

THE



INTERVIEW

Drama Editor John Sullivan with David Allard

EDITORS' NOTE: This interview took place before John's leave.

JS: I'd like to begin this interview by thanking you, David, for sending this wonderful play, *Pañuelos*, to Fleas on the Dog. It's an honor for us to publish this piece and we hope to see it someday, live on stage, as soon as you feel it's ready.

DA: *After a few rewrites, this play was accepted into the New York Theater Festival, where it will be produced Dec 8 -11. I will be playing the part of Balduino Colas in the production and we are currently in rehearsals to bring this to life. I am so grateful to share this important piece of history about both Argentina and the LGBTQIA community.*

JS: Your play is set in Argentina. You told me you lived in Argentina for a while. Could you talk about what brought you to Argentina, how long you were there and what you were up to? Specifically, did you go there to do first hand research to write *Pañuelos*, or did that emerge in a more indirect way?

DA: *I never officially lived in Argentina but spent summers in Central and South America while I worked as a Spanish teacher in my 20's. I did not go there to formally research anything, however, I have a BA in Spanish from the University of Massachusetts and an MA in Spanish from the University of Rhode Island, which afforded me time to research this topic. It has always been something that has interested me. Oftentimes I hear stories about human rights violations and political violence and they seem very out of reach, however, these troubling events happened in my own lifetime, in a country that I love and relate to quite a bit.*

JS: You said at one point that you've found North Americans have very little awareness of what happened in Argentina during their "Dirty War" (*Guerra Sucia*). Without getting overly complicated, could you give our readers some essential facts about the real world time frame and political context of this play? Some dates, some crucial actors and organizations involved in this struggle? Why did Argentina's military, majority church, and economic powers wage this Dirty War against its own people? What was the outcome?

DA: *Argentina's "Dirty War," also called Process of National Reorganization, or El Proceso, was an infamous campaign waged from 1976 to 1983 by the country's military dictatorship against suspected left-wing political opponents. It is estimated that 30,000 citizens were tortured, killed and most of the disappeared were never found, their bodies believed to have been disposed of in the Ocean. It was born out of the idea that the country was being ruined by left wing people and that they needed to be disposed of.*

JS: What was your process in writing *Pañuelos*? How did you research what happened during the Junta's rule? Were Argentines open to discussing this chapter in their history? Were younger Argentines well informed about what had happened, and why?

DA: *One of my dearest friends is from Argentina and grew up during this time. She and I have had many conversations about this time period over the past few decades. Like most national tragedies, I find there is always a group that does not want to discuss it or prefers to deny it. However, most people I spoke to had a lot to say about the time. I do find that younger Argentines know about the history, mostly because of the great work done by the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.*

JS: Your Daniel and Vero characters are distinctly apolitical, focused almost exclusively on their own personal lives – though Daniel's expression of his sexual being had been proscribed and condemned as subversive by the state. In the end, this detachment doesn't matter as he and his mother are swallowed up in the strife of the Dirty War. Why did you

create characters this detached from the political maelstrom surrounding them? What would you like the audience to take away from that?

DA: *In my research, I read about a journalist that was covering the World Cup in Buenos Aires during this time. The journalist said that the grass was not cut well at a stadium and soon thereafter he was tortured for his comment. As a writer, I wanted to let the audience know that no one was truly safe during this time. Also, in my research, I discovered that over 500 LGBTQ people were kidnapped during this time. I did not feel that their story had been told and I thought it important to do so. I also felt it important to show that, though many of these victims were working class people, being gay is something that transcends social class and leaves one subject to the kind of torture that occurred, regardless of social standing.*

JS: The *pañuelos* are both physical props and an all-encompassing trope that effectively ties this play together. Could you talk about the significance of these scarves in the resistance to the Junta's rule: particularly the *pañuelos blancos* worn by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and their supporters? When did it strike you how to best use the *pañuelos* as a central element in your play?

DA: *An amazing Professor I had in college, Anne Barry, knew a great deal about this topic and her class impacted me a great deal. I remember being 19 years old, in her class and watching the movie "The Official Story." In this movie, the protagonist, Alicia, wears a scarf in a particularly poignant scene. Right after that scene, the movie shows the mothers marching in the plaza with white scarves on their heads. Although it was 21 years ago, that image has always stuck with me. Last year, I took a one year Spanish teaching position here in New York City, and showed my students this movie. It reminded me of the importance of the *pañuelos*. Suddenly, the story took shape in my head and I began to write it.*

JS: Reading *Pañuelos* calls up some deep associations from previous literature, all connected by the act of remembering, memorializing, by basically saying the names of the dead that were consigned to oblivion by brute power. I'm thinking: Carolyn Forché's poetry anthology, "Against Forgetting," Ariel Dorfman's "Last Waltz in Santiago," and his drama, "Death and the Maiden", as well as "By Night in Chile" by Roberto Bolaño - but there are so many more. Could you comment on the significance of the act of remembrance in your play? And how does *Pañuelos* reinforce the idea of remembrance as resistance to injustice?

DA: *As a writer I am fascinated by the theme of "national amnesia." I always worry that after atrocities occur, we are quick to move on and forget that they ever happened. I think, perhaps, it's a coping mechanism. But as an educator, I know that we have to continue to tell these stories as our best line of defense from allowing history to repeat itself. Oftentimes, when this story is told, the horrific events of mothers being killed and their children being given to military families is the narrative. However, I wanted to make sure that people know that these atrocities also happened to a wide spectrum of*

people, often for doing very little. I think it is important to understand that this tragedy happened less than forty years ago and that it could happen anywhere.

JS: *Pañuelos* recreates a very dark moment in time in a region that's seen its share of politically motivated violence. So how does this play speak to the rest of us? Some may say that all happened once in Argentina, or Chile, Brazil, or Peru, but those places are a world away, very different from North America, or Europe with our well-rooted democratic traditions. How might you respond to that?

DA: *After teaching, I went to work as a political aid for almost a decade. I am very grateful for my time in politics, I learned so much. However, I am concerned that civil debate and democracy are in danger in this country. I firmly believe that telling people how to feel and what to think is not a good tool for changing hearts and minds. I now believe that presenting compelling stories is more impactful. It is my intention as a writer (and as an actor) to tell good stories that bring people together and (hopefully) help them see the world through a different lens.*

JS: Thank you so much, David Allard, for talking with us, and for sharing your play, *Pañuelos*. You've taken us on a difficult but ultimately inspiring journey with Daniel and Vero.