

## Style

# Review: GALA Hispanic Theatre's 'Cabaret Barroco'

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By **Celia Wren** September 18, 2013

Would you let your beloved talk you into become a toreador? Especially if it meant waging your first-ever bullfight in front of a king? You would if you were Cosme Rana, one of the love-bedazzled characters in GALA Hispanic Theatre's stylish, playful season opener, "Cabaret Barroco: Interludes of Spain's Golden Age." When his sweetheart orders him to turn matador, or else give up all hope of winning her, the phobic Don Cosme gingerly picks up a red cape and enters the ring.

Logic tends to evaporate where love is concerned — that's one theme of "Cabaret Barroco," an anthology of entremeses composed by writers from the Spanish Golden Age. Back then, authors such as Pedro Calderón de la Barca penned short, comic interludes to be performed alongside full-scale plays. This world-premiere production, mounted in collaboration with the Spanish company Accion Sur S.L., weaves several entremeses together, framing them in variegated fashion with short skits and songs based on lesser-known Golden Age texts. ("Cabaret Barroco" is performed in Spanish, with English surtitles. The music is original.)

The words may date back centuries, but Spanish director JoséLuis Arellano García knows that the subject matter — infatuation, jealousy, greed, gender relations — is familiar and evergreen. To emphasize that timeless, accessible quality, he has opted for an artfully low-key presentational approach: On an uncluttered wood-toned set, four male and four female actors, dressed in versions of 17th-century attire, divvy up the roles in the sketches, then cluster back together for the now-reflective, now-wisecracking songs. ("Affairs of the heart . . . are like eggs: The most tender are poached," one ditty quips.)

Stylized movement adds to the production's confident, seamless vibe (a trait that will not surprise audiences who caught Arellano's stirring "¡Ay, Carmela!" and "El Caballero de Olmedo" at GALA in the past). During some of the songs, the ensemble members clutch tiny stools, which they hold over their heads, or stand on, or point at one another like weapons snatched up in a brawl. (Andoni Larrabeiti devised the choreography, whose occasionally stamping footwork hints at flamenco.)

Such moments suggest the torment of love. But most of the performances in "Cabaret Barroco" tend toward exuberant clowning. In Calderón's interlude "El toreador," for instance, Chani Martin is funny as Cosme Rana, first seen sobbing uncontrollably into a handkerchief out of love for Dona Bernarda (an imperiously flirty Natalia Miranda-Guzman), whom he has glimpsed in a portrait but never actually met. (Properties designer Alicia Tessari has created a delightfully quirky bull — sort of a wheelbarrow with horns — for the toreador sequence.)

In another enjoyably broad comic turn, Gonzalo Bouza plays Gracioso, loutish sugar daddy to the title character in Agustin Moreto y Cabana's "Dona Esquina." So rich is the glowering Gracioso that, instead of walking, he has himself wheeled about on a mailroom cart; when he steps off the contraption, he totters unsteadily with hulking strides. You're not surprised that the wily Dona Esquina (the dynamic Luz Nicolas) can bamboozle both him and her mercenary, back-stabbing neighbors (Carmen Cabrera, Menchu Esteban and Miranda-Guzman).

The able cast also includes Jimmy Navarro, who (among other roles) plays a bully who's tricked into allowing his sister (Cabrera) to marry as she pleases. (Women often outwit men in these folk-tale-like stories.) And Carlos Castillo snivels effectively as Toribio, who enlists a witch to help him with a seduction — with disastrous results.

Composers David Peralto and Alberto Granados Reguilon furnish underscorings and song melodies that feature infectious lilts and classical Spanish sounds — contributing to the show's atmosphere of pedigreed buoyancy.

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## **Cabaret Barroco: Interludes of Spain's Golden Age**

Direction and dramaturgy by JoséLuis Arellano García; adaptation by Mar Zubieta and Francisco Rojas; music direction, David Peralto; scenic design, Giorgos Tsappas; lighting and sound, Manu Roca; costume design, Ivania Stack. In Spanish with English surtitles (English translation by David Johnston). About 2 hours 10 minutes. Through Oct. 6 at GALA Theatre, 3333 14th St. NW.

Call 800-494-8497 or 202-234-7174, or visit [www.galatheatre.org](http://www.galatheatre.org).

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