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In 'El Muerto Vagabundo,' many worlds collide

Posted by [A.L. Adams](#)

If you wander into Milagro Theatre's *El Muerto Vagabundo*, what will you see? A world premiere of a seasonally themed story about homeless people both living and dead. A split narrative performed in both Spanish and English (with some of the best jokes delivered only in the latter).

You'll watch The Kid (Diego Delascio), a recently orphaned young Mexican-American boy who hopes to contact his parents by observing Dia de Muertos, and his cynical older sister (Mariel Sierra), a social worker who serves many homeless clients, follow a mysterious (for lack of a better term) hobo clown into an "underworld," a homeless camp under a bridge that doubles as a gateway between the dead and the living. From there, you'll be treated to what amounts to a series of monologues from archetypes of the homeless condition, with a smorgasbord of stagecraft, a few surprising plot twists, and a feelgood, spookily sentimental finish.



Themes of celebration and mortality share abound as two "dead" characters entertain the living. L to R: Geo Alva, Carrie Anne Huneycutt, Carlos Manzano, Patricia Alvítez, Juliet Maya Buri, Robi Arce. Photo: Russell J Young

That experience alone is enough—but it's not all there is. Those who follow Portland theater will appreciate several more contexts in which this particular play could be viewed.

Seasonally

For the last 21 years, Milagro, Portland's premier Latino/a theater, has always devised a special show for Dia de Muertos. As the latest installment of such an established run, *Vagabundo* invites comparison to prior shows, especially with a new-to-Milagro director/devisor, Georgina Escobar, taking it on.

You could safely call this one "less historical" or "more contemporary," at least compared to Milagro's recent historical fictions of Don Juan and Shakespeare. It's also ... if not less musical, at least less music-featuring than some years, with more songs (including the canonical "Llorona") wisping in and trailing out on the static of a "haunted radio" rather than being performed live in full. In truth, the modest use of music helps propel the plot, and we do get one ballad sung soulfully by El Journalero (Julio César Velásquez).

As ever, the show is a pageant of archetypes of people both departed and bereaved, and does an especially effective job of sharing the spotlight with each character and combining a multiplicity of media including shadow puppetry, diorama, mime, monologue, singing, and dance.

Spiritually

If there's one consistent thread running through Milagro's various takes on the Dia de Muertos holiday, it's an incredibly specific feeling of ... I want to say "suspenseful warmth?" No one in local theater portrays the paradox of a "death celebration" more deftly; in fact, their closest competition may be church. That makes attending this show each year feel pretty ceremonial. If you're so inclined, add it to your short list of can't-miss holiday masses, or even bring a memento of remembrance of a loved one to add to the altar display next door in the El Zócalo space.

Sociopolitically

As the Portland arts community's latest response to our burgeoning housing crisis, this play joins a crescendoing chorus. Across the river, the Littman Gallery is showing *Camp Here Tonight*, an impressionist re-creation of tent villages by activist artist and Hazelnut Grove supporter Wynde Dyer. Since summer, Wanderlust Circus ringmaster Noah Mickens has organized a drive to supply displaced campers from the Springwater Corridor with locals' discarded Burning Man gear. Meanwhile, arts-mentoring organizations like [Pe:ar](#) and the Circus Project have been serving at-risk youth (including the unhoused) for years. But the first piece of homeless-themed theater I witnessed in the city (besides Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, which probably deserves a perennial nod) was Compassworks' *Feral*, a compelling collection of true-life homelessness testimonials delivered *Vagina Monologues*-style at the Bob White Theater as part of Fertile Ground 2013.

So what talking points does *Vagabundo* add to the ongoing conversation? In addition to advocating a vocab update ("Not homeless! *Houseless!*") this script mostly offers what activists would deem a "signal boost"—meaning repetition to amplify the essential truths. Here, that's a reminder that homelessness—er, *houselessness*—springs from a poverty cycle fueled by various human conditions including sexual abuse, addiction, wage and labor abuses, the war machine, and mental illness. *Vagabundo* puts a human face (or at times, intersectionally, two) on each problem, simultaneously demonstrating the bravery it takes to live with it. Preachy? At moments. But also deeply empathetic and engaging.

As a Window into Local Latino/a Theater

This Dia de Muertos show provides a glimpse of what's new in the Latino/a theater community. It is child actor Diego Delascio's Milagro debut, but we may start to see him there more? It's also an introduction to Julio César Velásquez, who's new to Portland via L.A. Carrie Anne Huneycutt, whose role is more often in the costuming department, makes a rare turn in front of the curtain. Familiar faces Patricia Alvitez, Juliet Maya Buri and Mariel Sierra return, with the latter in a lead role. "Physical poet" Robi Arce in the silent-but-central role of El Vagabundo represents deftly for three contingents: Latino/a theater, physical theater, and teaching artists (he teaches with Oregon Children's Theatre). And you might want to get a look at Geo Alva and Carlos Manzano for a first impression of their newly formed Latinx Improv and Manzano's upcoming turn in the CoHo-workshopped *Intimacy Project* this winter.

With so many angles of appreciation, *El Muerto Vagabundo* is a uniquely compelling offering. Better get in there while the veil is thin.

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El Muerto Vagabundo runs through November 6 at Milagro Theatre. [Ticket and schedule information here.](#)

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