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jj's place

by

josé casas

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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JOSÉ CASAS

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“Produced by special arrangement with
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this play is dedicated to

josé joaquín salazar
my nephew
who inspires me to write plays
for youths whose stories need to be told

jj's place (formerly *jj's arcade*) was commissioned by ZACH Theatre (Nat Miller, associate artistic director) and Teatro Vivo (Rupert Reyes, artistic director) in Austin. *jj's place* was selected for the Kennedy Center's 2016 New Visions/New Voices 25th anniversary festival. The production was directed by Nat Miller. Dramaturgy by Roger Bedard.

CAST:

JJ HernandezCarlos Castillo
Sandra Hernandez/
Linda Garcia.....Gabriela Fernandez-Coffey
Mario HernandezG. Alvarez Reid
Oscar TorresMichael Willis

The play was subsequently co-produced between ZACH Theatre and Teatro Vivo in April 2017. The production was again directed by Nat Miller.

CAST:

JJ HernandezDiego Rodriguez, Alessandro Sanchez
Sandra Hernandez/
Linda Garcia.....Martinique Duchene-Phillips
Mario Hernandez Mario Ramirez
Oscar Torres Ben Bazan

In October 2018, *jj's place* was produced as a partnership between the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University and Spinning Dot Theatre in Ann Arbor, Mich. The production was directed by Jenny Sawtelle Koppera.

CAST:

JJ Hernandez Huck Amick
Sandra Hernandez/Linda Garcia Chloe Castro-Santos
Mario Hernandez Oscar Zelaya
Oscar TorresJustin Gordon

“The opportunity to create a small world
between two pieces of cardboard, where time exists
yet stands still, where people talk and
I tell them what to say, is exciting and rewarding.”
—Chris Van Allsburg

jj's place

characters

josé joaquín hernandez (“jj”): 10 years old. chicano. he is a creative, imaginative and intelligent boy but, because of an undiagnosed learning disability, he struggles. he is mourning the loss of his mother. he seeks a connection to his father. he yearns to be accepted by others; feelings of loneliness dominate his mind.

mario hernandez: mid-30s. chicano. he owns hernandez supplies and servicios. he struggles with the loss of his wife, not wanting to cope with it. he has trouble expressing his feelings. he is an intelligent man, but never had the opportunity to pursue his dreams. for the first time in his life, he must discover what it means to be a true father.

oscar torres: late 40s. chicano. an employee at hernandez supplies and servicios. his personality is one of joy and laughter. he is the neighborhood clown who always tries to make people feel better, but he is also the observer of the barrio, his heart always willing to help.

sandra hernandez: mother of jj, wife of mario. appears as a dream/spirit/manifestation in jj's head.

linda garcia: early 30s. chicana. teacher at jj's school.

time and place

the play takes place in the barrio of boyle heights which is located in east la which is located in the city of los angeles. the area consists mostly of working-class latina/o families, some documented and some undocumented. this community struggles with issues common to urban areas, especially economic issues. it is not uncommon to hear a mixture of mexican music, rap, church hymns, and morissey in the air.

production notes

the term (*extended beat*) is used throughout the play. the intention of the term is two-fold: (1) it can be used as an elongated pause, or (2) it can be used as a way to “fill in the void” in anyway a director sees fit [without adding dialogue], the suggestion being that these moments signify important emotional beats in the play.

the roles of sandra and linda should be played by the same actress, but if producing parties want to use two actresses, that is acceptable.

if possible, those producing the play should encourage audience members to interact with the inventions/machines after the end of the performance.

additional production notes describing the settings can be found in the back of the book.

jj's place

prologue

(JJ HERNANDEZ is standing in a spotlight downstage center. two other spotlights appear upstage. standing in the spotlights are MARIO HERNANDEZ and SANDRA HERNANDEZ, jj's parents. jj stares out into the distance with a sad lost look.)

sandra. that boy.

mario. this boy.

mario & sandra. our boy.

(in the following dialogue sequence, characters speak their lines as the previous character is just ending, slightly overlapping.)

sandra. staring at the chalkboard.

mario. struggling to belong and understand.

sandra. his world suddenly turned upside down.

mario. searching for answers to questions he doesn't know.

sandra. a soul in need of reassuring ... in need of cariño.

mario. alone in a corner holding onto tears.

sandra. he is his father's son.

mario. trying to forget ese momento.

sandra. if i could, i would. if i could, i would ... if i could, i would hug him and never ever let go.

mario. his beautiful laugh disappearing into thin air.

sandra. i want to convince him that the days will get brighter.

mario. his mind wandering in different directions.
sandra. wishing i could erase his loneliness.
mario. puppy dog eyes breaking my glass corazón.
sandra. my baby boy, broken.
mario. my little boy, lost.
sandra. nunca será lo mismo.
mario. he will never be the same.
sandra. our son.
mario. our son.
mario & sandra. jj.

