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The LaVidas' Landlord

by Christopher Soden
EDGE Contributor
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You don't have to be very far into **The LaVidas' Landlord** to see where it's headed. The enthusiastic high school English teacher who is renting the property, Al Mann and his tenant, Carlos LaVida, work opposite shifts, and so are forced to communicate via a series of letters. Mann's perception of LaVida's plight (he and his family are political refugees from El Salvador) is extremely romanticized, and, curiously, he seems to identify most with LaVida's son, Juan, who is a toddler and perceives the entire world as his kingdom. As time passes and Mann's sympathy seems to slacken, the tone of his once cheery and magnanimous correspondence begins to shift. His requests become increasingly trivial. Could Carlos not burn candles as they evoke painful memories? Could his wife close the windows while cooking? Could he rinse the beer cans before putting them in the garbage? For his part Carlos prepares a list of repairs that need Mann's attention. Mann replies that he will get to them when he can.



Needless to say the structure of "The LaVidas' Landlord" is the first signal. There is a divide between the two characters that only deepens. In the second act the actor who plays LaVida (Sergio Antonio Garcia) assumes the role of LaVida's attorney, Mr. Munoz. Whether sending letters or leaving messages on voicemail, there is never any face to face connection between Al Mann and his tenant or the attorney. As communications break down and the characters polarize, the level of anger and frustration just gets higher and higher until catastrophe erupts. Al's optimistic (if schmaltzy) poetry has turned bleak, his bills are creating financial havoc, and his wife and children have left him. The more he tries to extricate himself the worse his situation gets. Like getting caught in the LaBrea tar pits. At first we think the problem is a language barrier, but Mr. Munoz the attorney is quite eloquent, so the problem seems to go deeper.

The explanation for Mann's downfall and resulting chaos (we surmise) is that for all his expansiveness and goodwill he has a preconceived notion about Carlos, Munoz and Latinos in general. What they used to call "reverse discrimination". His perception of them is positive, but it is fixed: it's preconceived. Any time we move into the land of expectations, where our ideas about who someone is (however pretty) are colliding with the truth of the actual person, well that's distortion. This kind of distortion seems to come less from racism than a lack of ability to see outside one's personal realm. When Mann writes a letter (accompanied by a plastic shovel) to LaVida about his infant son describing his skin as: "the color of earth" we know we're in trouble. In a way the letter is very sweet but it's also a red flag. We can tell that Mann is projecting.

We can understand the thrust of the play, that lacking information to the contrary, presuming to grasp another's motives or substituting an archetype (however noble) for the actual person can be a fatal error. That the one crucial element missing from Al and Carlos' relationship is genuine human contact. Playwright Lawrence Weinstein seems to suggest that (Greg Jackson) Mann is, at the end of the day, contemptible or no different from the men who persecuted the LaVidas in El Salvador, but, persuasive and intelligent as the play is, I think

that's reaching.

"The LaVidas' Landlord" is an intriguing play with thoughtful, engaging actors and a story that is poignant and often funny if somewhat predictable. Director Bruce Coleman has a sure touch, as the undercurrent of the piece gradually, subtly shifts. In the first act, Carlos LaVida looks a little too much like Tony Orlando (but that may be just me.) The set design by David Walsh is evocative and cozy. The guitar and piano music during scene changes was a nice touch, giving the production some articulation and resonance.

The LaVidas' Landlord by Lawrence Weinstein. Starring Sergio Antonio Garcia and Greg Jackson. Directed by Bruce Coleman.
Theatre Three, 2800 Routh Street, Dallas. 214-871-3300.
\$25-\$30. Thursday, March 27 at 7:30 p.m. Friday, March 28 at 8 p.m.
Saturday, March 29 at 8 p.m. Sunday, March 30 at 2:30 p.m.

Christopher Soden received his MFA in Poetry from Vermont College in 2005. He is a teacher, lecturer, actor, performer and playwright. In addition he writes film, theatre and literary critique. In his spare time he likes to read, cook, dine, do crossword puzzles, chill and nap.

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