

Delicious Melodrama at The Old Globe

by Makayla Hoppe



The cast of *Destiny of Desire*. PHOTO BY JIM COX.

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Historically, the American soap opera and Latin-American telenovela are cut from the same cloth. In the 1930s, soap companies began producing their own dramatized radio serials to sell products and some started production in Cuba to sell to a broader demographic. Over the years, the programs were adapted for television and began to look like the dramas we know today.

The soap companies stopped sponsoring the Cuban productions throughout the 1950s; after the Cuban Revolution, many actors, directors and crewmembers emigrated and took their knowledge and talent along with them. The soap opera has had its ups and downs with American audiences, but after 60 years, the telenovela is the most popular form of storytelling on the planet.

“Two billion people watch these kinds of stories every day all over the world,” said playwright Karen Zacarias. Karen’s play, “Destiny of Desire,” takes the telenovela genre and adapts it for the stage.

“We played ‘telenovela’ when we were growing up — my sister, my cousins and I — and it was always about, you know, pretend slapping each other and slamming doors and giving [dirty] looks,” she said. “It was just so fun and so over the top; it was something that was part of the atmosphere of growing up in Mexico. The people watched telenovelas, and we all understood the tropes of it even at a young age.”

Karen’s staged telenovela tells the story of two baby girls in the fictional

town of Bellarica, Mexico. One is born into a life of wealth and privilege and the other is born into a life of poverty. Suddenly, an ex-beauty queen with a lust for power swaps the babies and sets the stage for “two outrageous misfortunes to grow into one remarkable destiny.” The story is filled with plenty of the telenovela tropes Karen grew up with.

“I don’t know why nobody locks their doors,” Karen said. “People walking in on people doing terrible things they shouldn’t be seeing — when I watch these things, I’m like, ‘Why doesn’t he just lock the door?’ — so that happens again and again in the play.”

The play is a comedy, but it’s still filled with genuine drama. “The characters are really going through the emotions... You’ll be laughing and laughing and then suddenly you won’t be laughing anymore. We’re making an homage; we’re not making fun of [telenovelas],” Karen said.

Although many people might associate the telenovela with Mexico, the programs are also produced throughout Central and South America. Director Ruben Santiago-Hudson wanted to ensure that different countries were represented in the staged production.

“In my rehearsal room, I had a flag of each different country placed on the wall, so we could look each day we walked into rehearsal and understand the power and impact of Latin culture — how vast it is,” said Ruben. “So the music that I put in this play is music from several different Latin styles... You know, I mix it up — I do a lot of different things.”

Music and dance styles include salsa, cumbia, reggaetón, hip hop and folklorico, with choreography by Lorna Ventura.

Ruben is familiar with telenovelas, especially since performing in soap operas like “One Life To Live” and “All My Children.”

“I love the glamour of it,” he said, “I love the music and I love how beautiful the women are and how flamboyant the men are. I would look at it for amusement, but I never knew that I’d be directing anything that would actually pay respect to it.”

There’s also layers of depth to this melodramatic story.

“I’ve added the idea that as crazy as a soap opera or telenovela can be, there’s something truthful — real life is always crazier... There’s a constant reminder of how this applies to everyday Americans’ lives and is not some foreign kind of storytelling,” said Karen.

“That’s where the melodrama comes in,” Ruben said. “Everything is urgent, everything is heightened, but it’s also real. And it’s deep, deep, deep.”

“Destiny of Desire” runs until June 25 at The Old Globe and Karen hopes audiences will love the drama just as much as she does.

“We did a designer run for part of the staff at The Old Globe and it was so funny because people audibly gasped — they didn’t see a certain twist coming, and then it’s so devastating when it does,” she said. “It can be devastating or delicious.” 