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JESUSA RODRÍGUEZ'S

# Dialogues between Darwin and God



**I**N *Diálogos entre Darwin y Dios* (*Dialogues between Darwin and God*), renowned Mexican director, performance artist, and activist Jesusa Rodríguez steps on stage to engage with the archetypal Western figures. Performed in Spanish, with instances of code-switching and English supertitles, Rodríguez's *Dialogues* serves to satirize and critique preserved and perpetuated global icons. With aesthetic forms inspired by Mexican cabaret—including the use of comedy, song, dance, and improvisation—Rodríguez covers a wide range of U.S. history and politics. The performance closed the second day of events at *Global Flashpoints: Transnational Performance and Politics*, a conference held from October 6th

to 12th, 2011, and organized by the UCLA Center for Performance Studies and Center for the Study of Women.

How do religion and science relate, Rodríguez asks, to McDonald's, KFC, Burger King, and Starbucks? Consumption. Her piece employs a critique on consumerism by underlining large chains of fast-food restaurants. To start the show, Rodríguez as Darwin gives a keynote lecture by explaining the theory of evolution: she states that everything is a process, the "table first had to be a tree, went on to be wood, and was transformed into a table." Likewise, an image of the evolution of "man" (projected later in the show) illustrates how the ape goes on to be a man with a spear,

then a man with a rifle, then an overweight man with a McDonald's cup and bag in each hand, then finally a pig. She calls this a process of in-volution rather than evolution, that is, a process of regressing as represented by the consumption of fast food. Here, Rodríguez visually exploits the multiple slang meanings of the word "pig" as either a gluttonous or greedy person. Her use of visual and verbal forms of comedy foregrounds the severity of consumption and exploitation as a global phenomenon.

Rodríguez's physical embodiment of Darwin distorts an archetype, associating *Dialogues between Darwin and God* with concepts of memory and body techniques. In another instance during

the lecture, Darwin, who is over two hundred years old, continuously loses his place in his notes. Throughout his lecture he seems to forget what he is saying as he walks from stage right to stage left and vice-versa. Rodríguez walks with a limp, hunches her back, and supports herself with one arm. In the process of reaching for her notes, Rodríguez also frequently coughs. She calls attention to Darwin's bad health: his physical state, as represented by Rodríguez's body techniques, represents a form of decay that cites earlier comments on involution.

But Rodríguez never entirely commits to the Darwin icon. There are moments when she reveals herself as a performer by either no longer limping or changing the tone of her voice. There are also instances while she is still dressed as Darwin where she conflates his actions with actions that would typically represent God. This happens when Rodríguez, as Darwin, cues the stage lights to dim or brighten. These meta-theatrical moments destabilize and make visible her citation of gender and age codes. Darwin's old age and forgetfulness also serve as a trope for many types of political corruption that have benefitted from strategic forms of historical amnesia—that is, archived accounts of history willfully forgetting, denying, and excluding in the service of advancing a majoritative point of view.

Considering the title of the performance, Rodríguez chooses to impersonate both Darwin and

God. At one point, the projector screen rises to reveal God, and he just so happens to be in the image of Darwin—a white male with a balding head of white hair and beard. This moment reflects the patriarchal tendencies to idolize and emblemize images of men that represent larger structures of power. Notably, the only physical characteristic that differs between Darwin and God is the use of costume. Darwin wears a red vest over a white collared shirt and a pair of slacks, while God wears a silver cloak and dons a matching hat with an inverted pyramid. Nonetheless, Darwin and God are mirror images of each other.

The bearded white man not only follows the image of Darwin and the Western conception of the image of God but also resembles myriad figures of power in the United States imaginary that are constructed as white, masculine, heterosexual, and, in this case, aged, men. Here Rodríguez conflates iconographies, which results in defamiliarizing religious and scientific categories of identification; as stated earlier, there are moments when Darwin acts like God and vice-versa. For example, Darwin frequently controls the lighting, and God quotes Robert Giblin and Thomas Paine. Rodríguez does not make any gestures toward a historical reality. Instead, she skirts any ontological claims to truth by avoiding realism.

