

**Conversational Review of *Hungry Woman* by Josefina López,
Casa 0101, Los Angeles, California, June 7 and June 23, 2013.
Director, Corky Dominguez**

Jorge Huerta, Carlos Morton, and Chantal Rodriguez

JH: To begin, let me synthesize the plot. López adapted the play from her semi-autobiographical novel, *Hungry Woman in Paris*, published in 2009. The main action centers on the novel's narrator, Canela. A freelance journalist weary of having her politically charged articles rejected by her publisher, she invites us into her "world" as she relates how she escaped the U.S. during the GW Bush administration, prompted also by her favorite cousin Luna's suicide. Once in Paris, she enrolls in a cooking school while she navigates being "undocumented" in France. She also discovers that she suffers from ADD. She returns to the U.S., where her family expects her to marry and follow the usual expectations. Chantal, we two "mature" men are very interested in your impression of the play from a woman's point of view.

CR: As a Latina, I found this play extremely refreshing. While dealing with a multitude of important themes, it makes a crucial feminist intervention into the representation of the Latina experience. Throughout the play, Canela resists heteronormativity, most notably by breaking off her engagement to handsome doctor Armando, referred to as a MAP—Mexican-American Prince,—not once but twice! We also see her unabashedly initiate a fling with a British man, Henry, all over Paris. The theatricalization of an educated, socially conscious Latina with a healthy sexuality, not rooted in guilt or shame, is so important.

JH: I was very impressed with Rachel González as the main character, Canela. Ironically, she looked very much like a younger Josefina López.

CM: The resemblance was uncanny. And González, to her credit, was able to carry the dramatic action forward, although at times the narration bogged down. This is the biggest risk a writer faces when adapting a novel for the stage.

CR: González was charming and thoroughly convincing. Linda López (no relation to the playwright), in the role of the mother, was also spot-on and provided many a belly laugh.

JH: I really enjoyed the play the first time I saw it, although I felt that it was too long. The second time I saw the play, it was not as moving. I don't know why.

CM: Chantal and I saw it on June 23, 2013. The house was full and I sat in the back to gauge audience reaction. About four middle-aged Latinas directly behind me reacted strongly with gasps, laughter, and spontaneous commentary, like a call and response. It was like being at a church service.

JH: I had a problem with the set, several platforms reaching out from the center, which the characters had to negotiate every time there was a scene shift. In the talk-back, it was revealed that the set represented a wedding cake—a great metaphor for this play about assumed heteronormativity—but who knew that is what it represented? Corky Dominguez, the director, had the main character, Canela, step out of scenes in the cooking school and cross down stage to add commentary to her experiences in said cooking school. The other characters were frozen, so why have Canela take the time to cross anywhere? She could have simply delivered her lines from the imagined cooking school counter. Cesar Holguin, the set and photo images designer, had everything painted white—the props, the furniture and set props,—which was interesting for a while. But these set pieces had to be brought on by crew members every time there was a scene shift. This added unnecessary minutes to the play.

CR: While I agree that there was some awkward staging around the set, I thought the white, layered platforms and props were quite effective as a vehicle for the play. Accompanied by intelligent lighting and projection design, I found the look of the play to be quite modern and one of the more sophisticated sets I've seen at Casa 0101 in recent years.



(Left to right) Mary Mendoza (Cooking Student), Cameron Moir (Henry), Maricela Guardado (Cooking Student), Juan Parada (Chef Renault Sauber), Rachel González (Canela Guerrero) and Isaac Cruz (Dick/Richard Reynolds) in Casa 0101 Theater's World Premiere Production of *Hungry Woman* written by Josefina López, directed by Corky Dominguez. Photo: Ed Krieger.

JH: I thought Anthony Villarreal's costume designs were very effective.

CM: However, I was distracted by the fact that Canela never ever took off her dress, not when she was making love to her paramours or even when she was in the bathtub at the end of the first act. Not that she had to appear naked, but at least in a slip. Perhaps that was a directorial choice.

