

Salvador Dali's magic universe

REVIEW: A new play mixes surrealism and naturalism, with intriguing results.

By **PAUL HODGINS**
The Orange County Register

The best plays create their own universe with such conviction that the characters seem eerily real, like old acquaintances you'd forgotten about. Perhaps it's because you recognize your world in theirs — everybody knows a Willy Loman, or siblings who use the past like a lethal weapon when they fight, as Austin and Lee do in Sam Shepard's "True West."

The extraordinary thing about "References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot," a new play that debuted Friday on South Coast Repertory's Second Stage, is that playwright Jose Rivera creates not one but two worlds that resonate deeply and convincingly. And one of those worlds, on the surface, should seem anything but familiar.

Rivera is a practitioner of the much-maligned device called Magic Realism: the cross-weaving of the fantastical and the mundane. Novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez made it popular decades ago. More recently, filmmakers such as David Lynch (and his many less talented disciples) have turned it into cliché.

Magic Realism has never successfully been adapted for the theater. There have been partial successes by Hispanic playwrights such as Luis Valdez and Eduardo Machado. But Rivera may be the breakthrough playwright who transforms it from a mere theatrical device into a mesmerizing and full-bodied style.

In plays such as "Cloud Tectonics," Rivera experimented boldly and inventively with surreal elements, making them intrinsic parts of the sto-

'References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot'

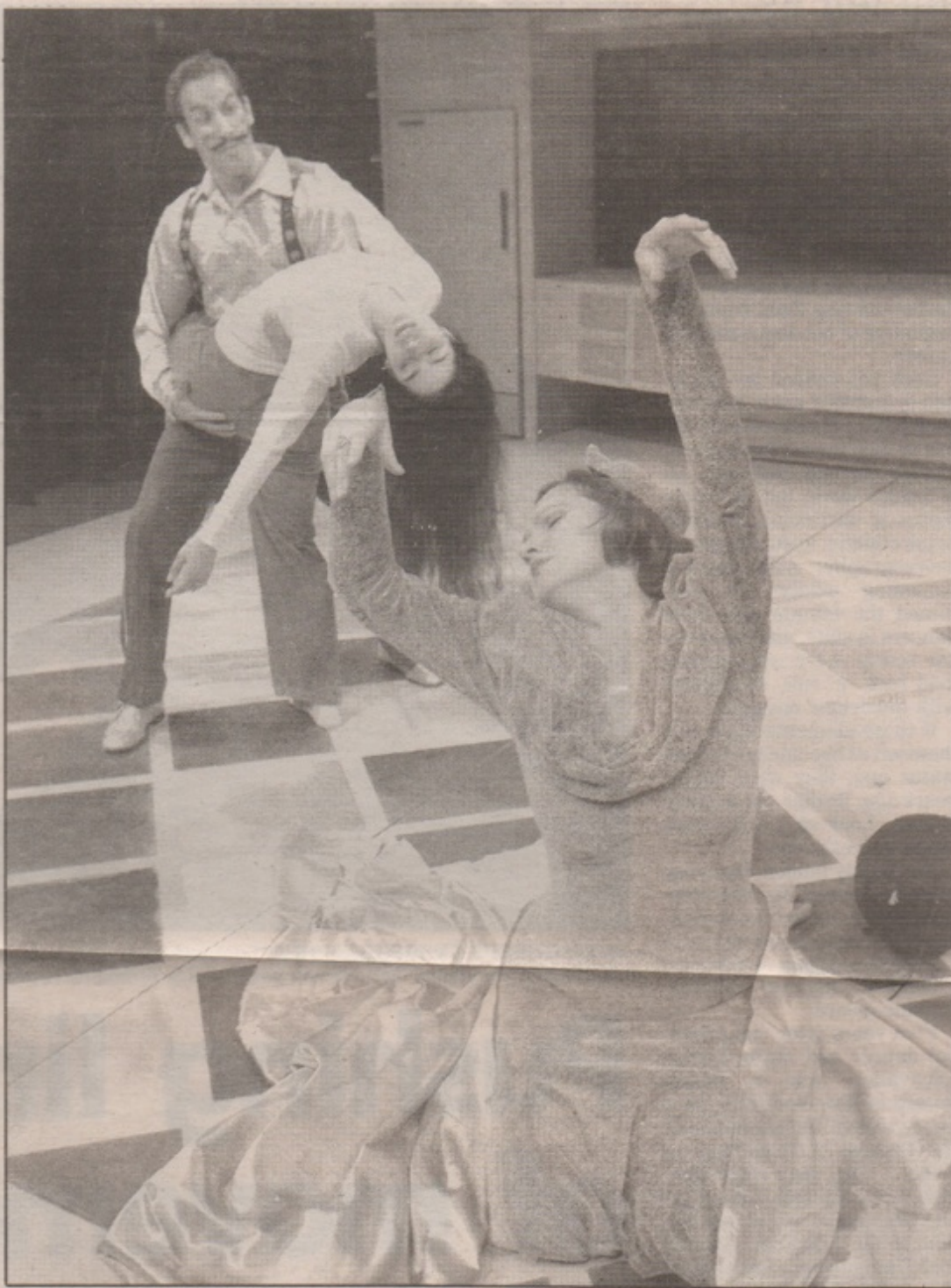
- ▶ **Where:** Second Stage, South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa
- ▶ **Continues:** Through Feb. 27. 7:45 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2:30 and 7:45 p.m. Saturday, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday.
- ▶ **How much:** \$26-\$45
- ▶ **Length:** 2 hours
- ▶ **Suitability:** Adult themes and language
- ▶ **Call:** (714) 708-5555

