Cultural Daily

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The Telenovela Gets its Theatrical Due

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, November 11th, 2026

Telenovelas, with their massive global viewership, are a cultural phenomenon. But the style is not relegated to Spanish-speaking audiences. Similar dramas glue eyeballs to screens in the Philippines, Thailand, the Arab world, Japan, South Korea, and Canada.

A stage production—especially one with Latin music—would seem in order. Enter Karen Zacarías' *Destiny of Desire,* playing in hyper-melodramatic style at the Mark Taper Forum, November 11 through December 20.



Destiny of Desire, playing at the Mark Taper Forum | Photo: Jamie Kraus

Growing Up With the Genre

The all-Latino cast is familiar with the escapist genre. When actor Zeus Mendoza, who plays Armando Castillo, was eight, evenings with his family in Phoenix revolved around telenovelas—*Mamá Campanita* and *La Fiera* were favorites. It was a nightly ritual of drama, laughs, and improbable plot lines.

In the play, Mendoza's character *o*wns the Castillo Casino and loves his status as much as his ex-beauty queen wife, Fabiola, played by Gabriela Carrillo. Fabiola secretly swaps their newborn daughter with another at the hospital and Armando raises the wrong child for 18 years without knowing.



Destiny of Desire, playing at the Mark Taper Forum | Photo: Jamie Kraus

The play has two layers. The first is a send-up of the ever-dramatic telenovela genre, served with music, dancing and outrageousness, "a nonstop roller coaster ride," as Mendoza describes it. The play's subversive edge comes from actors who break the fourth wall, stepping out of the story to share facts—some witty, some sobering—that raise questions about gender inequality, class divides, immigration, gun violence, healthcare disparities and other issues.

The meta message: perhaps all of life is a telenovela.



Destiny of Desire, playing at the Mark Taper Forum | Photo: Jamie Kraus

Mendoza credits director Marcela Lorca with expertly stitching the layers together into a seamless production. “I can’t imagine this show being directed by anybody else,” he says, adding that Lorca intimately understands the culture, the humor, and the pressures of growing up in it. Above that, he adds, she understands the dynamics of Latino families.

“We never intend to make fun of the genre; it’s one that billions of people around the world have grown up with,” says Mendoza. “We pay homage to it. Yes, there are a lot of shenanigans, a lot of fun as we embrace the music and dance of our culture. There’s a richness that comes through—it’s very infectious to the audience.”



Destiny of Desire, playing at the Mark Taper Forum | Photo: Jamie Kraus

Mendoza doesn't see Armando as a straightforward villain, despite his pride, power, and capacity to irritate. "He's also a victim of Fabiola's manipulation," he says. "I tried infusing him with heart as well. And he does a couple of things in the show that people will be shocked at."

Zacarías' play had its world premiere in 2015 at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., directed by José Luis Valenzuela. It went on to regional and national tours and landed at San Diego's Old Globe in 2023. As a co-production with the Center Theatre Group, the Denver Center Theatre Company performed the play in September and October 2026.



Destiny of Desire, playing at the Mark Taper Forum | Photo: Jamie Kraus

Will Non-Spanish Speakers Keep Up?

Mendoza says they will. Zacarías, who grew up in Mexico and the U.S., sprinkles in Spanish, but she crafted the script so English-only audiences can follow everything.

Mendoza arrives at the Mark Taper having played Armando Castillo in the Denver production that ran at the Wolf Theatre. Los Angeles will be a welcoming next stop, he says, given the city has a large Latino population with families who have lived here for generations. “In L.A., we have a built-in audience,” he says. “The marketing team has set up student matinees to get young Latino people to have an opportunity to see something like this.”



Destiny of Desire, playing at the Mark Taper Forum | Photo: Jamie Kraus

Mendoza was born in Chihuahua, Mexico; when he was four, his parents brought him and his brother to the U.S. He studied at Santa Clara University and worked as a Bay Area stage actor. In 2008, he received a Garland's Critics Choice Award nomination for his role as Slim in the Pasadena Playhouse production of *Of Mice and Men.* Mendoza, who also works in voice acting and gaming, has been a television series regular and guest star with roles in *Days of Our Lives, CSI, The Rookie, 9-1-1,* and others. In 2025, he performed as part of the ensemble in the Broadway musical adaptation of *Real Women Have Curves.* He's lived in Los Angeles since 1999.

For Mendoza, the Los Angeles run of the show is a homecoming; he says he doesn't take the all-Latino cast for granted. Opportunities to tell stories like this one "from beginning to end" with such a cast, he says, are rare.

Karen Zacarías' *Destiny of Desire* runs at the Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., November 11 through December 20, 2026. Tickets: CenterTheatreGroup.org

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