

INSIDE OUT

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DESTINY OF DESIRE

A PLAY WITH MUSIC

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INSIDE OUT

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Contributing Writer Madison Cook-Hines.

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Administration 303.893.4000
Box Office 303.893.4100

Destiny of Desire: A Telenovela Play with Music

A co-production with Center Theatre Group

By **Karen Zacarías**

Directed by **Marcela Lorca**

SEP 11 – OCT 4
WOLF THEATRE

Destiny of Desire is supported in part by the DCPA's Women's Voices Fund
Destiny of Desire is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals on behalf of Samuel French, Inc.
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PLAY SYNOPSIS

On a stormy night in Bellarica, Mexico, two baby girls are born – one into outlandish wealth, and one into a life of poverty. When the newborns are swapped by a ruthless ex-beauty queen, the stage is set for two outrageous misfortunes to grow into an extraordinary destiny. Brimming

with energy and live music, Karen Zacarías' hilarious hit, *Destiny of Desire*, takes you on an emotional rollercoaster sprinkled with the melodrama and wild antics that make the telenovela the most popular form of storytelling in the world.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Hortensia del Río – A beautiful, promising, yet poor mother who, due to circumstance, becomes a maid to the richest woman in town.

Ernesto del Río – Hortensia's hardworking yet poor husband who has scars on his face.

Victoria María del Río – Hortensia and Ernesto's beautiful yet sickly daughter.

Armando Castillo – Owner of the Castillo Casino, the richest and most powerful man in town.

Fabiola Castillo – Armando's ambitious beauty-queen wife with a murky past.

Pilar Esperanza Castillo – Armando and Fabiola's beautiful daughter.

Sebastián José Castillo – Armando's estranged son from a former marriage.

Doctor Jorge Ramiro Mendoza – Head of the hospital.

Doctor Diego Mendoza – Doctor Mendoza's kind and handsome estranged son, also a doctor.

Sister Sonia – A nurse who is a nun. (Or, a nun who is a nurse).

PLAYWRIGHT & DIRECTOR BIOS

Karen Zacarías (Playwright) was recently hailed by *American Theater Magazine* as one of the ten most-produced playwrights in the US. Her award-winning plays include *The Copper Children*, *Destiny of Desire*, *Native Gardens*, *The Book Club Play*, *Legacy of Light*, *Mariela in the Desert*, *The Sins of Sor Juana* and the adaptations of *Just Like Us* (DCTC World Premiere), *Into the Beautiful North* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*. She is the author of ten renowned TYA musicals (including *Ella Enchanted: The Musical*) and the librettist of several ballets.

She is one of the inaugural resident playwrights at Arena Stage, a core founder of the Latinx Theatre Commons – a large national organization of artists seeking to update the American narrative with the stories of Latinos – and she is the founder of the award-winning Young Playwrights' Theater (YPT). YPT was cited by the Obama administration as one of the best arts-education programs on the nation.

Karen was voted 2018 Washingtonian of the Year by *Washingtonian Magazine* for her advocacy work involving the arts. She is an inaugural 2019 Sine Fellow for Policy Innovation at American University and is selected by The League of Professional Theatre Women to

receive the 2019 Lee Reynolds Award, given annually to a woman in theater who has helped illuminate the possibilities for social, cultural or political change. In 2021, Karen was awarded a United States Artists Fellowship award.

Karen lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband and three children. www.KarenZacarias.com, <https://www.concordtheatricals.com/a/102371/karen-zacarias>

Marcela Lorca (Director) is a director/choreographer celebrated for dynamic storytelling and visceral productions. Her directing credits include *Sueño* (American Players Theatre); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival); *Julius Caesar* (The Old Globe), *Anna in the Tropics* (Asolo Repertory Theatre), *Caroline, or Change* (Guthrie, Syracuse Stage), *Blood Wedding* (Guthrie, Kansas City Rep), and *Disgraced* (Guthrie, McCarter, Milwaukee Rep), among many others. She was Artistic Director of Ten Thousand Things (2017-24). She's choreographed more than 150 productions, devised 10 original plays, co-founded two actor-training programs at the Guthrie Theater, and received the 2019 Zelda Fichandler Award for her impact on the field.

