

CULTURE MATTERS

'Felix Starro' brings a Filipino story of faith and undocumented immigration to off-Broadway

"I am drawn to the story is because it is not just about a faith healer, but it is about what it means to leave everything that you know alone," writer Jessica Hagedorn said.



— Francisca Munoz, Caitlin Cisco, Alan Ariano and Diane Phelan in "Felix Starro." Richard Termine

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By **Lakshmi Gandhi**

Writer Jessica Hagedorn and composer Fabian Obispo did not realize that they were setting a milestone with their new musical “Felix Starro” – it was the show’s director Ralph B. Peña who pointed out that it would be the first off-Broadway Filipino American musical.

“I’m just here to do what I do. I’m a writer; I have stories,” Hagedorn said. “I don’t sit there and think, ‘This is going to be the first Filipino American show.’ It came about naturally.”

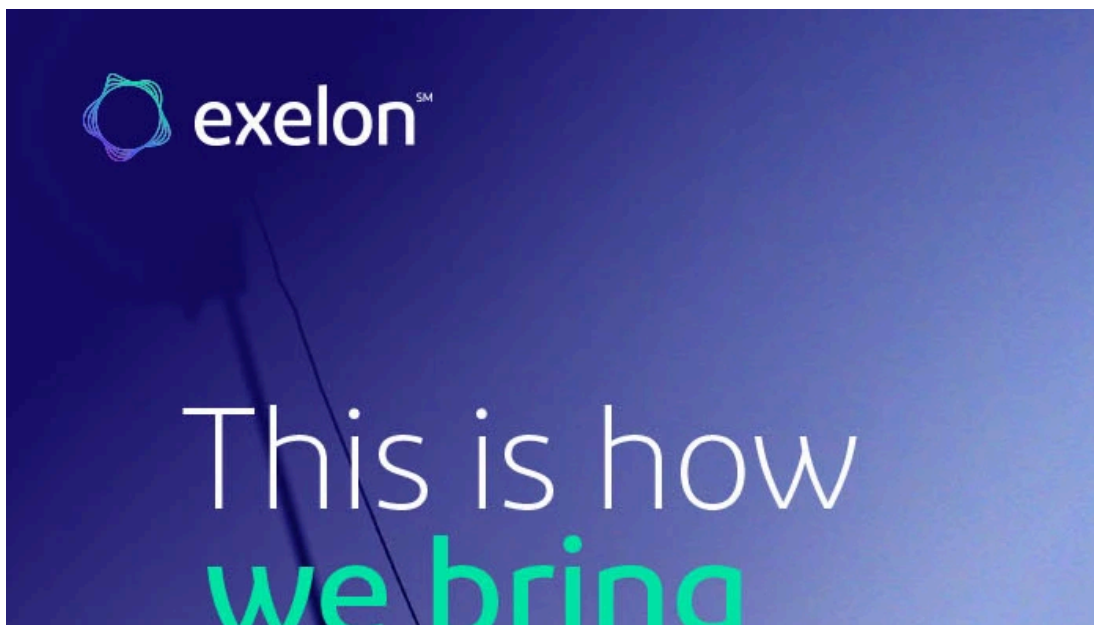
Meanwhile, Peña and others involved in the production see it as an achievement long overdue. “We are proud of it, but it is a stark reminder that there is a lot of work to do,” he said. “It is 2019, and it is sad that it is the first Filipino American musical to make it off-Broadway.” In addition to having a Filipino American writer, composer and director, the majority of the cast is also of Filipino descent.



— Alan Ariano as the lead character Felix, a psychic healer, and Nacho Tambunting, right, his grandson Junior, in a scene from "Felix Starro." Richard Termine

“Felix Starro,” which premiered this week, is running at Theater Row in Midtown Manhattan through Sept. 21. Produced by the Ma-Yi Theater Company, the show is based on a short story by the Filipino American writer [Lysley Tenorio](#) about a famous psychic healer who goes to San Francisco to cater to clients there.

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“It is a ride for me emotionally,” actor Alan Ariano, who plays the title character, said. “The idea of playing a Filipino, someone of my own heritage, was very unique for me because there aren’t that many roles available to us.”

Along for the trip is Felix’s assistant and only grandson, Junior. But while Junior steadfastly helps his grandfather perform his “miracles,” he also is dreaming of the possibility of a new life in the United States.

Because the show’s primary storyline was about a faith tradition most Western audiences may not be familiar with, Hagedorn said some people who saw the show while it was being workshopped wondered if the Junior’s decision to overstay his visa and become an undocumented immigrant was necessary. The feedback surprised Hagedorn given the increasing relevance of the issue in the current national conversation.

“They said, ‘Do you need it?’ and I said, ‘You bet I need it,’” she said. “Why I am drawn to the story is because it is not just about a faith healer but it is about what it means to leave everything that you know alone. I mean, he’s alone in a new land, he knows no one.”



— Ching Valdes-Aran and Nacho Tambunting in "Felix Starro." Richard Termine

That chance to provide a look at the decision-making process many undocumented people go through was a major reason why the role of Junior was so appealing to actor Nacho Tambunting.

“It is so powerful. You see everything that is at risk,” he said of Junior, who plots in secret to obtain false documents. “Coming to the U.S., not knowing anyone and then having to change their name and having to sacrifice so much. I think that is such a powerful thing.”

Junior agonizes over his decision to leave the Philippines and his grandfather behind and wonders whether anyone can truly start over. That emotional battle was what drove Hagedorn’s desire to adapt the original short story.

“It is very spiritual, and it’s so complicated, and it has these issues of faith and family and becoming undocumented, which is so timely,” she said. The show’s core lies in the complicated bond between Felix and Junior and what the younger man feels he owes his grandfather. A pivotal moment occurs when Junior realizes that he has completely shed his old identity in order to create a new life.

“Each night I go to this place of so much emotion,” Tambunting said of that scene. “I think that’s the thing that many undocumented immigrants feel, and to be able to tell that story is so powerful for me.”

To prepare for the show Tambunting and most of the other cast members had to familiarize themselves with the Philippine tradition of psychic healing, which is heavily faith-based. Many healers became worldwide celebrities in the 1970s when Western stars like Shirley MacLaine embraced the tradition.

“This worldwide phenomenon was short-lived, but Filipino faith healing was the talk of the town then,” [Hagedorn said](#). Psychic healing was a passing fad in the West, but for the character of Felix Starro, his belief in it and his ties to the Philippines are both unwavering. Part of the reason Felix and Junior do not understand each other’s decisions is because they have different conceptions of what they’d like their lives to be, Hagedorn said.

“People have different desires and love of place,” she said. “I wanted to sort of show you can’t predict people’s ties and the ties that bind us to home.”

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