

# Cultural Daily

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## The Saga of Elliot, an American Soldier

Sylvie Drake · Wednesday, February 7th, 2018

Playwright Quiara Alegria Hudes has been around a while. She co-wrote the Tony® Award-winning *In the Heights* with Lin Manuel Miranda. (Do I need to mention he created *Hamilton*?) Her play, *Water By the Spoonful*, now at the Mark Taper Forum, won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. And her new musical — *Miss You like Hell* — opening at New York's Public Theatre this Spring is creating plenty of buzz already. She is a writer to be taken seriously.

So Los Angeles is in luck. This month and next, it gets the opportunity to see her entire *Elliot Trilogy*, of which *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, is part one.



Peter Mendoza as Elliot, in Quiara Alegria Hudes' *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* at The Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Aside from *Soldier's Fugue*, now at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City, and *Water By the Spoonful* (to be reviewed next week), downtown's Latino Theatre Company is launching a production of the trilogy's third play, *The Happiest Song Plays Last* at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. It starts previews Feb. 17 and opens officially Feb. 22.

This final play finds Elliot in Jordan, with his military service well behind him, when he's offered the chance, Hudes tells us, "to act in a movie that combines some of his past troubles with a moment when he's poised to overcome them as a young man, to fully step into his manhood, while also reliving some of his difficult military experiences because the movie he is acting in," she says, deals with Marines in Iraq.

So Elliot is the heart of all three stories. And heart is the appropriate word.



l-r, Jason Manuel Olazábal and Rubén Garfias in *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*.

"I am marrow-deep grateful to Elliot Ruiz — my cousin, my muse, my inspiration," Hudes writes, noting that "when he returned from Iraq, that boyish sparkle in his eye had changed, ever so slightly. As his life story continued to unfold, I continued to write and Elliot gave me his blessing and took my creative license in stride. Each play is intended to stand alone and be its own story... Together, they tell the story of a coming of age of an American young man who is bright and witty and adventuresome, and also deeply troubled."

Right out of the gate, the 74-minute *Soldier's Fugue* alerts us to Hudes' talent as a creator of theatre that impels us to wake up and listen. Her spare yet pointed collage of words and images marry music (Hudes' other love) to a poetic narrative that leads us through a young man's painful introduction to American military life in service to an America that has not always been hospitable to the color of his skin. Hudes' words also invoke an intergenerational connection in her cousin's Iraq experience through the telescoping flashbacks of Elliot's grandfather's struggles as a soldier in the Korean War and of his father's experience as a soldier in Vietnam. Deftly and with no hint of didacticism, she interweaves all three with her shadow use of the musical motif and a shared instrument — a flute.



Caro Zeller & Jason Manuel Olazábal in *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* at The Kirk Douglas Theatre.

A lot of this production's success is owed to the four actors in the cast — Peter Mendoza, Rubén Garfias, Jason Manuel Olazábal and Caro Zeller — and to the light touch of director Shishir Kurup who stays well away from hammering any message. It is a swift, touching, vivid and, in its own way, conclusive portrayal that reminds us of who is out there, among others, fighting these battles and reaping their grim rewards.



Rubén Garfias and his flute in *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*.

Sibyl Wickersheimer's uncomplicated set, Geoff Korf's lighting design and John Nobori's sound design effectively combine to deliver an experience at once sobering and uplifting. We require little more.

Next week comes *Water By the Spoonful*. Stay tuned.

*Top image: The cast of Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue now playing at The Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City.*

*Photos by Craig Schwartz.*

**WHAT:** *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*

**WHERE:** Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd, Culver City, CA 90232.

**WHEN:** Tuesdays-Friday, 8pm; Saturdays 2 & 8 pm; Sundays I & 6:30pm. Ends Feb. 25.

**HOW:** Tickets \$25-\$70 (subject to change), available at [www.centertheatregroup.org](http://www.centertheatregroup.org), or at 213.628.2772, or in person at the Center Theatre Group Box Office at the Ahmanson Theatre Downtown, or at the Kirk Douglas Theatre two hours before curtain. Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf community information and charge, visit [Center TheatreGroup.org/ACCESS](http://CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS).

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