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Gerry Goodstein

Ricardo Barber, standing at left, and Juan Villareal, seated, in a new musical at the Gramercy Arts Theater, "Y se Armó la Mojiganga."

THEATER REVIEW

A Gambling Peasant Stumps Jesus and Satan

By D. J. R. BRUCKNER

"Y se Armó la Mojiganga" ("And the Carnival Erupted") is an apt title for a new musical at the Gramercy Arts Theater, the most spectacular production ever by Repertorio Español. Adapted by the Colombian director Jorge Alí Triana from a popular Colombian play that is itself derived from a classic 19th-century story, this "Carnival" starts on earth, falls into hell, ends in heaven, and makes all those places ring with laughter.

In 90 minutes throbbing with music that might be called rock salsa, it shows a miraculous cosmos: flights of gossiping angels and pits of lewd devils; cured cripples, wily bishops, jobless grave diggers, souls floating in the air; a fat, gartered king who is a real back-room politician; and Jesus, Peter and Satan all flummoxed by a peasant who gambles without pause and gives all his winnings to the poor.

Jesus and St. Peter come to earth to reward this generous peasant with five wishes. His apparently simple requests bring him irresistible power. His gambling becomes so faultless it reorganizes the world's economy. He banishes Death (who hovers almost voluptuously over everyone on incredibly nimble stilts) up a tree and the fear of it from people's minds. And he does much more, until the rulers of heaven, hell and earth are clamoring for a return to the old ways.

He then cons a bored Satan into a card game in which he wins the freedom of everyone ever sent to hell, which creates a theological problem so exquisite that a solution can be imagined only by God. He uses his final wish, that he become as tiny as an ant, to produce an ending so touching and funny that it draws rolling volleys of applause from the audience.

Fifteen actors take 38 roles, and their movements are choreographed to produce a vision of tumult or of celebration in a world of captivating magic. And the spell of the magic never fails.

Performances are in Spanish, with simultaneous translation that comes through with admirable clarity even

Y SE ARMÓ LA MOJIGANGA (AND THE CARNIVAL ERUPTED)

Based on a folk tale by Tomás Carrasquilla and the comedy "On the Right Hand of God the Father," by Enrique Buenaventura. Directed by Jorge Alí Triana; music by German Arrieta and Gonzalo de Sagarmínaga; lyrics by Marta Isabel Obregón and Felipe Gorostiza; musical direction by Nicolás Uribe; orchestrations by Juan Carlos Arenas; costumes by Rosario Lozano; masks by Sylvia Restrepo; choreography by Karim Noak; lighting and sets by Robert Weber Federico. Presented by Repertorio Español, Gilberto Zaldívar, producer; René Buch, artistic director; Mr. Federico, associate artistic director. At the Gramercy Arts Theater, 138 East 27th Street, Manhattan.

WITH: María José Álvarez, Ricardo Barber, Víctor Batista, Rolando Gómez, Alberto Morgan, Alexia Murray, Sofía Oviedo, Virginia Rambal, René Sánchez, Ana Soler, Fermin Suárez, Eva Cristina Vázquez, Tatiana Vecino, Braulio Villar and Juan Villarreal.

during the musical numbers. "Y se Armó la Mojiganga" remains part of the company's regular repertory at least through the end of the year.