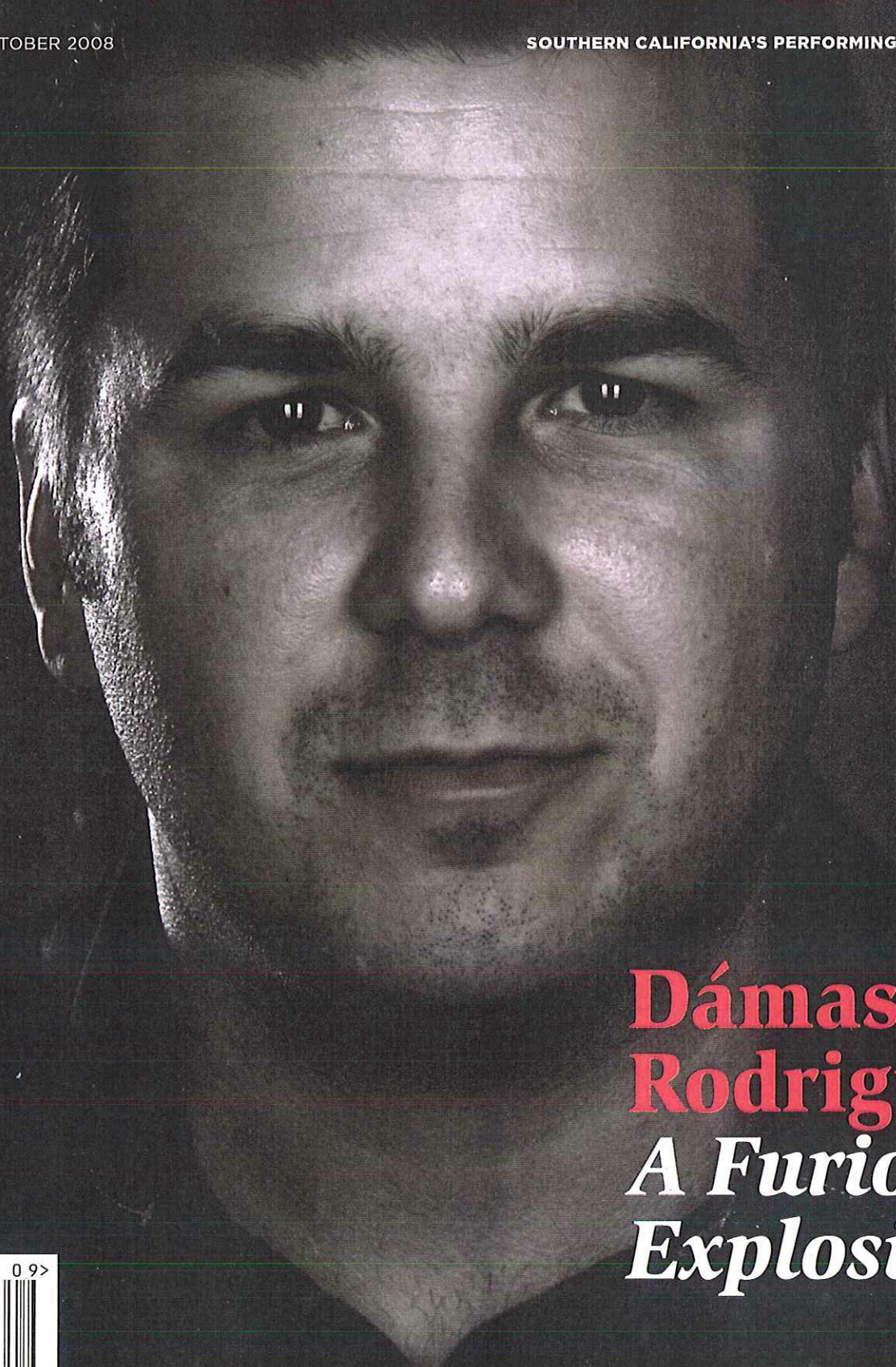


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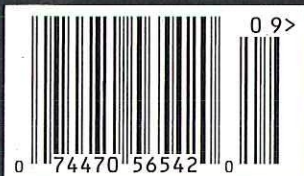
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**Dámaso
Rodríguez**
*A Furious
Explosion*

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From its inception six years ago, the Furious Theatre Company has become one of the fastest rising ensembles in LA stage history. Through the kind offices of the Armory Center for the Arts, Furious had its humble beginning in a free warehouse space in the less than spectacular northwest Pasadena. Since then the company has leapt into a junior partnership with Pasadena Playhouse, performing in the 99-seat Carrie Hamilton Theatre (formerly the Balcony) and is announcing a highly ambitious series of plays for its sixth season including a co-production with a fellow Pasadena theatre, Boston Court.

