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INTERNATIONAL THEATRE JOURNAL LAST PRINT ISSUE

This expansive and insightful article by Jessica Rizzo synthesizes three of Caborca's works: **HAMLET**, **DISTANT STAR**, and **THE ENTITLEMENT**.

A note on DISTANT STAR:

From conception to production, **DISTANT STAR** was co-created over ten years of collaboration and partnership with director Shira Milikowsky at every stage.

A note on HAMLET:

Caborca's **HAMLET** was built and performed in residency at Jersey City Theater Center, thanks to the generosity and vision of JCTC Artistic Director, Olga Levina.

Appended by Javier Antonio González, Artistic Director and David Skeist, Producing Director, Caborca

THE COMPLETE SCRIPTS OF
MIKE LEW'S
TEENAGE DICK
ASTRID SAALBACH'S
END OF THE WORLD

PLUS
LATINX CASEBOOK
THE ASSEMBLY'S *SEAGULLMACHINE*
COSTUME DESIGNS OF
CHRISTINE CROOK
2017 ARTREND INTERNATIONAL
PERFORMANCE ARTS FESTIVAL
DEAD WHITE ZOMBIES' *HOLY BONE*

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Manifoldly Multilingual: The Theatre and Film of Caborca

by Jessica Rizzo



Photo 1: Caborca, *Distant Star* (2017). Mad Norberto (Laura Butler Rivera)

Photo: Marcos Toledo

Caborca is manifoldly multilingual. This Brooklyn-based theatre company has its origins in Puerto Rico, where most of its members were born. In New York, their ranks swelled to include artists from the fifty states and beyond, meaning that the company's collaborations are complicated and enriched by the fact that its members grew up speaking different mother tongues. With *The Entitlement*, their first feature film, Caborca has demonstrated a facility with multiple artistic languages as well. The company has often incorporated video into their works for the stage, using the presence of the mechanically doubled image to create a sense of cascading realities. *The Entitlement* reverses this strategy, using highly theatrical flourishes to call the film's surface realism into question. In all instances, Caborca's dramaturgy of suspicion keeps the audience on edge, perpetually anticipating the revelation of some sinister reality behind the appearance. The company's flair for translation extends to their embrace of a variety of strategies for adaptation. Caborca has devised work, performed in both English and Spanish, and produced many original plays, with Artistic Director Javier Antonio González always serving as either playwright or director, and often as both. In 2017, however, they presented a pair of projects fashioned from existing texts, each formidable in its own way, and each engaged with questions of power

and resistance.

With most of its members hailing from a disenfranchised US territory, the company's perspective on the nature of sovereignty is a particularly valuable one. Caborca's inaugural artistic gesture was an act of defiance; when González was a student at the University of Puerto Rico's Río Piedras Campus, the resources of the school's excellent Drama Department remained frustratingly inaccessible. Renovations of the University's theatre, among the finest venues on the island, were indefinitely stalled due to the disappearance of millions of dollars in promised funding. When the students found an overlooked entrance to the locked theatre, González and a cast of nine women began rehearsing there. At first it was just for fun, but soon they decided to stage a production

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there as a protest. They proceeded without permission, but aided in their clandestine efforts by a sympathetic staff member who gave González a key to the theatre's back door. This made it possible to use the entire building to create a piece of promenade theatre. The audience entered through the basement and empty scene shop, then wound their way through every corner of the building. A terrace offered breathtaking views of the University's iconic clock tower and the moon while other spaces in the derelict theatre were literally breathtaking—dirty, foul-

Making his first pieces under such adverse conditions in Puerto Rico, which González calls "a territory under siege," inevitably left "a scar or several" on the work he would go on to make with Caborca, which was officially founded in 2009.

