

REVIEWS AND NEWS



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From left, Pietro González, Ricardo Barber, Pedro de Llano and René Sánchez in "The Feast of the Goat," from a Mario Vargas Llosa's novel.

THEATER REVIEW

Severity of a Tyrant's Tale, From Vargas Llosa

By BRUCE WEBER

These days any stage work about an evil dictator is going to make you think of the news. But that's not really the case with "The Feast of the Goat," the Repertorio Español's slow-moving but absorbing stage adaptation of Mario Vargas Llosa's novel about the Dominican despot Rafael Trujillo. Even though it's a work of fiction, it is, almost more than anything else, a history lesson.

With a script by a Colombian father-daughter team, Jorge Ali Triana and Verónica Triana, and directed by Mr. Triana, the show makes eerily atmospheric pageantry out of the murderous regime of the anti-Communist dictator known as the Goat.

Trujillo, who was assassinated in 1961 by a band of disillusioned former supporters, had exercised a ruthless autocracy over the Dominican Republic for 31 years. An anti-Communist, he was supported for most of that time by both the United States (an army general, he was trained by the United States Marine Corps) and the Roman Catholic Church; this was in spite of his documented atrocities, like the 1937 blood bath on Dominican soil that killed thousands of Haitians, with whom Dominicans share the Caribbean island Hispaniola.

Mr. Vargas Llosa hasn't seen the show, presented in Spanish with simultaneous English translation available on headphones, but he has

given his blessing to the script. The portrait he paints of Trujillo as a maniacally egotistical, sex-crazed, pitiless man of violence is faithfully recreated by the Trianas. And on the stage of the Repertorio's cozy shoebox home on East 27th Street in Manhattan, the history of Trujillo's regime is compactly synopsized in hyperbolic scenes that are almost like photographs doctored to heighten their effect.

Darkly sinister lighting and arch music that insinuates evil are part of a stylized presentation that often has single actors making lengthy, animated speeches while the rest of the ensemble behaves as a unified chorus, either keeping still or engaging in an orchestrated pantomime.

The fictional narrative that the novel and the play entwine with Trujillo's story is highly melodramatic. But it is credible, and it propels the action enough to offset the purposeful lurch in the play's historical recap. The plot involves the return home to the Dominican Republic, after three decades, of Urania Cabral, a woman who left as a teenager. The daughter of a trusted Trujillo adviser who fell out of favor toward the end of the dictatorship, Urania is back to confront her father, Agustin, now enfeebled and mute after a stroke. It emerges that Agustin's cowardice was behind a dreadful betrayal of his daughter, the event that caused her to turn her back on her country and her family.

Not all the actors can manage the heightened expressiveness with

LA FIESTA DEL CHIVO  
The Feast of the Goat

By Mario Vargas Llosa, directed by Jorge Ali Triana, adapted by Verónica Triana and Mr. Triana. Lighting by María Cristina Fusté; sets and costumes by Julian Hoyos and Regina García; second assistant to the director, Sandra Villegas; movement director, Aníbal Pardo; makeup artist, Eduardo Navas; original music and soundtrack by Jimmy Tanaka. Presented by Repertorio Español, Gilberto Zaldivar, executive producer; René Buch, artistic director; Robert Weber Federico, associate artistic producer. At the Gramercy Arts Theater, 138 East 27th Street, Manhattan.

WITH: Ricardo Barber (Gen. Rafael L. Trujillo and Agustin Cabral), Alejandra Orozco and Aníbal Pardo alternate in the roles (Urania, Cousin Lucinda, Society Woman and Prostitute), Marcelo Rodríguez (Antonio de la Maza, Simón Gittleman and Speaker 1), Pietro González (President Balaguer and Speaker 3), René Sánchez (Henry Chirinos and Monsignor), Alberto Morgan (Gen. Pupo Román and Miguel Báez Díaz), Denla Brache (Aunt Adelina), María Martínez de Trujillo, Altagracia and Puchita Brazobán and David Crommett (Manuel Alfonso and Borracho).

which Mr. Triana treats the material without spilling over the top into cartoon. But the production has the advantage of several who do. Alejandra Orozco is an intense, severe Urania, exactly right for a competent middle-aged woman who has spent her life psychologically battling a grievous early trauma. David Crommett makes a late but crucial appearance as Manuel Alfonso, an aide to Trujillo and the procurer of his women. Mr. Crommett is compellingly oily, making especially good use of Alfonso's

speech handicap; he's lost a chunk of his tongue to cancer.

And Pietro González (an actor who looks disconcertingly like a diminutive Mikhail Gorbachev) plays Joaquín Balaguer, Trujillo's longtime second-in-command and powerful successor (who died last summer) with the craft of a master plotter awaiting his chance.

But the play mostly belongs in the hands of Ricardo Barber, who plays both Trujillo and Agustin Cabral and does so with great élan. As the dictator, Mr. Barber, often in military regalia and crowned by a white-plumed hat, seems both scarily on the edge of madness and yet capable of consciously using that part of himself as a mode of intimidation. His eyes blaze in his drawn face, both the swelling self-importance and the challenge to all usurpers evident in every pose.

As the aged and infirm Cabral, sitting in a wheelchair, he is remarkably controlled in his collapsed posture, his tremor, his glassy look. And in the scenes in which Urania recalls her childhood, Mr. Barber makes Cabral a man desperately beleaguered by a life in an awful crossroads, a coward who comes face to face with his cowardice.

By creating the dual role for Mr. Barber, Mr. Triana is making the point that Trujillo's control of the nation depended on gutless collaborators, and in his performance Mr. Barber makes vivid the wages of despotism, for a nation and for a man.