ry. In "References" the surreal becomes an alternate reality that counterbalances and completes the central plot, and the result is fascinating. You feel as if you're watching a new method of storytelling in the process of being born.

The first and last acts concern a love-hate relationship between a cat and a coyote in a moonlit Barstow back yard. The coyote criticizes the cat's soft, passionless world and tempts her to spend the night hunting with him, or at least indulging in other carnal pleasures. The cat chides the coyote for his hardscrabble existence and reminds him the drool in his mouth hints at more than a night of friendly hunting.

Still, she is attracted to him; lust and danger jostle for dominance. These acts are staged with a dream's disconnectedness and psychosexual overtones, and they're surprisingly compelling.

The two interior acts involve the lives inside that lonely Barstow home. Benito, a gung-ho Army lifer, returns from the field to find his intelligent young wife, Gabriela, restless and unhappy with her waiting-in-the-wings existence. He wants sex and easy domesticity; she wants honesty and respect from her spouse. Like the cat-coyote conflict, the sexual tension could be cut with a chain saw, and the verbal combat gets nasty. "You use words the way some people use razor wire and guard dogs," Benito complains.



MARK AVERY/The Orange County Register

COLLIDING WORLDS: Robert Montano and Ana Ortiz are Benito and Gabriela, and Svetlana Eframova is the Cat in 'References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot' at South Coast Repertory.

Unlike the coyote-cat scenes, this domestic squabble is written as pure kitchen-sink naturalism. But the two worlds echo each other in intriguing ways.

Rivera shapes each act masterfully, letting the tense dynamic between opposing pairs seesaw, constantly rearranging the jagged geography of desire and dread, forcing confrontations, upping the ante at every turn.

Robert Montano and Ana Ortiz give Benito and Gabriela

the required volcanic intensity, though Ortiz isn't yet fully equipped for a role of this depth. Victor Mack and Svetlana Eframova have a ball as the coyote and the cat, although they could let a bit more of their inner beasts escape the pen. Wells Rosales captures the confusion of puberty as Martin, a neighboring teen-ager who's just beginning to explore the meaning of manhood.

Director Juliette Carrillo

has created a supple, sensual production that's visually dazzling and attentive to changes of scene and tone. Scenic designer Monica Raya plays slyly with Dali-esque concepts such as contrasting proportions without turning her set into an obvious homage. All in all, it's an evening of theatrical magic and unnerving familiarity that asks some hard questions about love and commitment. You'll swear Rivera has been eavesdropping on your life — and your dreams.