THE TELENOVELA: A POPULIST ART FORM

"I've always wanted to write a telenovela. . . In Colombia alone, in one single night, one episode of a telenovela can reach ten to fifteen million people . . . It's only natural that someone who wants to reach people is attracted to telenovelas like a magnetic pole. He cannot resist it"

— Gabriel García Márquez, award-winning author of *A Hundred Years of Solitude*

HOW TELENOVELAS TOOK OVER

In the 1950s and 1960s, Hollywood dominated the global media scene. Worldwide, media tended to flow in one direction: from the United States—and, to a lesser extent, Europe—to the rest of the world. In the global TV industry, the assumption was that in order to be successful, you had to meet the high demand for imported U.S. media. However, in 1965, TV Globo, a brand-new Brazilian network, did just that, and nearly went under. Despite the Hollywood-centric history of programming in Latin America, TV Globo only found its feet when it abandoned the imported model of primetime TV and began contracting local producers to create Brazilian shows for its Brazilian audience. Networks in Mexico, Cuba, Colombia, Argentina, and other nearby countries began noticing the same trend: there was a massive appetite for local programming across Latin America. The telenovela—a genre that emerged in the 50s and 60s—met this demand.

Telenovelas share enough history with North American soap operas that it's tempting to elide the two. Both received early financial backing from Colgate-Palmolive, a company interested in new ways to advertise and sell soap. Both lean on elements of melodrama and serialized, daily storytelling to keep viewers hooked. But the telenovela is an undeniably Latin American product. The genre coalesced from a range of regional influences, including newspaper serial novels, episodic comics, oral storytelling traditions, *lectores*—readers—in pre-revolutionary Cuban factories, Mexican cinematic melodrama, and radionovelas. Whereas a soap opera goes on indefinitely, telenovelas are between 120 and 180 episodes—finite storylines moving toward a singular, climactic conclusion. Unlike soap operas, which are often programmed as daytime TV for a niche audience, telenovelas play in primetime, and are watched by people across ages, classes, genders, and educational backgrounds.

As telenovelas blossomed into a regional institution, distinctive national styles developed. Colombian telenovelas were known for humor; Brazilian networks sometimes used the telenovela to explore social issues; Mexican telenovelas were famous for a commitment

to classic melodramatic form and sometimes conservative moral binaries. The CEO of Mexico's Televisa network in the 70s liked to say that "the company made television for the 'popular' and 'modest' middle class" (Straubhaar et al, 125, Footnote 1)—in other words, their programming was conservative because it was trying to be populist. But criticism leveled at Televisa pointed out that the company was careful to align itself with each successive government administration, avoiding sociopolitical critique, and feeding its "modest" masses a satiating and uncomplex version of their nation, which was not populist at all. (from Orozco Gomez 2006). But the genre in Mexico continued to evolve, and began featuring storylines about premarital sex, children with developmental disabilities, homosexuality, and other topics that might have, at the time, been taboo in day-to-day conversation. In this way, telenovelas became a way to examine the 'controversial,' and make it less so, and they provided stories as a type of common ground.

Eventually, in this region that once imported more than half of its programming from the United States, telenovelas became a major export. In 2014, Mexico's Televisa network was responsible for the top ten most watched programs in the United States' Latine market (Straubhaar et al, 55), and in 2016, Brazil's TV Globo was the 25th largest media company in the world (Straubhaar et al 23). Popular telenovelas like *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, and *Juana la virgen* have been adapted for U.S. markets as *Ugly Betty* and *Jane the Virgin*. Telenovelas exported to China and Russia garnered viewership in the tens and hundreds of millions. Production companies in Korea and Turkey have started exporting their own telenovelas back to Latin America and across the world with resounding popular success. According to the BBC, by the mid-2000s, "hundreds of millions of people [were watching] telenovelas around the globe, everyday. Some go so far as saying two billion people – a third of the human race – [were] glued to these programmes (sic.) on a daily basis." The telenovela, adored by people from all walks of life, was officially a global phenomenon.

HOW TO SPOT A TELENVELA

By Programming

Primetime: Geared towards a wide audience (can be streamed, too, of course!).

Limited Length: Usually 120-180 episodes from beginning to end.

Serial Narrative: Follow along closely, sometimes nightly, or else miss out.

By Content

Popular Story Arcs:

- Rags to Riches: The “Cinderella” story format is especially popular.
- Romance: Always. It’s often heterosexual, and frustrated by external factors until the last minute.
- Relationship Triangles: Of course!
- Rich Family and Poor Family Cross Paths: And things get tangled.

Moral Binary: Characters tend to be either good or bad; right and wrong choices are clear to the audience, if not also the character. The plot often espouses “universal” values.

People Embodying Key Social Issues: More or less likely, depending on the nation of origin.

References to Popular Culture or Actual Events: Might nod to a particular national celebrity or scandal.