(lights fade to black.)

i. my world

(in the darkness, some “funky” music can be heard. something that conjures up fantastical images, like a mix between arcade music and electronic dance music.

after a few moments, there is a barrage of lights. different and bright colors start traversing the stage. in the midst of this is jj. he is watching the lights in amazement, grooving to the beat of the music, embracing this space.

after a few moments, a multitude of images begin traversing the stage. the images are not random images. these images are in jj's head. they are the way he is experiencing the world at this moment. he is happy. he is creative; trying to forget the problems of his life.

jj is standing center stage. he begins controlling where and how the images move. in some ways, it feels as if he is acting like the conductor of an orchestra. the speed in which these images appear and change is quick and frenetic, but in a

fun magical way. these images are the amalgamation of the images that exist in jj's imagination. feel free to explore what those images might be. examples of images include:

*math equations melding into circuit boards
fireworks blasting in the night sky
pieces of cardboard turning into landscapes
stuffed animals expanding into giants
rainbows turning into mazes
coding matrix turning into colorful rain
pyramids rising from the ashes*

math equations begin swirling around the space. jj points to and controls the images. he is enjoying the power he has to create and manipulate the images. throughout this visual collage, jj continues to create images, images and more images.)

jj (shouting out). my world!!! mi mundo!!!

(a crayon drawing of jj with his parents appears and, suddenly, everything stops: the other images, the sounds, everything. jj focuses on the picture.

extended beat.

the image of his mother in the drawing slowly fades to nothingness. beat. the image of his father in the drawing slowly fades to nothingness. beat. the pain on jj's face is evident. beat. the image of jj in the drawing slowly fades into nothingness.

extended beat.

extended beat.)

linda (v.o., amplified/ghostlike) jj ... do you hear me?

(jj doesn't reply.)

linda (*v.o., amplified/ghostlike*). jj ... wake up!

(jj doesn't reply.)

linda (*v.o., amplified/displeased*). jj ... what is the answer to question number three?

jj (*quiet dejection*). i don't know.

ii. his name is José

(a school bell rings. the school day is over. mario is having a discussion with LINDA GARCIA, jj's teacher.)

linda. mr. hernandez, thank you for meeting with me.

mario. is this going to take long? i have to get back to work.

linda. we need to discuss your son's behavior. (*beat.*) i know it's been three months since your wife's—

mario. it's been hard on him.

linda (*concerned*). on the both of you, i imagine.

(mario doesn't reply.)

linda (*cont'd*). he hardly speaks and now with the fighting, he—

mario. he was defending himself!

linda. we do not tolerate violence in this school.

mario (*defensive*). then ... tell those other kids to stop picking on my son. why are you talking to me? where are the other boy's parents?

linda. jj is—

mario (*irritated*). his name is José.

(extended beat.

extended beat.)

linda (*apologetic*). yes. you're right. i apologize.

(extended beat.)

linda (*cont'd*). there is also the issue of his school work.

mario. he can make it up in summer school.

linda. there is no summer school. (*beat. awkwardly guilty.*) not this year ... budget cuts.

mario (*unsure how to restart the conversation*). i'll make him study harder. i'll take away his video games and—

linda. this has been a problem long before now—

mario. my wife, she was the one who—

linda. i'm sorry.

mario. sorry doesn't pay the bills.

linda. (*delicately*). it's much more complicated. we need to work together to figure out a solution. i believe we should test josé for—

mario (*angrily*). josé does not need testing! there is nothing wrong with my son!

linda. he is struggling badly in all of his classes and has fallen behind to the point that—

mario. it can't be that bad.

linda (*frustrated*). i believe he may have a learning disab—

mario (*despondent*). then help him.

linda. what do you think i am trying to—

mario. that's your job!

linda (*frustration bordering on anger*). no, señor hernandez!!! (*beat. serious.*) with all due respect, it's yours.

(the space is suddenly quiet. it's an awkward, painful kind of silence.

extended beat.)

linda (*cont'd*). there's still the matter of the incident. the school has a zero-tolerance policy.

mario. meaning?

linda. josé is suspended for the remainder of the week.

mario (*surprised and concerned*). cuatro días? four days... are you serious? they are kids! can't you make them shake hands and apologize like in the old days? what am i supposed to do? no puedo perder trabajo. i can't afford a babysitter. how am i supposed to take care of josé and look after my business?

linda. it's school policy.

mario (*annoyed*). my boy is not a bad kid.

linda. no one is saying he is. i know how difficult the situation is. we can find a way to—

mario. we?

(linda doesn't reply.

extended beat.)

mario (*cont'd, defensive pleading; acknowledging, but not acknowledging*). my entire life has been about trying to put food on the table and a roof over josé's head. so many fathers around here don't even do that.

linda. i'm sorry, but it's not enough.

mario. it is ... por el momento.

(linda doesn't reply.)

mario (*cont'd, beat*) anything else ... profesora garcia?

iii. bored

(jj and mario are at the front of the shop. mario is fixing a blender, but it is apparent that he is upset. jj is sitting in a chair, his backpack next to him on the floor. the atmosphere is tense. jj begins twirling around in circles in the chair, humming.)

mario. *(not turning around, annoyed)*. stop that.

(jj stops. beat. he coughs. he gauges the situation. he begins twirling around again.)

mario *(cont'd)*. i am not going to tell you again.