In January of 2017 González directed *Hamlet*, starring Anne Gridley. [Photo 2] Caborca was in the process of developing their staging of Shakespeare's play when Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, upending the order of the cosmos for women, people with brown



Photo 2: Caborca, *Hamlet* (2017). The First Player (Laura Butler Rivera) engages Horatio for her performance of *The Mouse Trap* (Michael Barringer). Photo: Marcos Toledo

smelling, possibly with hazardous levels of asbestos in the air. The company had to distribute face masks to the audience. González recalls a powerful moment from their first performance; playing a maid, actress Laura Butler Rivera slammed her hand on the ground, lifting a cloud of dust near her unprotected face. Members of the audience responded by removing their masks to demonstrate solidarity with the performers. As the government's malign neglect of the public university system continued, González and his collaborators kept staging protest-productions in the otherwise abandoned theatre. Though they faced consequences, they were committed to expressing their dissent, even on a campus where clashes between student protesters and the police have a history of turning violent, and even deadly. This early foray into taking site-specific approaches to conventional theatre spaces was to leave a lasting mark on González's aesthetic.

skin, and everyone else who had been operating under the assumption that members of those groups qualified as human beings in America. With a rotten state of their own to contend with, Shakespeare's Denmark suddenly seemed an uncomfortably recognizable place, but González determined that the play required further intervention. Casting Gridley in the title role gave this actress known for her impishly comic performances in Nature Theater of Oklahoma productions an opportunity to tackle a great dramatic role, but it also located women at the heart of an effort to resist a corrupt regime; the deceased King Hamlet's ghost was also played by a woman.

Individual passages from *Hamlet* are among the most quoted and thickly embroidered with theoretical analysis in the English canon. González treats this as an opportunity, rather than an inhibition, turning the single line "The time is out of joint" into the structural

key of their adaptation; Caborca's *Hamlet* for the Trump era is performed in reverse. Beginning with the Act Five bloodbath, Gridley's Hamlet faces the unenviable challenge of being compelled to seek justice while painfully aware of the tragic consequences his actions will ultimately effect. In Shakespeare's play as written, the line comes at the end of Act One, after Hamlet has learned of his uncle's crime and mother's noxious complicity, after he has promised to revenge the murder of his father. "The time is out of joint," he laments, "O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right" (1.4.210-11). Gridley's Hamlet is bitter, resentful at having been thrust into the position of redeemer. Her vacillation stems from an oppressive understanding of the mission assigned to her as an exercise in futility. No matter how righteous her cause, no matter how strongly allied she is with the forces of goodness, she knows that darkness and lawlessness will ultimately prevail.

This is a very Nietzschean reading of the play. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche famously compares his concept of the "Dionysian man" to *Hamlet*, observing that:

[B]oth have for once penetrated into the true nature of things,—they have perceived, but it is irksome for them to act; for their action cannot change the eternal nature of things; the time is out of joint and they regard it as a shameful or ridiculous that they should be required to set it right. Knowledge kills action, action requires the veil of illusion...true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, preponderate over all motives inciting to action, in *Hamlet* as well as in the Dionysian man (Nietzsche 23).

In drama, as in life, action supplies form and meaning. With all incentives and justifications for action removed, Caborca's backwards *Hamlet* nullifies drama. The presence of the temporally untethered performer struggling against redundancy and irrelevance comes to the fore as narrative tension dissipates. For Nietzsche, true knowledge refers to knowledge of the ultimate groundlessness of truth, the fundamentally chaotic substrate of existence. Projected videos of plumes of smoke dissipating into the air serve as the backdrop of certain scenes, evoking both the dissolution of all certainties and the old adage, "Where there's smoke, there's fire." Trump's election hovers in the background of Caborca's *Hamlet*, a tangible and specific event marking a crisis of truth in American political discourse. On January 22, 2017, just a few days before the show's opening, U.S. Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway had appeared on *Meet the Press* and put forward the now-infamous "alternative facts" defense of her newly elected boss's strange insistence that his inauguration had attracted bigger crowds than any inauguration ever, a demonstrable falsehood. The incident would set the tone for the Trump presidency. Many more false or misleading claims would follow, 2,140 during his first year in office by one measure (Kelly). As a seeker of truth, then, Caborca's *Hamlet* is

racked with doubt. Here, his crisis of confidence has less to do with the question of whether he is equal to the task. He is, rather, certain that he will succeed and certain that his success will make no difference whatever in a world where the currency of the truth has been devalued. In this way, *Hamlet* also becomes a metaphor for the postmodern artist, for the seeker *after* truth.

