

A Peek at June in a Box

By Lou Fancher

If cooking up a delicious piece of theater is dependent on the innovation of the “chefs,” then the Saint Mary’s College production of *June in a Box*, opening November 10th, is sure to be palate pleasing.

With nationally recognized playwright Octavio Solis pairing up with the college’s Theatre Program Director, Rebecca Engle, the combined forces of a gifted Latino playwright and a diverse, broad-thinking director will come to the LeFevre stage.

The play, originally developed with Campo Santo and Intersection for the Arts in 2008, is based on the real-life kidnapping of June Robles, the daughter of a wealthy immigrant family from Tucson. She was discovered, 19 days after the abduction, chained in a metal box and buried in the Arizona desert. No ransom was every paid and no criminals ever apprehended.

June in a Box introduces the elder June, reliving the experience years later and grappling with her memories as she searches for resolution.

For the SMC production, Solis has created a new version.



From left: Liam Callister, Haley Leitman and David Silavin

Photos courtesy of Michael Cook

“I cleaned it up,” he explained, in an interview two weeks before opening night. “I needed to do some housekeeping: rewrite a scene, make judicious cuts and add actors.”

The cast more than doubled, from four to nine, which relieved Solis of the constraints of having actors with multiple roles perform quick changes and allowed for more actors onstage at one time.

“Octavio’s plays are a canvas for collaborators,” Engle said, suggesting one of the reasons she approached Solis about remounting the work. “Between the drafts, he actually *took out* the stage directions.”

Engle has conducted movement and gesture studies with the student actors, exploring the mischievous, scavenger physicality of two coyote characters in the play.

She has coached 18-year old sophomore Haley Leitman, who plays the young June Robles, to trust simplicity and be emotionally honest.

“What I have found is that everybody has, inside of them, the memory of how they saw the world when they were six,” she said.

Engle praised Solis for the raw, unadorned “poetry” he employs in telling the story of a family in the



Haley Leitman and Tatiana Ray

Photo by Michael Cook

middle of an emergency. The language is loaded, especially that of the main character, who speaks with a distinct urgency.

“With June, the tack I took is that she’s never really been able to get out of that box. Her innocence was somehow still locked up in that box. I’m interested in her [making] peace with it as she is confronting her own death, when she will be going back into a box,” Solis explained.

A *corrido*, a poetic or musical narrative form of Mexico, alerted the playwright to the story, and SMC’s production features live music by Beth Custer.

“We are taking a step back with the music,” Engle said. “Instead of being performed by the composer, she has created a score that will allow it to be available to other people. We started with leaf sheets and an audio recording. Now, there is an orchestration.”

Engle finds the play’s greatest value is the process. She said it’s a boots on the ground view of how a play emerges during revision and an experience most college students

don’t get.

“We’re in the cauldron at the moment, so there’s not a lot of space for reflection,” she apologized. “The playwright is discovering the play as we are discovering it!”

Solis will participate in a pre-show talk on November 11th and a talk-back following the November 18th show. But don’t expect a lecture from the visiting playwright, who thinks the play is meant to serve the students and the community, not the other way around.

“I’d rather have a dialogue with the students and audience,” he said. “With a Q&A, I can be caught more off the cuff.”

June in a Box performs Thursday, Friday and Saturday Nov. 10-12 at 8 PM, Friday and Saturday Nov 18-19 at 8 PM, and Sunday Nov. 20 at 2 PM. Tickets are \$15 general; \$12 seniors and non-SMC students; \$8 SMC students, faculty and staff. Tickets available online, by phone (925-631-4670) or at the door.

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