Happy Endings: Especially when it comes to romance. The drama lies in the twists and turns along the way.

By Common Character Types

Kind Women Born into Poverty

Maid, and Maid’s Daughter

Evil Rich Ladies

Entrepreneurs

Mysterious Men

Teenagers Dealing with Teenager Problems

Greedy Relatives

Good Priests

Bad Stepmothers

Decadent Aristocrats

By Storytelling Style

Musical Themes: Used to identify a character or to enhance the emotional expression of a moment.

Suspense: Naturally!

Heightened Emotion: Rooted in melodramatic style, but expressed more often through dialogue, music, naturalistic acting, and camera work than exaggerated gesture.

Humor: Not always, but in Colombian telenovelas, especially, characters may be exaggerated, recognizable archetypes, played for laughs.

Multiple Plotlines: Often tangled together and tied up right at the end.

Resources:

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ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

Interview with the Composer

This production of *Destiny of Desire* features brand-new music by composer and music producer Aldo Max. Aldo uses a rich blend of musical styles throughout his compositions for *Destiny*, including Cumbia, Rumba Guaguancó, Son Montuno, Huapango, Tango, Bachata, Merengue, Canción ranchera (Ranchera), and Bolero. He took time during rehearsals to answer a few of our questions:

What influences did you look to when you began composing? Were there particular telenovelas that inspired your work on *Destiny of Desire*?

Latin American composers and musicians like Rubén Blades, Willie Colón, Carlos Vives, Los Van Van, and Chucho Valdés, as well as compilations such *Tequendama de Oro*. In particular, I remember the Argos production of *Demasiado Corazón* (1997), which featured a salsa main theme composed by Willie Colón. I think it broke some conventions around music in telenovelas by capturing a truly Latin spirit.

Did the “Brechtian” production style cause you to think differently about your approach?

Actually, yes! Especially with one operatic music track that helps bring the play into this Brechtian mood and gives the scene a more epic feeling. In a way, it also brought me closer to the kind of work I do as a film score composer.

Since this is an inherently collaborative process, how did conversations with the rest of the creative team influence your choices as a composer?

That was a fundamental part of the process. We started meeting with Karen and Marcela from the very beginning, and they gave me a lot of feedback that helped me understand where the play needed to go. A big part of our work as composers is “translating” dramaturgical ideas into actual music.

Could you walk us through your composing process?

As I said, the process began with meetings, phone calls, and reading the script. I also did some research into Afro-Caribbean rhythms that could bring the play into this Latin spirit. I’ve been a lover of Latin rhythms since I was a teenager, so this was an incredible opportunity to dive deeper into them.

Was there something that seemed particularly important to bring to the music of *Destiny of Desire*?

I wanted to bring this Latin musical spirit to the play, honoring the great authors and musicians who have shaped this tradition rather than simply creating conventional telenovela music.

A “BRECHTIAN” TELENOVELA THE EPIC GENRE

Destiny of Desire may be a telenovela for the stage, but its meta-theatrical style and its factual and musical interludes draw on a niche genre of theatre that emerged out of post-WWI Germany.

Epic Theatre, as it came to be known, was a style championed by poet, playwright, and dramaturg Bertolt Brecht. Brecht felt that typical plays lulled audiences into satisfied inaction, whereas they ought to awaken audiences to mechanisms of injustice and provoke them to consider the actions they might take in response. As Brecht saw it, the root of action was critical thinking, and empathy—the favorite tool of classical storytelling—was the enemy of critical thought. Epic Theatre offered a new approach.

In a typical “Aristotelean” drama—the gold-standard for western storytelling structure—the audience is meant to feel what the hero feels; to experience the hero’s pain as their own, and at the end, to release that pain into the great exhale of catharsis. As Brecht put it:

“The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too—Just like me—It’s only natural—It’ll never change—The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable—That’s great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world—I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh” (Brecht & Willett, p.71).

But in Brecht’s view, that type of proxy-experience, especially when it ends in a cathartic unburdening, leads to complacency. Epic Theatre, on the other hand, is structured to prevent audiences from emotionally identifying with its characters, and to appeal to reason instead:

“The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d have never thought about it—That’s not the way—That’s extraordinary, hardly believable—It’s got to stop—The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary—That’s great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh” (Brecht & Willett, p.71).

This disruption between audience and story is often called “the alienation effect” in English, which is something of a mistranslation. Rather than causing discomfort or unwelcomeness, Brecht argued that theatre should be fun the way sports are fun: at a game, the viewer remains aware of their own identity, opinions, and personal stake, and still enjoys the journey.

