

*Nor the Cavaliers Who Come with Us*, by One Reed Theatre (Frank Cox O'Connell, Megan Flynn, Daniel Mroz, Marc Tellez and Evan Webber). Glen Morris Studio Theatre, Toronto, March 28 – April 14, 2007. Reviewed by the late Lisa Wolford-Wylam, PhD in *Canadian Theatre Review* 132 (Winter 2007), pp. 99-103.

The figure of Malintzín Tenépal, translator and mistress to Hernán Cortés and legendary mother of the mestizo people, has been a focal point for such celebrated Mexican writers as Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes, and more recently for revisionist work by Chicana scholars and cultural workers intent on rescuing this much maligned foremother from the distortions of patriarchal history. *Nor the Cavaliers Who Come With Us*, the first production by exciting new ensemble company One Reed Theatre, enters into dialogue with these revisionist projects, restoring the woman the Spanish conquistadors called Doña Marina to a central place as active agent in the downfall of the Aztec empire. In stark contrast to historical records that stifle the native interpreter's voice in their emphasis on Cortés, *Cavaliers* positions Malinche as a central narrator of the conquest and locates the intersection of its bitemporal action within the house built for her by Cortés in Mexico City/Tenochtitlán. Near the beginning of the performance, Malintzín (Megan Flynn) conjures the house through vivid description, marking its boundaries with limes that she takes from an antique suitcase. At the heart of the house, she tells us, is a fair-skinned man writing letters to a Spanish king. Cortés is first represented by a small fabric doll like those made by Chiapan women to honor the Zapatistas, drawn by Malintzín from her mysterious suitcase and held up for audience view in a playful Brechtian gest. Only later is Cortés embodied in a complex and compelling performance by Marc Tellez, whose first words contest with Malintzín's in an effort to control the shape and meaning of his/tory.

The result of more than 800 hours of development over the past two years, the initial gestation of *Cavaliers* can be traced to a course in devising taught by Ker Wells, a founding member of Primus theatre, at the National Theatre School when Flynn, Tellez, Frank Cox-O'Connell and Evan Webber were in training there. Indeed, the genesis of One Reed is in many ways similar to that of Primus, formed by a group of NTS graduates intent on creating original devised work in a style influenced by the aesthetics and compositional techniques of Eugenio Barba. Daniel Mroz, a long-time student of Primus and its leader Richard Fowler, seemed an ideal choice as the ensemble's director, invited by the actors to help them shape and refine performative research they had begun on the conquest of Mexico. "At one point," Mroz told me, "they had the entire history of the conquest written out on index cards stuck to the wall around the whole perimeter of the rehearsal space." Beginning from the actors' research and a text by Webber recounting his journey to visit an aunt who resides near present-day Chiapas, the group created a theatrically inventive and politically astute reflection on colonization and class hierarchy that blends song and movement with liberal doses of self-deflating humor. Performed on a bare stage with audience seated on all four sides, *Cavaliers* blends the stark imagery and bold, actor-centered transformations characteristic of poor theatre with a distinctly contemporary and self-reflexively Canadian perspective on historical violence and the elision of marginalized voices. Source materials from which performance text and imagery were derived include the letters Cortés wrote to the Spanish king and near-contemporaneous accounts of the conquest, along with Mexican card game La Loteria. The company's name, One Reed, references the year in the Aztec calendar when Cortés and his soldiers landed in Mexico, while the title of the performance cites the Requerimiento ceremonially read aloud by the conquistadors to New World inhabitants, claiming sovereignty over their land.

Oscillating between 21st and 16th century Mexico, *Cavaliers* juxtaposes Webber's narrative of a naively idealistic Canadian tourist to what publicity materials describe as the "brutal comic love

story” between Cortés and Malintzín. Each of the four actors embodies different roles in the two timeframes, shifting fluidly from one to the next in moments of quasi-filmic montage linked by resonant physical imagery and transformations of simple stage objects. A bottle passed in one moment among Cortés and his fellow conquistadors in another becomes symbolic of sexual violation when he thrusts it forcefully into Malintzín’s arms and abdomen, roughly uncorking it as he withdraws. Malintzín then crosses the stage, the thin trail of sand spilling from the bottleneck evoking both the conqueror’s seed and the Aztec empire he sought to claim. In a subsequent scene, toy soldiers in the stereotypical guise of cowboys and Indians dotting the sand represent a battle between the Mexica and the invading Spaniards, while in yet another episode the tourist sips ice tea with his aunt Joanne (humorously portrayed by Tellez sans costume change as a cloying Southern belle with a thick Texas drawl), as her native housekeeper (Flynn) repeatedly runs in a brisk, circular pattern, shaping the sand with a long-handled broom into the form of a round carpet.

