

'The VIP' at Single Carrot Theatre by Amanda Gunther

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Amanda Gunther

They lived as hostages for 126 days. The rescue mission took 41 seconds. A stunning dramatic reality is explored upon the stage at Single Carrot Theatre in this compelling play based upon real events. Written and Directed by Company member Aldo Pantoja, *The VIP* takes an in depth look at the lives of the hostages held by guerilla nationalists in Peru in 1996; the relationships they formed, the normalcy they tried to find in during their struggle just to stay alive. It is a gripping and thrilling piece of theatre inspired by real events that is provocative and thought provoking.



Carlos del Valle and Natalia Ballestero. Photo by Britt Olsen-Ecker Photography.

Set Designer Ryan Haase constructs a cross-sectional in the round performance space that gives the audience four very different perspectives of the events on stage depending upon where you are seated. But the true symbolic beauty of Haase's design is in the framework of the structure. What few constructed wall spaces exist are covered with crumpled paper, a representation of disarray and filth just like the current political struggle. But cleverly woven into this mess are bits of sheet music, just as there are seamless serene moments of song woven into the chaos that unfolds on stage; symbolically actualizing that music brings beauty even during the darkest of times.

Musical Director Britt Olsen-Ecker working with Director Aldo Pantoja brought a sense of tranquility to the war torn atmosphere of those being held hostage with the incorporation of songs sung in Spanish. Even if you aren't bilingual or understand Spanish clearly, Olsen-Ecker coaxed vibrant emotions from those singing so that the meanings of the songs were clear, never losing anything in translation. These moments of punctuated peace, though at times

were extremely intense be they loud or rhythmically powerful, were the perfect juxtaposition of serenity and beauty against the ugly violence of the overall situation.

Pantoja crafts a stunning script; a bilingual blend of English and Spanish with awe-inspiring moments of history flushed into the present reality. His work speaks for itself in both creative brilliance and historical accuracy; an amalgamation of fiction, reality, history, and religion all blending seamlessly into one performance. His work displays the inner workings of these hostages lives; how day to day they found routine and comfort to make their survival more bearable. A raw and honest approach to a tragic and horrific event in history, Pantoja has a gift with spinning this tale into a theatrical sensation that keeps the audience in rapt attention from the moment the play begins until the very end.

The ensemble working together as a whole, particularly in moments of song, commands a presence upon the stage that draws the audience into the story like a moth to the flame. There are moments of sheer terror created by the terrorists, reflected into the hostages, but also moments of compassion and even a hint or two of levity and humor; the epitome of a well balanced story. There are also picturesque moments where beauty and tragedy become one stunning visual; like at the very beginning where the actors walk in strumming guitars in a slow motion assault — only the leader is strumming his assault rifle instead of a string instrument; a breath-taking aesthetic that sets the pace of the play right from the beginning.

What really made this show work as a two-language show is the raw emotions that are translated in body language, vocal, and facial expressions. Cerpa (Daniel Douek) the leader of terrorist guerrilla group speaks primarily in Spanish, but his powerful physical expressions as well as vocal intonations reflect the deep roiling emotions of his character's frustrations to us. Douek embodies a dynamic character that is more than just the furious rebellious leader of the terrorists, layering his existence in haunted feelings. At first he mimics a rogue gun-toting Robin Hood type character, the voice and advocate of the poor, but as the play progress his deeper motives are revealed in a harrowing and jaw-dropping intense scene shared with Gringa (Luz Nicolàs). Douek's ability to master the dramatic aspects of his character is phenomenal and his driving intensity throughout the production makes him a truly successful actor in this role.

Nicolàs matches Douek's level of emotional intensity in that scene, bringing her own raw vulnerabilities to the surface. As a complex character that we only see glimpses of, Nicolàs exemplifies the importance of the music in this production. Her candlelit bath scene with that harrowing song is one of the most stunning and emotionally expressive moments in the show; truly drawing from a deeper place in her existence.

The other female that finds herself at the center of attention is Melissa (Natalia Ballestero). An armed terrorist just like Gringa, Ballestero's character is equally silent for the most part. But when she jumps to action its ferocious and terrifying. Often an ever present silence, Ballestero creates a delicate feminine balance to the brutish males in the terrorist ranks, despite being harsh and torturous in a vein all her own.

It is only fitting that the two arbitrator characters be double cast by one actor. Mark, the representative of the Red Cross and the archbishop are played by Paul Diem, unifying their presence as one overarching olive branch amid the chaos. Diem is always calm and collected, his words not nearly important as his peaceful presence. The other double cast that seems particularly poignant is Fèlix Guardia, playing both a terrorist soldier and the great Atahualpa, the Incan King. As it is the fury of generations in the Incan King's forced conversion and murder that drives the spirit of the guerillas, it seems only fitting that Guardia double up as one of the terrorists. He showcases an enormous strength in both roles, though in vastly different formats, the Incan King through emotional calm and conviction and Arabe the terrorist through vocal eruptions and physical prowess. Both performers master their double-casting with ease in this production.



Luz Nicolas, Natalia Ballestero, and Daniel Douek. Photo by Britt Olsen-Ecker Photography.

The guiding light through this all comes from the narrator, Lalo (Carlos del Valle). Dividing his attentions between informing the audience and playing in the scene, del Valle weaves the tale with expressive honesty, inviting the audience into his reality. Even in the impossible situation that the characters find themselves, Valle's character guides them into normalcy, finding routines, finding small comforts; ever a voice of reason and reckoning. He undertakes the most intense role of the production; the reliable narrator, letting us see everything unbiased and fully informed. To do so with flawless execution as del Valle does is a true theatrical gift.

The VIP is clearly a signature production of Single Carrot Theatre, inspiring many with this bold and edgy new work; a show not to be missed!

Running Time: Two hours and 20 minutes, with one intermission.

The VIP plays through May 12, 2013 at Single Carrot Theatre – 1727 N. Charles Street, in Baltimore, MD. For tickets, call the box office at (443) 844-9253, or purchase them [online](#).

