

## LA CHUNGA @ AGUIJÓN THEATER

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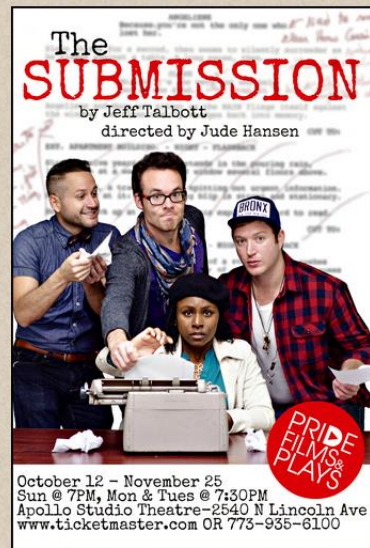
Theater review by Kerstin Broockmann, October 10, 2014

2 ½ stars out of 4

Agujón Theater is launching their 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season, for which they are revisiting previously produced work, with Mario Vargas Llosa's 1986 play *La Chunga*. Though they could be faulted for taking Vargas Llosa's baroque material a tad too seriously, the company's commitment almost overcomes the surfeit of earnestness with their passion. However, the play is too problematic to hold up even in the capable hands of the Agujón ensemble.



In a world dominated by men, *La Chunga* refuses to be subjugated and ultimately wields all the power, at least in the bar she owns, where she shrugs off the crude banter and insults of her customers. Her regulars, the "Inconquistables" (translated as Superstuds) are a bunch of good-for-nothings who gamble for drinking money and mask their fears with a violent machismo, often directed at the women who have the misfortune to fall for them. When Josefino, one of the Inconquistables, brings his latest romantic conquest to *La Chunga*'s place, it immediately becomes that the young woman, Meche, has relinquished her power already, despite protests to the contrary. It is also clear that, despite



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denying the Superstuds' speculation that she is a lesbian (why else would she be single and not interested in them, after all?), La Chunga is beguiled by Meche. After a gamble leaves Meche at La Chunga's mercy, her fate becomes unclear. The two women went to La Chunga's room, and that was last time Meche was seen. The remainder of the play depicts the Inconquistables' ideas of what might have happened in La Chunga's room, shaped by their own demons and fetishes. If Vargas Llosa is trying to make the point that no woman can escape being objectified by men no matter how hard she tries to avoid their gaze, he needs to go beyond that point. As it is, the play is a series of male fantasies interspersed with La Chunga's counsel to La Meche that she not become solely an object of desire, a fate which, under Vargas Llosa's pen, not even La Chunga avoids.

As the title character, Rosario Vargas is fierce, world-weary and shrewd, though she also shows tenderness towards the young woman who enters her lair. Vargas plays her cards close to her chest, except when she expresses disdain for the world of the men who purchase her liquor and the women who live only to please them. Her performance preserves the mystery at the center of the story admirably. As Josefino, her adversary in trying to win the affections of Meche, Sándor Menéndez captures most of the charm and duplicity of the character, but does not quite achieve the menace implied in the dialogue. Carlos Garcia Servin, as young Lituma, does a wonderful job of balancing his character's need to fit into the ultra-macho world and his good nature; it is also clear that he is not strong enough to avoid the lure of the Inconquistables. Completing the quartet are Augusto Yanacopulos as the elder José and Marcopolo Soto as the manic Mono. Yanacopulos embodies the empty futures in store for the Superstuds, while Soto drives much of the action with his relentless goading of his friends. As Meche, Erica Cruz Hernández projects just enough bravado to be convincing as a woman who sees romance as her only ticket to a better life, clinging to the illusion that she is choosing to allow herself to be exploited by the man she loves. Hernández and Vargas also do a great job of allowing their relationship to be distorted by the prisms of the fantasies imposed on their sojourn in La Chunga's room.

Director Marcela Muñoz clearly delineates the shifts between fantasy and reality, while maintaining the suspense that keeps the audience wondering exactly what *did* happen. This is largely possible due to her direction of Rosario Vargas in the title role. La Chunga is not portrayed as above the world she inhabits, though she keeps herself apart from it; her feelings for Meche are not always backed by honorable intentions and this makes the play as interesting as it can be. Vargas also does double-duty as the set designer, and she captures the run-down bar as well as La Chunga's room, which, though spare, has signs of being a sanctuary. The room is placed behind an upstage scrim, and the lighting design by Muñoz and

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Augusto Yanacopulos reveals and transforms it as each version of the events of the night is played out. The Aguijón ensemble knows how to create a unified vision, from the design elements to the performances. They are able to trust each other in even the most turgid moments of the play, allowing them to reach some of the dark psychological places that Vargas Llosa explores. At times, some of the blocking allows the tension to dissipate, giving the characters too much distance from each other to sustain the menace that one would think would be ever-present among armed and drunken men.

Aguijón Theater knows how to put together smart productions of little-seen works in their original language, and *La Chunga* is no exception. However, though their passion and reverence for the work goes a long way to creating an effective evening of theater, their efforts are ultimately not enough to make the play interesting as more than an examination of Mario Vargas Llosa's world view.

The plot is too predictable to be shocking and there are too many occasions when Vargas Llosa seems to relish the opportunity to create a series of fantasies that force his female characters into the very roles that other parts of his script encourage them to overcome.

*La Chunga* runs through November 16 at Aguijón Theater, 2707 N. Laramie Avenue. Performances are Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 pm and Sundays at 6 pm. Tickets are \$25 and can be purchased by calling 773-637-5899 or visiting [www.aguijontheater.org](http://www.aguijontheater.org). More information also available at [www.TheatreinChicago.com](http://www.TheatreinChicago.com).

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