Whether Epic Theatre can achieve its goals in practice is up for debate. In an interview about his co-written play, *Mother Courage*, Brecht conceded “I don’t believe that it leaves the audience in a state of objectivity... I believe rather—or let’s say I hope—that it makes them critical” (Brecht & Willett,

p.226). Another popular detraction is that audiences, in fact, *want* to be swept away by stories, and that denying people an empathetic arc for the sake of objective purism is bad storytelling. To that, Brecht was unsympathetic: “I’m not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their hearts warmed” (Brecht & Willett, p.14). All the same, many productions that nod to the legacy of Epic Theatre are not true models of the Epic genre. Rather, like *Destiny of Desire*, they use some of Epic Theatre’s meta-theatrical methods to infuse an Aristotelean plot with a sociopolitical message. Such productions may not be traditionally Epic but may nonetheless be considered “Brechtian.”

HOW TO BRECHT-IFY YOUR PLAY

Destiny of Desire is not an example of Epic Theatre, nor is it trying to be. But it uses a few of Brecht’s favorite tools to achieve its own aims. The following is a limited snapshot of that Brechtian toolbox:

Expose the Theatrical Mechanism: Don’t dim the lights, don’t hang curtains to hide the backstage area, let set changes happen in full view, use live foley sound effects, have actors play multiple roles. Show the *work* of theatre.

Why? If you remind the audience that they are watching live theatre, they’re less likely to be hypnotized by the story, more likely to form a unique or dissenting opinion, and more likely to remember that this story is, in some capacity, being told to provoke them to think.

“Literarization”: Scene titles written on posters. Stage directions or commentary projected as text behind the action. In other words, make people *read*.

Why? You’re requiring people to engage in a multi-layered manner; now, instead of sitting passively, they’re *doing* something. As Brecht puts it, “doing is better than feeling” (Brecht & Willett, p.32).

Music as Music: Down with musicals! No more bursting into song as an extension of heightened emotion. In a Brechtian play, if the characters are singing, they *know* they’re singing. All the better if the music somehow disrupts the natural flow of action.

Why? To prevent reverie, essentially. Letting different elements be dissonant allows audiences to wake up and consider how all those elements relate (or don’t).

Try a Non-Heroic Protagonist: Let your main character make choices with which the audience *must* disagree. And don’t follow up with a fitting comeuppance—that kind of catharsis offloads the need for critical thought—let the immoral be immoral and the audience decide what to think.

Why? It’s a lot harder to empathize with a character who steps outside moral lines willingly and is never punished. It’s a lot harder to get swept away when you want to protest. As Brecht said of *Mother Courage*, “even if Courage learns nothing else at least the audience can, in my view, learn something by observing her” (Brecht & Willett, p.229).

Self-Aware Acting: Make sure actors set the example of objectivity; they should portray the events, the actions, but avoid overwhelming the audience with earnest thoughts of fictional passion. They should remember they are acting; as in a recitation of Epic Poetry, they are the storyteller taking on voices, but not Odysseus himself.

Why? As Brecht put it, the characters “are not matter for empathy; they are there to be understood” (Brecht & Willett, p.15). It’s not that audiences shouldn’t feel anything, it’s that they shouldn’t feel simply what the characters feel. Brecht struggled to convert German actors to this style—he found a strong example of his preferences in Chinese Opera.

Irreverence: Don’t take your story so seriously. Brecht wrote “for the sort of people who just come for fun and don’t hesitate to keep their hats on in the theatre” (Brecht & Willett, p.14).

Why? Irreverence allows for humorous detachment. “Brecht was insisting on the need for what he called a ‘smokers’ theatre’, where the audience would puff away at cigars as if watching a boxing match, and would develop a more detached and critical outlook than was possible in the ordinary German theatre” (Brecht & Willett, p.8).

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

DESTINY OF DESIRE

Pre-Show Questions

1. How do you think the circumstances of your birth and upbringing shaped the trajectory of your life?
2. What entertainment that you engage with might be considered “populist”? What is the value of common-ground entertainment—ie. entertainment that is accessible to and popular with people from all walks of life?

Post-Show Questions

1. How did the “Brechtian” elements of this production—the factual interludes, exposed theatrical mechanisms, etc.—influence your experience of the story?
2. Was Fabiola a victim of her harsh upbringing, or was she capable of making a different choice? Is there a gray area?
3. How did the various technical elements in this show—the lights, sound, set, and costumes—enhance the storytelling? How did they alter or inform your understanding of the story?