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14

by
josé casas

Dramatic Publishing Company
Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(14)

ISBN: 978-1-61959-194-3

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14 was premiered by Teatro Bravo in September 2003 at Playhouse on the Park in Phoenix, directed by Christina Marín and with the following ensemble:

Barbara Acker

Christina Marín

Christopher Miller

Adam Villalpando

this play is dedicated to my parents,
josé estanislao casas y magdalena wong casas

and

for all those who left the country they loved
to find a better life for their families
in el norte

14

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casting

four actors are required for this play to emphasize the two main cultural groups (whites and latina/os) associated with the issue of immigration in the areas along the border. the play calls for:

- one white actress
- one latina actress
- one white actor
- one latino actor

any production that seeks to cast these roles differently *must* get permission before doing so.

set

the setting consists of a variety of locales on different areas of the stage. a video screen located upstage center (or a barren back wall) is the only set piece location that is specific. the other set pieces are to be placed at the discretion of the director. some of these set pieces may be used for more than one monologue if needed (or desired). the set pieces/locales are:

a desert water station

consists of a large plastic barrel that is painted light blue and placed atop a makeshift stand. a water valve is located at the end of the barrel and above it are stickers spelling out the word “*agua*” and a cross scribbled on with paint or marker.

a makeshift altar

adorned with pictures, flowers and an assortment of candles and personal objects.

chairs and a desk

to indicate an office, restaurant, etc.

production notes

- i. a slide/video projection should be shown at the beginning of each monologue (interview) giving the name of the piece, the name of the character, the character's occupation and hometown (as shown in the script). there are also specific slide requests within the text of the script. slides can be used to suggest setting if setting requirements for specific pieces are too cumbersome.
- ii. throughout the play, there is extensive use of the (*extended beat*) stage direction. these are meant to give the characters unspoken dialogue. they can range from an extended pause to a character action, depending on the context in which they are inserted. actors are encouraged to experiment with these extended beats and explore their "true" meanings.
- iii. the play was written with no intermission, but productions seeking to use an intermission are allowed to do so at their discretion.
- iv. productions are not allowed to change the order of the monologues. if they wish to, they *must* get permission before doing so.
- v. translations of the pieces "virgencita linda" and "muñeca" are included with the script as a courtesy, but those pieces must be performed in spanish. no exceptions will be allowed.
- vi. producers wishing to use the specific music suggested within various scenes of the play *must* acquire the rights from the property holders.

introduction

Voices of the Frontera

by Ashley Lucas

My great-grandfather was born somewhere in Mexico—where precisely, we cannot say. His father died when he was 8 years old, and my great-great-grandmother took her son and crossed the river into Texas, where my family has lived ever since. She married a white man whose last name was Duncan. She and her light-skinned son took his name and learned quickly that it was easier to live as white people in Texas than as Mexicans. We lost the family name and all the stories of our family in their native land, save this vague outline of their border crossing. Though I long to know more of my Mexican ancestors, I am painfully aware that we are among the lucky ones. My family's crossing was likely not easy, but they survived and had children who never knew the the terror of being smuggled into a new country. Reading and seeing *14* reminds me of the strange blessings of my inheritance, the immigration story so safe in its distance from me that I can afford not to know quite how it happened.

The characters in *14*, a devastatingly accurate and moving play by Chicano writer José Casas, navigate a more troubled border than past generations of my family did. On May 19, 2001, a 20-year-old smuggler named Jesus Lopez Ramos abandoned 25 Mexican immigrants in a treacherous stretch of Arizona desert known as the Devil's Path.¹ Fourteen of those left behind died of dehydration. Casas' play is named for those 14 whose stories he could not tell. Their silence enshrouds the play and begs us to imagine a world in which we could have met them.

¹ There is some inconsistency in reports of the age of smuggler Jesus Lopez Ramos. *The Los Angeles Times* identified him as 20 years old in the article "Smuggler Pleads Guilty in Deaths of 14 Immigrants," while the *Tucson Citizen* reported that he was 21 in the article "Death in the Desert/One Year Later."

His play is peopled instead with characters from interviews he conducted with Arizona residents from a variety of backgrounds. The resulting cross section of the border population offers perspectives from those who oppose undocumented immigration and the border crossers themselves. We hear from the mother whose son was killed by an undocumented drunk driver and the father whose son helped to beat an undocumented teenager to death. We meet a wealthy Scottsdale socialite and a woman in her 70s who cleans rooms at the local Holiday Inn and has lived in the shadows since she crossed the border nearly 40 years ago.

