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Border Issues on Stage

Latino-Canadianness, the Americas, and the Representation of Arabs in the Theatre of the Canadian playwright Guillermo Verdecchia, an Interview

Abstract:

Guillermo Verdecchia is a Canadian writer of drama, fiction, and film who has also been active as a director, dramaturge, and an actor for stage, screen and radio in North America and other parts of the globe. Among many awards, he is a recipient of the prestigious *Governor General's Award for Drama* for his *Fronteras Americanas*, the *Chalmers Canadian Play Award,* and *sundry film festival* awards for *Crucero/Crossroads*, based on *Fronteras Americanas* (dir. Ramiro Puerta). Verdecchia was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina and came to Canada as a young child. He grew up in Kitchener, Ontario. Verdecchia received an MA in Theatre Studies from the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario. Currently (2014) Verdecchia is Picador Guest Professor for Literature at the University of Leipzig, Germany.

Markus Heide spoke with the author in Toronto in October 2013.

Keywords: Guillermo Verdecchia, border thinking, diasporas, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the aXes of Evil*

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MH: In 2013 the anthology *Fronteras Vivientes: Eight Latina/o Canadian Plays*, edited by Natalie Alvarez, was published by Playwrights Canada Press (Toronto). Your play *Fronteras Americanas* (1993) is included in the anthology. In what way do you see yourself at home in a Canadian-Latino/a community of writers or as part of a Canadian-Latino/a literary tradition? Is this ethnic context important for your self-definition as a playwright, director, and performer?

GV: The short answer is: Yes, I do see myself or have seen myself as part of that community. And, at one point I thought, that my work was -- I do not want to say seminal -- but an important first step in identifying this body of Latino-Canadian writing and in some way substantiating that body of writing. And this collection *Fronteras Vivientes* goes a long way in making this body of work manifest. It really identifies this body of work, but also this community.

But at the same time, like most artists, I do identify with a community while also intending to exceed the boundaries of this community. At one point it was important for me to understand that I was part of a community of Latino-Canadians. It is not so enormously important for me in my writing today. Although, as an artist in this community, I do feel that I want to make a contribution to the community. I want to see it grow and even to see it take off into directions that may not have much to do with me.

MH: When *Fronteras Americanas* came out in 1993 not much had been published in Canada that marked a specific Latino/a identity. In the US, however, this was different: Mexican-American literature and theatre had been published at least since the Chicano/a Movement of the late 60s and 70s. In drama the most influential figure most certainly was Luis Valdez and his *Teatro Campesino* of the 70s. In your play there are numerous intertextual references to the Chicano/a literary and theatrical history and Latino/a cultural practices. How important has this cultural context been for the play and for your work in general?

GV: The Chicano example – that is Chicano/a literature and cultural production – for me was a really important reference point. I was struck by their history and their creativity in terms of managing this bi- or tricultural tension. Their way of dealing with the “inbetween position” was for me something like an existential validation. I thought: Look, there is somebody else – practically on the other side of North America – asking the same kind of questions. What does it mean to have two tongues, two hearts, two memories? And how can you live with that without feeling “divided”? So, Chicano cultural production was to me a thrilling example of people wrestling with problems similar to mine, although in different contexts. Chicano literature, theatre and other cultural production had come up with very exciting solutions to problems I struggled with when I worked on *Fronteras*. In this sense it was a very important reference point for me.

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MH: In what way have experiences of Othering, of racism, exclusion, and discrimination – each of them being reflected as central topics in the Latino/a literary and cultural production in the US – affected your work as a Canadian playwright, performer and writer?

GV: Well, actually, overt racism, exclusion and discrimination have never really been part of my life. I am rather privileged in terms of exclusion from mainstream society. I was mostly educated in Canada. I am white. I am male. I am straight. I can pass as a member of the dominant culture. So my experience is quite different from some of my friends who have noticeable accents, who are darker than I am, or who come from Central America being marked in a way that I am not marked. The things that I have experienced were much more subtle and more on the level of existential uncertainty, as to: Why do I dream, or imagine, in one tongue and live in another? Where do I belong? Why do I feel this way about certain things that are not visible? Why are things in my imaginary that do not exist in the external world? Things that I cannot see on film or TV here, that I do not see on the street, and yet they have this very powerful hold on me. So that is a feeling of dislocation, a kind of un-reality. I cannot say that I experienced much overt exclusion, more like moments of feeling "you do not belong", or "go home" – although I did not know where my home was if not here.

