

Playhouse protégé

By Charlotte Stoudt, Special to The Times | January 13, 2008

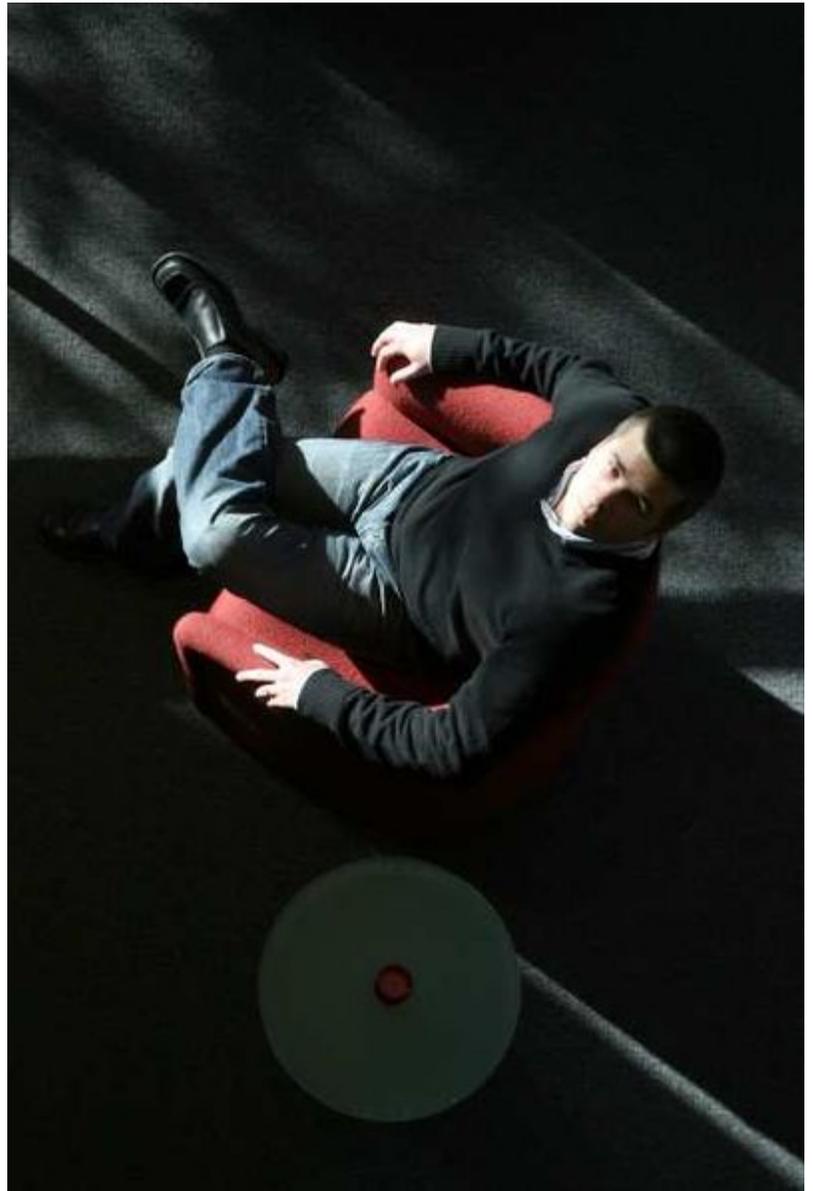
ORSON WELLES is about to get fired. Again. It's 1960, and he's directing Laurence Olivier in a new Ionesco play in London. Trying to direct, that is. Olivier is having a meltdown, Welles starts throwing chairs, then Vivien Leigh turns up and tries to seduce the stage manager. Fighting for control of the production, Olivier wins. Welles protests. He needs this job. "Don't plead, Orson," Olivier says calmly, ruthlessly. He might as well be sending Welles to the lions.

This showdown is based on fact, though the specifics are imagined; the scene is a group of actors finishing up the first rehearsal of "Orson's Shadow" on a rainy December day in Pasadena. Dámaso Rodriguez, recently appointed associate artistic director of Pasadena Playhouse, is staging Austin Pendleton's acclaimed backstage dramedy for the theater's 2008 season opener.

After the last lines of the play are spoken, there is scattered applause. And then, as happens at the end of every first rehearsal anywhere on the planet, everyone turns to the director for reassurance. The boyish

Rodriguez looks like he should be in charge of a Sunday-school class, not a feeding frenzy of world-class narcissists. "Don't just play the parts of your characters you like," he tells the cast. "Really go after each other. I encourage you to make each other suffer."

This decorous young Turk knows a thing or two about putting people through hell on stage. In 2001, Rodriguez and five others, including his wife, Sara Hennessy, founded Furious Theatre Company after moving to L.A. from Chicago.



Pasadena granted Furious the use of the Armory Center for the Arts, and they quickly gained a reputation for producing turn-of-the-screw, intensely satisfying theater. Rodriguez picked up an NAACP Prize for "Saturday Night at the Palace" and a Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for his direction of Craig Wright's "Grace."

Rodriguez and Hennessy also interned at A Noise Within, studying Shakespeare with the Glendale theater's co-founder, Art Manke. "Dámaso immediately struck me as keenly analytical," says Manke, who serves as dance consultant on "Orson's Shadow." "He holds his intelligence over the passion and furor of a play, which makes it all the more exciting. Conflict is strongest when it's revealed through subtext. Furious' productions all have that quality."

