

“A Night with The Cast and Crew of *R & J*”

By Carerra Williams

This interview is a result of me attending rehearsal for *R&J*, a queer retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*. There I asked the cast and crew questions about this production that would take place in modern

day Verona, CA, centering the Latinx community. This opportunity was important to me for several reasons as a queer woman of color. One, there is a lack of representation of queer women, particularly those of color, in the media we consume. Two, the overabundance of interracial relationships in all mainstream media. While interracial partnerships aren't inherently wrong, in excess it's both disingenuous and problematic.

Disingenuous because most people remain coupled with people of the same racial and ethnic background. So, interracial partnerships are not nearly as commonplace as our media makes them seem. Problematic because it gives the impression that we live in a post-racial society, where racism, anti-blackness, and bias don't have an impact on with whom we partner, when nothing can be further from the truth, especially for white people. It also limits what people of color/those marginalized believe is possible concerning love and partnership.

If people don't see healthy, loving, supportive representations of relationships between people of color and queer people, it's difficult, if not impossible for you to see it for yourself, believing instead that the only way to find these things is to partner with someone white. It also suggests to marginalized people that they're not deserving of love. Compromising an already fractured sense of self-worth in a white supremacist, cis, Christian, heteropatriarchy. So, a theatre performance where queer women of color are given the space to fall in love and have complexity is new territory even in 2023.

This representation is something I'd like to see more in media. Lastly, I was brought up in insular religious communities, spaces where silence, shame, secrecy, celibacy, and guilt were encouraged and rewarded in women and queer people. Specifically, regarding our identity, sexual desire, and behavior. Here is a narrative that deviates from those ideas, making something public that many think should stay private --- queer love.

That said, I was immediately invested. As I sensed, this performance has the potential to counter regressive or harmful ideas about racialized people, gender, and queer identity. As a former church girl with tons of trauma tied to that institution, what initially seemed most critical is how religion would impact these characters. But walking into rehearsal, I watched Romea slowly saunter towards Juliet at a Ball Romea and her friends crash. As they embrace for the first time and began to dance, tears welled up. I knew it'd be pivotal, especially for queer audiences and a step in the right direction for queer women's stories, especially those of color. For these reasons, I wanted to ask further questions about the necessity of these performances. I encourage you to go on this journey with me as we learn more about this production together.

Any quotes are generous contributions from those involved with the production, the directors, staff, and select actors. I will not use their names, outside of directors and staff, to protect their privacy and right to anonymity. I would like to thank the Theatre and Dance Departments, and the cast and crew, for their participation. As well as being so accommodating, welcoming, and appreciative of my interest in the production.

Director(s): Professor Kelly Herman (Lecturer-Theatre) and Dr. Kimberly Huth (Associate Chair, Associate Professor - English)

Choreographer: Marco A. Carreon (Lecturer – Dance) Jozben Barrett (Lecturer-Actor)

CW: Religion is often a cornerstone of communities of color. How will that impact family dynamics? How will that impact how the titular characters view themselves? How will that impact their relationships with each other, their peers, and their friends?

Cast: “I’ll answer it seeing as I’m getting married! [laughter from crew]. I feel like religion, particular to this play, and how we’re trying to adapt *Romeo and Juliet*, it’s still very important because I can’t live without Juliet and nothing is going to be official until I actually get married to her. She can’t be married to Paris and married to me, Romea, not Romeo but Romea.”

“Even her”, referring to her costar, “she’ll probably speak more on her experience. But she can’t get married to Paris *and* also get married to me because she feels that it’s wrong.”

CW: “From my understanding, what she’s referencing as wrong is not just making yourself available to multiple partners as a woman, but openly and unabashedly accepting her queer identity.”

Cast: “But she knows herself, she trusts herself that there’s only one person for her. But the production does involve Christianity, you’ll see it throughout the play, most notably with the friar.”

Cast: “Contrary to the expected onslaught of epithets and homophobia with a queer retelling, there is more validation of the relationship, more than we might expect.”

