

OLLANTAY

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Special Issue

- Chicano Theater
- Guest Editors: Carlos Morton & Lee A. Daniel
- Play: *Walking Home* by Elaine Romero

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A. Martínez in the world premiere of *Bandido* by Luis Valdez, directed by José Luis Valenzuela, at the Mark Taper Forum, 1994. (Photo by Jay Thompson)

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Kat Avila

The Genesis of Edit Villarreal's *MGM*

Utilizando un juego de palabras engañoso y humorístico, Edit Villarreal tituló su obra en dos actos Mis visitas a MGM, no por la famosa productora de Hollywood sino por su abuela: Mis visitas a mi abuela Marta. De acuerdo a la periodista Kat Avila, el drama es eficaz en dos niveles: un texto que provoca la nostalgia al recordar lo que era una familia méxico-tejana que incluía a los abuelos en su seno y también como una obra que se concentra en la interminable saga sobre la inmigración y la asimilación de los extranjeros a los Estados Unidos. La pieza está basada en la vida de su autora y la de su abuela materna, Marta Garza, oriunda de Monterrey en México, justo al otro lado de la frontera con Tejas. La abuela Marta, llamada la "grande", la crió hasta que cumplió seis años y luego pasó todo sus veranos con ella. Concebido originalmente como un poema de veinte y cinco páginas un año después de la muerte de Marta Garza en 1987, Villarreal lo transformó en una obra de teatro. Luego de varios borradores y talleres, la pieza ha sido ampliamente representada y fue traducida al español por Lina Montalvo con el título de Encuentros con mi abuela Marta. Ambas versiones fueron presentadas por el Bilingual Foundation for the Arts de Los Angeles. Kate Avila concluye diciendo que el haber escrito esta obra le permitió a Edit Villarreal lograr varios objetivos: rendirle un homenaje a su intrépida abuela, escribir una comedia acerca de la inmigración, experimentar con el realismo mágico y poner bajo la lupa a la poderosa iglesia católica observándola de soslayo con una pizca de malicia.

One of the most enduring images of Edit Villarreal's classic *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)* comes not from the stage, but from the audience—teary-eyed individuals stricken by the death of feisty elder Marta Grande in Act 1. The drama is effective on two levels: 1) being a play that reproduces a nostalgia-inducing text of what it was like to grow up in a Tex-Mex extended family, and 2) being a play that iso-

lates a resonant part of the never-ending American saga of immigration and assimilation. *MGM's* appeal is not limited to Chicanos; it has been successfully produced for both Latino and non-Latino houses, and this at a time when limited accessibility to mainstream theaters and resources remains a contentious issue for many Latino playwrights.

The widely produced *MGM*, a heavily autobiographical two-act play, evolved from a process of grief

resolution that produced a poem, twenty-five pages long, penned a year after the death of Villarreal's maternal grandmother. Her grandmother, Marta Garza, was a ranch girl from Monterrey, within the state of Nuevo León, just on the other side of the Texas border. Villarreal's grandmother raised her until she was six years old; after that, into her pre-teens, she would spend summers only with her *abuelita*. Marta Garza became the prototype for *MGM*'s dear Marta Grande.

They lived together in the officially bilingual town of Brownsville, on the Río Grande and as far south in Texas as one can comfortably travel, a stone's throw away from the tropical weather-inducing Gulf of Mexico. One of Villarreal's earliest memories was of rising at dawn with her grandmother to take care of a giant army of about one hundred clucking chickens—collecting the eggs for sale and feeding the chickens. When the older chickens stopped producing, they were butchered and sold. Because her grandmother did not drive, they would hitch a ride with her grandfather to pick up chicken feed at the store.

Her grandmother's industriousness and capitalism did not stop with chickens. Later, she would pick up a pig and fatten it up, slaughtering a pig for the market every other year or so. She also tended a garden and goats. Villarreal's grandmother confided that her husband had no idea how much money she made selling the eggs, chickens, and sausages. In Act 1, Scene 9, "*Gallinas y la independencia*—Chickens and Indepen-

dence," the character of Marta Grande advises her granddaughter, Marta Feliz:

You buy. You sell. And never tell anyone how much money you have.

Marta Grande's real-life counterpart's philosophy was: her money was her money, and her husband's money was also her money, having received money from him for the children and the home.

In the play, Marta Grande finally agrees to marry the boyishly-appealing Juan, who pledges himself totally to her, even enthusiastically converting from Catholicism to the Baptist religion so that she can marry him. A World War I *veterano* like the fictional Juan, Villarreal's Texas-born-'n'-bred maternal grandfather also worked as a police officer on the international bridge in Brownsville. What the job must have been like for her grandfather is reflected in Juan's words (Act 1, Scene 4):

Confiscating illegal fruits and vegetables from Mexico. At night. They gave me a .45.

And further elaborating in the same scene:

You know what? There's no difference between an apple from this side of the border and an apple from the other side of the border. And anyone who's afraid of Mexican bugs better forget it. And you know why? Because the *pinches* bugs all came over here *before* there was a border.



Schultz Bros. Photography

Edit Villareal

The character of Juan shares the same sense of humor with Marta Grande, and one is led to speculate that Villarreal's grandparents enjoyed a very loving stable relationship based on what is demonstrated on stage.

