

# Notes on *ALHAMBRA*

## From *STUFF AS DREAMS: My Work in Theatre*, a forthcoming book reflecting on fifty of my plays

Fred Curchack

IN MAY OF 2016, LAURA AND I JOINED OUR FRIENDS SARAH and Chuck Riehm on a two-week trip through Spain. Sarah was researching a play that she was writing about Flamenco artists and wanted to visit some of the locations. I knew little about Spain and had no thoughts about writing anything, although I had committed myself to direct my first student production in years at UT Dallas.

We planned the trip over long-distance telephone, choosing rental apartments and hotels in Madrid, Seville, and Granada, with a stop in Cordoba. Laura and I would then go on to Barcelona and beyond. I did my obligatory, cursory tour book prepping and off we went. On various tours through touristic sites, I was intrigued by guides speaking about *Convivencia* (co-existence) a historical theory that posits that from the Muslim conquest in the 8th century until the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together in relative peace and harmony. This seemed to be a favored theme for the Spanish tourist industry which tends to romanticize history and ignore the darker aspects of religious and racial relationships.

I was deeply troubled about the U.S. presidential primary race, fearing that the jingoistic, racist slogans would prevail. Xenophobic rhetoric was roiling the American currents of white supremacy, Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-Mexican hysteria, homophobia, sexism, not to mention plain old fascism. The notion of *Convivencia* seemed like a desirable contrast to the shitstorm nightmare brewing back home.

In Granada, we booked a private tour of the Alhambra with an extraordinarily insightful tour guide. I asked him about *Convivencia* and little-by-little, the idea for a play emerged. Like many of my works, it would

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grapple with my fears about the state of the world, searching for a way to make peace on earth and within ourselves. In some ways, the play would be a sequel to *Golden Buddha Beach* my 2004 play about our adventures in Thailand, which featured Buddhism, tourism, and the tsunami. Recognizing the unlikelihood that my infinitesimal artistic creations would accomplish anything to change the world, I still felt impelled to articulate my own madcap sense of reality for the benefit of all, hoping against hope that my efforts would serve as a subtle healing emanation.

Focusing on creating professional theatre work, I hadn't directed a university production in eight years since adapting my play *MONKEY: The Quest to the West* for a student ensemble in 2008. My colleagues at UT Dallas had asked if I'd like to direct again and even knowing it would be much, much more work than the two, once-a-week classes I had been teaching, I said yes. I chose to teach an acting class in the fall semester in order to train some actors who might then work on a production in the spring. I didn't have a clue what the show would be, but I thought I just might crank out something new.

When we got home from our journey, I researched Spanish history, art, architecture and religion. Reading through forty-plus books, I started to see rich possibilities for the play. The differences and even contradictions between how historians interpreted history were particularly interesting. I reread *The Rings of Saturn* by W.G. Sebald, a masterpiece of indefinable genre in which the narrator recalls his walking tour of East Anglia in England. The people and places that he encounters stimulate wide-ranging associations about history, culture, time, identity and ruminations about humanity's inhuman propensity for cruelty and oppression. In Sebald's book, it isn't possible to know what is autobiographical travelogue and what is fiction.

Of course, travel can expand one's horizons, but the word "tourism" can be used as a pejorative, critical of how superficial we tend to be as we scarf down impressions on our vacations. Many people live their lives as eternal tourists, casual sightseers who never see past the touristic

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attractions on the surface of their own existence. I thought that I'd use the actual, factual itinerary of our touristic journey to explore deeper reflections on what we saw.

Spain's horrifying history of religious intolerance, the Inquisition, the Spanish Civil War, Franco's fascist regime, all of these exist alongside of a luminous legacy of art, literature, architecture, and Christian, Muslim, and Jewish philosophy and mysticism. I found hope and inspiration in Spain's great Sufi sage Ibn Arabi, the Christian saints Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross, the Jewish Cabala, Moses Maimonides, Gypsy flamenco, Garcia Lorca's poetry and his thoughts on "duende," Picasso, Dali, the transcendent architecture of the Real Alcazar of Seville, the Mezquita of Cordoba and of course the Alhambra.