All of these characters are given the dignity of meaningful representation. None are cartoons or shapeless representatives of particular groups. Because Casas spoke to actual Arizona residents, his characters feel fully embodied, and even those with an axe to grind have compelling ways of doing so. The Chicano actor who passes for white explains his pressing need to fit the types of roles in which agents will cast him. The Latino politician argues about the cost of bilingual education and insists that others should be able to learn English as well as he did in the public schools. These characters make arguments to which both the unseen interviewer and the playwright himself are quick to object, but the ideas and the characters who present them are given depth and precision. The play draws the audience toward these characters, even as it critiques their assertions, because the rich world of the play offers spectators complexity rather than easy answers.

Casas, who is my colleague in the department of theatre and drama at the University of Michigan, has said to me that he wished this play were no longer relevant in 2018. His grief chronicles the ongoing tragedies of lives lost in border crossings since the

play was written nearly two decades ago. Eighteen immigrants suffocated to death inside a trailer truck in Victoria, Texas, on May 15, 2003; the truck “showed signs that the trapped people had tried to punch holes through it so air could come in.”² In an eerily similar incident in July 2017, another 10 immigrants died in a truck near San Antonio, Texas, making them part of the 232 who died crossing the U.S.-Mexican border in the first seven months of that year. The continuing militarization of the border, plans for a border wall and the xenophobia stoked by the Trump administration only make such deaths more likely and the play more necessary.

When I think of the 14 who died on May 19, 2001, I wonder what drove them to place their trust, life savings and lives into the hands of another undocumented man, just 20 years old. Their desperation—because such danger cannot be confronted solely on the wings of hope—drove them to cross a scorched and barren stretch of desert where many of their predecessors had died on the same journey. They did this knowing that the promised future our nation would offer them was one of secrecy and underground economies, of manual labor and fear of deportation. They agreed to walk away from all they knew and all they loved, toward this uncertain and unquestionably difficult future. These 14 were not found to be smuggling drugs, and they bore no indication of being “criminals” or “rapists,” as President Trump would have us believe a great many Mexican immigrants are.

One of these 14, Lorenzo Hernandez Ortiz, left his wife and five children in San Pedro Altepepan, Veracruz, Mexico. He agreed to pay \$1,700 in U.S. currency to a smuggler, and a

² “Trapped in Heat in Texas Truck, 18 People Die,” by Simon Romero and David Barboza. *The New York Times*. May 15, 2003.

year after Ortiz's death, his wife Juanita was still struggling to pay his debt by selling tamales for 10 cents each at the school near her home. Ortiz had a family he hoped to better support with remittances from his meager wages from whatever job he could find in the U.S. He died trying to make life better for those who could not even attempt the crossing. His story does not appear in *14*, yet his life and its potential meanings are invoked by performances of the play.

The majority of my students at the University of Michigan struggle to picture Ortiz's life and even those of the characters who speak in *14*. Even as we sit on the northern border of our nation, many among us imagine immigration narratives as being far from our present reality. A startling number of my students have never been to Canada, despite living right next to it for much or all of their lives. My students from Dearborn, Mich., with Arab families from various countries expressed an immediate connection to *14*. Of course, the Dreamers know these stories all too well. When Casas produced the play on our campus on Feb. 22, 2018, the undocumented students in the audience wept silently throughout the play and stood shyly in corners at the reception afterwards, waiting patiently to be introduced to the only actors they had ever seen tell their stories onstage.

These Dreamers survived the crossing where those 14 did not, and still these students must be careful about how and when they tell their stories. In 2017, the Trump administration rescinded the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which was started in 2002 under President Obama to give undocumented students a legal path to attend college and earn a living. The Dreamers wait for the next decisions to be made about their legal status. If and when they are granted the right to

stay, they do not know what jobs in the U.S. an undocumented person with a college degree can hold. They still fear for their parents and families, both in the U.S. and abroad. They watched the one performance of this play on our campus with eyes that did not seem to blink. They already knew something about the 14 voices of the deceased that the play was missing and wanted to hear what the living had to say.

The final monologue in *14* belongs to Reverend Clay Nash, who maintains water stations in the desert. He has encountered quite a few dehydrated bodies in the desert and cannot know how many lives the water stations might save. He says, “Providing this water is nothing more than an act of faith and conviction.” He does something very simple but profoundly difficult and controversial because he believes that no one should have to die of thirst in the desert. He reminds the audience, “Regardless of which argument you side with when you see a person dead in front of your eyes, your thoughts should be on him or her. Honoring that person while, at the same time, being grateful that you get the chance to see another day!” Casas does not attempt to represent the bodies of the 14, and he never tells us anything more than their names and the way they died. They fill the play with their absence and demand that we all remember the accidents of birth or the fierce struggles that brought us to this moment.

