

THE DRAMA FEATURE INTERVIEW



Features Drama Editor John Sullivan with Camilo Almonacid

John Sullivan: *Could you tell our audience something about your personal journey through the twin realms of writing and theatre? What models, forms, practices and experiences helped you develop your skills as a playwright? Whose work has informed the scope and range of your own development? Where did you get that comic spark that allows you to say some pretty subversive things with a big smile on your face? & From where you are now, where would you like to go next?*

Camilo Almonacid: Aside from being the class clown, and playing a tree in a school play or a low status shepherd in *The Passion of Christ* at my childhood church, I never had any real inclination toward the fine arts, I was more into sports and Hip-Hop music and culture. Around 17 years old I began writing poetry, and rap lyrics, or just jotting random thoughts on paper, or napkins or keeping them scribed in my brain but I would never really share them with anybody. Then, a few years later, while living in Seattle, I started going to a free Poetry class at El Centro De La Raza, a community center. Also, around the same time, I got involved with the Seattle Public Theatre doing Theatre of The Oppressed work. My art was shaped by social awareness, and as a tool for building community but was also born out of a deep need to express my thoughts about society, and a desire to be part of something meaningful. I felt alienated and needed a space to vent! I craved connection. I didn't see it as a profession per se; I thought it was a direct way to subvert the dominant culture. This led me to work with organizations whose mission was to promote dialogue through plays about pressing social issues and historical injustices.

I am proud to say I am still committed to the same type of work in Arts Education in NYC. For me, plays became a vehicle to fuse my favorite mediums of communication- Poetry and Theatre. I am influenced by the ancient works of the world, Ovid, Mahabharata, Rabinal Achí, etc...and similarly, I draw from everyday stories, from film, cartoons, Chespirito, things I read in the New York Times, or Harper's Index or impressions I get from going to the Met Museum and sitting near the Egyptian temples.

I feel a strong connection with playwrights like August Wilson, Jose Rivera, Susan Lori-Parks. I love novels, especially Latin American authors like Roberto Bolaño, Julio Cortazár, Leonardo Padura, German Espinoza, Santiago Gamboa, Juan Gabriel Vasquez, Alejo Carpentier, Rosario Castellanos, Wendy Guerra- I love the form of novels, it's intimacy and expansiveness.

I can't live without humor, and my writing reflects that because that's my way of taking the edge off life (like a drink) and also my way to take a stance against the powers of inhumanity—a satirical action, a symbolic, proverbial pantsing of the king.

I have been working on *Hotel Happy* since 2015 or so, and am looking forward to the Off-Broadway production in 2024. Excited is an understatement.

JS: *The work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Magical Realism truly changed the face of fiction and drama. I'm thinking of Jose Rivera's play, Marisol, in particular but Zoot Suit by Luis Valdez and a host of others also come to mind. It's almost impossible to not be influenced by work that is powerful, and Marquez is a key part of Colombia's contribution to world literature. Would you call your play an example of Magical Realism? Or is it something else?*

CA: There is some resistance to this label by many Latin American writers, and other artists who believe Macondo has over-saturated the narrative space. I personally love the fantastical and absurd. I do believe there are elements of Macondo in *Hotel Happy*, for sure, and I embrace it. At one of our first readings somebody said my play was "Scooby Doo Shakespeare" and I can get down with that too. I have also read about Spectral Realism which is born out of violence.

JS: *Your character portraits of the major players in Hotel Happy are multi-layered and nuanced. I'm intrigued at the depth of the American contractors, as these interlopers were in-country using their training in American wars to squeeze a living from the pain and turmoil of a civil unrest in Colombia. I wasn't expecting that. What made you devote so much care to creating these characters? They are not unsympathetic stereotypes. How do the stories of these American "mercenaries" promote the development of major themes in your play?*

CA: I didn't know to what extent private military contracting was utilized in Colombia. After I read a book called "Nuestra Guerra Ajena" by Germán Castro Caycedo, I got a new perspective. The book is a report based on interviews and documents describing, in some cases, guys who get involved in drug trafficking whilst claiming to be there to eradicate the problem. He sites instances of disrespect for the culture, and that the mercenaries liked to party A LOT and go to brothels. Around the same time I was reading that book Obama's Secret Service agents had been in the news because they did not pay some escorts they had gone out with in Cartagena, that's when the idea came.

In terms of character development, I think it has been instilled in me to always attempt to craft three dimensional humans, and give dignity to all characters, especially to those with whom I do not share their value system.

Plus, I know audiences might be expecting for the white guys to be caricatures of themselves, and I want to subvert that expectation, and see if the characters can still be endearing to the audience. At the same time, I love playing with clichés, and sprinkling in irreverence, and clowning.

JS: *The three sex workers – Sofia, Lulu & Candela – and the three American security contractors – John, Bob & Ron – seem, at first, at odds with one another, with divergent points-of-view informed by different circumstances of culture and material opportunities. But as the play progresses – and maybe this is just a quirk of my own perception – it feels like they're walking parallel paths toward a more or less common destination. Could you comment on any parallels and similarities between these groups of characters?*

CA: Yes, precisely, my goal is to show how war has displaced Colombians and Americans and Animals too. WAR DISPLACES US ALL. In the play, although from varying vantage points, all the characters' lives are intersected and shaped by war.

Although gruesome to watch, a documentary made by Hollman Morris called *Impunity* depicts the atrocities Colombians have lived through, causing one of the biggest crises in the world of internally displaced people. Although my play leans toward comedy, I tried keeping this truth brewing underneath.