Marta Grande's comically bitter sister, Florinda, was named after the sister who accompanied Villarreal's grandmother to the United States during the tumultuous Mexican Revolution. (The Mexican Revolution started with the revolt against Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship in 1910 and ended with Alvaro Obregón's assumption to the presidency in 1920. The passion behind the cries of "*¡Tierra y libertad!* [Land and liberty!]" and "*¡Viva la revolución!* [Long live the revolution!]" brutally tore the country apart.) To escape the revolutionary violence, fifteen-year-old Marta Garza and her sister (paralleling the journey of their fictional counterparts) joined the steady optimistic flow of Mexicans streaming northward. They received shelter in the United States as wards of the Baptist Church.

The daughter of Marta Grande, Marta Chica, never fully escapes from the background shadows in the play. In Marta Feliz's narrative, Marta Chica is remembered literally as an angel in white who plays the piano beautifully. She is a nurse by profession. The demands of her job call upon her not only to work days, but frequently nights, explaining why she is not a strong presence in Marta Feliz's memories. Villarreal was acutely aware of the sacrifices working professionals had to make. She grew up with professionals in the family.

Her mother was a registered nurse, as was an aunt who worked as a surgical nurse in the operating room.

The sexually charged situation between the characters of Father Ernesto and Marta Feliz was artificially constructed by Villarreal to document a relationship between a man and a woman where they could be truly friends and intellectual equals, and to break the stereotype of the omniscient good priest. Father Ernesto is young, has weaknesses and is infatuated with Marta Feliz; he wants her, though he has fooled himself into thinking that it is solely for godly reasons. Thus, the worldly education of Father Ernesto begins under the unlikely tutelage of Marta Feliz; she is the catalyst for his becoming a revolutionary priest. In Act 2, Scene 14, "*Un Padre para el Siglo XXI—Twenty-First Century Priest*," introducing himself as the new priest at a Los Angeles parish, he exhorts:

And so, following His will, we will continue to pray for a better life. *Pero*, we should organize, too. Just in case.

He returns the favor when he helps Marta Feliz to move from Texas to Los Angeles to start anew.

Assertively incorporating details from her family history, the UCLA-based Villarreal began fleshing out *My Visits with MGM* during the winter break of 1988 from the poem she had written about her grandmother. Upon completion, the play was dutifully forwarded to José Cruz González at the Tony-award-winning South Coast Repertory, in Costa Mesa,

California. In the summer of 1989, project director González selected the script for the annual Hispanic Playwrights Project (HPP) (in existence since 1986) for additional development and a mainstage reading, choosing it because he immediately recognized his own extended family and upbringing in the play, a sentiment shared by many who have seen *MGM*. (Other plays selected for public readings that summer were Cherie Moraga's *Shadow of a Man* and Octavio Solís's *Man of the Flesh*.) A year later, González directed a workshop production of *MGM* at Borderlands Theatre in Tucson, Arizona; *Teatro Visión* in San Jose, California, and *Teatro del Valle* in Phoenix, Arizona, also sponsored workshop productions in 1990 and 1991, respectively. In January 1992, the play received its first equity production with director Peggy Shannon at San Jose Repertory Theatre in California.

The Bilingual Foundation of the Arts (BFA) in Los Angeles followed a few months later with English-language and Spanish-language previews of Villarreal's work, continuing a long-standing tradition of that theater to present plays in both languages. The Spanish translation was written by Lina Montalvo and was titled *Encuentros con mi abuela Marta*. José Cruz González artfully directed both languages versions. Due to strong ticket sales, the play was performed not at the BFA's regular performance hall, but at a larger facility within the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

Moreover, in 1992, a radio production of *MGM* was executed by L.A.

Theatre Works, in association with KCRW. *Shattering the Myth* (an anthology of Latina-authored plays selected by Denise Chávez) included the play, thereby putting it in front of a greater audience of people who may not have otherwise heard of *MGM*.

The playwright admits to being a big re-writer. With every production she works through changes. The version found in *Shattering the Myth* is draft four or five. The current draft of *MGM*, which has been produced the most, is draft thirteen. Draft thirteen portrays Florinda as a more sympathetic character and has less Spanish.

The use of Chicano Spanish lends authenticity and credibility to the social interactions. However, the danger is that much of the humor and humanity of a play can be lost behind the Spanish. Information can be missed simply by not having an ear sensitive to Mexican Spanish dialects. Vetzta Trussell, the Guatemalan-American actress who played Marta Grande for several different productions, said one time she had been complimented on her reproduction of the Northern Mexican Spanish accent by a native from that part of the country. Implications can be lost on some audience members, much in the same way a foreigner misses the background information provided by a Euro-American actor using a Brooklyn, East Texas, or Southern accent.

Out of consideration for non-Spanish speakers, *MGM*'s dialogue is recorded in such a way that even if one does not understand Spanish,

one can still understand the emotional timbre of the moment. It would not work for an utterance to be delivered in one language and paraphrased, mirror-fashion, in the other, because for bilingual audiences and actors the play would become repetitive and boring. The idea is to move the thought forward, says Villarreal. If a character expresses himself or herself in Spanish, the response will be in English, providing enough of a hint of what was articu-

lated in Spanish.

Writing the play allowed Villarreal to accomplish several objectives: to honor her feisty grandmother, to pen a comedy about assimilation, to experiment with magic realism, and to mischievously skewer the powerful and patriarchal Roman Catholic Church. The play continues to enjoy relative popularity and we hope it will help keep the mainstream front door open a crack for other Latino playwrights.

Kat Avila is a Japanese-Mexican-American free-lance theater journalist. She has an M.A. in communication. She helped compile her father's recently released book Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994).