

critic's notebook

New World Order

José Rivera's *Sueño* revitalizes Calderon at Hartford Stage

S*ueño*, José Rivera's adaptation of Calderon de la Barca's classic *La Vida es Sueño* (*Life Is a Dream*), starts out impressively enough. When John Ortiz's hirsute, muscular and scantily clad body appears onstage suspended in midair by long red ropes, Hartford Stage Company audiences can't help but hold their collective breath and expect a wild theatrical ride. Ortiz plays Segismundo, the son of a Spanish monarch

By Ed Morales

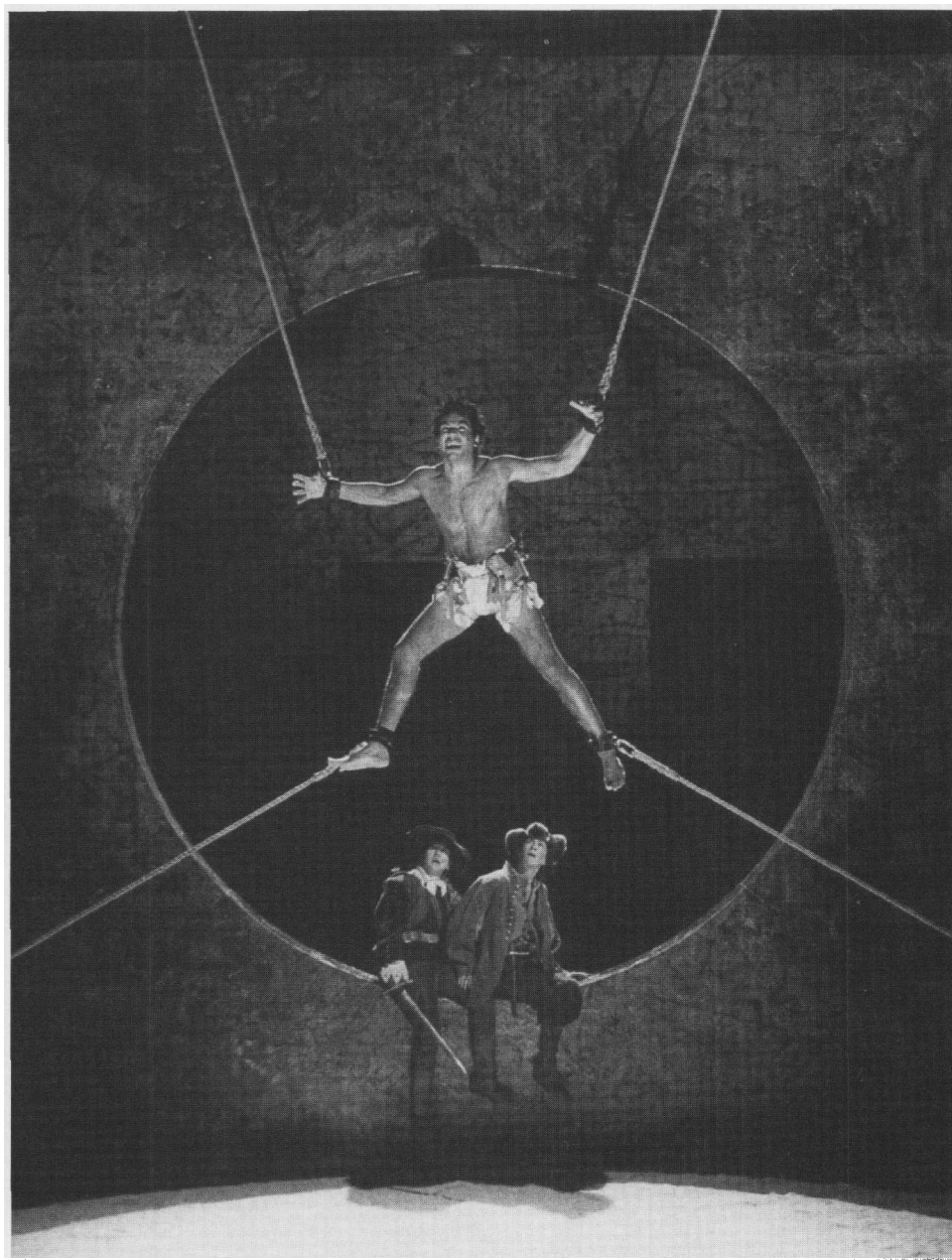
held in a dungeon because of his original sin—killing his mother in childbirth—but about to be freed from his misery to have a go at his birthright as a ruler. The sharp contrast between his captivity and deliverance causes Segismundo to blur the line between reality and dreams, and allows Calderon to explore the big philosophical questions (What is existence? Is life a

dream, and if so, who is dreaming us? God?) that have made *La Vida es Sueño* so enduring. However, it's hard not to wonder what kind of resonance these issues can have for a 20th-century audience, when a good chunk of reality is virtual or simulated.