The well-mannered company with a taste for tightly wound drama also got the attention of Pasadena Playhouse Artistic Director Sheldon Epps. In 2003, he offered the now-15-member Furious a four-year residency in the Carrie Hamilton Theatre, an 86-seat space named in honor of board member Carol Burnett's late daughter. Their most recent show, "Canned Peaches in Syrup," featured a post-apocalyptic war between cannibals and vegetarians. Half-eaten human limbs littered the stage. Epps loved it.

"I've been very impressed with the quality of Dámaso's work," he says. "I appreciate his predilection for material that's different from my own. His aesthetic is slightly off-kilter. But he always works with honesty and deep emotion. And he has a consistent ability to make actors soar."

Furious has now staged nine shows at the Hamilton. "The residency's suited everyone," says Rodriguez. "We needed a home and the Playhouse wanted more diverse programming. Last summer we had a meeting to discuss the future. Basically, it was, 'Are we breaking up or getting engaged?' The decision was to solidify the relationship."

Epps took things a step further, using part of his recent Irvine Fellowship award to fund an associate artistic director position with Rodriguez in mind. "Not every great director is a great leader," observes Epps. "The job of an artistic director is very specific. You have to inspire, articulate the mission -- and raise the money."

Does Rodriguez's new position signal the end of Epps' tenure? "I've had 10 great years here," says Epps, 55. "I don't know that it will be another 10. But I'll be here quite happily for another few."

Youth will be served

IN "Orson's Shadow," Olivier's lover, ingénue Joan Plowright, persuades him to take on the brilliant, iconoclastic Kenneth Tynan as a literary advisor. Olivier is skeptical: Will upstart Tynan make him look like a worn-out duffer? But Plowright insists: "It's a wonderful idea. Because Ken is young."

The 33-year-old Rodriguez is a striking mix of the steady and the fearless. Born to Cuban parents but raised in the United States, he grew up in Texas but made frequent trips to Miami to visit grandparents. "Miami has a high-energy, theatrical culture. I jumped in and out of Spanish. My mother was an animated storyteller and my father was a huge movie buff. He had a program in place to show me the classics. It was like, 'Now it's time for you to watch "Spartacus." ' "

On the night before he went off to college at Texas A&M, Rodriguez and a friend watched "On the Waterfront" and "A Streetcar Named Desire." Rodriguez was mesmerized by Marlon Brando. "I thought, 'This is what great acting is -- so visceral.' I loved the violence, the beatings he took," he remembers.

The director seems to have an uncanny ability to give scripted work the suspense of live sports. As playwright Yusef El Guindi, whose "Back of the Throat" was staged by Rodriguez in 2006, puts it, "Dámaso knows how to keep a play right at that sharp edge without tipping it over and making it lose its coiled energy."

The same balancing act is needed to keep a major institution vital: get the bills paid, but also keep the audience moving in adventurous directions. Rodriguez says he's barely begun to learn the art of running a \$7.5-million-a-year theater in contrast to Furious' bare-bones, \$150,000 operation. "On some level, it's a question of scale. You face the same problems, just with more zeros," he says. "The big difference is that the Playhouse belongs to the community. If it went away, there would be a huge impact. There's a civic component in being an artistic director of a major institution. Galas, board meetings, live auctions. The mayor was at an event the other day. This is not a world I'm used to operating in."

Rodriguez can probably master mission speak for fundraisers, but will main-stage audiences learn to appreciate the theatrical pleasures of cannibalism? Subscribers aren't finding the Hamilton, even though it's only 100 feet away from the front door of the Playhouse. "There's not as much crossover as we anticipated or hoped for," admits Epps. "Dámaso's new position is one way to facilitate that."

Frank Gehry's upcoming pro bono redesign of the Hamilton will also focus attention on the smaller space, which has admittedly limited facilities. "It's not unreasonable for theatergoers to want better bathrooms and air conditioning," observes Rodriguez, who will continue in his role with the Furious Theatre while assuming duties at the Playhouse.

He takes the long view: "We only recently discovered that most people don't even know there's a theater up there. I think the first thing to do is get the Playhouse staff excited about the work. Then we'll try for a wider audience. I'm not interested in forcing people into an experience they don't want to have. But I can only assume I was hired because of who I am. To bring my own taste to the table. So far that hasn't led to any conflict. Am I 'the cannibal guy'? Well, I see my role differently: How can I support the artistic leadership of the Playhouse?"

Hope for the future

EPPS believes in passing the torch, regardless of what Rodriguez does with this experience. "You only learn this kind of work through on-the-job training. I had a similar opportunity at the Old Globe under Jack O'Brien when he hired me as associate artistic director. I wanted to offer Dámaso the same chance, wherever he ends up."

For the moment, Rodriguez's primary concern is getting "Orson's Shadow" on its feet. He has come to appreciate each of its flawed characters, but admits gravitating toward Welles. "The concept of a guy who did 'Citizen Kane' at 25 -- not just the filmmaking, even the performance is so bold. He's such a risk-taker. Welles' Mercury Theatre did some unbelievable, cutting-edge work."

Although Rodriguez isn't planning to emulate all of Welles' qualities. "I'm betting you can be a great artist without being troubled or reckless. Furious Theatre was built on discipline. When you're actually going into rehearsal, you need to bring as little drama as possible. I like to say to a cast, 'I hope we have a really boring few weeks together.' "