beauty of the present moment.

*Jorge seems to have a keen interest in protecting individual freedom. His writing often reveals that desire by taking place in a setting where he feels that freedom is circumscribed.*  
—Playwright Eisa Davis

Nowhere in *Tight Embrace* does Cortiñas explicitly name his play's setting. Barquin and Zero are part of an unnamed revolution in an unnamed country. We're not focused in on a specific dictator or bourgeois class and the effects of their reign. We're not concerned with why Claudia and Adalina have been taken captive. We're looking at the results of their captivity, the shifting rivalries amongst strangers driven together by circumstance, the heartbreak and the (something like) love that arises under this steady threat of outwardly imposed violence.

And make no mistake: in this world, the threat of violence is literally ever-present.

*Kill the prisoner.*  
—from *The Rules* in *Tight Embrace*

Several inanimate objects take on almost character status throughout *Tight Embrace*, carrying their own symbolic weight and physical importance. A box of chocolates becomes a measure of favoritism, reconciliation, and begrudged camaraderie. An umbrella opens indoors to offer protection from perceived slights. A notebook (and its orange leather cover) suggests betrayal, puppy love, and a chance to set the record straight—although it may not have an orange leather cover after all. None of these images resonates quite as powerfully or casts quite as large a psychological shadow as the single gun shared by the guards.

(continues...)

# BROOKLYN RAIL

(continued)

The rules the guards must adhere to are spelled out quite clearly for them and for us: when in doubt, kill the prisoner. Adalina never seems too afraid, however, even as she quizzes Barquin on the very rules that would have him end her life. The gun's intimidating presence is undeniable, but like any prolonged peril, fades into the characters' periphery over time. It becomes part of the furniture. There are more important day-to-day events to tend to than fear: sweeping the floor clean of impossible amounts of dry-season dust, manipulating your jailers to learn their names or see their faces, teaching the young guard how to impress the young lady he has his eye on. It's difficult to stay afraid of a weapon you never see used.

A gun is a gun, though, and guards are guards, and there's no plain and simple way to eliminate those facts from the equation. Chekhov's decree that "one must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it" holds doubly true for safehouse settings: you don't give a guard a gun if you don't think he may someday need it. Whether or not that gun ever actually goes off is almost irrelevant: it has the potential to be fired, and everyone in the room, regardless of how much they may seem to bond, is entirely aware of that potential. You could call it an undercurrent of fear; you could also call it an acute awareness of reality.

*I don't want to know anything more about you. I'm sorry.*  
—Adalina, from *Tight Embrace*

In dialogue with Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, one is consistently brought face to face with his complicated worldview. The realities of the world in which we live are never far from the surface; his grasp of politics, history, and the way the world works inform his conversations as fully as they do his work. His is a realistic approach to life: we still live in a world full of racial, gender, and sexuality biases. We still live in a world suffering from crippling imbalances of power. Even the movements dedicated to struggling against these injustices find themselves flawed and in need of overhaul. Jorge speaks on these topics with measured fervor, knowing that his voice, while powerful, is only a portion of the equation.

Most importantly though, a conversation with Jorge is unwaveringly hopeful. Much like *Tight Embrace*, Jorge himself finds the beauty in heartbreak, the joy that surrounds and seeps into even the most painful of situations. It's hard to walk away from a chat with Jorge without a smile on your face. As actor Vanessa Aspillaga says:

*Jorge has a generosity of spirit that, to me, as an actor who has worked with him professionally and as someone who has broken bread with him socially, always felt like a big splash of the warm Cuban-American waters of our hometown of Miami Beach.*

*Tight Embrace*, directed by Lisa Peterson, plays at the Kirk Theater (410 West 42nd Street) from November 22nd through January 2nd. Tickets: Ticket Central at 212-279-4200 or visit [www.intartheatre.org](http://www.intartheatre.org).