

Lydia

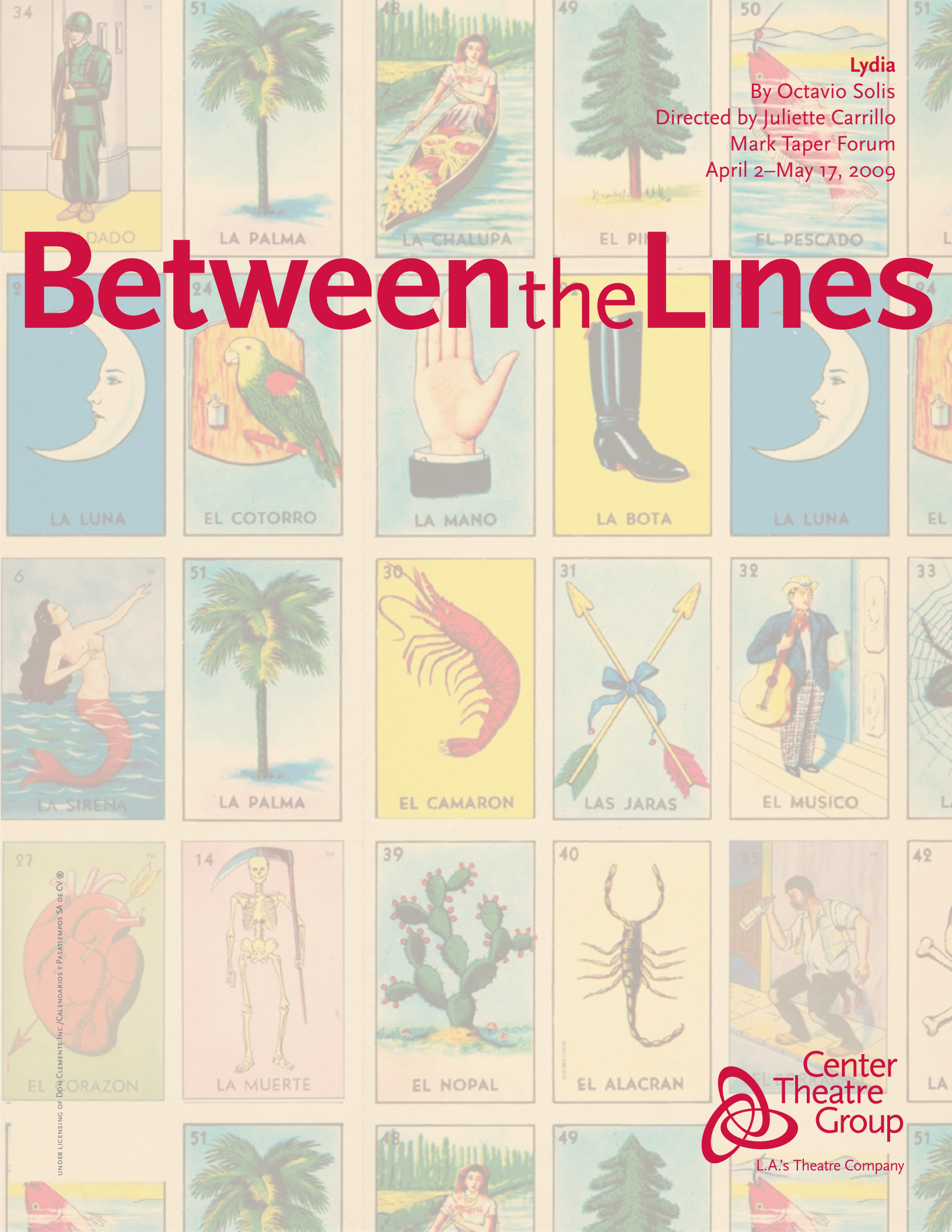
By Octavio Solis

Directed by Juliette Carrillo

Mark Taper Forum

April 2–May 17, 2009

Between the Lines



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Ahmanson Theatre
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601 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Welcome

In the border town of El Paso, Texas, a family is shattered by a mysterious accident. Estranged from one another, each is suspended between worlds: between dream and the “real-real,” life and death, childhood and adulthood, Mexico and America, the desired and the permitted. They are paralyzed but safe in their silent suffering until a mysterious stranger crosses their borders and, for better and worse, makes them speak.