Furious is committed to plays never seen in Southern California. Last season, critics and audiences took notice of the company's two riveting world premieres: *Canned Peaches in Syrup* and *An Impending Rupture of the Belly*. The company is in constant search for startling new material and Furious producing director Dámaso Rodriguez is unrestrained in his enthusiasm about season six.

U.S. Drag is a wicked satire about American obsession with celebrity—even if the reason for instant fame is

wouldn't get rights to it but I had read reviews of the Off Broadway production of *U.S. Drag*, and ordered the script. We wanted a relationship with her. *U.S. Drag* has such brilliant wit."

Following it the company is producing its first holiday show. Rodriguez smiles, "*The Night Before Christmas* by Anthony Neilson is 'alternative holiday programming.' It's like *Miracle of 34th Street* with a hooker and an elf.

"The first two shows are written for fairly young actors so the original company members sought sharp material for their own early 30s age bracket and came up with the disturbingly funny *Hunter Gatherers* by Peter Sinn Nachtreib. Rodriguez describes the play, "It's about two couples who have known each other since high school. Every year they get together for an anniversary dinner. It's *Virginia Woolf* dark, very Albee. It starts out civilized then descends into another primal place."

The final play will be a co-production with The Theatre @ Boston Court. Rodriguez says they are currently negotiating rights on several properties but cannot announce a title at this time.

actually damaging as the word of mouth was it was too hot. The air conditioning just can't keep up with 100 degree days."

The word "furious" only sometimes refers to wrath. The name was one of the first agreements made when six energetic and passionate theatre artists came together six years ago. Rodriguez explains his philosophy, "It's not about anger but more energy and intensity of experience. There is not a disconnect between the name and us. We wanted a name that would convey something exciting in audiences' minds when they came, even if they first thought it just meant anger. On some level the plays we do are angry. We look specifically for material that is visceral first and intellectual afterwards. Yes, we want our work to be socially relevant and filled with political content but hopefully it is a ride first. That was the kind of theatre the six of us had been most impacted by so we wanted to build the company around those experiences."

Fellow founding member Brad Price has similar views: "Furious means a visceral experience in the arts that is unique, far different than experiences you get at other theatres. It's about taking risks, about challenging yourself as an audience member. People say to us, 'You aren't angry. You're probably the nicest people in the world.' But definitely there is an image evoked by the word that we bonded with strongly in the beginning and that is indicative of the passion. We produce furiously and everything we do is with great passion and fearless abandon."

Another founder, Eric Pargac, describes his reading of the word, "Before we started a company we talked about what theatre should be. What really worked for all of us was when we had an intense emotional experience. When we weren't thinking about the play structure or anything; you were on the edge of your seat, riveted by what was going on. That's what a furious theatre experience is for us, just being there in the moment. Being riveted by what's happening to the characters."

The six original company members, Rodriguez, Price, Pargac, Sara Hennessy, Shawn Lee and Vonessa Martin each maintain the same job descriptions they chose in their first meeting and all continue to be actively

Dámaso Rodriguez's Furious Company

BY TOM PROVENZANO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC SCHWABEL/SCHWABELSTUDIOS.COM

murder. Playwright Gina Gionfriddo is one of the most sought after authors in New York where, like her acting counterparts, she spends much of her time on the TV series *Law and Order* for which she writes and produces. Rodriguez minces no words about Gionfriddo: "She's brilliant. This play is going to expand what is 'furious.' The play is as meaty as anything we do but it is lighter. Gina hit it big when her play *After Ashley* premiered at Humana a few years ago. This year I went to the Humana where her play *Becky Shaw* was the toast of the festival. I knew we

