

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

May 20, 2019

Tom Jacobs

Journeying Northward — and Inward

Some plays are about social and political issues; others focus on interior journeys. “Into the Beautiful North” is both.

Echoing today’s headlines, the acclaimed adaptation of Luis Alberto Urrea’s 2009 novel tells a tale of three young Mexicans who cross the border into the United States. It will be staged by the Department of Theater and Dance at UC Santa Barbara in the campus’s Hatlen Theater beginning May 24.

“It has gotten more and more relevant over time,” said playwright Karen Zacarías, who wrote the play during the 2016 presidential election. “It has become much more urgent and vital to tell this story.”

But it’s also a highly personal story of self-discovery. Director Shirley Jo Finney reports the young actors are responding to it on both levels.

“I’ve heard stories like, ‘When I told him about the play, my father told me about his experiences crossing the border,’” she said. “That led to discussions about his sacrifice, and how she (the student) is the product of that sacrifice. They are realizing they are descendents of a historical narrative, and because of that, they feel a real responsibility in the storytelling.”

The story focuses on 19-year-old Nayeli, who is troubled by the fact drug gangs have taken control over the small coastal town she calls home. Inspired by a screening of the classic Western “The Magnificent Seven,” she recruits two friends to join her on a journey to America.

Her plan is to save the town by bringing back some of the men who have immigrated north for work — starting with her own father. But along the way, Nayeli comes to realize she has to become the hero she is searching for.

“The play has a ‘Wizard of Oz’ kind of quality to it,” Zacarías said. Finney, a veteran Los Angeles-based director who staged the university’s 2015 production of “In the Red and Brown Water,” agreed, but she added two other references: Joseph Campbell’s “The Hero’s Journey,” and “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.”

Like Lewis Carroll’s creation, these characters “have to travel into dangerous places, including literally into underground tunnels,” Finney notes. “They emerge into the light with a new sense of self-empowerment, and a new challenge to their perspective.”

Zacarías was approached to adapt the novel by the Milagro Theatre of Portland, Oregon. “I thought it was a wonderfully humorous and humane book, with a beautiful heart,” she recalled. “Turning a 500-page book into a two-hour play is difficult, but it became a labor of love very quickly. I knew I was the right person to do it.”

In part, that’s because she is an immigrant herself. Born in Mexico, she came to America at age 10, when her father, a public-health specialist, got a scholarship to study in Boston — and later, a job with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. “Everyone in my family is either a scientist or a poet,” she said with a laugh.

Zacarías, who became an American citizen two years ago, earned a degree in international relations from Stanford University, even though “deep down, I always wanted to be a writer.” She went on to study playwriting in graduate school. “I’m an extrovert,” she said, explaining her decision to focus on theater. “Being a writer and an extrovert is a hard combination. I really enjoy the rehearsal process and the collaboration.”

Thanks to a grant from the New Play Network, “Into the Beautiful North” had a “rolling world premiere” in 2016 and 2017. After Portland, it was staged by companies in San Diego, Chicago and the San Francisco Bay Area.

“This is the first time we’ve granted a university the chance to do it,” Zacarías said. “I know (Finney) and knew she would do a really good job. Also, most of the characters are the age of college students, so it will feel authentic in a different

way.”

“The play has been done professionally with all-Latino casts,” she added. “At a university, you’ll have a multicultural cast. I find that very moving. It’s beautiful and inclusive.”

Finney, who loves the play’s mix of comedy and deeply felt emotion, is working hard to get the cultural details right. “My assistant director is an exchange student from Mexico. She has been totally invaluable,” she said.

But ultimately, she argues, the show isn’t just about international borders that are difficult to surmount; it’s about psychological ones as well. “It’s a coming-of-age story,” she said. “It speaks to all of us, because it deals with identity.”

“It’s a remarkable companion to what’s going on politically,” agreed Zacarías. “But in the end, it’s about finding who you are meant to be.”

“Into the Beautiful North” will continue through Sunday, June 2. Details about the production, including ticket information and a complete performance schedule, can be found at [The Department of Theater and Dance](#).

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.