14

prologue

(in the darkness, a spotlight shines on the back wall/video screen. the slide reads:

*may 19, 2001
a smuggling guide abandons
more than 20 mexicans crossing east of yuma.
dehydration kills 14.
their deaths trigger renewed binational debate
over immigration.
the dead are:*

the next series of projections are individual slides showing the names of each victim. there should be a beat between each slide. the names of the victims are:

*lorenzo hernandez ortiz
raymundo barreda landa
reyendo bartolo
mario castillo fernandez
enrique landero
raymundo barreda maruri
julian mabros malaga
claudio marin alejandro
arnulfo flores badilla
edgar adrian martinez colorado
efrain gonzalez manzano
heriberto tapia baldillo*

final slide of prologue:

*two others have yet
to be identified.*

extended beat.

*as the projection on the screen slowly fades into darkness,
guns n' roses' "welcome to the jungle," or something
similar; begins blaring.)*

part i: welcome to the jungle

welcome to the jungle

*roger tate and marta ramirez
business owner and secretary
yuma, ariz.*

(with the music still playing, two spotlights go up—one downstage right and one downstage left. located downstage right is a chicana in her mid-forties. her name is marta ramirez. she is sitting on a chair; behind a desk. a picture of her family sits prominently on the corner of the desk. standing downstage left is roger tate. a white man in his late forties.

it is apparent that he has not had much sleep. he is standing in front of his family-owned hardware store. the store has been vandalized, and roger is sweeping up broken glass. these interviews are taking place at different locales so neither of these characters knows of the other's presence onstage. marta ramirez begins to talk as the song slowly fades away.)

marta. the theme of this year's prom was "welcome to the jungle."

roger. yes, sir ... that's correct.

marta. i had never even heard of guns n' roses.

roger. they're being singled out.

marta. nice enough looking kids. the girls' dresses were beautiful,
and those boys looked so handsome in their tuxedos.

roger. their pictures on the front page of the newspaper.

marta. smiling and posing for the camera.

roger. they had their entire lives ahead of them.

marta (*annoyed*). there they were. chests puffed out ...
beaming with pride.

roger. there are two sides to every story.

marta (*incredulous*). giving a white power salute in the middle of their prom photos ... thinking it was some sort of funny joke!

roger. they're teenagers

marta. their parents should be ashamed of—

(extended beat.

roger starts pacing around a bit and then rubs his tired eyes.)

roger. you'll have to forgive me. i haven't had much sleep lately. reporters have been calling me and my family all hours of the night. we changed our phone number to an unlisted one, but that still hasn't stopped them, though ... it isn't right, i tell you. all this attention is insane. (*beat.*) this hasn't been easy for my family. my little girls have had to stay at home because of all this commotion ... some other kids threatened them at school. my wife went grocery shopping the other day and was harassed by a mob of people. she had to have the police escort her home. (*beat.*) fortunately for us, we have some good neighbors. they've offered to take turns buying our groceries until this whole thing's blown over. i can't even go a single day without somebody wanting to talk to me ... a man can only— (*beat; angrily.*) a man deserves the right to some privacy!

marta. i don't understand why this had to happen ... or, how it ever got to this point.

roger. uhm, i don't much like reporters ... i was told you weren't one of them. i hope i can trust you to be fair.

marta. i won't sit here and tell you that there's no racism in this town. border cities aren't built that way. instead of

black versus white. it's mexican versus white ... same fight. after a while, you actually get used to it. that's not to say, you accept it. all i'm saying is that most of the time around here people's barks are worse than their bites. as long as it's just a bunch of people yelling at each other or shooting a dirty look now and again, things remain somewhat tolerable ... but, lately, it seems like this whole state has— (*beat; solemnly.*) those boys had to ruin what little peace there was here.

roger. no one knows exactly what happened.

marta. francisco and javier did nothing wrong.

roger. people want to make it out to be a race war; something to that effect. nonsense. they're painting a false picture. that's not the truth. my son and his friends were only doing what they felt they needed to do. are you telling me those kids should have let those boys walk all over them? the one mexican kid grabbed that girl inappropriately. no one seems to mention that ... and, what about that girl? what about concerns for her safety? who knows what could've happened! everybody knows that section of town isn't very safe ... my son and his buddies were protecting her. he was being a gentleman ... just like i taught him.

marta. all the jocks and their friends go to the peak to drink and smoke pot ... and whatever else it is that high schoolers do up there.

roger. they weren't out to hurt anybody.

marta. all because they smiled at a girl ... imagine that.

roger. that mexican boy and his friends—

marta (angrily). —friend!!!