This is the story of *Lydia*, the seductive and startling new American drama by playwright Octavio Solis.

Between the Lines

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Cast of Characters



Cecilia "Ceci" Flores

Turning 17, a girl-becoming-a-woman for whom time has stopped

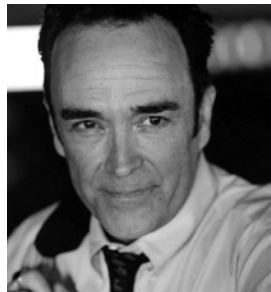
ONAHOUA RODRIGUEZ



Rosa Flores

Her mother, a Mexican immigrant

CATALINA MAYNARD



Claudio Flores

Her father, a Mexican immigrant; estranged from America and his English-speaking family

DANIEL ZACAPA



Rene Flores

Rosa and Claudio's eldest son; "messed up with some hard-core macho shit nobody gets"

TONY SANCHO



Miguel "Misha" Flores

Their younger son; a budding writer

CARLO ALBÁN



Alvaro

Cousin and close friend of Rene, Misha and Ceci; a veteran just returned from Vietnam

MAX ARCINIEGA



Lydia

A young woman from Mexico; an undocumented worker

STEPHANIE BEATRIZ

“She wanted to wear this. She said Alvaro would have the first dance. In her quinceañera.” —Lydia, Act I.



In the early 1970s in her family’s home in El Paso, Texas, Ceci Flores, a teenager with a long scar on her head, wakes from a reverie and introduces us to her *familia* that is “all sad and wounded because of somethin’. Somethin’ that broke.” As Ceci attempts to remember her own story, “to read her scar,” the reality shifts: her language deteriorates to incoherent noises. We discover that Ceci is brain damaged, a “vegetable” unable to speak or care for herself because of a car accident while driving with her older brother Rene two years earlier, three days before her *quinceañera*. Following the accident, her mother, Rosa, quit her job and became a born-again Christian; Claudio, Ceci’s father, retreated even further into his headphones, *rancheras* and television; and Rene, who refuses to explain the accident, turned to gay-bashing. And her brother Misha, the bookish, pubescent writer-to-be, has become “sad for me, for us, the things that darken the day.”

But Rosa is ready for change. She’s returning to her job in the county clerk’s office and so has hired a maid to care for Ceci, an “illegal” from Mexico: Lydia. Very young but preternaturally assured, the mysterious Lydia disrupts the tense stasis of the household. Not only can she communicate with Ceci, Lydia understands, and confronts, everyone’s pain. And she awakens desire. “I’m horny! ... I want to be wanted,” Ceci realizes after

Lydia arrives. Misha falls in love with, and begins writing poems for, the mysterious stranger. And Lydia seduces Claudio, knowing that is what he needs to return to life. But even Ceci knows that sex and desire can be destructive as well as redemptive, observing that cartoon characters go through hell “but nobody ever gets hurt” because “they don’t have private parts. They’ll be safe as long as they don’t screw each other blind.”

Cousin Alvaro, who shipped out to fight in Vietnam the morning after Ceci’s accident, finally visits after having been home for months. All are delighted to see Alvaro — except Rene. The two cousins have an intense relationship, one marked, for Rene, by a fierce sense of betrayal — part of which involves Ceci’s accident. To everyone’s shock, Ceci, wearing her *quinceañera* dress, is brought in by Lydia, who claims, “She wanted to wear this. She said Alvaro would have the first dance. In her *quinceañera*.” Alvaro dances with the broken girl but the scene infuriates Rene — and worse, Claudio, for whom the sight of his daughter in the *quinceañera* dress is unbearably painful. To protect Lydia, Misha takes responsibility for the dress, and the enraged Claudio savagely beats his younger son while a shamed Rene does nothing.