The focus on and acknowledgement of location is central to grounding topics in history and destabilizing their claims to truth. This is achieved,

in part, by Mexican cabaret. In Mexico, other forms of theater such as Teatro de Carpa (Tent Shows) and Teatro de Revista (Review Theater) inform cabaret. Whereas her performance references many U.S. figures, Rodríguez ultimately brings the topic back to Mexico in content and style. In short, her performance includes parodying political and religious figures that are simultaneously outside and within Mexico. They remain outside in terms of physical location but within by considering the ways that these figures have affected Mexico or Mexicans.

The first song that Rodríguez sings comments on the Monsanto Corporation: “I give thanks to Monsanto, who has given me so much. It gave me whooping cough and swine flu, breast cancer, colon cancer...and it gave deformities to the man I love.” Monsanto, a U.S.-based agricultural corporation that produces genetically modified seeds, grows and sells transgenic seeds to such countries as Mexico, India, and Brazil. Rodríguez's song reflects a form of grace-giving (she continually gives thanks) that satirically discloses a critique of multinational corporations and the effects they produce on the countries that they target.

“Viva la Evolución!” Rodríguez says following the Monsanto song as she references another political icon. The backdrop shows a red and black commodified silhouette that once was Che Guevarra but now is an evolved monkey. Rather than identifying with this Latin American cultural



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icon, Rodríguez opts to disidentify with Guevara. Guevara's image is often associated with all that is utopic about revolutionary movements, but in this case it does otherwise: he is critiqued alongside Thomas Paine, Carl Sagan and the Ku Klux Klan. Bringing in a variety of U.S. political figures from the late eighteenth century up to the twentieth century, Rodríguez destabilizes chronological notions of time in history to remember that which has been forgotten—the way that revolutionary and reactionary movements, in many cases, carry on a masculinist and misogynistic frame. Thus, while Rodríguez channels Darwin she is able to juxtapose and critique figures without limiting herself to a temporal or topographic location.

Another way Rodríguez resists sustaining a particular time or space is by engaging with the audience. Rodríguez sets up an actor-audience relationship that posits a reluctantly active spectator. To achieve this she depends on live and improvised interaction. At one point, Rodríguez says to her spectators in English, “Raise your hand if you believe in God. Now, who does not believe in God?” As the “disbelievers” raise their hands, Rodríguez asks one audience member to lower one hand (two hands are not allowed). Then she asks audience members to explain why they believe in God. Among the responses is a young woman who says that the existence of God is probable, and, likewise, evolution is probable.

As a reaction, Rodríguez states that everything is probable, and as an audience member leaves the performance Rodríguez tells her that she is as beautiful as a goddess and now she believes in this goddess.

While Rodríguez interrogates her audience on their religion (or lack thereof), the projected script infers a type of answer from the audience, even while Rodríguez herself has no control over how the audience will react. The supertitle reads, “Many of you did not raise your hand in either instance, so either you were masturbating or you believe that you do not believe.” The presumed response comments on the discomfort caused by requesting participation from members of the audience. The discomfort also lies in the direct inquiry of religion and on the perception of religion as something practiced on an individual level. Even while there is an occasional lag or advancing of subtitles that distinguishes spectators who speak Spanish from those who don't, Rodríguez lessens the discomfort with her comical sexual remarks.

Since Rodríguez's use of comedy makes use of the material body, she is able to communicate with the audience with or without supertitles. As she mentions in the post-show discussion, comedy in the U.S. is different than in Mexico because Mexican comedy is more corporeal. Considering that her background and experience originate in Mexico, the performance brings with it body

techniques from Mexican cabaret. The inclusion of the body, particularly in moments of comic relief, helps Rodríguez communicate the idea that religion often serves to benefit a “self,” resulting in the denial and exclusion of others (both individuals or institutions).

Rodríguez uses cabaret to de-privilege conventional and archival forms of knowledge through her body movements, the material aspects of theater, and audience interaction. In this performance Rodríguez has the agency to choose the memories or codes she wishes to cite and/or edit. Rodríguez challenges a long history of ongoing patriarchy generated by Mexican and U.S. cultures and fostered through religion and science. Rather than commodifying her own performance, she calls into question multiple forms of consumption, be it through food or entertainment. Her use of subtitles and interaction with the audience, among other tactics, makes visible the otherwise invisible population of Latinos in the U.S. and communicates locally about global concerns.

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Note: All photos courtesy of Jesusa Rodríguez