CR: I didn't have a problem with Canela staying in the same dress throughout the play and thought the use of the *rebozo* to change the look of her outfit was well done. I agree that the costumes were very effective, though I was most distracted by the costume choice for Luna's ghost. The character elicited much laughter, but it may have been for the wrong reasons, given that most of her appearances as a ghost were serious in nature.

JH: I disagree about Luna's costume; I thought the use of coke cans hanging from her black dress, while somewhat comic, also emphasized the

fact that as a diabetic, she should not have been drinking all that sugar. In fact, I think the audience's laughter at her costume represented their recognition of the connection. Technically, I thought the production was very effective; the sound design, lighting, and especially the slides that were projected onto the platforms. These sometimes stayed still and at other times revolved, adding some interesting "action" without distracting from the play.

CM: Yes, the slides set the scene and mood of Paris, the City of Light, and other locales. What did you think of the sound effects?

CR: The production as a whole was very well designed. I thoroughly enjoyed how the lights, projections, and sounds not only transported the audience to Paris, but also spoke to Canela's internal conflicts in specific moments.

JH: When you adapt a novel written in the first person, you run the risk of creating a very long monologue. Could anything have been cut?

CR: I think about 25 minutes could have easily been trimmed from the play. Dramaturgically, I felt that the lengthy monologues in the first act, while possibly aiming to maintain the autobiographical voice of the novel, ultimately failed to drive the dramatic action forward. However, the second act of the play was noticeably more fluid and truly enhanced the play's overall pacing and progression.

CM: At times the play was excessively episodic, trying to cram in too much of the novel. When I read the book, I didn't finish it all in one sitting, but rather savored it over the course of a week. You can't do that with a play; you have only two hours max. In reference to her penultimate play, *Detained in the Desert*, the author coined a new term—"Cineteatro"—and perhaps could have utilized more *teatro* than *cine*. For instance, since there is no real antagonist (Canela is her own worst enemy) *La Calaca Flaca* could have been used more as a foil in order to show rather than tell.

CR: I also really appreciated the character of La Calaca. Beyond being a joy to watch, she represented the historical use of "La Muerte" in early Chicano Theater and added the perfect touch of surreal energy to the play. Though I agree with Carlos that she could have been employed to move the dramatic action forward. What are your thoughts on this character, Jorge?



(Left to right) Mary Mendoza (La Calaca Flaca) and Rachel González (Canela Guerrero) in Casa 0101 Theater's World Premiere Production of *Hungry Woman* Written by Josefina López, directed by Corky Dominguez. Photo: Ed Krieger.

JH: Yes, *calaveras* have been a mainstay of Chicano Theater since the early days, not just as background but as active participants, which was missing here, as Carlos says.

CR: The fact that Canela remains happily single at the end of the play and doesn't feel the need to be partnered was very effective for me. I felt López was making a powerful statement about the pressure women feel to be married and the double standard that befalls them if they do not—eternal bachelor vs. old maid. What I found the most moving in this regard was the mother's acceptance and encouragement for her to break off the engagement a second time. Through the theatrical device of blinding, a hilarious diabetic complication, and Greek-like plot twist, Canela's mother finally "sees" her daughter, possibly for the first time, and asks Canela not to sacrifice herself by getting married to Armando. This scene, full of López's sharp humor, also works to break the cycle of the *mujer sufrida* stereotype when she says, "Don't go sacrificing yourself for me. Look where it gets you."

CM: The reference to Tiresias was good, but the fact that Luna dies from drinking too much Coca Cola and that the mother goes blind from eating a desert prepared by her daughter is “overkill,” if you’ll excuse the pun.

JH: On another note, Chantal, one of the aspects of this play that I found very fascinating is the fact that Canela is an immigrant in France.