Ranchera

“Broken man drowning in old rancheras and TV.
I hear voces antiguas calling his name, Claudio....”
—*Lydia*, Act I.

A genre of Mexican popular music that emerged after the 1910 Revolution, *ranchera* self-consciously draws on and nostalgically celebrates rural traditions. Not surprisingly, as Mexicans increasingly moved to cities, *ranchera*, with its themes of exile, loneliness and a lost “golden age,” became increasingly popular. It remains so, even (or especially) for Mexican immigrants.



The tension in the household builds until a heartsick and drunken Rene denounces Lydia and her sexual relationship with Claudio — which rouses Misha to attack his brother. Stirred by the violence, Ceci reveals the truth of what happened the night of her accident when she hid in Rene’s car hoping to go partying with her brother and her true love.

Ceci’s truth will alter the lives of all involved. “Give [Ceci] love and she will give you all the *poemas* of her life,” Lydia tells Misha. But can he? And can Ceci be freed from the prison her life’s become?

Quinceañera

A popular tradition of some Latin American countries, the *quinceañera* (which commonly refers to both the girl and the ceremony) is a celebration on a girl’s fifteenth birthday marking her transition from girlhood to (young) womanhood and sexual maturity. While the form is constantly evolving — there is no “true” *quinceañera* — it most often features an entourage for the girl that includes selected young men and women or simply a single young man, the *chambelán*, who is the girl’s date and, in the central event of the evening — one that is almost always rehearsed — dances a traditional waltz with the *quinceañera*. In some versions, the girl begins the ceremony in flat shoes that are later replaced, by her father or another male relative, with high heels.

Talk About...

Family Ties

A parent often prefers one child to the rest. Did this happen in your family? How did it affect you or your siblings? If you were a parent, how would you deal with such feelings?

A Desert Island

If you were stuck on a desert island, which one of your family members would you want with you and why?

Sex and Death

Sex and death have an ancient, if somewhat enigmatic, association in the human imagination — a relationship further complicated in the conclusion of *Lydia*, which involves two taboo acts: one, as the playwright says, of “selfless love,” the other of self-destruction. How did the end of *Lydia* affect you?

*Segregation, determination, demonstration, integration,
Aggravation, humiliation, obligation to our nation.
Ball of confusion. Oh yeah, that's what the world is today.*

— “Ball of Confusion,” recorded by The Temptations, released May 7, 1970

Ball of Confusion: The Early 1970s

Although the world of *Lydia* encompasses memory, dream and the metaphysical, it is deeply grounded in and true to a specific place and time. The place is El Paso, Texas, the border city directly across the Rio Grande from Juárez, Mexico. And while the time is never explicitly stated, we know from references in the play that it is between May 1970 — when the Ohio National Guard killed four students during an [anti-Vietnam War protest](#) at Kent State University and the seminal heavy-metal band Black Sabbath released its eponymous debut album in America — and January 1973, when the U.S. ended the ground war in Vietnam and, effectively, the military draft that so concerns the Flores brothers.

Although it is convenient to think so, history does not shape itself to the calendar. Nonetheless the era we call the '70s was different from the '60s. The 1960s lived so fast that it couldn't last a full decade and it has become an intellectual parlor game to define the “end” of the '60s. Was it the release of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, with its discordant concluding chords, in 1967's “Summer of Love”? Or 1968, when the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and the election of Richard Nixon marked the end of a progressive era

and the inauguration of 40 (so far) years of divisive politics? Or December 6, 1969, when [The Rolling Stones](#) continued performing while witnessing a murder at the [Altamont Speedway Free Festival](#)?

