

FUKU AMERICANUS

Intersection for the Arts

MAY 15, 2009



From left to right actors: Carlos Aguirre, Brian Rivera and Vanessa Cota. Photo credit: Rebeka Rodriguez.

Took in the first night of the world premier of "Fuku Americanus" at the Intersection for the Arts in Babylon. FA is a stage adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Campo Santos put out this one, written and directed by Campo Santo's Sean San José, and co-directed by The Living Word Project's Marc Bamuthi Joséph.

The book is far too big and complex to fit within the confines of a black box stage, so San José and Joséph chose to abstract a few political concepts from the densely packed 335 page opus and whittle down the number of characters to

Oscar, Yuniór, La Inca, Moms, and Lola. The book itself possesses a double frame structure with Yuniór beginning the story with a description of what a "fuku" is, followed by a description of the hapless Oscar who seemingly will never fulfill his duty-bound responsibilities of a Dominican male by getting laid. The meat part of the book, however, deals not with Oscar, but with three generations of women who unwillingly pass on the mixed legacy of defiance, defeat, family strife and failed attempts to escape the family curse from one generation to the next while living under the shadow of the terrifically brutal Trujillo dictatorship. The book ends with a summary of Oscar's death and some details about his last days as laid out in various "found" manuscripts. The critical manuscript, in which Oscar claims in a letter will "explain everything" is lost in the mails between the Dominican Republic and the US, leaving former-coke addict, ex-Lothario Yuniór to wrap things up in several indecisive "endings", finally concluding with a remarkable exclamation.

As for the play, *fuku*, a generic term for a curse, is personified by actor Biko Eisen-Martin who chews up the stage in his role as a sort of Greek chorus, prancing and chanting and swinging his arms and his fetish beads like some Caribbean *brujo*. The original fuku of the title, as Fuku personified explains, was brought on the entire world by the arrival of Columbus, referred to simply as The Admiral, in Hispaniola in 1492. From this act, which worked itself out through the generations -- including Columbus himself, who died penniless in a madhouse -- which has brought misery upon the world, each misery generating yet another fuku, ensuring the perpetuation of an onus upon the generations.

The really big fuku, of course, is the legacy of slavery in the New World, attendant with all its particular horrors which reverberated down through history to the present day. The other fuku, according to the stage production, is the legacy of colonial conquest, and not only of the distant past by the Europeans. As Fuku explains in the second act, the DR was invaded by American troops in 1965.



*Maria Candelaria (left) is Belicia, Biko Eisen-Martin (center) is Fukú and Vanessa Cota is Lola in the Campo Santo/Intersection for the Arts production of **Fukú Americanus**, a theatrical adaptation of Junot Diaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel **The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao**. Photos by James Faerron*

The reasons for the invasion are not described in the play, but history shows that Lyndon Johnson feared the establishment of a "2nd Cuba" in the Caribbean after Trujillo was finally assassinated in 1961 after thirty years of *Grand Guignol* horror. A democratic government was overthrown by a military junta, which itself failed to restore order. In fact, the DR looked to be well on its way to resolving some of the problems which have afflicted various Caribbean nations as leftist forces began driving back the right wing forces when the US invaded.

As the stage Fuku explains, while displaying a wall map of the DR that eerily resembles in outline that of a certain Middle East country, "We were invaded before Iraq."

A puppet government was set up under the head of Joaquín Balaguer, former chief under the Trujillo regime, and the nation labored under this man's iron fist for the next 22 years.

But Fuku leaves that part out. He goes on to say, "It was not Castro or Johnson or the CIA that killed the Kennedys. I know who killed Kennedy. It was the fuku stirred up by that invasion. And guess what. Those same advisors, same intelligence personnel, same military organizers who went from there in the DR to the rice paddies of Vietnam bringing along with them a little gift from the DR. How do you think the most powerful nation on earth was defeated by a tiny Southeast Asian country? It was fuku."

As for the individuals involved, their story is a story of diaspora, immigration, family conflict, minority struggle in America, and fate. The one

physical trope pulled from the book concerns hair: its individuality, its definition of the personal identity. As one book reviewer pointed out, modern day immigrants are both gifted and cursed with the new two-way street of communication with the places of origin. In the past, immigrants landed here on the shores of American, entirely cut off from their past, and so were gradually absorbed into the American fabric with near total loss of language and culture, save for a few dispensible trappings.



