

Miss Julia

Vueltas Bravas Producciones transports August Strindberg's play to Colombia.

Zachary Stewart • Off-Broadway • Jun 13, 2017

The air is equatorial when we enter the First Floor Theatre a [La MaMa](#) for *Miss Julia*: True, New York City is in the throes of a heat wave, but as the cast vigorously dances to Colombian music while handing us little cups of rum, it is impossible not to break a sweat. It's the right atmosphere for J.Ed Araiza's Spanglish adaptation of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, which sets this story of passion and class conflict on a Colombian estate.

Juan (Jhon Alex Toro) is a servant of the household and so is his fiancée, Cristina (Gina Jaimes). Miss Julia (Tina Mitchell) is the daughter of the boss. Having just been dumped by her intended, she wants to dance with the handsome and charming Juan. He warns that the others will gossip when a woman of her class expresses so much interest in the help, but Miss Julia (pronounced who-lee-ah) will not be denied. She fantasizes about running away with Juan to Panama and opening a hotel (she has generously decided to invite Cristina to run the kitchen). Juan, in turn, fantasizes about sleeping with Julia and taking her money.

Beyond the Hispanicization of names and passing references to Latin American geography, Araiza's adaptation is remarkably faithful to the original. First produced in 1889, *Miss Julie* represents one of Strindberg's most successful attempts at theatrical naturalism, in which cutting-edge science is applied to a domestic drama in a brutal, unsentimental manner. In practice, this allowed Strindberg to use social Darwinism to cheerlead the aspirational bourgeoisie, coating everything in a thick layer of his particularly noxious misogyny: "Jean stands above Miss Julie not only because his fate is in ascendancy, but because he is a man," Strindberg writes in a rambling manifesto of a preface to the published edition of the play, adding, "His inferiority depends mainly on the temporary social environment in which he has to live, and which he probably can shed together with the valet's livery." The message is clear: Any society in which women are allowed to boss around men is decadent and destined to be swept away.

That story remains in Araiza's adaptation, although the interplay of Spanish and English in the text adds a new layer of language politics: Juan and Cristina speak only in Spanish when alone, but Julia speaks to them mostly in English. It's not that she doesn't know Spanish, which she intones with a thick Anglo accent: "Juan, Buy-are con-me-go," she says, slamming her consonants. It is that she knows she can assert her power by forcing him to meet her on her linguistic turf, his second language.

We wonder what an obviously North American woman is doing with a house full of servants in Colombia. This raises questions of neocolonialism and globalization that Araiza mostly leaves to the speculation of the audience. *Miss Julia* is not nearly as explicit as Yaël Farber's 2012 adaptation, *Mies Julie*, which

imagined the play as a drama between a white South African farmer's daughter and her black servant.

Director Lorenzo Montanini's staging offers the most radical departure from the playwright's original intent: He sets the play in a barren corridor, staging in traverse to bring us into the confrontation. He further pushes against Strindberg's naturalism by having the actors perform ritual movements (the pointing of a finger toward the back of the mouth to telegraph disgust, the elegant slicing of a digit across the throat to inelegantly suggest suicide). At one point, Julie and Juan crawl toward each other like feral cats about to fight. Rather than deepening the story, it feels stagy and awkward.

Montanini's blunt approach does help illuminate character, though: Jaimes is mousy and skittish, mostly avoiding the spotlight. Toro's bowed head and formal mannerisms barely conceal his threatening posture. Mitchell plasters a permanent smile on her face that makes her look like a villainous Disney queen.

Mitchell's portrayal is further colored by Adán Martínez's costume: Julia wears a frilly tulle dress with a black ribbon around her neck, making her look like she just stepped out of a Degas painting. This is a woman who is arrested in her development, who never really got over her childhood ballet lessons. Unfortunately, Martínez capitulates to the off-off-Broadway cliché of having the actors in bare feet (even Juan in his livery). "Kiss my shoe," Julia orders Juan, a strange request considering she isn't wearing one.

Minor missteps aside, *Miss Julia* is an exciting and watchable 75 minutes, buoyed along by live musicians Helen Yee and Martín Vejarano, who subtly help shift the tone of the show throughout. Yee's creeping violin, in particular, offers the perfect soundtrack for Julia and Juan's clandestine nocturnal affair. Their performances are worth the price of admission alone.

Strindberg's macho-man version of economic justice undoubtedly has resonance in modern Latin America, which seems trapped between vulture capitalism and chauvinistic Bolivarian socialism. Vueltas Bravas Producciones never bangs us over the head with this connection, but seductively invites us to make it on our own.