Lydia is not concerned with social history yet it meticulously captures not only the quotidian details but the temper of the '70s when social and political conflicts were escalating, the economy and the environment were failing and the Vietnam War had become a “quagmire.” There was a new militancy to both the anti-war and the Civil Rights movements, although the latter was now many movements as the success of the African-American struggle for equality inspired other communities — Women, Asian, Latinos, Native Americans and even, in a few extraordinarily courageous and little publicized instances, Gays and Lesbians — to more actively demand equal rights. Frustrated by the slow pace of change, many lost faith in non-violent protest; progressive movements increasingly became about “Liberation” or “Revolution” rather than “Civil Rights.” If the restlessness of the 1960s was hopeful anticipation of the Age of Aquarius, then that of the 1970s was tense expectation of anarchy loosed upon the world.

While the cries advocating and/or warning of “Revolution!” sound pretentious in hindsight, they were reactions to very real injustices, apprehensions and anger. That America today is (relatively) unaffected by and oblivious to its wars may largely be because the conflicts are fought by a volunteer military. The Vietnam War was fought by a conscript army and the consequence of every able-bodied young male in America facing the possibility of being drafted and sent to fight in the jungles of Southeast Asia was, to again quote *The Temptations*, *Fear in the air, tension everywhere*.

As for civil rights, discrimination and prejudice remain a fact of American life, but with an African-American President and a Speaker of the House and Secretary of State who are women, it is easy to forget that four decades ago women and minorities were effectively barred from advancing in politics and business. And while gays and lesbians still face hostility in much of America, ours is also an age in which openly gay public figures, including admired politicians and moguls, are commonplace, and the most divisive legal issue about homosexuality is whether same-sex couples have the right to marry — things which would have been unimaginable 40 years ago when gays and lesbians lived in fear of being exposed and were, in effect, criminals. (It was only in 2003, in case challenging a Texas statute, that the Supreme Court ruled that laws criminalizing homosexual activity between consenting adults are unconstitutional.)

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,” observes the narrator of L. P. Hartley’s novel of remembrance, *The Go-Between*. One of the achievements of Octavio Solis’ *Lydia* is that it brings the past to life with such effortless specificity and power as to make us experience his seemingly foreign country as our own. Which, of course, it is.

Lottery Draft

“Is that what you’re looking for in the mail? Your draft notice? Ese, your birthdate’s not due in the lottery till next year.”

— *Lydia*, Act I.

Prior to 1969, all males between the ages of 19 and 26 were subject to the military draft, with the likelihood of being called up increasing over time. Instituted as a reform, the “lottery” draft used birth dates, randomly selected every year, to determine the order of selection for the draft and was meant to achieve at least three things: 1) To diminish the “agony of suspense” for young men by reducing to one year (from eight) the period they would be subject to conscription. 2) To make the system more equitable by limiting the ways affluent and middle-class youths, who were almost exclusively white, could avoid combat. And, 3) to undermine the anti-war movement. The so-called reform completely failed to achieve any of these goals.

The Chicano Rights Movement

“What about, bro? Oppression and la raza unida and our Indian roots?”

— *Lydia*, Act I.

The Mexican-American Civil Rights organizations established after World War II, such as the [Community Service Organization](#) in Los Angeles (the training ground for César Chávez, who in 1962 co-founded what became the United Farm Workers) were largely modeled on the non-violent integrationist programs of African-American groups. As the 1960s progressed, younger Mexican-Americans, usually college students, were inspired by the Black Power movement to establish activist groups that were more militant

and separatist than their predecessors. Passionate about their distinct ethnic culture and even about establishing (or reclaiming) a nation on the old Mexican/Aztec lands of the Southwest, these “militants” embraced such now familiar terms as *La Raza* and *Aztlan* and adopted as an honor what had often been a derogatory term for a Mexican-American: *Chicano*.

The Mod Squad

CECI — “Are you guys toking up or something?”

ALVARO — “God, you been watching too much Mod Squad, esa.”

—*Lydia*, Act II.

“One White, One Black, One Blonde” ran the promotion for this groundbreaking and groovy ABC **crime drama**, one of the first television series to portray the counter-culture with enough sympathy and “street cred” to win the youth audience. The story followed three young and hip dropouts from straight society who are forcibly recruited into a special police unit that infiltrates the counter-culture and exposes the adult criminals preying on America’s teens. Produced by Aaron Spelling and Danny Thomas, *The Mod Squad* ran from 1968 to 1973.