In his confrontation with the brutal inequities of contemporary Mexican society, Webber as tourist functions as a proxy/viewpoint figure for the (implicitly Anglo-Canadian) audience, which he addresses directly at an early moment in the performance, relating how few people he found in an informal political survey willing to identify themselves as socialist:

I found the results really surprising, because I come from Canada, which is a socialist country. [...] I hang out mostly with students and art people in rooms where voices are not often raised very loud because we’re all in agreement. I mean, we all agree that we want things to be at least good enough for everyone? That we’d all be willing to make a few sacrifices for everyone else’s sake, right? (Cavaliers 6)

The tourist’s increasingly disquieting awareness of the disjunction between the weak liberalism of his received ideals and the social reality of the Mexican underclass is countered by the authoritative proclamations of the *ladino* horse veterinarian Alfred (Cox-O’Connell), who cynically justifies domination as the natural and inevitable result of superior might, mystifying differences as “sacred because they define us” (Cavaliers 22). Disparaging his wife Joanne’s efforts to aid disempowered women in the region as foolish and wrong, Alfred views the relation between the upper-caste landowners and the native peasants as analogous to that between horse and rider: “Together they are better than either can be alone, but they’re not equal And if they were, they would be nothing. So it is” (Cavaliers 22). The performance montage highlights the dubious nature of Alfred’s self-assurance by revealing a masked Zapatista (Tellez) looming ominously in the shadows behind him, silent and unacknowledged. The central role of the horse in facilitating the Spanish conquest provides a connecting link between the two time frames, an image literalized in one moment when the veterinarian places a single tiny horse figurine in the midst of the toy soldiers, explaining the tactical advantage to the tourist, and in another when Cox-O’Connell transforms into Cortés’s steed, Tellez mounted high upon his shoulders.

In stark contrast to Malintzín’s description of Cortés as a fair-skinned man, Tellez is visibly identifiable as mestizo, his father a Chicano from Texas who immigrated to Canada. In addition to underlining the Brechtian elements of the performance style, the casting of Tellez as conquistador – his dark skin and black hair marking him as a product of the *mestizaje* legend attributes to the union of Cortés and Malintzín – destabilizes visual taxonomies of difference, an effect further highlighted by the casting of Anglo-Canadian actors in the roles of Aztec and Mexica. The political argument articulated by Cavaliers is effective in part because it insists on the viewers’ complicity in the patterns of domination and exploitation it critiques, and also due to its humor and playful sense of irony, which effectively undercut what might otherwise seem

overly didactic. To cite only one example, the “heroic” ocean voyage of Cortés and his soldiers is depicted by a raucous sea shanty, three of the actors singing and dancing jauntily while the fourth strums a ukulele.

The *a cappella* singing of the One Reed actors is especially strong, with mariachi songs and ballads in Spanish interwoven with text and action. While the political sophistication of the performance may owe much to the devising process and its genesis in research, the clarity and economy of the montage with its striking images and stark transformations demonstrates the close attention of a skillful director. Mroz deftly shapes the epic scope of his material into an hour-long performance rich with palimpsestic meaning. Certain images doubtlessly convey more to a spectator with some knowledge of the cultural and historical specificities to which the performance alludes. For example, gender roles conventionally available to women in Mexican and Chicano culture are structured in relation to the familiar dyad of Madonna/whore, more specifically a binary between the Virgen de Guadalupe, a mestiza deity said to have revealed herself to Juan Diego a short 12 years after the arrival of the Spaniards, and Malintzín, whose name became a curse implying both sexual and cultural betrayal. In one moment of *Cavaliers*, the tourist visits the Basilica of the Virgen in Mexico City, the image of the temple created by Flynn in an iconic pose, her eyes downcast, a long, dark mantle draped over her head. In the transition to the following scene, the Virgen descends from the altar, advancing on the tourist in a silent inversion of Her initial apparition to the indio Diego. Draping her mantle over Webber, she transforms him from anxious traveler to Aztec emperor, the action and location smoothly shifting to the first encounter of Cortés and Moctezuma.

From her opening narrative to her final line of spoken text – “You are for my taking, and I want you no matter what” (*Cavaliers* 38) – Flynn portrays Malintzín as an active agent and producer of history, saving Cortes in battle by eloquently persuading the Mexica to join the conquistadors in fighting to overthrow the oppressive Aztec regime. Neither a passive victim nor a self-serving traitor, Flynn’s Doña Marina is repeatedly shown to be more courageous and competent than the powerful men among whom she navigates her fate as slave and consort to the conqueror and mother of a nation.