Jian Jung's design concept underscores this recoiling from the pursuit of truth, this postmodern disillusionment with "words, words, words" (2.2.210) Modelled after the Italian comic artist Gianni De Luca's 1975 version of *Hamlet*, the production uses projections and stylized poses for the actors to recreate specific images from the graphic novel, flattening the characters into iconography on the bright, monochromatic panels of the set. "One of [De Luca's] major innovations," writes comic art scholar Paul Gravett, "is his concerted avoidance, on the majority of his pages, of conventional panel divisions." More frequently, De Luca works with the "large, undivided single picture and finds inspired solutions to apportioning the page and arranging the narrative flow" (Gravett 29). Causal certainty, too, becomes subject to new regimes of organization, with appearance and affect prevailing over logos.

The tragedy in reverse is a postmortem, an attempt to account for how things could have gone so terribly wrong



Photo 3: Caborca, *Distant Star* (2017). Carlos Wieder (David Skeist) looms above Marta Posadas (Tania Molina)

Photo: Marcos Toledo

now that it is too late to rectify them. This focus echoed the preoccupation with performing political autopsies that consumed the news media in the months following the election. These recursive exercises could not undo what had been done, and Caborca's *Hamlet* deftly captures the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness experienced by many at the time. In an essay titled "The Time is Out of Joint" Jacques Derrida reads *Hamlet* as a play about the impossibility of bearing witness to the end of meaning, an interpretation befitting Caborca's graphic-novelized production, with actors conducting themselves as though being borne by forces beyond their control from one synthetic posture to another. "In *Hamlet*," Derrida says, "the dramatization deploys a spectacular and supernaturally miraculous *mise en abyme* of testimonies" (Derrida 33). Each scene of Caborca's adaptation contains within it the

to us via live-feed video, its presence transmitted into the theatre from the liminal space of a nondescript hallway, an additional displacement. Gridley's Hamlet comes to this scene pre-exhausted by the three-hour tragedy she has already lived through (backwards and in heels, so to speak). "After having seen the worst," says Derrida, "after having been the witness of the worst disorder, of absolute injustice, he has the experience of surviving...He has seen the impossible and he cannot survive what he has survived" (ibid. 36). In Caborca's *Hamlet* this spectral survival is represented by Hamlet joining his father on video. Hamlet recedes into an image of an image, an abstraction.

Caborca followed *Hamlet* with an adaptation of Roberto Bolaño's novel *Distant Star*, another text that balances logophilia with a sharp skepticism regarding language's power to obfuscate and conceal. A special