Playlist

Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler), Marvin Gaye (written by Marvin Gaye, James Nyx)

Paranoid, Black Sabbath (John Osbourne, Anthony Iommi, Terence Butler, W. T. Ward)

Liebestod, from the opera *Tristan und Isolde* (Richard Wagner)

Evil Ways, Santana (Sonny Henry)

Who’ll Stop the Rain, Creedence Clearwater Revival (John Fogerty)

Ohio, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (Neil Young)

Cielito Lindo, Trio Los Panchos (Quirino, Mendoza, Cortés)

Slipping into Darkness, War (Lee Oskar, Lonnie Jordan, Harold Brown, Morris Dickerson, Howard Scott, Charles Miller)

I Feel the Earth Move, Carole King (Carole King)

Ilusión Ranchera, Pedro Infante (José Alcalde, Ma. Antonieta Murillo)

American Pie, Don McLean (Don McLean)

Killing Me Softly with His Song, Roberta Flack (Charles Fox, Norman Gimbel)

Talk About...

Then and Now

What do the 1970s signify for you?

We Shall Overcome


How do you think life for Women, African-Americans, Gays, Lesbians or Latinos was different in the early 1970s?

If I Could

Would you rather be living now or in another era? When and why?

The Boob Tube

What TV show best captures the culture of your youth?



Playwright Octavio Solis
talks to *Between the Lines*
about border towns,
writing and *Lydia*.

“I carried certain images in my head for a long time: a girl locked in her body, a father locked in his stereo headphones and TV, a terrible accident in the middle of the night — and the final image, the embrace. I knew the play had to lead to that act of selfless love — a taboo act but an act of selfless love. For years I knew these images were part of a play but I didn’t know what play.

“There’s a personal element to the story: the period when I came of age, became a man — a young man — and realized I was both part of my family and separate from them. And this was when I became a writer — consciously became a writer. I had been writing every day about things I needed to express but didn’t express until I wrote them down, but I never before that time thought I would be a writer.

“El Paso is a rough town — and not really one town. El Paso and Juárez are so close but so far apart, separated by the river. The place is one huge metaphor. They are separate from one another but each is also separate from the rest of its respective country. Both independent and co-dependent, the border towns constitute their own nation. People there see the world differently; they have a broken view and double vision.

“Things were changing in this period, the late ’60s — early ’70s, changing in the U.S. and changing in Mexico. After 1968, many people were moving in from Mexico to escape their repressive government and El Paso was more than ever part of two different nations — half the

radio stations were Spanish — but at the same time separate from both. We were totally American but felt this magnetic pull from the southern land. And the city was different from the rest of the U.S. Cultural changes, social changes, they arrived late to El Paso.

“Sex is a central element of the play. That on the eve of her *quinceañera*, Ceci has this accident and so will never have that fundamental sexual experience and that the object of her love could, in any case, never help her have that experience — is terribly, terribly sad. Everyone should experience sex before they die. That real true love. People who don’t feel that have missed something essential, have ... a less full life.

“Everyone in the play needs love — is desperate for it but can’t give it. Lydia arrives and she gives freely and by doing so makes this family, this family that is unable to love, realize what’s missing. She’s been broken herself and knows what she has to do to heal the family.

“I don’t think about style. I just try to create a certain world. My biggest influences tend to be not theatrical but literary and I try to bring literary values, a certain kind of rigor and craft, to my playwriting. But I love the theatrical process: developing the play, rehearsing the play. Part of the reason I like to be in the [rehearsal] room — and one of the reasons I’m not a novelist — is to work with actors. *Lydia* needed the human touch of everyone in the room.”



Director Juliette Carrillo talks to *Between the Lines* about defining Lydia's multiple realities.

Juliette Carrillo is not only the director of the Taper production of *Lydia*: she directed the play's world premiere at the [Denver Center Theatre Company](#) and will direct – indeed, is already working on — a third production at [Yale Repertory Theatre](#). She spoke to *Between the Lines* about how she distinguishes and defines the various dimensions of *Lydia*.

