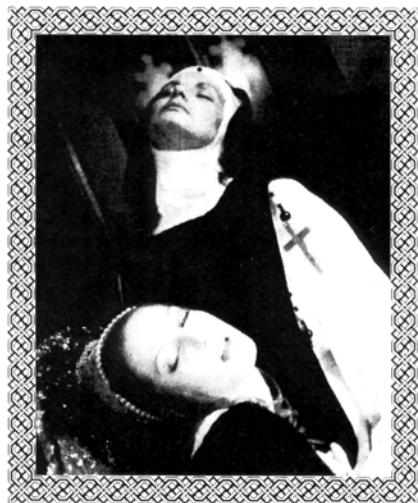


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LESBIAN IN A NUN'S HABIT

NEW PLAY BRINGS 17TH-CENTURY POET
SOR JUANA'S LIFE TO THE STAGE

By Les Spindle

WITH ITS WORLD-PREMIERE DRAMA "THE NUN AND THE COUNTESS," the three-year-old MACHA Theatre Co. continues its tradition of unveiling provocative dramatic works with lesbian themes. MACHA, which stands for Mujeres (Women) Advancing Culture, History, and Art, was founded by Artistic Director Odalys Nanin, who has been the primary driving force in keeping lesbian theatre alive in Los Angeles in recent years. Her latest work

promises to be her most challenging.

The play, based on Alicia Gaspar de Alba's novel "Sor Juana's Second Dream," tells the true story of a passionate romance between Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, a cloistered nun and renowned poet, and Countess Maria Luisa de Paredes, the nation's vicereine, in 17th-century Mexico. Sor Juana, perhaps the first feminist, used her art as an outlet to fight the stifling restrictions against women imposed by the Inquisition and the

Catholic Church. She dared to mope the rights of women to sit and discourse with scholars at a time when women were not considered equals. Nanin plays the title in addition to writing and producing. *Frontiers* chatted with her about production, which opened Oct. 25

Les Spindle: What inspired you to write a play based on these characters?

Odalys Nanin: I had known about Sor Juana for a long time



because of her beautiful poems. She was the most prolific poet of the Golden Age. I have read them to two of my girlfriends because they're so romantic and passionate. But I never knew much about her life. My friend Alicia [Gaspar de Alba], a UCLA professor who wrote the novel [about Sor Juana's life], brought it to my attention. It's very accurate historically, dealing with everything about Sor Juana's life, including her relationship with the countess. When I started reading that 500-page book, I couldn't put it down, finishing it in three days. As I read, I visualized scenes with a lot of wonderful things happening. My theatrical projects aren't just about the writing; they are about presenting things that need to be seen. I wanted people to be exposed to the amazing world of Sor Juana. What amazed me about this novel is how well the atmosphere and political intrigues of the time were portrayed. It opened up a whole new world to me. I became impassioned with it, and just had to write the play.

Sor Juana is well-known in Mexico, but not in the U.S. What did she contribute to literature and to social causes?

The life of this woman is fascinating, and the amount of work she did in that convent is astounding. She did it all with a quill and an inkwell. I have a thick book of her poems, Christmas carols, and plays. They are incredibly beautiful, and you can see her championing for women's rights in the text. She was also a musician and a painter. She spoke three languages. She was all of these things in a society in which women were supposed to be only wives or nuns.

In such a sexually primitive environment, how did Sor Juana get away with writing love poems to a woman and pro-

moting women's rights?

What saved her was that she was under the protection of the royal palace. She was invited by the viceroy to come there at age 15, as she had been recognized as a child genius. She learned to read when she was 3. She was a different kind of woman, so ahead of her time. She stayed at the palace until she turned 21, when the marquis and marquesa, for whom she was lady-in-waiting, left for Spain. She was an illegitimate child and had no way to make money and didn't want to get married. Her only real choice was to become a nun. When she met the countess in 1682, and they started their eight-year relationship, her romantic passion came out. Her poems were the only way she could express what she was feeling. So she wrote the most passionate, sexual, romantic poems that you can imagine. The countess protected her against repercussions from church or state.

Did she see the benefits of her social advocacy during her life?

I don't want to reveal certain plot developments. You have to see the play. But before she died at age 45, events occurred that stripped her of her creative tools and her soul. In my opinion, she slowly committed suicide. I see her as an amazing icon in terms of women, and in general as an advocate for equality and human rights. She was like a Martin Luther King. She was like a lesbian trapped in a nun's habit, and also trapped in her time. **Z**

"The Nun and the Countess" continues through Dec. 14 at the Hollywood Court Theatre, 6817 Franklin Ave. (inside the Hollywood Methodist Church). \$25. 818/623-9333.