

ONSTAGE
The Pasadena Playhouse's *Carrie Hamilton* Theatre is now home to Dámaso Rodríguez and his Furious Theatre Company.

>> theater

That's Quite an Entrance

Dámaso Rodríguez found a home for his company and a leadership role for himself at the Pasadena Playhouse

LAST YEAR, stage director Dámaso Rodríguez tackled a postapocalyptic, farcical love story with themes of cannibalism. *Canned Peaches in Syrup* might not have been an easy production to swallow, but it was a chance for Rodríguez to work on a project that pushed theatergoers to new limits.

"The audience was going through something bizarre, and they were going to either like it or hate it. I had never seen something like that onstage," Rodríguez says of the play by Alex Jones, a British playwright associated with a theater movement known as "in-yer-face." ▶



ON THE EDGE
Rodriguez directed the postapocalyptic farce *Canned Peaches in Syrup* last year.



Taking risks has been Rodriguez's style as far back as his childhood. He had been extremely shy, but everything changed once his father pushed him to enroll in a speech class. Rodriguez, whose parents fled Cuba in the 1960s, was inspired to take other kinds of chances, too.

In this era of limited support for the arts, starting a theater company is certainly a risk, but that's precisely what Rodriguez and some friends did in 2002, when they founded the Furious Theatre Company. The ensemble is now in residence at the venerable Pasadena Playhouse, where the artistic director, Sheldon Epps, named Rodriguez associate artistic director last year.

"I'm at that age where I'm starting to think about mentoring young people and providing them with opportunities that I've had," Epps says. According to the veteran director, the idea is that Rodriguez "will take this time to learn the job so that he will be poised to run a larger venue." Epps obviously saw something in the 33-year-old Rodriguez, whose accolades include a 2006 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle award for best production for *Grace*, about an evangelical Christian couple involved in a double murder-suicide with their neighbor.

Born in Miami, Rodriguez was a toddler when his family moved to the Dallas-Fort Worth area. He started acting in high school and then headed to Texas A&M University, where he honed his chops

and met his future wife, Sara Hennessy. After college, the couple moved to Chicago, where their goal was to build a network of actor friends who would help create a grassroots theater company, a dream that didn't materialize in the Windy City. In 1998, lured by greater professional possibilities, Rodriguez, his wife, and their friends packed a moving truck and moved to Los Angeles, relying on a spirit of enterprise to create their troupe. Their model was Chicago's legendary Steppenwolf Theatre Company, founded in the 1970s by a group of actors that included Gary Sinise. Not knowing much about the L.A. theater scene, they produced *Ramblers* by John Boston, a play they had successfully mounted in Chicago.

"It was sort of a disaster," Rodriguez recalls. "In Chicago one good review could sell out a show. It turns out that doesn't necessarily happen [here]. We couldn't even get the *L.A. Times* to cover it."

With a lot to learn, Rodriguez and company secured a temporary, rent-free space provided by Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts. In late 2004, the Pasadena Playhouse offered its 99-seat second stage, the Carrie Hamilton Theatre. The historically mainstream Playhouse now hosts a company known for its topical and edgy work, though when it comes to certain personal views, Rodriguez says he considers himself mostly nonpolitical. His position is not neutral, however, when discussing Cuba, where he still has relatives. "In my family it's a very black-and-white thing," Rodriguez says. "There's

a communist dictatorship where people's rights have been taken away. It's a shame we're not free to go there."

Rodriguez wants to keep developing plays that challenge audiences in new ways, and to bring diversity to the stage, particularly Latino talent. Recently, though, he's been focused on his first

"Transitioning to a bigger stage is exciting."

—Dómaso Rodriguez

main-stage production at the Playhouse: *Orson's Shadow*, which is loosely based on real-life events that took place in 1960 when Orson Welles directed Laurence Olivier in a production of Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. "Transitioning to a bigger stage is exciting," Rodriguez says with a grin. "Doing something that I'm passionate about makes it less daunting." —JUSTINO ÁGUILA

Orson's Shadow continues through February 17 at the Pasadena Playhouse, 39 S. El Molino Ave., Pasadena, 626-356-7529, www.pasadenaplayhouse.org.