

'La Señorita de Tacna (The Young Lady From Tacna)' at GALA Hispanic Theatre by Jessica Vaughan

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Jessica Vaughan



Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2010, always wanted to be a playwright. *La Señorita de Tacna*, written in 1981, was his first play. His literary roots are clear in the poetic language and the character Belisario, who sits in a corner of a fantastic set by Giorgos Tsappas, trying to write a novel. A long ramp runs from his writing nook up to his Mamaé's chair. It is her story that he is trying to tell, or perhaps she is the one telling the story – trying to recreate her past in the midst of dementia. Other-worldly lighting by Cory Ryan Frank highlights the dreams, but also is practically necessary to delineate when we have skipped another year or back again.



Victor Maldonado (Joaquín) and Luz Nicolás (Mamaé). Photo by Lonnie Tague.

On one level, this is the most ordinary story in the world – the younger generation cares for their elders, debating nursing homes, expenses, expectations, and their own thwarted ambitions. On another, each scene may be history or story, out of sequence, in a dream. It is exceptionally well -written and not at all like most English-language drama with its obligatory dénouements. The play is performed in Spanish with English surtitles.

Director José Carrasquillo has chosen to keep things simple stylistically with few props or furniture beyond Mamaé's chair and Belisario's typewriter – the two anchors to this story that spans a century.

The cast stays in one costume even as they use their bodies and voices to transform from youth to crone and back as the scenes skip through the decades. The costumes are in a neutral palette and create a beautiful tableau by Designer Ivania Stack. The sound by Brendon Vierra also helps to set the mood with classic music piping throughout the play.

Luz Nicolás (Mamaé) is the lynchpin. She moves from a confused, dying woman to the young lady of Tacna and back in mere heartbeats, not opting for subtlety but total commitment. Carlos Castillo (Belisario) has a quieter but equally difficult job of acting the writer, an essentially internal activity. A lot of paper ends up crumpled under his desk as he recalls (and creates?) his family history. Marian Licha (Abuela Carmen) has a wonderful, warm air and helps to humanize Mamaé, who lives with her and her husband for most of her life. Their scenes together were some of my favorites. Hugo Medrano (Abuelo Pedro) makes a good counterpoint to the angrier Mamaé, though his aging is no less difficult. Victor Maldonado (Joaquin) plays a specter from Mamaé's past, a young Chilean officer she almost married. The playwright pokes a little fun at Chileans in Peru while unearthing the history of war between those countries.

Pedro and Carmen have three children, Amelia, Agustín, and Cesar (Andrea Aranguren, Tim Pabon, and Oscar Ceville) who have good chemistry. They are believable as siblings – exasperated and yet unshakable in their love for each other and their parents. They are less interested in the young lady from Tacna who grew up to be their second mother, Mamaé. It is only Amelia's son the writer Belisario who wants to know and Mamaé herself.



(left to right) Marian Licha (Abuela Carmen), Carlos Castillo (Belisario), and Luz Nicolás (Mamaé). Photo by Lonnie Tague.

Who is the young lady from Tacna? I don't know, which is perhaps the point. What stories of our grandparents have we lost to illness and old age? *La Señorita de Tacna* explores one lost story and how any story gets created.

GALA has produced a layered, polished, and moving production of this classic.

Running time: Two hours, with one 15-minute intermission.



La Señorita de Tacna (The Young Lady from Tacna) plays through March 9, 2014 at GALA Hispanic Theatre – 3333 14th St NW, in Washington, DC. For tickets, call (800) 494-8497, or (202) 234-7174, or purchase them [online](#).

Special student matinees for *La Señorita de Tacna* are February 7th, February 14th, February 21st, February 28th, and March 6th and March 7th at 10:30 am. For more information about The Student Matinee Program, please call (202) 234-7174.

LINK

[Director José Carrasquillo](#) on 'La Señorita de Tacna' (The Young Lady from Tacna) at GALA Hispanic Theatre by Joel Markowitz.