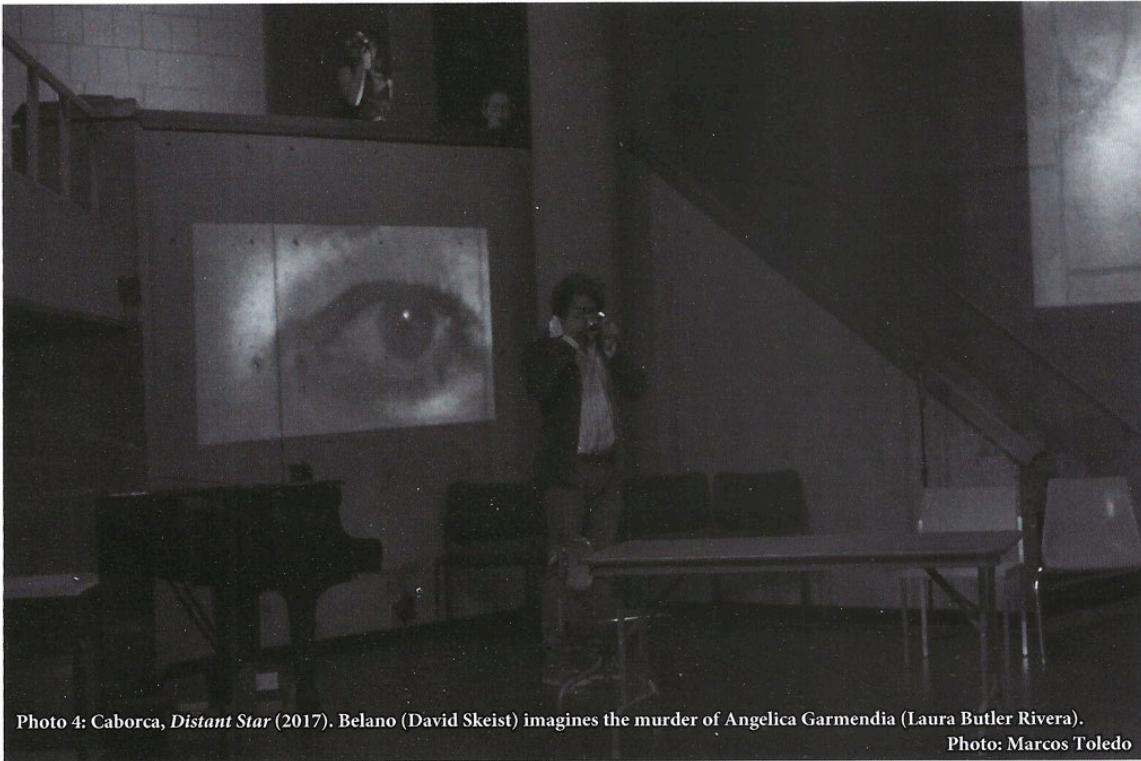


Photo 4: Caborca, *Distant Star* (2017). Belano (David Skeist) imagines the murder of Angelica Garmendia (Laura Butler Rivera).

Photo: Marcos Toledo

untimely revelations of the scene that precedes it, crushing inevitability piling on crushing inevitability until Hamlet is paralyzed, seeming to stand outside his own tragedy as a nauseated spectator. In this way, in what cannot be an entirely unfamiliar position to Puerto Ricans in New York, Hamlet is also a kind of exile, watching the defilement of his homeland from a distance. "In the withdrawal that immobilizes him," Derrida contends, "this witness is now but a spectator of the play: passive and apathetic in his very passion" (ibid. 34). In Caborca's *Hamlet*, the "final" scene is the first of Shakespeare's play as written: Hamlet speaking with the ghost of his father. Here the ghost is introduced

project for the company, *Distant Star* went into development a full ten years before its 2017 production, before Caborca was even an official entity. While *Distant Star* was their first Bolaño adaptation, the Chilean writer has always been an important part of the company's DNA. "Caborca" is the name of a literary magazine dedicated to "visceral realism" in Bolaño's novel *The Savage Detectives*. The company initially became interested in adapting *Distant Star* towards the end of George W. Bush's presidency. Dismayed by the Iraq War and inspired by the publication of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, the company was attracted to the

