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THEATER REVIEW

Facing a War Zone Rife With Cartels and Zombies

By CATHERINE RAMPELL

In 2010 a 20-year-old criminology student with a new baby volunteered for a job no one else would take: [chief of police](#) in the tiny Mexican border town of Práxedes Gilberto Guerrero, a place overrun by rival drug gangs. (To give you a sense of either the courageousness or foolhardiness of her decision: her predecessor had been tortured and beheaded.) The international news media quickly anointed this remarkable young mother, [Marisol Valles García](#), as “the bravest woman in Mexico.” She proceeded by publicly withdrawing from the drug war, which she said she would leave to the feds; hiring more female officers, who didn’t carry guns; and focusing her police force’s efforts on community building and teaching family values, which she hoped would keep the gangs at bay.

Matthew Paul Olmos is one of at least two playwrights to find inspiration in her story (as well as countless activists on both sides of the border). His chilling new play “so go the ghosts of México, part one” — produced at La MaMa after being selected by Sam Shepard, and the first of a three-part cycle — is [based on her efforts](#).

In a program note Mr. Olmos says his play is “not meant to be a literal telling of her story,” but rather “a poetic impression of what Marisol did for her country.” There is little chance of confusion on this point, given the show’s use of zombies, a supernatural car radio, an imaginary child and one character who is just an abstract symbol for an entire pigheaded neighbor country.

The images of this production are persistently haunting, thanks not only to Mr. Olmos’s audacious, almost novelistic script but also the inventive contributions of the director, Meiyin Wang, and her stellar design team. Some of the action is depicted through film projection onto the pitted surfaces of Nick Benacerraf’s squalid set — built from old speakers and sheets of plastic — enhancing the sense of disorientation. Light bulbs sometimes stand in for people and mystical forces. (Lighting and video design are by Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew.) Most strikingly, the entire production is infused with an anxiety-inducing soundscape (by Elizabeth Rhodes), which alternates among paranormal radio music, the goose-pimpling sounds of static and a dull, quickening heartbeat.

At times the production verges on haunted-house cheesiness (a distinct risk when zombies and red corn syrup are involved) or preachiness, but the overall effect is so horrific and enthralling that you’re willing to forgive the excesses. The actors are mostly excellent, particularly José Joaquín Pérez as a cartoonish, low-level thug, whose cellphone and gang-provided pistol are both his lifeline and only source of usefulness in this world; and Laura Butler Rivera, who beautifully captures the ambivalence Marisol feels when she realizes, as the audience has known since first being introduced to her uninhabitable world, that she has been defeated.