“With the staging and design, I’m inspired and guided by the poetry of the play. The essence of poetry is distilling a representation so that the single image can evoke a whole world. You don’t need to reproduce an entire house onstage — just the essence of a house, the poetry of a house that captures this family’s home in early 1970s El Paso.

“It’s very easy to convey early ’70s with decor. You choose the right couch, the right rug, the right lampshade and you have it. And of course, clothes help tremendously. What has changed in each production is the context for the decor. In Denver, we were very focused on an image of a landscape of the border behind the action. At Yale,

we are using an idea of a skeletal home — broken up, literally and figuratively. At the Taper, we have done away with walls altogether, and just stripped it down to the bare essentials, focusing on the actors.

“I learned in Denver how important it is to capture the very different kinds of time and perceptions of time that are in the play. There’s a sense of time having stopped — that Ceci’s accident stopped everything. And Ceci’s experience of time is very different from that of the family.

“When Ceci begins to come to a new level of consciousness and she sees her family in a new light, I have slowed down time: the actors all move in slow motion as she talks about them. Later, when she refers to Lydia as ‘the blur,’ Lydia moves at a triple-time pace. It all comes from Ceci and how and where she is in her development of consciousness.”



Talk About...

Lotería

"I wake to this. Life inside my life. No wings, no glass, no moon. Only Lotería which means Bingo which means chance which means play. So I play the cards into view."

—Lydia, Act I.

Lotería is, indeed, a kind of Mexican bingo that uses a deck of 54 cards rather than numbered ping-pong balls. Although the cards are numbered, they are in practice known by the images they bear and while they inevitably remind people of the Tarot, the *Lotería's* images do not have the extensive and systematic tradition of symbolic meanings associated with Tarot. Ceci's metaphoric use of *Lotería* is her own creation.

S&H Saver Books

"Primero, you get these stamps from the Piggly-Wiggly when you shop... Then when you get enough libritos filled, you go to the catalogue and pick out the things you want, go to the S&H store and trade the books for them."

—Lydia, Act II.

Beginning in the Great Depression, the Sperry and Hutchinson Company operated a rewards program in which their Green Stamps, given to customers by retailers, could be saved (glued in collectors or saver books) and redeemed for products from the S&H catalog. Green Stamps were so common and iconic that they became the subject of one of Andy Warhol's earliest Pop Art masterpieces, the 1962 painting *S&H Green Stamps*, currently in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

The Changing Scene

When did you become you? Was there a particular experience that marked the end of your childhood and your coming of age?

Are there specific ways in which the set design of *Lydia* shaped or accentuated how you experienced or understood the play?

Is there anything you might have experienced or appreciated differently if the set had been like Juliette Carrillo's description of the one used in the Denver production? Or like the set planned for the Yale production?

Websites:

<http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade60.html>

<http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade70.html>

Web guides on the 1960s and the 1970s, respectively, from *American Cultural History: The Twentieth Century*, a project by the Reference Librarians at Lone Star College/Kingwood Library.

Books:

Oresteia: Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides

by Aeschylus (University of Chicago Press, 1969)

Family, desire, violence, guilt, death — these have been the elements of drama since its beginning, as demonstrated by Aeschylus' masterpiece from 458 B.C., the only surviving trilogy from the community that originated drama and, indeed, the writer credited with creating playwriting as we know it.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

by James Joyce (Penguin Classics, 1993)

Originally published in 1916, James Joyce's semi-autobiographical novel is both a definitive account of a writer's coming of age and one of the most influential English novels of the 20th century.

Chicano!: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement

by Francisco A. Rosales (Arte Publico Press, 1996)

Companion volume to the 1996 PBS series chronicling the Chicano movement from 1965 to 1975.

Film & Video:

The Mod Squad

Season Two, Volume One (CBS/Paramount, 2008)

The late 1969 episodes of the original series (not the 1999 big-screen adaptation) offer a network TV time capsule of the aftermath of the 1960s.

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