MH: *Fronteras* is a play about borders and it employs imagery and iconography of the border – which in the work by such artists as Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Gloria Anzaldúa has grown out of the US-Mexico border context. With *Fronteras* you relate to this border discourse, including Canada and other parts of the Americas. At the same time one gets the impression that the play's main character also desires to overcome any identity category.

GV: Absolutely. Border thinking is the key to *Fronteras* and my work. Simply said, it is the idea that I do not have to choose between Canada and Argentina. I do not have to settle for "Latino" – although this already is a hybrid identity. In a way I would say, I live in the hyphen, living and acting as Latino-Canadian. I claim this but it is the kind of simplifying representations that work in popular culture, this is much more complex. This is, I suppose what you see towards the end of *Fronteras*, an ambivalence, or as you put it, an "overcoming" of identity categories, a refusal to identify in pre-given ways. It is not that I simply want to claim Latin America for myself as a Canadian but I also claim Canada, and I claim Canada as part of Latin America. It is a more complex cartography than what was taught in public school or than we learn when we grow up, or as the mainstream mass media constantly reproduces it. Yes, absolutely, the idea and the concept of the borderlands was a solution for me. I noticed that I can live in this in-between space that thinkers like Anzaldúa, Gomez-Peña, and Bhabha have identified. It is a very productive and exciting space. It is a space that actually makes sense to me emotionally and speaks to my experience.

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MH: By giving expression to the experiences of a Latino character who grew up in Ontario and by connecting this experience to Latino/a cultural traditions and histories, *Fronteras* positions Canada in the Americas. Your play suggests exploring Canadian experiences in the context of the Western hemisphere.

GV: It was a really important part of the play for me to articulate the idea that we are part of a continent whose name is "America". Although we are constantly worried about our neighbor to the South and measuring ourselves against and comparing but we could also imagine fruitful economic, political and cultural relationships with the other parts of the continent: with Mexico, with Central America, with South America. So this is a really important part of the play, the idea that we can redraw the map, and we can configure new borders with the rest of the continent, instead of thinking of ourselves as isolated and only in close relationship with the United States.

MH: *Fronteras* made many critics read your work in the context of Border Studies and Latino/a Studies. In other plays these issues are not as obvious. *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* (1991), for example, shows a different approach to drama. Critics have discussed the play – and also the follow-up, *Insomnia* (1999) – in terms of meta-theatre, as a piece reflecting on power relations and ideology constructions. In your own words: What is your central interest in these plays? Do you see these plays as a break with the issues addressed in *Fronteras* or do you see continuity at work?

GV: I think there is a strong connection between *Fronteras* and *The Chomsky Lectures*, both in terms of content and formally. They are both interested in questions of power and in relationships between the North and the South, to put it in general terms. *The Chomsky Lectures* is concerned with Latin America, there is a whole section on the Contra war in Nicaragua and Canada's relationship to that war, Canada's relationship to Central America but also to Chile and other countries in Latin America. But it is also about the relationship to the United States that was the primary actor in these conflicts. So, it provides another look on geopolitics and the relationship of the North and the South. *Fronteras* perhaps looks at it in slightly more personal, psychological ways, and looks at the cultural politics, whereas the *Chomsky Lectures* is more interested in, let's say, state politics.

MH: Your plays deal with questions of power asymmetries in society and in forms of representation. In this sense your work is very much part of the tradition of political theatre. How do you characterize your interest in politics and in political drama?

GV: In general terms I see myself in the tradition of socialism, although this is less obvious in my plays. On another level, I guess the politics I am most interested in is the politics of representation.