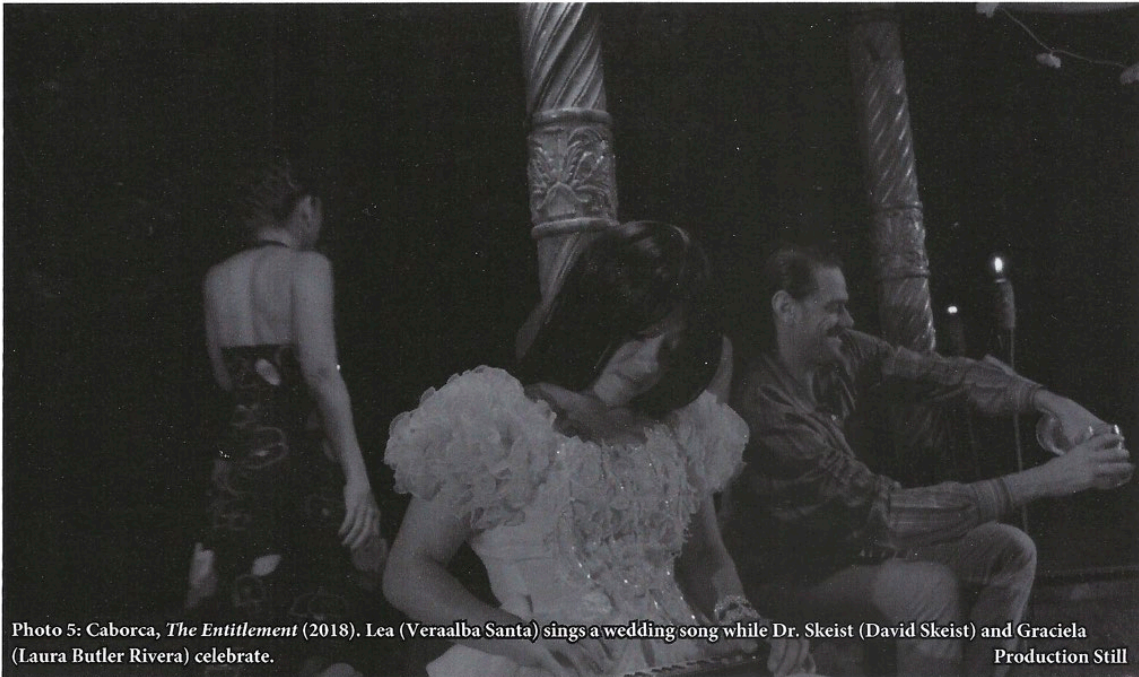


Photo 5: Caborca, *The Entitlement* (2018). Lea (Veraalba Santa) sings a wedding song while Dr. Skeist (David Skeist) and Graciela (Laura Butler Rivera) celebrate. Production Still

idea of using Bolaño's novel to explore the workings of neoliberal disaster capitalism. When Barack Obama was elected, some of the energy surrounding that project dissipated. Trump brought it back.

Distant Star is peopled by different fictional factions of poets in Concepción, Chile. Contentedly absorbed by their studies, literary squabbles, and romantic adventures, the young writers find that the stakes of their artistic endeavors have risen abruptly when the country faces a fascist takeover. The play takes place just before, during, and after the 1973 American-backed coup that ousted the democratically-elected Marxist president Salvador Allende and cleared the way for the ascent of dictator Augusto Pinochet. Without imposing an overly simplistic, one-to-one comparison, Caborca's choice of this text at this time could not but call to mind the United States' extensive, problematic legacy in Latin America. The run of *Distant Star* at Abrons Arts Center in New York happened to overlap almost exactly with Hurricane Maria in the company's native Puerto Rico. Trump and his stilettoed spouse visited the devastated island for photo ops while authorizing what was widely criticized as a drastically inadequate response to the crisis. Comparing the federal responses to Maria and the contemporaneous Hurricane Harvey in Texas, many saw the more robust assistance program on the mainland as a recapitulation of the racist attitudes that have dominated American relations with Puerto Rico since the US wrested possession of the territory from Spain. Puerto Rico is an unincorporated US territory, which means the island exists in a bizarre in-between state of neither/nor. While Congress has legislative authority

over everything from the Puerto Rican postal service to military defense, citizens cannot vote in presidential elections or send voting representatives to Washington. In 1898, Republican Joseph Foraker argued on the Senate floor that Puerto Rico "differs radically from any other people for whom we have legislated previously...They have no experience which would qualify them for the great work of government" (Denis 15). While Maria was still wreaking havoc in 2017, Trump unwittingly echoed Foraker's patronizing stance, tweeting "Such poor leadership by the Mayor of San Juan and others in Puerto Rico who are not able to get their workers to help. They want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort" (Trump). Over a century of thinly-veiled contempt has not, however, prevented the US from making a pretty profit off of the island. In recent years alone, the government has used the island as a tax haven to decelerate an exodus of American businesses, then rescinded tax breaks to offset the damage done by the 2008 recession, resulting in a crippling 45% poverty rate in Puerto Rico, nearly twice that of Mississippi, the most impoverished state in the US.

