Octavio Solis

Memories on the Border

An interview with the playwright

BY ELAINE ROMERO

ELAINE ROMERO: You developed *Lydia* pretty quickly from commission to premiere. What was your process like?

OCTAVIO SOLIS: I put this work through my own rigorous process. I wrote at least two drafts very, very quickly. I started the day after Christmas and I submitted it in early February. Kent Thompson [artistic director of Denver Center Theatre Company] went for it right away. That's when we lined up Juliette Carrillo and our team, and he lined up the Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School & Camp up in Steamboat Springs. We developed it there for a week.

You set the play in the early '70s. What role did memory play in the writing?

The play feels almost autobiographical. Not quite. A lot of the big things in it have no parallel to my own life. It is taking me back to my formative years in El Paso, growing up there in the '70s, when I was 12, 13, and starting to see the world through a very different lens. I started writing a lot of poetry in those days. The parents are obviously not my parents, but they're based on qualities that I saw in my parents and parents all over El Paso. There's a poem called "Ode to a *Chanate*," and its parallel is my very first poem, "Ode to a Prairie Dog." Memory does play a great part. In fact, I seem to be dipping more into memory as I write.

What was El Paso like in the '70s?

It was a very stormy time. The Vietnam War was very present. We knew about these assassinations. We knew about the rioting, the death counts, because we were watching the news every night. We'd see older kids that we kind of looked up to go to the war because they were drafted. We were amazed at how many of them went voluntarily. It made a huge impact on families—made them feel more American. They thought, "This is how we'll earn our right to be here." The war is definitely present in the fringes of this work—as is the border. The border was an issue then, too, but not quite the hot, nationally politicized issue it is now. It has always been an issue in El Paso. It's a chimera that takes many forms. It becomes a focal point for addressing crime, human rights, the drug trade and corruption.

We also had a maid who took care of us when we were kids. Consuelo was an older lady who watched us for almost 10 years. She was like a grandmother. She'd live with us and cook for us and take care of us and bathe us. At some point she stopped coming. I think it was because she passed away. My parents wouldn't tell us. We started getting these young, young girls. I was 14, 15 years of age. I didn't know quite how to deal with that. The relationship between the family and Lydia is really sort of a fantasy of what I wish I could have done—talked to pretty, young girls, who seemed so strange and so scared and somehow so exotic to me—and yet more real. They were like the real deal and we were imitations.

The real deal as in being Mexican?

Yeah. But also they came from dirt poverty—as I'm sure Consuelo did. They came here to do this kind of work, and it was really kind of spooky.

What's your take on your title character—Lydia?
She's no witchy woman or angel. She's just a person who wants to come and live the American dream. She admires this family for all its American-ness, for all the qualities that make it, in her eyes, a prosperous family. She loves the way they dress. She loves the big house. She loves that they have a big mall. She's entranced by all that. She has her own personal dreams. She's a person who wants to work and live free without fear. But all the other characters in the play project on her what they fear, what they need, what they hope for. When they do that, she seems to sort of fulfill what those things are.

When did you know your brain-damaged character, Ceci, would have a voice?
The play came to me many years ago through a series of flash images. One of the big images—I didn't want to explain it, but I wanted to understand it—was the final moment of the play. There was no way it could be anywhere else except at the end of the play. I said, "Okay, wherever I drop the little ball bearing on the pinball thing, I know it's going to go right down to that scene. So I've got to figure out how." After years of having these moments foment in my head, I finally said, "Okay, I've got to write it all down." I knew that Ceci had been through some accident that caused her to be locked in, and yet I wanted to give voice to her. She doesn't have language. She can hardly gesture that she's hungry or has to go to the bathroom. But when we get inside her soul, she's incredibly eloquent.

You have upcoming productions of *Lydia* at Yale Repertory Theatre, the Mark Taper Forum and Marin Theatre Company. Will you continue to revise?
I think that the Yale Rep production will be the one that finally cements the script for me. Honestly, kept to my own devices, I'll keep revising from production to production. At some point, you have to give up.

I hear *Lydia* is part of a trilogy. Is that true?
Alvaro has a supporting part in this play. I want to explore him further. I'm writing another play, called *Yolanda*, in which he is the main character. I feel a third play coming, but I have to finish my work on *Yolanda* first. And *Lydia* is still sort of haunting me.

What does that mean, that *Lydia* haunts you?
I don't know. I think it's telling me to deal with the stuff that's in that play on a personal level. This play is saying, "You wrote this for a personal reason—it's for you. I'm telling you something." I think it's changing me in some way. We're constantly changing our work, all the time, and we don't take into account that sometimes the work changes us.

Do you have other plays that haunt you?
Bethlehem. It's a dark, dark play. It's a play about the devil, really. For all my liberal thinking, at heart I am a moral person. I said, "How dark can I really trust myself to go with this work?" And I did it with that play. I went all the way to the bottom and came back out.

You're adapting *Don Quixote* for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Has it been difficult to make it your own?
A little bit. I haven't cracked the book open since I started writing it. On some level, I feel I am being utterly true to Cervantes—to the spirit of the work. It feels like I'm writing a play based on it rather than trying to literally theatricalize the novel. I never lose sight of Cervantes. I feel that I have a responsibility to make people go, "Oh, man, I can't wait to read the novel."

You relocated to San Francisco a number of years ago. Did moving away from El Paso transform you as an artist?
I found myself in my writing going back to El Paso constantly. But the El Paso I started writing about was an El Paso of the imagination. Everyone has a different idea of what New York is. Spike Lee's New York is very different than Woody Allen's New York. I created a myth of El Paso through my plays. They all somehow come up to the edge of the border. I lived on the edge of the border—less than half a mile. We used to ride our bikes to the river. We could see people trying to decide the right time to cross. It was a very real thing to me. Every time I think I'm done, and I think I've made the transition to writing plays that are set in California, I still somehow end up going back to El Paso. Faulkner created that little county where everything took place. This is what El Paso is to me. It's my Yoknapatawpha County.

Elaine Romero's plays include *Barrio Hollywood*, *Something Rare and Wonderful* and *Walk into the Sea*. She is working on commissions for InterAct Theatre and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and is playwright-in-residence at Arizona Theatre Company.