CR: Yes, I think the immigration thread is really important to this play and speaks volumes. The experience of being undocumented takes a new form in this play. Ironically, it is through her relationships with other female immigrants that Canela comes to realize her own privilege as a U.S. citizen. This happens most poignantly through her experience with a Turkish Muslim woman who begs her for help to get away from an abusive husband and an impending honor killing back in Turkey. Ultimately, despite her struggles as a Latina in the U.S., Canela comes to realize that it is not so bad back at home and admits to feeling she belongs in the States much more than in France.



Rachel González (Canela Guerrero) in Casa 0101 Theater’s World Premiere Production of *Hungry Woman* written by Josefina López, directed by Corky Dominguez. Photo: Ed Krieger.

JH: Other themes that were effectively explored were diabetes, depression, and Attention Deficit Disorder. Suicide is another major theme, beginning with Luna's funeral and continuing to Canela's own thoughts of ending her life.

CM: In previous encounters with Josefina López, she told us she didn't know she had ADD when she was a teenager. She also said that when she lived in France in 2006 this was the second time she lived in a country where she didn't speak the language (the first being the U.S.). Josefina also admitted she felt inadequate because her then small sons spoke better French than she did.

CR: These themes are another important intervention given that issues of mental health have historically been taboo in the Latina/o community. I found it interesting that once diagnosed and treated, Canela ultimately rejects being medicated for the rest of her life, as it inhibits her from being her true self. López also roots Canela's ADD in her being Mexican-American, gesturing towards the shattered Aztec moon deity, Coyolxauhqui, and perhaps even the Salem witch trials when Canela tells the audience, "Years later I consulted a psychic and healer who told me that my ADD came about as a result of my soul being shattered into many pieces because in many lifetimes I was tortured and burnt at the stake for being a powerful woman accused of being a witch."

JH: Remember that the dead cousin is called "Luna." I loved the scene in which Canela, on medication, was "floating" through her life, no longer worried about the fate of the world and the U.S. under GW Bush.

CR: That was a wonderful scene, Jorge! Given the experiences of both of you at the height of the Chicano Movement, I'm interested in how you and Carlos reacted to the elements of political resistance in the play. López sets the stage for a harsh critique of the GW Bush administration, but Canela also gets wrapped up in the Algerian protests and the play ends with Canela and her mother attending the immigrant marches in Los Angeles.

CM: Although the politics resonate, the Algerian segment comes across as tangential. Again, too many plot lines in a play dissipate the action.

JH: At the beginning of the Chicano Theater Movement, the *teatros* were collectively creating *actos* and other genres, but nothing like this complicated story. Indeed, this play could not have been written or produced in the 1960s and 70s because of its demand on the creative team. Furthermore, female sexuality and sensuality were prominent in the novel and presented in this production with a certain “restraint.”

CR: I think the staging of the sexuality/sensuality was handled quite well. The restraint not only allowed the audience to “go there” without being offended, but also protected the actress and character of Canela from being overexposed. Nevertheless, many a gasp was uttered during these scenes, which signaled their intended result.

CM: After the show, I saw the long lines of audience members, especially women, lined up to purchase copies of López’s novel, *Hungry Woman in Paris*. The author has become a role model to many women for having the guts to speak up about the most intimate details of her life. She holds nothing back and that is certainly heroic.

CR: I absolutely agree with you, Carlos. Latina women have not had many opportunities to see a character like Canela before.

JH: This play is written in English, Spanish, Spanglish, and French. How’s *that* for originality? Do either of you know of any other Latina/o play that employs the French language—quite effectively,—I might add?

CR: I can’t think of another Latina/o play that not only employs the French language, but also so many different cultures, ethnic and otherwise, in the development of a modern Chicana exploration of self. The play really stands out as an examination of a contemporary, transnational Latina experience. And, as the howling laughter attested, Canela’s story was indeed one of the “juiciest, dirtiest, most delicious confessions you’ll ever hear” at Casa 0101.

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