The Hamilton is slated for reconstruction, a plan that has continually been put off but is expected to happen next spring. Still the company wanted to plan a full season of shows. "So we got together with Boston Court," Rodriguez explains. "It happened so easily and naturally. We pitched a few shows we thought were 'furious' but could work in their space; shows we couldn't do in the Carrie Hamilton. Our approach was that even if the renovation doesn't happen, we'd go through with the co-production. The space does need renovation. We cannot handle summer. I think it was

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Brad Price



Furious Theatre Company Co-Founders
Co-Artistic Directors: Vonessa Martin,
Lee, Brad Price, Sara Hennessy,
Argac and Dámaso Rodríguez

involved. Although many talented artists have worked with the company, only nine have been added as official company members.

Generally new members tend to be younger but most recently the company added three veteran LA actors: Richard Hilton, Dana Kelly, Jr. and Robert Pescovitz. The latter has just signed to direct the company's first holiday show, the less than merry *The Night Before Christmas*. Pescovitz is delighted by the point of view the ensemble takes, "The furious aesthetic seems to me to be to depict the ugly, yet often funny, side of humanity; and by revealing it we hope to shock people into change."

While the strength of the company has attracted fine artists and audiences to its work, perhaps its most important fan is Sheldon Epps, the Artistic Director of Pasadena Playhouse, who has turned that institution from an often disregarded entity to a major player among the country's most illustrious regional theatres. The small theatre adjacent to the main one had been simply a rental house and often less than stellar productions there were falsely connected to the Pasadena Playhouse's artistic endeavors.

Epps had long sought a partnership with a theatre organization that would work independently. "I was looking to host another theatre company that wouldn't do work in any way redundant to the work we were doing here on the main stage. I don't dictate anything about their programming. Hopefully I am honest, direct, straightforward in offering another opinion. Not necessarily superior but one that comes from somebody who has been doing theatre longer than most of them."

Epps also has a strong reaction to the word furious. "Their performances have a certain kind of energetic emotion. There can be a certain kind of violent humor or physicality. I find their work to be very physical and theatrical. I guess the first thing that comes to mind for me is they have a furious energy about what they are doing as a storm has a furious energy." Part of his affection for the company is that it is so similar to what he was doing at their age. "I started a very small theatre company in Chelsea with about 70 seats: The Production Company."

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Sheldon Epps

In addition to welcoming Furious onto the Pasadena Playhouse campus, Epps began putting some of the founding members onto his professional team. Brad Price has stepped in as Development Director and Eric Pargac as graphic designer. But the biggest promotion for the Furious members was this year's naming of Dámaso Rodriguez as Associate Artistic Director of Pasadena Playhouse. He directed Orson's *Shadow* on the mainstage last winter and will be helming Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* in 2009. "It is a play Sheldon has had on the list for awhile," says Rodriguez. "I imagined I would be given something more contemporary, to bring that energy to the mainstage. But the other side is maybe I can take my perspective to this play. You may think you know *The Little Foxes*—it is vicious! It is furious. It is also extremely relevant right now."

The question for the company's future is to be answered by the ability to balance its own fury with the more mature work of the Playhouse. Rodriguez is not worried, "I am proud that since my position was announced, we went immediately into rehearsals for *Canned Peaches*, closed that and went into rehearsals for Orson's *Shadow*, came back and did *Saturday Night at the Palace*—all within six months. That's a good example of how invested I am and the Furious company is in both." ■

**Furious Theatre
Company Productions**

U.S. Drag
Previews Oct 18-24, 2008
Plays Oct 25-Nov 22, 2008

*The Night
Before Christmas*
Previews Nov 28, 2008
Plays Nov 29-Dec 20, 2008

Hunter Gatherers
Previews Jan 21-23, 2009
Plays Jan 24-Feb 21, 2009

Carrie Hamilton Theatre
39 S. El Molino Ave,
Pasadena
800-595-4849 or
furioustheatre.org

“The furious aesthetic seems to me to be to depict the ugly, yet often funny, side of humanity; and by revealing it we hope to shock people into change.”

Robert Peskovitz

