
REVIEWS

Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez. *José Can You See? Latinos On and Off Broadway*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. 275p.

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The title of Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez's engaging book on Latino theater does more than announce its general contents. The author explains that "José can you see?" is a conflation of "No way, José" and the first line of our national anthem. The juxtaposition of this unanswerable challenge or "implied command" to José as non-Anglo other, invoked to "see/embrace" America's dominant culture, sets the socio-political perspective of Sandoval-Sanchez's work.

He makes clear that his exploration of Latino theater takes place within the context of a revision of Broadway and Hollywood's negative stereotyping of ethnicity and otherness. For the author, revision is no mere theoretical reflex but rather one of the keys to Latino cultural survival. Thus, Sandoval-Sanchez begins his journey by pausing to re-examine Anglo-American Broadway theater in its treatment of "Latinidad" from a Latino perspective, before offering an historical survey of US Latino/a theater with its various trends, key productions, and pressing issues within a clearly diverse US Latino population.

As a native Puerto Rican now living and teaching in the US, Sandoval-Sanchez is well aware of theater's ability to create, perpetuate, and disseminate negative images of Latino ethnicity through the powerful visual imagery central to theater and film. By invoking the careers of Carmen Miranda and Desi Arnaz, Sandoval-Sanchez unfolds a socio-political backdrop of US/Latin American relations characterized by paternalism, and Anglo re-presenting of Latino culture as exoticized and/or feminized. Miranda as caricature of the "Brazilian Bombshell" and Arnaz as "Latin Lover" signify a reductionism calculated to make their "Latinness" palatable to mainstream American audiences. The author's disclosure of how Anglo culture limits and thereby controls the identity of these non-Anglo emigrant performers sets the stage for his subsequent critique of *West Side Story*, while his assertion that Miranda and Arnaz are ultimately able to transcend/resist the stereotypes that their popularity fosters is both provocative and questionable.

Sandoval-Sanchez's chapter on *West Side Story* will intrigue many readers as the play, and later the film, are widely known and loved by American audiences. He

asserts that the play/film offers a surface love story masking a subtext that is “an explicit discourse of discrimination and racial prejudices toward immigrant Latinos/as,” but this precludes the possibility of viewers, including Anglo ones, reading this dramatization of race relations against the grain. Does the play, and more ubiquitously, the film, depict only the Puerto Rican Sharks as menacing and criminal, or does it paint the Jets as the same, and the latter’s obsession with maintaining their turf (read “power”) the cause of the ensuing violence? Is the song “America” meant to inferiorize Puerto Rico/cans, or do the lyrics reveal the emigrants’ wrenching ambiguity towards the idea of “home,” their rooftop singing and dancing signifying a moment of celebration but also of irony, dignity, and poverty in their adopted land a sardonic and, as we know, lethal mix? Readers may question the author’s interpretation of the Sharks’ portrayal in addition to that of Maria, but this does not detract from Sandoval-Sanchez’s larger probing of how Puerto Rican gang members are dramatized, or what the Sharks-as-invasive-group may mean to Anglo audiences.

The above comprises “Act One” of *José Can You See?*, but the best is yet to come in “Act Two,” in which the author introduces readers to the history of Latina/o theater and its contemporary staging. To stress its diversity, he offers a survey of this theater’s multiple sites, such as Chicano theater in the Southwest and California, Cuban theater in Florida and New York, Puerto Rican/Nuyorican theater on the East coast, etc. Because the author focuses on plays from the ’80s and ’90s, the treatment of these earlier regional productions is regrettably brief; readers will learn, however, of the gradual development of Latino theater since the ’60s, from grassroots organizations and community theater aimed at mobilizing disenfranchised non-Anglos to political action, to the urbanization and professionalization of Latinos in the ’80s, to the urgent dramatization of the AIDS epidemic among Latinos in the ’90s.

One of the most satisfying parts of the book is Sandoval-Sanchez’s close reading of select plays such as Pedro Monge Rafuls’ *Noche de Ronda* (*Cruising at Midnight*) and Louis Delgado Jr.’s *A Better Life*, both of which not only treat AIDS-related themes critical to the Latino population, but which also give voice to gay Latino issues and self-representations. By examining plays that feature gay characters, Sandoval-Sanchez is able to explore the multiple problems that various Latin populations struggle with in the US, including the rampant spread of AIDS, but also broader social issues including the generational gap within families, class issues, crossing-over and related identity dislocations, health issues, cultural shame, and the internalization of Anglo racism. The author does an especially fine job in making clear the double oppression feminist Latinas face, since they must resist

Anglo representations of Latina ethnicity while struggling against patriarchal machismo within their own culture. As a gay Latino, Sandoval-Sanchez is particularly sensitive to plays that give a voice to Latina lesbians, who encounter yet another layer of negative stereotyping rooted in pervasive homophobia.

José Can You See? is both well-researched and readable, offering a solid introduction to the spectrum of Latina/o theater productions through a close look at a handful of plays traversing topics critical to Latino cultural survival in contemporary America. Perhaps most importantly, this book will challenge readers to ponder how Latinas/os are represented in mainstream America, particularly in movies and tv, and what this means. The appendix offers a capacious bibliography and anthology lists; published and unpublished Latina/o theater on AIDS; a compendium of reviews, recordings, and videocassette/television transcripts; and an annotated bibliography of plays referred to in the text. These annotated plays may be especially helpful to teachers interested in selecting plays for class, or to anyone interested in reading further. For undergraduates familiar with cultural studies, this book or excerpts might be suitable, although at times theoretical denseness can make for slow reading. Finally, it should be mentioned that the text includes a number of illustrative black and white photos which could be used as a starting point for initiating classroom discussion of issues surrounding the representation of Latino culture that this book raises. ✱