



AT RISE...

BY

John Sullivan

The featured play in FOTD Issue #15 is a rare bird, indeed. Toggling between unruly / hilarious set pieces and deadly serious moments of reflection / and revelation, Camilo Almonacid, a Columbian-American playwright living in New York City, uses the tools of physical comedy and an outrageously improbable / but entirely possible situation to focus on how social / political conflict impact the life-ways of innocent non-combatants, and even some U.S. contractors, strictly in it for the money, uprooted and displaced by the slipstream of violence. In *Hotel Happy*, his characters are ordinary people caught up in the maelstrom of a grinding / seemingly endless guerilla war and the asymmetrical power dynamic between the comfortably powerful and the very vulnerable. And from a wider geopolitical perspective: the Global North and the Global South.

Hotel Happy shares a magical fabulist strain that runs through Latin American / Chicano/ Latinx writing since ... well, as far back as the work of Cervantes, and in the visual realm, Goya. The influence of Magical Realism seems pretty obvious; it would be hard for a Colombian writer to not be informed in some way by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Or a little further afield, the

Argentinian Surrealist Julio Cortazar, Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider-Woman*, or Ariel Dorfman's *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*. And there are many close parallels in American theatre: *Zoot Suit* (Luis Valdez), *Saints & Heroes* (Cherrie Moraga), *Marisol* (Jose Rivera) all explore a similar vein of magical transformation and defamiliarized reality. The magical / transformative moments in *Hotel Happy* would seem to reflect the footprint of some of these influences.

But really, what comes to my mind immediately is the gumby-limbed / incisively satirical / and effectively subversive comedy tradition that began with Venetian *commedia dell'arte* & later extended into the contemporary work of Dario Fo, author of *Mistero Buffo* / *The Pope & The Witch*, and the widely performed *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Almonacid's trio of sex workers, and Madame Carlota / boss of the brothel that serves as the play's primary setting, throw a wrench into the plans of three American defense contractors to serve the purposes of their own ruthless bosses while beefing-up their bank accounts, and – like true colonialists – psychologically owning everything they see (and covet) in the process. Especially during some of the play's madcap comedy routines, it's like watching Commedia Zannis duping and bedeviling a puffed-up cadre of *Capitano Scaramouches*. And then, there's the donkey, "Chocorrano", whose needs and presence and "buried treasure" really complicate the knot.

But this play also subverts a number of standard narratives and character stereotypes; while by no means angels, the *Norte Americanos* radiate their own charm and their lives are plagued by insecurities and self-doubt – in some ways, not unlike the personal problems of the three sex workers, though for entirely different reasons.

The play's sex workers come across as exceptionally canny / endearing / empathetic characters at first contact in the script. But by showing us the contractors' tender sides and human frailties - seasoned with some of the standard distain for locals you might expect from jaded security operatives in a conflict zone - the playwright evokes a sense of existential damage from exposure to violence and an intense longing for roots and a safe home. This commonality among all of the characters culminates in a lyrically moving blessing on the war-fractured land that closes the play.

A very little bit about the conflict and the socio-political circumstances that impact all the characters in Hotel Happy:

The roots of the "conflicto armado" in Colombia stretch back over half a century into the past. But in 2016 Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos, signed a formal peace accord with the FARC-EP (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia), a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist peasant-based organization that emerged in 1964 after the defeat and destruction of the rural socialist / communist autonomous *Marquetalia Republic* by the Colombian army with the support of the United States. The ensuing war was bloody, whole villages were destroyed, their inhabitants caught in the crossfire or actually executed - many times on the mere supposition that they were aiding and abetting the guerillas, or killed by guerillas for possibly passing information to the army. This war caused a mass exodus from the country into cities like Bogota. Thousands of internal emigrees, without much urban experience, possessing mostly agricultural skills, were forced to adapt and fend for themselves, doing whatever was available to stay alive.

Regardless of the pact between FARC-EP and the government, and the fact that parts of the nation are healing, FARC dissidents and another guerilla military organization - the ELN (National Liberation Army) - are still in armed conflict with the government. And sometimes, with each other. Narco-cartels and gangs involved in other criminal enterprises continue to vie with one another for control of regions and markets. The tender peace is tenuous, and hardly universal. *Hotel Happy* is situated squarely in this gray – but still locally bloody - aftermath.