

Theater



Edited by
Kris Vire
theater@timeoutchicago.com



WHY, I HORCHATA
Soria, right, drinks up the spotlight in *Oedipus el Rey*.

Sharpe relief

Actor Arturo Soria enjoys a breakout year.
By **Oliver Sava**

On his first day as a substitute teacher at Humboldt Park's Pedro Albizu Campos High School in 2010, actor Arturo Soria was thankful for two words at the bottom of his lesson plan: "role play." Once the required academic portion of class was completed, Soria had the uninterested students stand and play "Zip Zap Zop," a popular backstage warm-up in which those words are passed around the circle at a rapid pace, and watched as they filled with energy. That one-off gig would lead to two years working at the high school and a new nickname: the "Zip Zap Zop" Teacher.

Using a theater warm-up as a teaching exercise shows how Soria, 25, incorporates what he's learned in performance outside of the theater. Conversely, his personal experiences have informed his characters onstage, particularly during the past year.

A New Jersey native and son of a Brazilian mother and Ecuadorean father, Soria has an East Coast Latino background that made him the perfect fit for the quick-talking, razor-sharp Stonewall rioter Tano in the Inconvenience's *Hit the Wall*, the breakout play of last spring's Steppenwolf Garage Rep. For his role as L.A. gangster Creon in Victory Gardens' *Oedipus el Rey*, Soria mined his experience at Pedro Albizu Campos. "For the idea of what it is to

be in a gang and what it is to live in this neighborhood and to look over your shoulder, I took a lot of influence from my students and the community," Soria says over drinks at Lincoln Park café Bourgeois Pig.

Soria has stopped teaching since turning Equity earlier this year, with classroom time replaced by daytime rehearsals for Victory Gardens' upcoming *Equivocation*. In Bill Cain's historical drama, Soria plays Sharpe, a member of William Shakespeare's acting company. The role is a distinct departure for the actor, and his first foray into Shakespearean language since graduating from the Theatre School at DePaul in 2009. "I'm still transitioning," Soria says. "I've been wanting to read my lines with a dialect that's more urban, and it doesn't work as well. I'm having to retrain myself to speak in a different pattern."

That re-education has proven handy, especially in the audition room. "My Shakespeare auditions, I always bomb them. Yesterday, I had an awesome Shakespeare audition, partly because of this play and learning to talk again." He prepared for that audition with the help of costar Bruce A. Young. Learning from established

professionals has been one of the major boons of going Equity, Soria says. But a part of him misses the gung-ho cooperative spirit of the city's storefront scene.

"For me, what's exciting about storefront theater is the ensemble and the family that you build with those people," Soria says. "With *Hit the Wall*, we were all very collaborative. There's this sense that we're in this together, we're going to build it together."

Soria considers the role of Tano a high point in his career, a sentiment shared by *Hit the Wall* director Eric Hoff: "Arturo's knowledge of queer history and queer politics, he understands that as an educator and an activist and an organizer. Combined with his natural talent as a performer, he really understood what the role of Tano was all about."

For his next project following *Equivocation*, Soria takes on a very familiar role: his mother. "My mom is an entertainer, she just doesn't get paid for it," he jokes. Presented as part of MPAACT's Solo Jams series, *You Don't Know My Life, Ni Mi Madre* is the latest step in his growth as a writer and performer, an evolution that Soria is happy to experience in Chicago.

"When I graduated, I was thinking a lot about where I want to go: Should I go back home to New York? Should I go to L.A.? I'm really proud that I stayed in Chicago and stuck it out."

In previews now, Equivocation opens Monday 24. See Resident companies.

Wrens



Rivendell Theatre Ensemble
(see Resident companies). By Anne McGravie. Dir. Karen Kessler. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 15mins; one intermission.

To open its 16th season and the first full slate in its new Edgewater storefront, Rivendell Theatre Ensemble revisits its inaugural production. Playwright Anne McGravie's quietly moving 1996 work follows a clutch of "Wrens," members of the Women's Royal Naval Service, a kind of women's auxiliary to the British Navy in the first and second world wars. McGravie herself was a member of the WRNS during World War II, and she sets her play among seven women sharing a Nissen hut on the north coast of Scotland on the eve of V-E Day.

The women come from all corners of the Commonwealth, ranging from Welsh housewife Jenny (Rebecca Spence) to proper English prude Cynthia (Jodi Kingsley) to 17-year-old Scottish orphan Meg (a terrific Amanda Powell). They chatter and clash over their homelands, religions (Catholics vs. "Protties"), Britain's place in the world and, above all, what things will be like after the war, when they'll have to leave this place of relative independence and accomplishment for women of their era to return to the comforts and constraints of "civvie life."

It's a warmly observed portrait of a moment when women and the world were on the cusp of palpable but unknowable change, as well as a jarring reminder of just how much attitudes have changed in only 70 years (one of the women, revealing she's been sexually assaulted, frets her boyfriend will never forgive her "for letting it happen"). Director Karen Kessler and her top-notch cast fill out McGravie's remembrances with skill and care.—*Kris Vire*



WOMEN IN UNIFORM
Mary Cross, left, and Ashley Neal look to victory.

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