The notion of *Convivencia* doesn't only mean coexistence with other races and religions. Doesn't our capacity to live peacefully depend on whether we can make peace with our neighbors and within ourselves? In *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, G.I. Gurdjieff has "Saint Buddha" saying that the best means of freeing oneself from unconsciousness is "intentional-suffering," and that "the greatest 'intentional-suffering' can be obtained in your presences if you compel yourselves to be able to endure the 'displeasing-manifestations-of-others-towards-yourselfes.'"

On the trip, our relationship with Sarah and Chuck was harmonious. We were easily able to accept and even joke about each other's idiosyncrasies and quirks. For the purposes of the play, I decided to exaggerate and exacerbate the petty irritations one occasionally feels with people's annoying manifestations. I depicted our petty bickering as escalating global hostilities that culminated in a video projection of an atomic blast. I relate this to what Gurdjieff refers to as people's "predisposition to periodic reciprocal destruction," which he calls "an unimaginable horror."

I thought of the piece as a kind of vacation slide show where you

invite your friends over to hear about your trip. I would have served tapas and Spanish wine if the university allowed it. I made an hour-long video to accompany a lot of the action. Although I had taken mucho megabytes of photos in Spain, I ended up downloading all the show's images and videos from the internet. Since the performance was free and for educational purposes, I didn't worry about copyrights. I heard that the Picasso estate charged a hundred bucks per night to use a slide of "Guernica" for a show in a small venue! "Fair use" allowed me to legally pilfer dozens of images and videos. In any case, our little college show snuck under the radar of the royalty police - same with music. I helped myself to a glorious array of recordings to make the soundtrack.

I utilized a variety of projection screens. Video was projected onto a large white cyclorama curtain at the back of the stage. Occasionally a second white curtain was pulled across center stage. For some sequences, actors manipulated moving fabric to catch projections. In other scenes, actors moved four-by-six-foot white cardboard placards as moving kaleidoscopic screens. The costumes were all shades of white, so actors' bodies also served as projection screens. It was thrilling to refine and develop these visual techniques that I had experimented with in so many previous performances.

A major influence was Alwin Nikolais with whom I studied dance and choreography when I was twenty. I recall sitting next to him and watching him choreograph his dance company who were draped in fabric that served as screens for slide projections. Nik would have gone nuts with video projection.

Having written many rap songs for plays since 1989, of course I was driven to concoct several for *Alhambra*. The mind-melting success of the rap-historical-musical *Hamilton* guaranteed that audiences were primed for history lessons in rhyme. My rap uses simple rhythms and exact rhymes, so it sounds a bit like Dr. Seuss or as one critic once wrote about me, "like Leonard Cohen rapping." I wrote lyrics hoping that I could put some of them to music but my attempts to recruit a composer or decent musicians for no pay didn't pan out. I was game to compose the music myself, but the student cast I ended up with were decidedly not singers and I decided to scrap my melodic dreams and instead created multi-track beats for accompaniments. I also tried to recruit flamenco dancers and musicians, but with no pay? No way José. So, the compromise was to project videos of world class flamenco dancers onto various choreographed, dancing fabrics, placards, and screens.

In retrospect, the performance did not influence the presidential election nor did it put an end to racism, sexism, classism, fundamentalism, homophobia, bigotry, war, human cruelty or people's "predisposition to reciprocal destruction." Still, I like to imagine that it was of some value in opening up the possibility of consciousness and conscience for those who participated in it and for those who witnessed the production and also, inexplicably, even of some value for others who didn't see it.

**Excerpt from ALHAMBRA:**

**TILLY.** Franco's tomb is behind the back of the statue of Jesus.

*(Video of dead Franco in his casket)*

**ED.** After he died in 1975, the "Pact of Forgetting" tried to smooth the transition to democracy.

*(Video fades out)*

**LOLA.** The "Amnesty Law" guarantees that no one responsible for crimes against humanity will be prosecuted.

**ED.** *(Sarcastic)* Forget the traumas of the past so we can focus on the future. Right?

**TED.** The "Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory" was founded in 2000, to collect testimonies about Franco's victims, and to identify bodies from mass graves.