CW: “This is a welcome departure from the current pain narratives of queer life. Yes, in life there is pain, there is sadness, there is adversity regardless of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, ability; but that is countered by so much joy in affirming environments. Sadly, not everyone has access to these environments,’ increasing the likelihood of health disparities, risk taking behaviors, mental health issues, suicidality and increased risk of homelessness, especially for queer youth of color. Exemplifying the power and necessity of affirming, compassionate spaces within our communities with open communication, social services, and health care practitioners trained to support LGBTQIA+ youth.”

Cast: “I think as far as the way we’re doing *Romeo and Juliet*, it’s a lesbian version of it. So, religion and the queer community, haven’t had the best relationship, and on top of that we’re Latinas. So, not only are we Latinas, we’re religious *and* we’re trying to get married. It adds a lot [of depth] to our characters, it adds a lot to the stakes, it adds a lot to the story. Juliet is supposed to be following the rules of religion and marrying a man, but I fall in love with a woman, do I know about my sexuality? Am I still trying to make sense of it? So, it adds many layers to the story because I can’t go against who my family is, what they stand for, and what their religion stands for because it’s such a staple within our communities and within our families. It’s also

going to bring a lot of attention and awareness, particularly to older generations watching. I *hope* it goes well with the older generations [laughter from cast], but it adds so much more intensity, I think. For us and everyone else.”

CW: Out of curiosity, are your characters afraid of their parents’ reactions?

Cast: “Like my parents, Juliet? I think Juliet is, yes.”

Cast: “As Romea I don’t really care [laughter]. I hardly see my father and he spends his time like, “Where is this girl at?” I ask for my dad one time throughout the entire play and everything else is “Juliet, Juliet, Juliet.” I think my character is more comfortable with their sexuality. I don’t really care what other people think. But I also have my own morals, like peacekeeping. My character is not for violence at all despite the hatred between our two families. But I’m more of a free spirit, if you know what I’m saying. In terms of the character.”

Cast: “To add on to what they’re saying, I play the friar. I think it’s interesting in that we, coming from our reality, you have the church saying gay marriage is not ok. But the friar is best friends with Romea. This church in Verona has no problem. Our reality is like, that’s “something you don’t want to mention.” But in this town the church is ok with it, with gay people. It’s an interesting light to bring to it.”

CW: Queer women of color narratives are scarce, which is why I’m looking forward to this one (cast erupts in “awws”). What was the inspiration for creating a queer retelling of *Romeo & Juliet*?

Cast: “That’s a director question. That’s a Kelly question.”

K. Herman- “I’m going to try to say this without crying [aww]. I had two students several years ago that were Latinas who were in love. I’m all about disclosure. I have watched my gay friends go through the process of coming out to their parents. I’m definitely a couple of generations away from this one. But to watch that happen on the tail end of the AIDS Crisis, to watch that struggle and think that it shouldn’t be that struggle. It should be easier to be able to love who you need to love in order to get through this life. And it doesn’t really fucking matter, because we’re given a chance to love somebody and whoever that is that’s your person. So, when I had these two students and they were terrified of telling their parents and they’re like “You don’t understand, you’re not Latina.”

“And I go I do understand because I understand how important love is, and it doesn’t matter. I go be brave, be brave and stand together and that will help. I don’t know if it improved, they didn’t tell me how it went. But I saw a production of *Julius Caesar* where it was all women, and I went “I want to do that. I want to make it *Romeo and Juliet*.” Kim and I talked about it after collaborating on *Midsummer* and she said, “Yep, I’m in.” And the pandemic struck, and everything kept getting pushed out and pushed out. It was supposed to be last year, but it wasn’t the right time for a production where five young people die. So, we decided to give it some time- and now was that time.”

CW: The performance is centered on the Latinx community. What aspects of Latinx culture does the production intend to include? Why was that important for the staff and performers to include?

Cast: “We honor the dead with Dia de los Muertos every year. With one day dedicated to the kids and one day dedicated to the adults. That’ll be part of the performance.”

Cast: "There's Latin music."

CW: "There's also Latin dance, no."

Cast: "Thanks to Marco!"

Cast: "And we're throwing in Spanish, cause that's what we do, Spanglish."

[inaudible conversation]

Marco: "What she's saying is that there's different slang. She's Columbian, so for her it's a different slang that she uses compared to the one's we're using in here."