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I fundamentally believe that the representations and images we create, circulate, and hold of one another authorize, permit, license, legitimize certain ways of behavior, policies, and actions. The images we have of one another have a kind of performative force, and they, in subtle, or not so subtle ways allow us to do things to other people. For example, – and this is something Marcus and Camyar and I spoke of in *Ali and Ali* all the time – in North America all we ever see are weeping Arab women, traumatized by the death of their children, or apparently very angry, menacing Arab men posing with machine guns in the streets. As these are the only images we see, we begin to think that these people need our help, they are either victims, or they are crazy. So we must intervene. This is a very limited repertoire of images that, in response to, we only have very limited options to react. So in *The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the aXes of Evil: A Divertimento for Warlords* (2010) we thought: Well, we need other images of Arabs, that are more complex that challenge the usual representations, that fall neither into the victim category nor into the – shall we say – maniac categories and tropes.

MH: You referred to Marcus Youssef's work – your partner in many of your plays, as, for example, the more recent *Ali and Ali*. In the introduction to *Ali and Ali* you use the term "agitprop" for characterizing the play. The issues addressed here and the way these issues are addressed on stage, I find, indicate a move from border issues of the Americas towards an interest in contemporary global politics and conflicts.

GV: We still talk about borders, and we still see borders and bordering as a problem, about inclusion and exclusion. We are now, however, facing securitized, militarized borders in this so-called post 9/11 world. We are now talking about borders that, on the one hand, seem to be highly mobile and, on the other hand, are incredibly rigid. Today we face a different kind of nomadism, a different kind of migrancy that seems to have an implicit threat in it. So I believe these ideas are still at work and I am still very much interested in exploring the lines, the arbitrary lines, we draw between the global North and the global South. So this is very much a question we are interested in in *Ali and Ali*. But I am also interested in how borders are actually enacted, enforced. Where large ideas about the world actually play out, ideas about identity, the nation, the globe. They actually play out in rooms. Like when you cross the border you encounter this guy in this little booth, this little three feet or four feet space. This guy has this tremendous power to enact the border, to perform the border. The border, and ideas about the state and security, are very powerfully at work in such spaces. So *Ali and Ali* raises these questions, particularly in the second one, *The Deportation Hearings*, where they are about to be deported from Canada. So, I believe the border is still an important issue in my work, although the border takes on a different form than in *Fronteras*.

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MH: You addressed different forms of political criticism and how your work is linked to political issues. Could you please comment on the role of humor, comedy, and satire in your work, and in this context, also on dramatic self-reflexivity, on projections and other stage devices which particularly come up in *Ali and Ali*? How do you characterize the function of comedy in this piece and in others?

GV: First of all, it is a way I have of dealing with the world. I use irony and satire. I do like to turn things upside-down. This helps me feel better about the world, and this attitude shows up in my work. Obviously this attitude creates an opportunity, rather than to assault people, to disarm. Humor in this sense is disarming. It allows us, momentarily at least, to see things in a different light. Humor is often built on the principle of putting things in a wrong place. It allows you to put things into wrong places, to displace things. So we can put things to wrong places and regard this rearrangement and suddenly create a new understanding of the arrangement of things. In a way, we then reflect on social reality, the construction of social reality.

With the *Ali* performances we started by saying that we were going to refuse to take the so-called War on Terror seriously. I do not know what the news coverage was like in Europe. But here in North America we had quite a few people seriously discussing whether we should bomb Afghanistan and Iraq back to the Stone Age. It was a serious and sober discussion. It struck us as such an outrageous idea, obscene notion, not just a notion, actually an obscene action. One way to deal with it was to not take it seriously, to absolutely mock it, ridicule it, as much as possible. Because by taking it seriously, by arguing with it directly, we felt, you gave it some kind of power. We wanted to react with our own obscenity and outrage.

We went to see a hearing, here in Toronto, for one of the Muslim men who was being detained indefinitely without charges. They were never charged. He and a few other men were imprisoned for quite some time. These men did not even know what the actual reasons were why they were held in jail. They were held on a very obscure provision of the Immigration Act. We went to see one of the hearings. It was absurd. It was ridiculous. It was so surreal. We thought that the only way to react to this is with our own level of absurdity which is *Ali and Ali*: To let these two chaotic clowns into the middle of this; to make them reveal how absurd some of its premises are. So that is an aspect that shows how we use humor in our performances. Humor is tactical for us. We are really serious about these issues. It is hugely important. People's lives are at stake. Thousands of people have died. So it is very important, but we have to be careful about the terms under which we engage. We refuse their terms and instead offer our own.