L.toR.: Carlos Aguirre (in the blue shirt)
with Brian Rivera and Biko Eisen-Martin

In modern times, immigrants have telephones, rapid mail, and the airplane, all of which serve to preserve substantial parts of the old as traffic passes back and forth between the two homes, creating cultures that sit uneasily in two worlds, neither entirely welcome in either place. It is Diaz's point of view and hope that the diaspora never loses its Dominican nature, and he may be right as history indicates that as groups immigrate to the US in modern times they form enclaves which continue to speak the old language, perpetuate the old customs, and manage to retain a sense of personal identity.

Oscar is one who attempts to forge his own identity via online role-playing games, however he can never proceed beyond a caricature of his chosen avatars. At one point he shows up at a meeting wearing his role-playing costume (Dr. Who) but one character remarks, "You know who you look like? That English faggot Oscar Wao (Oscar Wilde)." The name sticks to Oscar, who in his typically passive fashion absorbs this imposition into the sense of himself.

The motif of running away, escape or concealment of the self runs through the play as each character tries to evade his or her destiny via any number of means. While Oscar leaps into the Anglo world of fantasy literature, Yunior pursues first drugs, then women as a means to losing himself. Lola shaves her head to become a punk and really does try to run away, but in so doing only replicates the mistake made a generation earlier by her own mother, who has ironically lost her own hair through chemotherapy.

Hair and how it pertains to identity is another leitmotiv that runs through this packed work of symbols and double-entendres. There is so much in the play

regarding the "immigrant experience" and that of the DR diaspora and of Trujillo's terrible legacy that its difficult to summarize any part of it. Through it all runs Oscar's fascination with Tolkein and Marvel Comics superheros.

"Trujillo was so evil that even after he died, the men responsible for killing him also all died horrible deaths. He was our Morgoth and he ran the Republic like his personal Mordor . . .". Oscar comments. It is Lola, however, who notices the whip scars on the back of her mother (from her own mother's barely hinted brush with the Trujillo dicatorship.) If Trujillo was Morgoth, then his successor, Beleager, is clearly meant to be his pale fire, Sauron.

In the end, it is the wise and compassionate La Inca (played by a powerful Anna Maria Luera) who appears the strongest figure in the play, for it is she who remains in the DR, dressed in black and stoically providing the sanctuary for those wandering to return. As the children of the diaspora batter their wings against the cage of the world, it is La Inca who provides the heart to whom they all return, the roots which provided their original source of life.

The play is fast paced, well-sprinkled with "Spanglish" and thoroughly a success on its own merits. It does leave out a good portion of the last third of the book, but the play attempts to limit itself to just a couple concerns referenced in the original text. While Diaz is primarily concerned with building out the thin library of "minority literature" and speaks largely to his fellow Dominicans, the play tries overtly to wrapper some of the text into a broader communication, as the characters address the audience directly in the last lines: "Go out and look at your own fuku. All of you." Zafa.

For information: (415) 626-2787, Ext. 109, or www.theintersection.org.

UKU AMERICANUS

Adapted Pulitzer Prize Winning Novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by
JUNOT DIAZ

Directed by Marc Samuthi Joseph and Sean San Jose

Featuring:

CARLOS AGUIRRE - Yuniór/ Ensemble
MARIA CANDELARIA - Moms/ Ensemble
VANESSA COTA - Lola
BIKO EISEN-MARTIN - Fuku/ Ensemble
ANNA MARIA LUERA - La Inca/ Ensemble
BRIAN RIVERA - Oscar

Soundscape, original music and beats Composed by Carlos Aguirre

Collaborative Team:

Sharif Abu Hamdeh (assistant director),
Alejandro Acosta (sound collaborator),
Kristoffer Alberto Barrera (projections design),
Mia Baxter (costume and properties design),
Heather Basarab (lighting design),
James Faerron (set design),
Michelle Fulwiler (costume assistant),
Melyssa Jo Kelly (production team),
Tanya Orellana (scenic painter/production team),
Theresa Schillinger (box office manger),

CC Sheldon (stage manager)