
Cultural Daily

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Moral Failures & Other Nightmares

Sylvie Drake · Wednesday, July 11th, 2018

There is a tendency for every generation to feel that it is living through something no other generation has ever lived through, especially the bad parts, when that “something” is painful, difficult and even illegal, and most especially when it involves a failure of morality. But the truth is that those pesky moral failures punctuate the history of humankind, and humankind has yet to find a way to banish them.

The two productions performed in rotating repertory at Rogue Machine Theatre this month take on this problem and — warning — both are closing this coming weekend. (I got to them late.)

The Ballad of Bimini Baths: Mexican Day is the third play in a clever trilogy by Tom Jacobson, each of which, in an unusual accommodation, received a world premiere performance in one of three separate small Los Angeles theatres. Plays one and two — *Plunge* and *Tar*, which I’m sorry to say I did not see, have already closed, so I can only speak to *Mexican Day*. Let me note here that each play as written also stands on its own and can be seen independently of the other two.

Jacobson tells us that these plays are inspired by real people and events. He centers the stories “on the celebrated/notorious bath house that stood on Bimini Place, just off Vermont Avenue at the end of the Heliotrope streetcar line... to illuminate larger themes of race and identity, individual failings and communal reconciliation in the City of Angels.”

(A brief note: reports indicate that *Plunge* and *Tar* connect to the Bimini Baths by more sinister events than does *Mexican Day*. *Plunge* channels the 1916 arrest and imprisonment of Everett Maxwell, prominent curator of the L.A. County Museum of History, Science and Art, for “mistreating boys,” to use the euphemism of the day. The second play, *Tar*, is linked to the others by an incident wherein Baths attendants were charged with cleaning up a person rescued out of the La Brea Tar Pits. True or false, the account is embellished by the playwright’s fertile mind.)

The salient feature of *Mexican Day* is its dramatic structure. I shall call the play an ironic comedy with much humor and a splashy ending. How we get to that ending is the fascinating part. By inventing a tale involving real historical characters, such as activist Bayard Rustin (a sly performance by the powerful Donathan Walters), iconoclastic reporter Hisaye Yamamoto (the equally sly Jully Lee) and disgraced museum curator Maxwell (Darrell Larson, self-effacing, embarrassed and ultimately so very surprising), Jacobson weaves a captivating mixture of fiction, truth and consequences, that, especially in its second half, allows for some bemusing speculation.



Jully Lee & Jonathan Medina in *Mexican Day* at Rogue Machine Theatre. Photo by John Perrin Flynn.

The play is slow to start, establishing its leading characters with some deliberation, though once engaged, they're off and running.

Rustin wants to confront the Baths' exclusionary policy of being closed to people of color except for the once-a-month Mexican Day. Seeking support for his activism, he finds an acolyte in *Los Angeles Tribune* reporter Hisaye, known to intimates as Si.

They unite as fighters on the front line. There is a guard at that front line, a quiet ex-army vet named Zenobio Remedios or Zeno for short (the subdued yet engaging Jonathan Medina), who has his own issues as a Latino, yet dutifully controls the door according to the company's exclusionary rules.

Rustin's chance encounter at the art museum with the older Maxwell ties everything together and is central to this unpredictable adventure. Maxwell is the remorseful figure that haunts the play and also provides the key to unlocking the bigotry.



l-r, Donathan Walters & Darrell Larson in *Mexican Day* at Rogue Machine Theatre. Photo by John Perrin Flynn.

Events in the second half up the ante by becoming a lot more eccentric and complex than this account allows for. Or should. The comedy, well directed by Jeff Liu, is punctuated by gorgeous snippets of powerful singing from Walters (Rustin was known as a fine tenor), healthy interjections of startling humor, in particular from Lee whose spontaneous feminine wiles deliver many exquisite moments, and a general departure into more ethereal territory as the four performers engage in a succession of impersonations at once playful and revealing. It is all fresh, seductive and topped by a joyous watery ending.