K. Herman: And we're going to use her Columbian in the apothecary when Romea goes to get the poison. So, she's going to be speaking Columbian and she's going to have to put it together during that process, because there is a difference between regions. Just like we speak different dialects within the United States and within the Latin community. Things are different if you're first generation or second generation or if you're spending a majority of your time in Mexico or Columbia or wherever. We actually have someone from Cuba, he's not here today, but Cuban is also different from other dialects. It's a tongue of many colors."

CW: I would argue that experiences and family dynamics, specifically in North America, vary in the Latinx community due to these same factors.

CW: With each iteration of the story, *Romeo and Juliet*, there's a conflict between the families. What should we expect to be the conflict in *R & J*? I'd imagine a site of conflict in this story is not just queer identity, but intergenerational trauma. These Latinx women have greater ability to determine their future and identity than their predecessors. Which could cause anger and resentment of their elders. But they also refuse to be limited by the cultural and gender expectations of their communities. That could be another site of conflict where the potential for violence and confrontation in these communities is heightened.

K. Herman: "If we look at the text, there's a familial grudge that's been generational. But part of that is 1st generation vs. 2nd generation, acceptance vs non acceptance, how Americanized you are and how that has its bias as well in certain cultures. Was the grudge a part of that? Was it money grabbing? Was it land grabbing? The cast is exploring that because what we talked about is perception is everything. So, what one person might see as a grudge the other may not. The other person their conflict is based on something else. So, it's miscommunication. We did a whole exercise on miscommunication, and then it began to resonate, because when we fight it's usually because people are not communicating effectively."

K. Huth: "The text doesn't say what the fight is about. That's what enabled us to make it specific to the culture we're trying to focus on."

CW: What era does it take place in? Why was that important to the story?

Cast: "We're in Verona, Ca in two thousand and now."

Marco: "It's in the music we're playing, right. It's current music."

Cast: "I think also you might hear, maybe in the beginning and end of the show, some songs that you'll recognize. Even if they're in Spanish, or Reggaeton, or a mix of hip-hop, old classic Spanish and Mexican music. It all sounds very familiar. I think what we're trying to do with that is reach the audience through memory or familiarity. As those songs can bring back something for them. That will help, maybe, the audience figure out what they're going to watch and experience. They'll be doing that in real time with us, if that makes sense."

Marco: "It also helps because the audience will see someone on stage and say, "oh, they look like me." It inspires them that they could do something like this. It also easier for them to connect to the situation or culture our actors are in."

Cast: "To add to their points. Also, knowing who our audience is and they may not be traditional theatre goers. People have a specific perception of what Shakespeare is even without having seen it. So, trying to break not only cultural norms, but social norms of what theatre is, who it's for, who can understand it. So, I think the way we are approaching it by putting it in the now, makes it more relatable to people who are watching."

Cast: "I think for a while that, like ballet, Shakespeare has been associated with stuffy white people. I think putting it in the now and placing it in an area predominately Latin. Then combining it with Spanish and rewrites with modern English too was very helpful."

Cast: "Then the ones in our class that do speak Spanish had to not only interpret what Shakespeare said and make it their own. They had to throw in Spanish too. That will help bring in an audience that didn't think Shakespeare could be accessible to them. Instead, we're saying "this is for everybody." We're not in stuffy corsets, it's not hoity-toity. We're bringing it down and making it more accessible to those who may have felt left out from certain theatre productions. Those who thought they were shut out of theatre productions like this.

Bringing the language of Shakespeare to a local level makes this space accessible to all people. They could follow along in that sense."

Cast: "My friend, she's going to come see the show, she's Latina and she's queer. When I told her about this she's like, "I'm not watching Shakespeare, like no!" And I'm like, "no hold up, let me tell you it's this and that" and she's like "oh, that's me. Ok I'm going to go." I think her being able to see herself on stage, her story, her community. She's like, "Oh, I'm going to see it." So, I think that is going to be able to bring more of an audience and they're going to be able to relate to it more, if that makes sense."