JS: *Outside of the Bread & Puppet Theatre, some Japanese Bunraku, and Indonesian Wayang, and Houston's Bobbindoctrin, I've seen very little serious puppet theatre. And Hotel Happy is the very first (mostly) representational play I've encountered that features a life-size animal puppet as an important character and major on-stage presence. What inspired you to create a character such as "Chocorramo"? How has this character both complicated and enriched your*

writing, and the work of the production team preparing the play for its upcoming full production? Where does “Chocorramo” fit in terms of the themes of your play?

CA: “Chocorramo” is the heart and soul of the play and for me represents the purity of nature, and living with overwhelming burdens and not complaining. My inspiration came while I was doing research in Colombia (thanks to a grant by NYSCA).

I was in Boyaca, Colombia (where most emeralds come from). My father was living in a small town called Tibasosa and every morning we would go out on epic walks in the mountains. We snuck onto a field of cactus pears, somehow got off the path, and got lost. At some point, we came across a glorious brown donkey, staring at us through our souls. That’s when my imagination started to frolic with this idea! One “what if” connected to the next “what if” until I decided to go for it. I don’t have a background in puppetry, only deep admiration and respect for the craft.

We got lucky, a silver lining during the pandemic, when Matt Acheson, who was the puppet director of War Horse, came on board to work on our first workshop. He created a prototype and most of our workshop was exploring how the puppet integrates into the action of the play. It was pure delight. Matt is currently designing the full-scale donkey puppet out of raw and tethered materials.

JS: *Hotel Happy has been through a couple of workshop iterations – with script modifications suggested by various members of the production team, and it’s slated for a full production next year (correct me if I’m wrong on that). People outside the theatre world usually have no direct experience with the collaborative process behind every play, or the components of the production / workshop process, and how those puzzle pieces come together. Or how a playwright interacts with and processes input from directors, stage managers, actors, set & lighting designers, costumers, etc.? Could you comment on how that process has gone for you thus far? How have you incorporated suggestions from your production team into your revisions?*

CA: This has been a healthy collaboration. Having the support of Houses on The Moon Theater Company has made this dream possible. They have helped me to get a grant, find Estefania Fadul who is our amazing Colombian-American director and Matt Acheson, our Puppet Director., as well as Tanya Orellana our set designer and Carolina Ortiz Herrera on lightning, and they continue to help build the rest of the team.

The support of having rehearsal spaces where we gathered to have my play read by caring, generous, and talented actors is invaluable.

As a student of theater and acting, I never underestimate the instinct of the actor, the emotional intelligence, and the sixth sense an actor brings to the room.

I have benefited from several readings, and two rigorous workshops. From all the notes I have received, the majority have been helpful and I have indeed implemented some suggestions. Sometimes we made discoveries in the room, or corrections of something I may have been inaccurate with.

Also, I am cognizant that as a man writing about women who are sex workers, I am walking a tightrope and I must be extra open to listen where I may be falling short or getting the perspective wrong. For this, I will be infinitely grateful to my wonderful wife Jenny Paredes, and all the women of the project like Estefania Fadul, Emily Weiner, and the amazing actresses that participated in the workshop readings.

This play needs to be explored on its feet, it is meant to be alive on stage, physicalized, that's when we truly feel the essence. My script is only a blueprint for that.

Here is a sample of our first attempt to implement the donkey into the action of the play. The puppet is a prototype. The actors spent several days learning the puppet vocabulary and then we went for it!





JS: *The setting for Hotel Happy is very specific and the characters are shaped and informed by that setting. How did you assemble this context, collect the details to make these characters believable (that certainly extends to Chocorrama), and create this real world with some significant magical properties? Could you describe your research process?*

CA: I feel I did a lot of research and could probably continue doing research on this play for the rest of my life. However, I tried my best to always explore the writing without pushing the research, I wanted to discover the action as I wrote, and that meant exploring space, and all its possibilities. Thinking of my former teacher Tina Howe (RIP) she would always say, “Weave a tale!”

My research came from books, articles, videos, or traveling to Colombia and talking to a donkey whisperer who was the braying champion of Boyacá. I did not go to a brothel, but did watch some good documentaries about sex tourism in Colombia online. I read books such as *Nuestra Guerra Ajena* by German Castro Caycedo, *Aquí No Han Habido Muertos* By Maria McFarland, and The Truth Commission Report *Cuando Los Pájaros No Cantaban*, a testimony by the victims of the armed conflict.

JS: *At the very end of Hotel Happy, Madame Carlota, Sofi, Lulu, Candela and “Chocorramo” (and Ron) make an arduous pilgrimage back to a power spot hidden in the bush. Carlota closes*

the play with a monologue that seems to be a cleansing ceremony, and the last lines in your drama are “Balance is restored” and “Peace”, delivered by Sofi and Candela, respectively. And it’s interesting that Ron “sobers up & stops dancing” in the presence of what feels (even on the page) like strong, conjured energy. This ending resonates so much with the spirituality of the land and the resilience of the people who live there, and their willingness to share – warmly and unselfishly - the blessings of peace. Could you talk a little about what you are doing with the play’s conclusion and how it connects with the major themes of your piece?

CA: The ending is one that I am still exploring. By the time the production occurs in Feb 2024, the version published in FOTD and the version on stage will be different. That’s exciting to me, to get to explore a play’s ending into a production. Yes, there is something ceremonial about it, and my goal is to show how this group of women help restore the balance much needed in Colombian society, for a new beginning. Inside this cave, they will find the depths of the human soul. It connects to the themes of the play because in the world of the play, as in ours, I think there is an inherent disrespect for the most treasured, beautiful, and vulnerable beings and there must be some action we can take to restore this fatal flaw of the world and reimagine our relationship to nature, Mother Earth.