

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Shallow Water

Sylvie · Wednesday, February 14th, 2018

Part Two of Quiara Alegria Hudes' *Elliot Trilogy*, *Water By the Spoonful*, a play about war, race, societal and family dynamics that proved worthy of the Pulitzer Prize in 2012, opened Sunday at The Mark Taper Forum in a production that was strange on more levels than one.

I am not referring to the brief interruption on opening night when one of the actors felt ill and unsure if she could go on. That was just a five-minute blip. She and the performance resumed briskly without further discomfort or disruption.

What I am referring to is a conceptual approach that makes it hard to know where to begin. Perhaps the way in is to tell you that in this second part of the *Trilogy*, Elliot is pretty clueless. He is no longer in the Marine Corps, not sure where in the world he should be, and working at Subway when Ginny, the woman who reared him, passes away. Her death unleashes a storm.

The period covered in *Spoonful* is a traumatic time for Elliot, who was wounded in the leg in Iraq, is haunted by an Iraqi ghost, and has returned to his home town of Philadelphia to make a life he hadn't exactly planned — or planned on: making sandwiches and enduring other low blows.

That's the main throughline, but Hudes is a playwright with a gift for creating many plot threads that she deftly interweaves. *Water By the Spoonful* is one of her most powerful and moving creations, which makes this production's shortfalls all the more bewildering.



Luna Lauren Vélez as Odessa in *Water* Lileana Blain-Cruz is the director and one assumes she made most of the baffling decisions — major casting ones and one about designer Adam Rigg's spacious, middle class, airy, clean and totally inappropriate setting.

This is not as much a criticism of the actors in Blain-Cruz's cast, as it is of their simply not being the right fit in too many of the roles. And casting being the well known half of the battle in creating a memorable theatrical event, this fundamental misstep is a big problem.

The play tells us clearly who most of these people are: survivors in a dysfunctional world. There is Elliot, of course, who is pretty confused, but there are also recovering addicts from all walks of life, most of them impoverished in many different ways by their habit, past or present. This motley crew congregates anonymously in lengthy, often humorous online exchanges on a recovery website run by screen name haikumom (aka Odessa and played by Luna Lauren Vélez).

Haikumom is an earth mother more closely related to Elliot than he likes. And thereby hang many astonishing tales.

No point in speculating why, in this staging, Odessa looks like the average healthy suburban next door, when she herself is a recovering addict who claims to be poor as a titmouse and makes do with a relic of a computer that her niece Yazmin (Keren Lugo) tells us is “the nicest thing she owns.” Really? This Odessa lives rather comfortably in Rigg’s too neat, too clean and too airy quarters. How does this add up to make any sense?

These are not minor wrong choices and they result in a serious absence of cohesion afflicting the entire production. More lethal still, this staging suffers from an inability to access the play’s very heart. *That* inability affects everything.



Sylvia Kwan & Bernard K. Addison in *Water By the Spoonful* at The Mark Taper Forum.

Because Hudes has so many different stories going within the larger framework, the scenes that resonate best are the one-on-ones between two of the website’s regulars: screen name Orangutang, a 26-year-old Japanese woman (Sylvia Kwan), adopted by American parents, who returns to Japan in pursuit of her heritage and human relationships that may help her make sense of her life. She succeeds in creating a relationship with screen name Chutes & Ladders, (Bernard K. Addison in an anchoring performance), a wise man in his 50s who pushes paper for the IRS and mourns the loss of contact with his son and grandchildren caused by his addiction.



Josh Braaten & Luna Lauren Vélez in *Water By the Spoonful* at The Mark Taper Forum.

The most playful, reluctant and engaging transformation is provided by Josh Braaten as screen name Fountainhead, the latest person to join the online group, and the one called upon to deliver the most radical change of behavior in the recovery circle that he has only so recently joined.

However, it is Sean Carvajal’s performance in the key role of Elliot that is perhaps the most defining; it is all words, noise and gesture that go wide instead of deep. The performance of his cousin and close buddy Yazmin (Lugo), a straight-ahead and recently divorced college music professor, is equally emotionally neutral. They give us virtual characters whose emoting is painted to look like emotion.



Keren Lugo & Sean Carvajal in *Water* This is an issue central to Blain-Cruz’s tone-deaf direction. *By the Spoonful* at The Mark Taper Forum. It also reveals some minor overwriting by the prolific Hudes

who stuffs more than is needed in those two hours of performance time. The fundamental *exposé* of the painful and difficult world most of these characters inhabit should feel a great deal more devastating than it does here.

This disappointment is substantial and systemic. Too often, play-acting substitutes for real acting, and the searing event that defines Elliot’s confusion — and is fully named in the play’s title — is never experienced as the wallop that it is by anyone on stage. *Water By the Spoonful* is a heartbreaking and beautiful composition that, in this production, is served cold.

A footnote: the third part of the *Elliot Trilogy* opens February 22 in a Latino Theatre Company staging at downtown's Los Angeles Theatre Center. Its title is *The Happiest Song Plays Last* and you'll read about it here.

*Top image: : l-r, Keren Lugo, Luna Lauren Vélez & Sean Carvajal in Water By the Spoonful at The Mark Taper Forum.*

*Photos by Craig Schwartz*

**WHAT:** *Water By the Spoonful*

**WHERE:** Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90012.

**WHEN:** Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends March 11.

**HOW:** Tickets: \$25 – \$95 (subject to change) available at 213.628.2772 or at [www.CenterTheatreGroup.org](http://www.CenterTheatreGroup.org) or in person at the Center Theatre Group Box Office at The Music Center. Group Sales: 213.972.7231. Deaf community info & charge: [CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS](http://CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS)

[alert type=alert-white ]Please consider making a tax-deductible donation now so we can keep publishing strong creative voices.[/alert]

This entry was posted on Wednesday, February 14th, 2018 at 5:49 pm and is filed under [Theatre](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.