But the fascist tyranny disrupting the lives of *Distant Star*'s characters found even more obvious parallels in Trump's America. Caborca's production followed hard upon the August 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where hundreds of armed white supremacists marched through the streets chanting Nazi slogans and praising their "God Emperor" Donald Trump. This shocking eruption suddenly made fascism seem a much less remote possibility, prompting the *Brooklyn Rail* to observe of the newly unmistakable



Photo 6: Caborca, *The Entitlement* (2018). Claire (Arnolda Noir) faces off with Rodrigo (Javier Antonio González). Production Still

correspondence between *Distant Star*'s characters and its contemporary American audience that "Their time, like ours, is one in which any promise of a better world seems suspended" (Fenstermaker).

With so much cultural baggage making this production of *Distant Star* seem almost historically overdetermined, director Shira Milikowsky could take a relatively simple, unadorned approach to staging González's adaptation. As in the novel, the play is narrated by a Bolaño stand-in recounting the Pinochetera horrors from exile. Played by David Skeist, this narrator slides fluidly in and out of the dramatic action, now embedded in the tumult of Chile in the '70's, now speaking directly to the audience with the perspective of hindsight and the wisdom of experience weighing on him. Developing *Distant Star* over the course of a decade meant that neither Skeist nor the other cast members needed to manufacture this sense of gradually accreted change over time—like their characters, they began working together as artists in their teens and twenties and have had the authentic experience of growing older, looking back, and measuring themselves against the youthful ideals they once held. *Distant Star* is at once an independent work of art and a compendium of every book club meeting, devising session, email thread, rehearsal proposal, and inside joke Caborca has shared. It contains their history of learning to work together as a company that has come to value what González describes as "ensemble-driven creation combined with a clear authorial vision."

The elusive center of the play is Carlos Wieder, also played by Skeist, an aloof, ambitious writer mixing in

Arturo's leftist milieu under an assumed name. [Photo 3] Wieder's true identity is revealed after the 1973 coup when he becomes a pilot in the Chilean Air Force and launches the "New Chilean Poetry" by skywriting his verses above the Andes in what are applauded by the regime as sublime displays of patriotism. He pushes his aesthetic experiments too far for the military government, however, when he stages an exhibition featuring photos of those he has murdered, when the latent becomes manifest. Skeist describes Wieder with the intensity and attention to detail of a detective. First, he is a slightly eccentric figure on the periphery of their group, envied for his élan and his ability to beguile the beautiful Garmendia sisters, twin poetesses coveted by all the young literary men. Then he is the opportunist, hungry for notoriety, regardless of how it is won. Finally, he is the nearly forgotten, middle-aged Chilean exile in Spain, writing (or perhaps making pornography) only under a pseudonym if at all, reduced to rumors, traces, hints, textual clues that never lead to a body. He seems reduced to a literary construct, which of course is all he ever was. Casting Skeist as both Wieder and the narrator allows his literate, deliberately-paced performance to become a kind of ouroboros, the mythical snake devouring its own tail.

Set designer Jung leaves Abrons Arts Center's concrete basement space largely bare, more a place for hearing and imagining than for seeing. Live-feed video is deployed occasionally to magnify special effects rendered in miniature—like the ingenious evocation of skywriting using a small glass box, fog, a stencil, and a flashlight—or to create distance between the audience and the play's more "realistic," or at least less surreal, scenes. [Photo 4] The

real dramaturgical challenge here is that Bolaño's prose is, as ever, packed with vivid digressions. Characters making only brief cameos assume outsized importance and then recede into nothingness just as quickly as they appeared. Analogous or competing narratives, like so many tangled skeins of thread, hang loosely together, never to be pulled taut. In 2666, his magnum opus, Bolaño self-reflexively describes a fictional novelist's style as

strange. The writing was clear and sometimes even transparent, but the way the stories followed one after another didn't lead anywhere: all that was left were the children, their parents, the animals, some neighbors, and in the end, all that was really left was nature, a nature that dissolved little by little in a boiling cauldron until it vanished completely (Bolaño 887).

