

***La Tempestad* by Larry Loebell**

directed by: Eric Parness

Resonance Ensemble

New York, NY

La Tempestad

In Larry Loebell's *La Tempestad*, the action is set in Puerto Rico with Prospero and his daughter Miranda as Puerto Ricans of Spanish descent, Ariel is of mixed decent, and Caliban a "Native islander, arguably of Taíno decent."¹ Set in 2002 prior to the invasion of Iraq, Prospero was transformed into an alter-Native Boricua (Puerto Rican) attempting to protect his land in Vieques, Puerto Rico, from the American military.²

Loebell offers a diversity of characters within Puerto Rican culture, including those who have previously emigrated to the mainland and therefore must negotiate their relationship to their culture and heritage. Miranda wishes to leave the island with her Nuyoricán fiancé Ferdinand, but after a practice drill kills the youngest tourist, Iris, Miranda finds herself glorifying a hegemonic idea of her homeland's politics and art, a tropicalization of the island.³ Trinculo urges Prospero to forgive the violence of the past, to forgive the American Armed Forces' bombers that killed two people on the island while successfully acquiring his museum items for a mainland exhibit. After it is revealed that Prospero uses his magic for political advantage, and he is not just a museum curator and hotel owner, but a freedom-fighter as well, Prospero replies, "I may yet learn to forgive history, but if these [cultural museum] objects are mishandled, I will not forgive you."⁴ For Prospero, the material objects that represent his culture are of more monetary and cultural value than the loss of human lives.

One mode of disidentification is the seeming invisibility of those who Prospero has subjugated. Ariel is Prospero's servant and Caliban works as a bartender and island guide for touristy gringos.⁵ When Trinculo, an academic and museum curator on a work holiday with his partner Stephano, enters the terrace bar, Caliban is "barely visible at first under a staggering load of glasses or other bar equipment."⁶ Whereas Shakespeare's Caliban is unidentifiable to the clowns Stephano and Trinculo, resulting in a scene of physical comedy amongst the drunk characters, Loebell's Caliban is simply not seen. Likewise, Prospero employs Ariel to spy on the U.S. Marine officer Alonso and his attaché Gonzalo, and they assume that Ariel cannot speak English, and as he sweeps the floor "They ignore him as if he were not there."⁷ With the ability to view others based on his seeming unimportance, Ariel becomes a successful spy for Prospero. Ariel is later freed for this good work, and Caliban is revealed to be a double-agent informant

¹ Loebell, Larry. "La Tempestad." *Playing with Canons: Explosive New Works from Great Literature by America's Indie Playwrights*, edited by Martin Denton, 45–78. New York: The New York Theatre Experience, 2006. 47.

² I employ Alicia Gaspar de Alba's definition of "alter-Native" to refer to the status as Latinx as descended from Spanish and Indigenous peoples, colonizer and colonized. Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art: Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*, The University of Texas Press, 1998. 16-17.

³ The trope of "tropicalization" is addressed by scholars of Boricua (Puerto Rican) culture. See Sandoval-Sánchez, Alberto and Nancy Saporta Sternbach. *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance & Identity in U.S. Latina Theater*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001.48; and Frances R. Aparicio, "On Subversive Signifiers: U.S. Latina/o Writers Tropicalize English," *American Literature* 66, no. 4 (1994): 795–801. doi:10.2307/2927701.

⁴ Loebell, "La Tempestad," 76.

⁵ Loebell wanted to write a large-cast production and was explicit that he did not want parts to be doubled He was concerned that if he said yes to doubling that directors would not make an effort to cast Latinx or Puerto Rican actors. Loebell, Larry. Telephone interview. 8 May 2014.

⁶ Loebell, "La Tempestad," 50.

⁷ Loebell, "La Tempestad," 55.

with a GS grade and a pension who successfully reports Prospero's anti-government sentiments. The play ends with Caliban telling Prospero that they are both on their own, and they separate from each other physically and psychologically, in counter-opposition to each other. Prospero unveils a protest banner and yells at the wind to the U.S. government he believes is out there, "I am watching for you. Where are you? I am watching."⁸ Prospero no longer has his servant Caliban or his employee Ariel who can go unnoticed by mainland white Americans; instead, he rails as the invisible islander that he is at his master, the U.S. government.

Throughout the play, Caliban refers to Prospero as his master, and he refers to himself as "descended from Spanish imperialists who tortured and enslaved my forebearers."⁹ Indigenous Latinx are twice-colonized, first by the Spanish and second by white settlers. While Prospero is Puerto Rican and in the same ethnic category of Hispanic/Latinx as Caliban, he is racially white (not Indigenous) and of European ancestry. In this configuration, Loebell makes explicit the split between Hispanic/Latinx, yet makes both Prospero and Caliban workers of the white hegemonic state apparatus, the U.S. government. Likewise, the subjection of Indigenous people such as Caliban to the Spanish-descended Prospero becomes subverted when the audience learns that Caliban is a double agent, making his seeming invisibility deliberate, flipping his relationship to Prospero. It also makes clear that both Prospero and Caliban can have histories of oppression and power, and the relationship of the Caribbean to the mainland United States is fraught in a cycle of manipulation and subjugation.

Production at Resonance Ensemble

The first production ran in 2005 by Resonance Ensemble at Ohio Theatre in New York City (dir. Eric Parness) with a multicultural cast of eleven. Resonance Ensemble began in 2001 with the mission "to weave a thread between the theatre's past, present, and future."¹⁰ Each season they mount two plays that are in conversation with each other in order to forge connections between older canonical works and contemporary plays. *La Tempestad* was written by Larry Loebell and directed by Resonance's Artistic Director Eric Parness. With eleven people in the ensemble, it addressed the same themes as Victor Maog's 2005 adaptation of *The Tempest* that involved only three actors, which ran in repertory. Resonance's first two seasons involved non-American plays re-contextualized in a diverse American setting, and the third season involved a Charles Mee play that emphasized diversity in its plot. For the fourth season, with *La Tempestad*, which was also written for a racially-diverse cast, Parness had to reach out to cast five or six Latino actors for roles since he only had one Latino actor in his company.¹¹ The show was financially and aesthetically successful, and the script was later published.

CARLA DELLA GATTA
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⁸ Loebell, "La Tempestad," 77.

⁹ Loebell, "La Tempestad," 53.

¹⁰ "About Us: Resonance Ensemble." *Resonance Ensemble*. Resonanceensemble.org. Web. 30 Apr. 2014.

¹¹ Parness, Eric. Telephone interview. 30 Apr. 2014.

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