(jj stops. beat. he gauges the situation. he is going to test mario once more. he begins twirling around again. after a moment, an angry mario turns around and physically stops jj.)

mario *(cont'd, angrily)*. José Joaquín—enough! time to do your homework!

(jj doesn't reply.)

mario *(cont'd, quietly)*. if you have a question, talk to your teacher ... me eschucas?

(jj nods his head.

extended beat.

jj picks up his backpack. mario goes back to working on the blender. jj takes out a workbook and a pencil. he puts his backpack down, opens the workbook and stares at the assignment.)

mario (*cont'd, weary*). i don't want to go back to your escuela. time is money and i don't have much of either.

(jj tries to do his work, but he doesn't understand the assignment. he tosses the workbook to the floor. a frustrated mario turns around.)

mario (*cont'd*). recógelo. pick it up.

(jj doesn't reply or comply.)

mario (*cont'd*). i'm not going to ask you again.

jj. no es justo! these words don't make any sense!

mario. stop making excuses—

jj (*anger and frustration*). i'm trying. de veras, apá. porqué no me crees!?

mario (*angrily*). pon atención! dios mío, when did you become so lazy!?

(jj doesn't reply.)

mario (*cont'd*). do you think what i do is easy? huh?

jj. mamá would've helped me.

mario. what was that?

jj. she would've—

mario (*unexpected and angrily turning around*). cállate!!!

(extended beat.

extended beat.)

jj (*surprised and hurt by his father's words*). sorry ...

(jj begins to quietly cry. it is obvious that mario regrets his words. he ponders whether or not he should console jj, but, instead, decides to stand his ground.)

mario (*guilty*). uhm ... do your work. you just need to take your time. have paciencia. that's all. (*beat.*) son ...

(*extended beat.*)

mario (*cont'd, quiet judgment*). no llores. big boys don't cry.

(*jj wipes the tears from his face.*)

mario (*cont'd*). you have to start doing better in school, mijo. i want you to work hard and one day move someplace nice.

jj (*quiet sincerity, sniffing*). boyle heights is nice.

mario. (*solemnly*) someplace ... nicer.

(*extended beat.*)

mario (*cont'd*). i'm going to work on señora vasquez's washing machine. if we get a customer, come get me ... ok?

(*jj doesn't reply. beat. mario exits to the back. the awkward tension fills the air: after a few moments, jj picks up the schoolwork he had thrown to the floor. for another moment, he stares at the books as if they are friends who have turned their backs on him. then, he angrily puts the schoolwork into his backpack. beat. jj begins mulling around the shop, doing anything to avoid studying. he checks some of the items his father is working on, messes around with some tools, etc. after a few moments, he sits back on the chair and, once again, begins twirling in the seat.*)

jj. papi!!!

(*mario ignores jj.*)

jj (*cont'd*). dad!!!

(mario ignores jj.)

jj *(cont'd)*. mr. hernandez!!!

mario. qué quieres!?!?!?

jj. i'm bored!!!

mario. and, i'm poor!!! deal with it!!! *(beat.)* why don't you help out around the shop?

(extended beat.)

jj gets out of the chair and grabs a broom, amazingly, so bored that he would even resort to doing some manual labor. he begins sweeping. located onstage are some folded-up cardboard boxes. jj plays around with them with the broom; no intention of real work, just hitting them with the broom. after a few moments, he puts down the broom and begins playing with the pieces of cardboard. he opens them up, creating squares and rectangles, looking through the space. he continues playing with the cardboard and it is obvious that there is an idea beginning to "sprout" in his head.)

iv. a universe of possibilities

(jj is back in his head. as the circuit boards traverse the set. jj begins tracing the design with his finger, closely examining it. jj nods and begins to use his finger as a wand. sandra enters quietly, trying not to interrupt jj.)

jj. hi, amá!

sandra. how did you know it was me?

jj *(not turning around, smiling)*. i can smell your perfume. you smell nice.

sandra. gracias, mijo.

jj *(pointing)*. see all the lines and patterns?

sandra. yes.

(jj meticulously begins manipulating the circuit boards and they meld into different images, moving around the stage in an excited fashion. the colors of the circuit boards captivating him.)

jj. cada uno ... they're stories, each and every one of them. once you know how they fit together, you can build anything you want.

sandra. de veras?

(jj nods his head.)

sandra (*cont'd*). what story do you want to tell?

(jj ignores sandra's question. he begins pointing and running around the space, continuing to create images.)

jj (*pointing to a circuit board*). that one is the story of a robot who was built to save the world. (*pointing to a circuit board.*) that one is about the creation of a roller coaster ride that never ends. (*pointing to a circuit board, amused.*) and ... that one right there, that one is about a super computer that gives people the answers to their questions before they can even ask their questions.

sandra. i want to hear your story, mijo.

jj (*ignoring sandra*). and, it doesn't have to be stories. you can turn them into anything you want them to be. people, places, things ... you can add things. you can erase things. (*beat. sadly.*) even feelings.

sandra. tu historia es importante

jj (*ignoring sandra*). all these lines together. las líneas. they help me.