(*extended beat.*)

marta. there were only two of them. two skinny little mexican boys against half a football team.

roger. they were defending themselves like anyone would in that situation.

marta. six football players ... three of them close to three hundred pounds.

roger. hell, i got into plenty of scrapes when i was younger. that's part of becoming a man.

marta. francisco and javier were held to the ground and kicked in the head while the other kids watched and yelled, "kill the beaners!" not one person lifted a finger to help them! five broken ribs and a depressed skull fracture. severe brain damage ... four operations later, and that boy is nowhere close to being normal. his life is over. *(beat.)* the other boy never had a chance. some say he was the lucky one.

roger. when did a little roughhousing become a crime? i feel sorry for those boys, i really do, but it's not my fault they couldn't finish what they started. why aren't folks blaming their—

marta. —parents!? *(beat.)* i have been part of the parent/teacher association for the last twenty years. i have never, once, seen those parents at a meeting. not a single one! but they were always at those football games. that's for sure! all those boys programmed for violence, but not the consequences. *(beat.)* did you know that when the police opened up their lockers, they found massive amounts of steroids and white power paraphernalia? a couple of boys even had loaded guns hidden away in their backpacks, but as long as the stands were full of people cheering for touchdowns—

roger. —i'm a respected man in this city—

marta. —people would look the other way.

roger. i'm a businessman, and i'm on the city council. my great grandfather, gerald xavier tate was considered one of the founding fathers of this area. there's no better place in this world to raise a family ... people trust me.

(extended beat.

roger looks at the sign.)

roger *(cont'd)*. take a peek at that name on the wall ... tate's hardware store. been in my family for generations. it's more than a hardware store. this is a place where townfolk can come to unwind. *(looking at the broken glass.)* they come here to relax and shoot the breeze. this building is a living piece of history. *(beat; unconvincingly.)* i'm a respected man.

(extended beat.

a look of pain crosses roger's face. he looks off into the distance. he sets his broom down; beat. he turns back towards the interviewer.)

roger *(cont'd)*. my son's also respected. honor society. captain of the football team. girlfriends left and right. he would always help a friend in need. he wasn't a follower. he was a leader. he was the most popular kid in yuma. he wouldn't do anything to damage that.

marta. especially, that tate boy. he always had this air of arrogance about him, like he was entitled. thought he could get away with murder. *(beat.)* who knows? maybe he will. the trial doesn't start for another few weeks.

(extended beat.)

marta *(cont'd, nonchalantly)*. i wouldn't be surprised.

roger. i'm getting him the best lawyer money can buy. i'll do whatever it takes to clear my boy's name. he has a bright future ahead of him. (*defiantly.*) he has a scholarship to play football at the university of utah. strong safety ... that's his scholarship. he earned it!

marta (*sadly*). i think about those boys. both groups. and i think to myself, every single one of these boys were once little babies ... with little fingers and little toes and flashed the kind of smiles that only babies can.

roger. jason is my son. he isn't guilty of any crime.

marta. i've met the tate boy's father on a couple of occasions ... he was cordial. seemed like a nice enough man ... but—

(*marta picks up the photo of her family; stares at it.*)

marta (*cont'd*). sometimes i wonder how i got so lucky with my kids.

(*beat; marta puts the picture frame back on the desk.*)

marta (*cont'd*). my kids are grown up. one works as a mechanic near gilbert; the other is studying here at the local community college, but i won't try to convince you that they were perfect angels. believe me, they were a handful. i'm sure there are things they did that i don't ever want to know about ... but, uhm ... but, i don't know. (*beat; contemplative.*) they seem to have turned out all right from what i see.

roger. i am not a racist. my son is not a racist. (*beat.*) some of my friends are mexican.

marta. those boys ruined two lives. two families. they need to be punished. they need to know that what they did was wrong ... everyone in this city needs to know!

roger (*pleading*). my son is a good boy! why can't people see that!?

marta (*defeated*). how did they manage to learn so much hate?

(spotlight fades off of marta.

extended beat.)

roger. people from all over town have been writing letters to the judge on his behalf. the principal and some of his teachers. all of his friends and family too. coach taylor even wrote the university to reassure them that this whole incident was just one big misunderstanding. (*beat; unconvincingly.*) in the end, i believe my son will be exonerated. then ... everyone will know that it wasn't his fault ... and that things just got out of hand.

(extended beat.)

roger (*cont'd, sadly*). that boys will be boys.

(spotlight fades on roger, then the stage goes dark.)