At first glance, *Sueño*'s theatrical strategy seems to be a variation on what might be called the New York Shakespeare Festival style of reinventing the classics: The characters engage in a contemporary sassiness; they draw out some of the contemporaneous subtext from 17th-century situations; and traditionally cross-dressed roles are augmented by nontraditionally cross-dressed ones. But on closer inspection, Rivera's *Sueño* proves to be a true adaptation, not a recontextualization; there are no TV sets or gang paraphernalia in this production. The costumes are faithful to their origins in Spain. Indeed, it's not the surface aspects of the production that offer a contemporary spin on Calderon's metaphysical musings—it is the *language* that has been changed, shifting from the baroque Spanish verse of the 1600s to the contemporary rhythms of America at the end of the 20th century.

FROM SEGISMUNDO'S OPENING SOLILOQUIES, where he proclaims himself "a storm of chemical responses pretending to have a soul," Rivera has reclaimed Calderon's florid use of metaphor and made it his own, spiced with science, sarcasm and sweetness. "I wanted to find the language Calderon would have used if he was a 42-year-old playwright living in California," the theatre and television writer says on the phone from his home in Los Angeles. That blending of the contemporary and the antiquated can have some surprising results. For instance, when Segismundo says he is "God's wild virus," you can feel all the implications of imagined or real modern-day plagues while simultaneously acknowledging their roots in an empire engaged in conquering a New World.

Rivera was not only faced with the task of reinventing Calderon's language, but also the challenge of making the play, which is long on plot and short on characterization, "actable." By doing case studies of people who had experienced long-term isolation, Rivera was able to



A vulgar, uneducated beast: John Ortiz hangs out in the Hartford Stage Company's production of *Sueño* with set design by Michael Yeargen and lighting by Christopher Akerlind.

T. CHARLES EUGENSON

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create a realistic psychological profile for Segismundo and enliven his character with appropriate behavior, particularly in the early scenes between him and Rosaura (Michi Barall), a young noblewoman bent on revenge. Long monologues were replaced with short, snappy, almost sitcom-esque interactions, a possible by-product of the time Rivera has done in Hollywood. (The writer professes to have given up television work, particularly since the demise of *Eerie, Indiana*, a series he created that some claim was too smart to remain on the air.)

In this way, the wordplay between Lord Astolfo (Damian Young) and Princess Estrella (Alene Dawson)—two scheming nobles who have their eyes on the throne—is one of the highlights of the production. “Flowers are dishrags compared to you,” carps Astolfo in his parodic wooing of a noblewoman in line to succeed the reigning monarch. “Helen? A slutbox. . . Aphrodite? Maggot poop.” Young and Jan Leslie Harding, in her drag interpretation of Rosaura’s clownish manservant Clarin (the character is traditionally played by a male), provide comic relief from the dark antics Segismundo engages in when he’s given a chance to prove he might be worthy of nobility.

BY SHOWCASING THESE UNDERLYING COMEDIC moments, *Sueño* moves away from the tragically cerebral aura that traditionally surrounds Calderon’s work. Nevertheless, the play’s dramatic impact is reinvigorated by Rivera’s commitment to updating its contextual underpinnings. In the post-Freud era, there are echoes of the Oedipus complex in Segismundo’s attacks on his father Basilio’s kingship. Perhaps more important, their relationship strongly resembles the one between Prospero and Caliban in *The Tempest*. Segismundo is portrayed as a vulgar, un-educated beast, an id looking to inflict severe psychological, as well as physical, pain. Basilio, on the other hand, seems to be uncertain about his


moral imperative—he is vaguely aware of his own complicity in the brutal conquest of the New World. Even as he obsesses over a lunar eclipse (the evil omen that marks the birth of his son), another spherical object, the Aztec calendar, lurks center stage for much of the play.

For Rivera, this zigzagging between the old and the new in some ways mirrors the


ambivalence of the Hispanic phenomenon, and may explain Latino interest in the Hartford Stage production. (The fact that the theatre coordinated a major community relations drive didn’t hurt either.) According to Rivera, while Hispanics may not feel directly connected to Spain, they still relate to intrinsic elements of the culture. “There’s this code of honor that we all seem to be struggling with,” muses Rivera. “Being Latino in the U.S. is like being caught in the middle between tradition and non-tradition. But we have come to feel comfortable with contradiction.”

While Rivera’s rewrite may make Calderon’s work more accessible and contemporary, *Sueño* has even more profound implications. Instead of saying, “If


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the Fates decree that now's your time to die/There's nothing you can do," Clarin declares, "If God wants your ass, he's going to get your ass." While the change works as humor, these lines are also helping Rivera establish the idea that the presence of mortal life is no longer just an extension of the proof of the existence of God. "In the original, Segismundo gets attached to the idea that if everything is a dream, the dreamer must be God," says Rivera. "What my version is trying to say is that the idea of God is unreliable."

In transferring Calderon's psyche into his own, Rivera is making a statement about American reality and the way it represents the difference between Old World

and New World thinking. The romantic pairings that climax the original—Astolfo-Rosaura and Segismundo-Estrella—are reversed. Rosaura turns her back on nobility and urges Segismundo to join her in a quest for free will and the overturning of the rigid class structures of Europe. It's a moment that brings out an idea buried in Calderon's text, that a New World is about to begin. In José Rivera's own sly and spiritual way, *Sueño* carries the enormous implication that we're on the verge of that kind of history happening all over again. **AT**

Ed Morales writes for the Village Voice and other publications.

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