*(Video projection of bones in disinterred mass grave)*

**TED.** So far, they've dug up over 1,300 of the 200,000 victims who "disappeared" under Franco's regime.

**ALL.** Where are Lorca's bones?

**ENSEMBLE MEMBER 1.** Spanish born philosopher George Santayana said:

**SANTAYANA.** "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

**ENSEMBLE MEMBER 2.** Karl Marx said:

**MARX.** "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce."

**ENSEMBLE MEMBER 3.** James Joyce said:

**JOYCE.** "History is a nightmare from which I'm trying to awake."

**ENSEMBLE MEMBER 4.** U.S. President Richard M. Nixon said:

*(Video projection of photo of Nixon with hand on heart and Franco saluting together. Background music: Military Band "Star Spangled Banner")*

**NIXON.** "General Franco was a loyal friend and ally of the United States. He earned worldwide respect for Spain through firmness and fairness."

**ENSEMBLE MEMBER 5.** Donald Trump said:

*(Video projection of photos of Trump speechifying. Hip hop beats and then sound of falling bomb added to Jimi Hendrix's "National Anthem")*

**TRUMP.** "We will make America strong again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And we will make America great again!"

*(Sound of exploding bomb. Screen flashes white and total blackout. Music continues with lower volume as background to rap and then mix of Jimi Hendrix's "Anthem." Text is divided among actors, some individual, some spoken together. As they speak their phrases, actors briefly illuminate their faces with flashlights. They stand close to the scrim so their shadows are huge behind them)*

**ENSEMBLE.** *(Rap song. Actors divide speaking phrases)*

Ceaseless horror / endless pain.  
Over and over / again and again.  
Limitless hatred / bottomless fear,  
So near / it's everywhere,

**ALL.** Right here.

*(Music louder. For 8 beats the music gets louder and the actors flick their flashlights on their faces as they move from the scrim downstage towards the audience as threatening zombies. Boing sound of flexitone cues actors. Music volume gets lower)*

The monster's hungry / it's coming to feast,  
On your heart / on your soul / the ravenous beast,  
Is famished / you're finished / diminished / hope's vanished,  
Your prayers are extinguished / your dreams are all banished.

*(Music louder. For 8 beats the music gets louder and the actors flick their flashlights on their faces as they move further downstage towards the audience as threatening zombies. Boing sound. Music lower)*

You've relinquished what distinguished you from bestial creatures,  
Humanity / sanity / all humane features,

Lost in egotistical grandiosity / heretical pomposity,  
Hysterical atrocity / hypocritical religiosity.

*(Music louder. Again, for 8 beats the music gets louder and the actors flick their flashlights on their faces as they move still further downstage towards the audience as threatening zombies. Boing sound. Music lower)*

The monster you fear, drags you down to its level,  
And now, how you revel in being a devil,  
Lost in this holocaust / schemin' / and dreamin',  
Now you are the monster /

**ALL.** You are the demon.

*(Music louder. Zombies reach audience. Musical climax of Hendrix mix: "of the land of the free ..." Sounds of bombs dropping and exploding. "... home of the brave" sound of machine guns. Zombies are splattered horrifically. Actors exit in blackout. Lights up. Video projection of fascist dictator figurines, then souvenir crucifix and lollipops)*

**LOLA.** (To audience) The gift shop didn't have any Franco action figures, but I got a fabulous Crucifix paperweight, and some "Valley of the Fallen" lollipops.

*ALHAMBRA* (2016), written and directed by Fred Curchack, was produced at UT Dallas in April 2017.

A video of the April 8, 2017 performance is published online:  
[vimeo.com/216976530/ba71530772](https://vimeo.com/216976530/ba71530772)

### From the press release:

Two couples take a dream vacation through Spain's art, architecture, poetry, music and dance, and the wonders and horrors of its Christian/Muslim/Jewish/Gypsy history. *ALHAMBRA* is a hysterical - historical - tragical - comical - phantasmagorical - theatrical spectacle with comedy, rap, and mind-boggling video effects. The play confronts our current global/national situation in the mirror of Spain from medieval times to now. Viewer discretion advised due to mature subject matter, the use of strobe lights, and hellfire. **A**