K. Huth: "I just want to add on to this. Thank you for everything you guys just said. But I think Shakespeare has this position in culture because of his association with stuffy white people and is a product of colonialism, racism, western superiority and a whole lot of things. But I think what this production is showing is it's not just about making Shakespeare something for everyone. But it's something everyone can use to talk about the things they want to talk about. We can make use of Shakespeare's position as a cultural figure to talk about the things we want to talk about. This is what this campus and this cast wants to talk about and Shakespeare's just a tool to do that."

CW: LGBTQIA+ youth are disproportionately impacted by mental and physical health issues and suicidality. LGBTQIA+ Latinx youth in the U.S. are more at risk than their white LGBTQIA+ counterparts. How will it impact the characters in the story?

Cast: "I think considering my character, I'm very unstable. I love very hard, even though it's love at first sight. But, when I start meeting with Juliet more, I become less frenzied, less unstable, because she's kind of my peace. We kind of support each other and balance each other out. So, I'm no longer thinking I'm going to die without her, well later on I do, well that's the end result. But within the middle of the play, you see how I'm no longer this crazy, love sick person because my focus is centered on Juliet. Because I now know somebody who's just like me, we're able to help each other and be the support we both need."

Cast: "I'll speak on this. I am someone who suffers a lot with mental health. I'm really open about mental health. Going back to both Juliet and me, our parents don't teach us how to take

care of ourselves, especially in the Latino culture. It's like "you're crazy, go to church," "there's nothing wrong with you. So, Juliet just brushes these feelings off. I think many of us do that, we don't want to face our mental health. We can call them crazy for committing suicide, but many people commit suicide from suffering those thoughts they can't shake. Unfortunately, for people in our communities a lot of people go through that. This hopefully can bring attention to our parents, our grandparents, etc. Since there's a lot of intergenerational traumas that need to be healed for future generations and for them too."

"It's not their fault, my grandmother didn't teach my mom, my mom didn't teach me. I had to learn on my own. It sucks but hopefully with these characters, these children, meeting such a tragic end, it will teach people to be better to do better. As well as tell people hurting that this is not the only option. There's life outside of your depression. There's life outside of this dark hole. You might not feel it. In our Latino culture, we might not feel it, but there is. There is help and crisis hotlines. There are friends you can lean on if your family cannot do it."

CW: Why was this moment the time for a queer retelling? What would you like your audiences to take away from the performance?

Cast: "When isn't the time. With the culture and society that we're coming out of and trying to grow from. When isn't the time. It's something we need, especially being Shakespeare. Going from it being "humdrum" and "oh that's white people shit, we're like "let's not do that. Maybe we need to combine forces so we can tell people "hey this isn't just for them, it's for us too, you know. And we're using it to bring light to something that doesn't always get the attention it deserves."

Cast: "Piggybacking off that there's intersectional identities that aren't necessarily voiced. It's more so the white community. Here, we're Latinx, we're women, we come from stricter families, more religious families. Seeing we're being more vocal about it, I would hope.... I think this play or production could make more visible what's happening in the world. And some people deny that queerness has always existed. They'll say, "why are people suddenly gay, why are people suddenly this this and that?" "It's like they're not suddenly anything. They were hiding it as a means of self-preservation. These stories are just reflecting what's happening in the world. There are many sides to the conversation, but we're just reflecting on the society we live in. Hopefully, to compel people to look more closely at the circumstances, ideas, and systems that impact queer people. Even if they disagree."

Cast: "Don't ask why now. Ask why not."

Cast: "It's very long overdue, especially for lesbians. We have enough, well not enough, but quite a bit of gay male representation. We don't see a lot of lesbians. We may see some bisexual women, but we don't see a lot of lesbians. Lesbian culture in general, like bars, gay bars, are getting closed."

CW: "I was not aware." {Immediately, I feel like a bad lesbian. Laughing hysterically in my mind.]

Cast: "We're going into an era of change. Lesbian bars get closed left and right. There's barely any out there in this country. I want to say, you can probably count on your hand the number of gay bars in the United States that are predominately lesbian or that cater to lesbians."

K. Herman: "You'll find them in areas like Long Beach, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago. But anywhere outside of that they're shuttering because of the extreme other side, for lack of a better word."

CW: "I think that's all I've got for you guys. Thanks for hanging out to talk to me!"
Concludes: A roar of applause, laughter, and exchange of gratitude ends our session.