Bolaño never announces what is of paramount importance. Rather, he requires of his reader something like the "evenly hovering attention" that Hans-Thies Lehmann argues is the attitude postdramatic theatre demands of its spectators (Lehmann 87). Here Caborca has made a felicitous match between their theatrical style and Bolaño's literary one. As in their *Hamlet*, the hero is replaced by the narrator. The character we follow most attentively is the witness, more observer than observed.

Caborca's *Hamlet* and *Distant Star* both address the complex ways in which tyranny from without comingles with tyranny from within. Their debut film, *The Entitlement*, written and directed by González, engages this dynamic more directly, existing on the realism-adjacent plane they have often explored as theatre artists, with the new medium giving them a useful new set of capacities and limitations.

Anne Gridley plays Molly, the latest "guest" to come and stay at a Felliniesque home for the terminally suicidal run by Dr. Skeist (David Skeist). The house rules are never spelled out, but on the sun-soaked face of it, this Arcadian place seems to be built on a compassionate ideal; it gives young, healthy people who have decided to end their lives the opportunity to spend their final days in a comfortable and supportive environment. They will be able to approach their ends mindfully, without fear of judgement or intervention. Here an act otherwise committed furtively, out of shame or desperation, can be discussed openly, can be affirmed as one more milestone in the journey of life. The suicide notes are written and filed. All the guests have left to do is determine when and how they want to go.

And yet, the guests seem to be in no particular hurry to check out. It turns out that there is much to occupy them here at their retreat, and little of it involves talking about suicidal ideation. Dr. Skeist is on call for therapy, but he spends those sessions encouraging patients who feel the impulse to take up new hobbies or learn new things, activities seemingly at odds with a drive toward self-destruction. Molly decides she finally wants to learn how to swim. She also takes an interest in her colorful housemates. There is Leah (Veraalba Santa), who is using a new name and wearing a different wig and a more glamorously outré outfit each time we see her. Graciela (Laura Butler Rivera) is on the house staff, but it comes out that she arrived there as a guest. [Photo 7] Roderigo (González), a writer, is putting off suicide until he can finish his masterpiece, or perhaps he's only procrastinating. A couple meets, falls in love, and gets married. It's a lovely ceremony. [Photo 5]