Concerning our use of projections: We live in a highly mediatized world. A world where we constantly get our information and knowledge from screens, from images that come at us. What I

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like to do, is “talk back” to these images, “talk back” to the screens. It is a quite a deliberate tactic on my part, not to make the projections appear cool. I do not want the videos to look sexy in these plays. In *Ali and Ali*, the projections we use do not look cool, and slick, and sexy. It is just a screen, a sheet, a piece of cloth, and it looks like a tent, and we throw the image up, I want to make it strange, to defamiliarize us with the images. It does not have that cool affect. I want to make us look at it critically, to make people think about it, to notice that this looks kind of unprofessional, that this does not look too powerful. “He looks like a fool.”

We are critical of the media, including theatre which has also been used as an ideological tool. It is kind of the air we breathe, a postmodern sensibility we have, self-reflexivity, yes. Because, somehow, we cannot even trust ourselves, and the tricks we are up to. But it also is a tactic, a political tactic we use.

MH: In 2007 you published *Another Country* and *Bloom*, two plays that concentrate on Argentina, the military rule in Argentina, and on different forms of violence. Could you please comment on these two plays and how they are connected to your own family history?

GV: Argentine history and, if you want, family history, are important for me and these issues come up again and again in various ways in my work. *Another Country* was my first drama. It has a focus on Argentina. It is fairly realist. So formally it is different from my later work but, again, the concerns are: Who has power? Who has privilege? And how is this power and privilege executed? And at what cost to whom? *Another Country* is a play that arose out of my feeling that if we had not left the country I would have been old enough to be in the Dirty War with the period of military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. I would have to do my military service. So I would have been either a young man in the army, potentially rounding people up, forcing them into a truck, beating them up, or taking them to a detention center. Or I would have been on the other side, being the guy beaten up, put into a detention center, disappearing. Somehow I couldn’t help feeling that I had this ghostly existence that I had lived this experience somehow. This was also influenced by the fact that I certainly got to know Argentinians who had gone through torture and jail, who had been exiled to Canada, and so on. It was very close to me. Although it did not touch me physically, it touched me in my imagination. It was a fluke— pure chance—that this did not happen to me. And I have carried this idea to most of my other work. I ask myself, for example, why does this or that happen to a young Palestinian boy? With such questions and such personal – if you want – family history in mind, we wrote the play *A Line in the Sand* – which looks at the life of a Palestinian boy. In our play it is a Palestinian boy but it is actually based on another event: The torture and murder of a young Somali boy by Canadian soldiers in 1993.

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And we – people I write and perform with – have discussed the feeling that it is merely a fluke. It is just pure chance that we are not rotting in some jail cell somewhere, and that somebody else is. That it is not us but somebody else going through such horrific experiences.

In contrast we are provided with that tiny little opportunity to speak, that bit of room, the freedom to speak publicly. We live in a free and democratic country. Because of these conditions of privilege, next to oppression, injustice, suffering, we have the responsibility to make use of that freedom, the responsibility to speak up. It might make a difference to the lives of others somewhere else, or in our own society, who do not have that same kind of freedom.

In Another Country is about the relationship between the North and the South, although it is very disguised. However, I deliberately did not make it sound like Argentina. I tried to make it sound and look like anywhere "middle class." She is an advertising executive. He is a kind of civil servant. They are kind of successful. They want to buy a house, and this and that. And then it turns out, of course, that he is torturing people for a living. The idea here is: This could be anywhere. We were not *especially* crazy in Argentina. They are not especially crazy anywhere else where atrocities occur. The conditions just form, and this terrible thing happens. So, I guess, the play is a kind of warning. Because I do not think that neither in the South nor in the North are we safe of such torture, atrocities, cruelty.

MH: Thank you very much.

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