



A KINGDOM, A COUNTRY, OR A WASTELAND IN THE SNOW

BY
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Reflections on capstone.

production

Like most students who come to Stanford, I want to shake up the world. I have known for quite some time that I feel passionately about issues of social justice and activism. I have tried approaching these passions from different angles, studying International Relations and devoting myself to learn about issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and geographic and political discrimination, and I have found that what has the greatest impact on me, both in ideological and emotional terms, has been activism through art, specifically theater and acting. Participating in plays that touch on these issues and force both the audience and the actors to re-examine assumptions, to challenge the status quo, and above all else to learn something new, is the most gratifying kind of experience I have had in the past four years. Studying and acting in the plays of Luis Valdez, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, David Hare, Caryl Churchill and Tony Kushner have been some of the hardest work of my life, but I cannot imagine anything nearly as satisfying as acting to teach and inform, and acting as a learning process.

experience. What has been missing is the presence of Latin American playwrights and Latin@ stories. Working on *A Kingdom, A Country or a Wasteland, In the Snow* by Lola Arias has catalysed my exploration of dramatic literature from the Global South.

Kingdom not only offered several interesting opportunities for political and cultural exploration, but it also challenged me immensely as an actor. The surreal aesthetic and tragic narrative of Lola Arias' play were something very new to me, but the family and identity politics are issues that resonate deeply with my sensibilities as an actor and as an activist. The rich history and parallels to Argentina's crisis are very present in the play and gave me the space to do some great contextual research.

Working with director Kellen Hoxworth on this piece proved very rewarding. Kellen is a fabulously insightful director and is highly attuned to the potential of his actors. Not only did Kellen create a collaborative environment in rehearsals, but he clearly understood the socio-political backstory to the play. It is rare to find a director with so much awareness of the context and impact of their own work. It gives one hope that maybe theater can help to revolutionize society, one performance at a time.

BY
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A Kingdom, a Country or a Wasteland, in the Snow premiered in October 2001 in a distant country, in another language, and with a different name. Originally titled *La Escualida Familia*, Lola Arias's cryptic and haunting family drama is marked by themes of deprivation, trauma, and the tenuous possibilities of rebirth and renewal. Arias's spare yet lyrical script invites the audience to step into a post-apocalyptic "kingdom"—an impoverished dwelling on the frontier, home to two adolescent daughters, sanctuary for their savvy, traumatized mother, and ruled by their authoritarian, abusive father. As Arias writes in the Preface, the play is about "History"—that is, it is "always about family" and "a map traced with pieces of bodies." The play offers a glance at the world, darkly, punctuated with moments of love, fantasy, and play. The script features dark humor in its layered significances, cannily confused metaphors, and cryptic double entendres. With such linguistic and textual density, one question loomed large: How could we translate the play and its citations of specific historical traumas to a contemporary, American audience?

Style emerged as a central means for translating the dense meanings of Arias's play. Dramaturgical research into the original Argentine production and the 2006 U.S. premiere offered compelling alternative models. The original production took the form of a Grotowskian "poor theater," with a spare set and costume design reinforcing the family's deprivation. In Jean Graham-Jones's view, it encapsulated a distinct style of Buenos Aires theater: simultaneously representational and allegorical, imbricating theatrical verisimilitude with a grotesque absurdism. The U.S. premiere, in contrast, was lavishly produced, with director Yana Ross electing to abstract the play, turning away from a theater of

mimesis and toward a post-dramatic sensibility. I chose to draw primarily from the original production with the belief that the tone and the mise-en-scène of Arias's "poor theater" would offer affective and psychic resonances beyond the textual translation.

A wonderful production team worked to construct a strange, unreal "kingdom." Connie Strayer's costume designs wove together the sparseness of fraying cloth with the lushness of rabbit furs. Derek Philips's live sound mixing fashioned a tense, tenebrous soundscape out of found materials. James Sherwood's lighting design created an intimate, brooding home interior and a vibrant, desolate outside world. Angrette McCloskey's set design brought the audience on stage, inviting them to view this world from the vantage of the family home. This dislocation also invited the audience to gaze into the theater "house," which was draped with white fabrics summoning associations with the play's titular "snow" as well as themes of dis-/repair and haunting. The cast—Justine Beed '17, Levi Jennings '16, Kasiemobi Udo-okoye '16, Victor Spielberg Verdejo '15, and Ellen Woods '18—enlivened their characters with nuanced insight, delicately balancing verisimilitude with the surreal. We invited the audience to join us in this world—a kingdom, a country or a wasteland, in the snow—and to dwell in the structures and strictures of endemic problems of power, violence, and love. In all, the production shared a particular story of history, at once real and fantastical, with the hopes of carrying it and the audience into another world, in a way only possible in a theater.