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Tom Jacobs

Time to roll up your yoga mat and take a stand

Stephen Sondheim had his ladies who lunch. Melinda Lopez has her students who stretch.

Her new play “Standing Still” is set in a yoga studio, and features a group of people who come together for a weekly class. On the day the play is set, they strive to find flow in the peaceful studio. But outside, civil disorder is rising in the unnamed nation where they live.

“What is activism?” asked director Risa Brainin, a theater professor at UC Santa Barbara. “If something is happening that you object to, how do you respond? What does it take to stand up?”

“Standing Still,” which will be performed May 13-23 in UCSB’s Performing Arts Theater, is the latest project in artistic director Brainin’s “LAUNCH PAD” series, now in its 21st season. Noted playwrights submit works in progress, which receive full productions including sets, costumes, lights and sound.

Playwrights can and do continue to refine the script throughout rehearsals, and even during performances. So the version of the show one person sees on the first preview can, and very likely will be different from the final performance.

“It’s an incredible opportunity,” said Lopez, an award-winning Boston-based playwright. “Readings are great, but when you have phenomenal actors embodying characters in three dimensions, you learn a lot more about what does and doesn’t work. Does this section flow? Does that joke land?

“What actors bring to a rehearsal is always inspiring — and always different from what I imagined when I wrote alone in my office.”

The acting company includes six students and award-winning actor and professor Annie Torsiglieri. “Annie is a bright light onstage,” Brainin said. “With her decades of experience on Broadway and regional theaters across the country, she inspires our students to create nuanced performances.”

Physicality is an important element of the play. To achieve an organic sense of movement, Brainin engaged choreographer Christina McCarthy and yoga instructor Denise Zaverdas to work with the cast. Most rehearsals begin by practicing yoga.

“In a yoga class, strangers come together, and over the course of a long time, they create a community that is more intimate than family or friends,” Lopez said. “That seemed inherently theatrical to me, and formed the basis for ‘Standing Still.’”

The play was co-commissioned by LAUNCH PAD and the Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Massachusetts. Lopez sent the first draft of the play in the summer of 2024, as the presidential campaign was heating up.

“I remember saying to Melinda at the time, ‘We won’t do this for another year and a half, and I don’t know how relevant this will be,’” Brainin recalled. “Boy, was I wrong. We’re in a moment where people are asking themselves, ‘What can I do personally to respond to injustice? Does protest actually accomplish anything? What counts as a form of activism?”

“Risa jokes that I thought I was writing a warning about the future, but I ended up writing a documentary about the present,” Lopez added.

That said, “Standing Still” is not about any specific nation. “The stage directions state it is set in the near future in a place near here,” Lopez said. “The experience of being in conflict with one’s government is not restricted to one part of the world or one political system.”

Lopez knows that from her family history. Her parents fled Cuba — first to Colombia, where she was born, and then to Massachusetts, where she grew up and still lives. ”So much of my work explores the fragility of democracy,” she said.

Lopez is on the faculty of Northeastern University, where she teaches playwriting, performance and dramaturgy. “I got the theater bug as a kid and never quit,” she said. “I still act professionally too. I have performed in a number of venues, including most recently, the Old Globe in San Diego.”

She described her writing style as a kind of heightened naturalism. “I like plays that grapple with the form,” Lopez said. “I write plays that need an in-person audience — that you couldn’t watch on TV. I love what live theater can do. My plays pretend they’re naturalistic until they’re not.”

The unusual setting of a yoga studio also allows Lopez to juxtapose yoga, the ancient practice of acceptance, with a situation that calls for collective resistance.

“I have thought a lot,” she said, “about the courage it takes to stand against injustice while remaining nonviolent.”

For ticket information, go to: https://launchpad.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/news

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