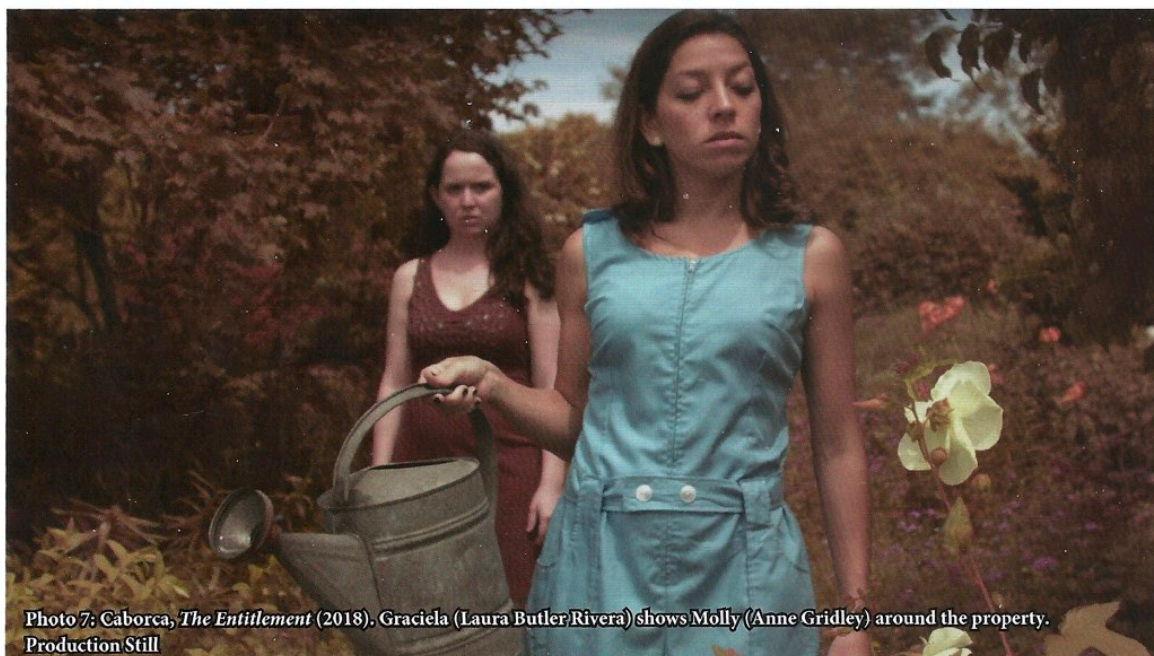


Photo 7: Caborca, *The Entitlement* (2018). Graciela (Laura Butler Rivera) shows Molly (Anne Gridley) around the property. Production Still

Here the nearness of death acts as an aphrodisiac for some. Indeed, the guests seem to pass their time in an unfocused, erotic haze, rather like the sanitarium patients of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. But Roderigo's unexpected death leads to the discovery that Dr. Skeist's motives for hosting these would-be suicides are not entirely pure. "The entitlement came and took him," Dr. Skeist says by way of explanation. Because Roderigo is the only self-proclaimed "artist" among the guests, and because he is played by the film's own auteur, this assessment gently suggests a reading of the film as an allegory of the condition of the artist, who must withdraw from the world in order to depict it, but who is not entitled to forsake it altogether. Roderigo, it seems, failed to manage that balance. We last see the guests frying in pain and confusion under futuristic ray lamps, their fate unclear. Electroshock therapy? Memory erasure? Mind control? The only one who escapes being held and psychically altered against her will is Leah, who dies by her own hand, bleeding but radiant in a Carmen Miranda-inspired outfit.

Race does not suggest itself as a central theme in *The Entitlement* until this final scene, but Miranda is an unignorably freighted cultural reference for a predominantly Puerto-Rican theatre company. The "Brazilian Bombshell" famous for wearing produce on her head presented a generic, homogenized Latina stereotype to her white audiences, playing hip-swinging spitfires from other Latin-American countries with approximately the same (highly lucrative) degree of va-va-voom. Her centrality to *The Entitlement's* final tableau calls to mind both the perils and the payoffs of cultural assimilation and cultural drag, both modes Caborca has studiously and successfully avoided.

What makes the film truly distinctive, though, is its particular, uneasy relationship to realism. The shocker denouement is hardly necessary; throughout the film, more subtle signs erode confidence in the stability of the fictional world. In one standout sequence, two characters roll listlessly down a grassy hill. Their movements are accompanied by goofy, plainly extradiegetic "sproing" sound effects, recalling Chekhov's "sound of a harp string breaking" in *The Cherry Orchard*. The small, aural gesture is capable of unsettling the entire dramatic universe.

In *The Entitlement*, as in all of Caborca's work, reality is at once a visceral and a fragile thing. The company's root in besieged, but ever-defiant Puerto Rico have given them an acute awareness of the fiction of sovereignty, and this imbues their work with an unrelenting skepticism regarding dominant political and aesthetic paradigms.



Photo 8: Caborca, *The Entitlement* (2018). Molina (Tania Molina) Production Still

Power, language, and even time and space are subject to continuous interrogation and radical reassessment in Caborca's dramatic cosmos. As they continue to make work in different mediums, it can be hoped that the multiplicity of Caborca's ways of looking at the world will produce work that is still more complex, more layered, and more resistant to the politics and aesthetics of homogeneity.

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