Based on this happy experience, I regret having blown the chance to attend the productions of *Plunge* and *Tar*, as much to satisfy my curiosity about seeing them done at different theatres with different casts, as for the overriding opportunity to see the totality of the trilogy. Perhaps such an occasion will come again, if not at three separate theatres, then maybe at one brave enough to take on all three plays. I promise to show up at all three openings.

One final note: designed by the endlessly creative John Iacovelli, the set for *Mexican Day* relies heavily on two revolving panels, built on the same framework used in *100 Aprils*, the other comedy sharing the space. It is a set remarkable as much for its ingenious simplicity as for its inventiveness at serving both plays well.



l-r, Rachel Sorsa, Robertson Dean, John Perrin Flynn & Leslie Ayvazian in *100 Aprils* At Rogue Machine Theatre. Photo by Michelle Hanzelova.

100 Aprils, written by Leslie Ayvazian, tackles a very different and much larger issue: the Armenian genocide of 1915 that remains, at least officially, unacknowledged by the Turkish state. The genocide of any population is perhaps the most perverted and abhorrent crime of all. And Ayvazian, who is of Armenian descent, has chosen to approach this complicated and delicate subject by attempting to write an Ortonesque farce.

That takes guts, as much as talent. And while I totally accept the idea that it can be done, the results on stage at Rogue Machine are less persuasive.

A vigorous and autocratic older Armenian-American man named John (John Perrin Flynn), lying in a hospital bed is, as usual, trying to rule his life and family as he always has, with a loud voice and an iron fist, despite some indication that it might be time to let things slide a bit. But John doesn't know how you do that. He's the family tyrant and an unrecovered refugee from that unacknowledged genocide that is never far from his mind.

His wife Beatrice (nicely played by Ayvazian) is on to him for having lived with the guy for so many years. She knows how to ignore him when she needs to. His adult daughter Arlene (Rachel Sorsa), however, is another matter. She loves her Dad, despite his temperament, and is panicked, flighty and scared, as she presumably always is when Daddy loses his cool, especially now that he's ill.

It doesn't help that John is tied to his bed and that his doctor (Dean Robertson) is confused in his mind with a nasty Turkish memory — i.e. the enemy. These factoids only raise his temper by several notches and his voice by a few decibels. What comes out of that mouth is a rambling reminiscence mingled with recriminations and complaints about the mundane as well as the

historical. The action, such as it is, increases in anger and agitation, and not always in elucidating ways.

What may have started out to be a satire or even a farcical satire, ends up being mostly a farce, while the subject matter and the method used to make it happen do not marry well, in spite of director Michael Arabian's efforts to see that they do.



Leslie Ayvazian and John Perrin Flynn. Photo by Michelle Hanzelova.

Fine performances by Rogue Artistic Director John Perrin Flynn as John and by playwright Ayvazian as his wife are the pleasant revelations, but the rest of the characters are more wooden and one-dimensional. As the action rises to fever pitch, the farce gets sillier. Even at 95 minutes or so without an intermission, the more unlikely things get, the more preposterous they appear.

“The point of the play,” Ayvazian wrote in a brief introduction to her script, “is to create a world that reflects the insanity that happens when a history is denied.” There is truth in that statement, but also a growing distance from what is happening on stage, because when the irony misfires, the insanity just becomes tiresome.

Top image: Jully Lee & Donathan Walters in Mexican Day at Rogue Machine Theatre. Photo by John Perrin Flynn.

WHAT: *The Ballad of Bimini Baths: Mexican Day* (part of a world premiere trilogy based on the History of Los Angeles).

WHEN: Friday & Sunday, 8pm. Ends Sunday.

WHAT: *100 Aprils*

WHEN: Saturday & Monday, 8:30pm; Sunday 3pm. Ends Monday.

WHERE: Rogue Machine Theatre, 1089 N. Oxford St., Los Angeles CA 90029.

HOW: All tickets \$40. For reservations call 855.585.5185 or go online at www.roguemachinetheatre.com

(UPDATE: Please note that both Mexican Day and 100 Aprils have extended their performances by one week. For more information you may call 855.585.5185 or go online to <http://www.roguemachinetheatre.net/>)

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