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The Many Faces of Julian López-Morillas

By Karen D'Souza

Julian López-Morillas is an old hand at juggling gigs. He has to be.

One of the hardest-working character actors in the Bay Area, he has graced stages from San Jose and Palo Alto to Berkeley and San Francisco for the last 36 years. Still, scratching out a living here means being fleet on his feet despite his long tenure. To make ends meet, he's also a teacher, a director, an audiobook narrator and a blogger.

"In truth I would prefer more stability, but that is the life of a theater actor," the veteran says over lattes before rehearsals for "The Seafarer" at San Jose Stage Company. "And the theater is my home; it's where I belong."

An unsung hero of the Bay Area theater scene, he has not only performed in every play in the Shakespearean canon (count 'em, 38), he has also chiseled a reputation as a protean classical actor with a piercing gaze who can morph from classical to camp and back (sometimes in the same week).

"He's like Captain Ahab. He's been around the world 20 times," says Randall King, artistic director of San Jose Stage, where "Seafarer" starts Nov. 18. "He's part of theater royalty here in the Bay Area. He's one of the people who sets the bar."

Since 1973, the actor has sent Bay Area critics scurrying for glowing adjectives with unforgettable performances from Pinter to the Bard. A veteran at the San Jose Stage Company, the actor is now in the middle of a theatrical trifecta there. He just wrapped a searing turn through Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman," only to dive right back into stormy Irish waters with Conor McPherson's dark fable "Seafarer," which opens Nov. 18. After that, he's set to star in Tom Stoppard's "Rock 'n' Roll."

"I consider Julian to be one of the greatest minds that I have worked with," says Jonathan Moscone, artistic director of California Shakespeare Theater. "His

mastery of Shakespeare's language is unparalleled. When he speaks, it is with such ease and authority that you cannot help but say, this man is speaking these words from the core of his being. I used to be terrified of his intelligence, but now I consider it a rare asset that I long to have in the room."

Famed for his fierce intellect, the actor has a distinctly professorial air (he's taught everywhere from San Jose State University to UC-Berkeley). He has a genius for linguistics that floors even other actors. He's famous for triple-entendres that few understand, he can do the New York Times crossword puzzle in less than 15 minutes (in pen!) and he has won big on "Jeopardy!"

Equal parts avuncular and candid, the 62-year-old retains an air of mischief despite his salt-and-pepper beard and his encyclopedic knowledge of literature. To unwind, he recently plowed through "Moby Dick" and "War and Peace." In his spare time, he is crafting a one-man show on the poet Robert Browning, "Sleep to Wake."

"He has an incredible brain, of course," says actress Stacy Ross, but also, "He's fun. He's got a wicked sense of humor. I think there's a dearth of really fine actors of his age because we tend to hit 50 and think 'I better make some money now' and it's off to wherever they can go to do that."

Not López-Morillas. While he flirted with moving to Hollywood back in his 20s, he has never regretted making his artistic home here. He does fly around the country for shows from Princeton's McCarter Theatre to the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. But he's committed to putting the art first, money last. It means making sacrifices (he and his wife are still renters after all these years) but he says they are well worth it.

"I'm not the guy who walks in the door and you say, ooh, actor," he says with customary modesty. "You need to watch me for a while to see the things that I can do and it means a lot to me that over the years I have earned a lot of respect in the Bay Area theater community. If I went to a new place I would have to trade all of that away, and for what?"

Over the decades, he has graced the stage of every major theater from ACT and San Jose Rep to TheatreWorks and he's got the miles on his car to prove it. It's a grueling schedule so he often catnaps in the green room during shows.

"This is a community of actors who have committed to living and working here for personal and artistic reasons. It's not about the money," says the actor at a cafe on Fourth Street in west Berkeley, a few blocks from his home (although he is moving to Crockett because they need more space ... for all their books).

"The experiences I have had with film and TV work have been stultifying. It's just horrible. It's about everything but creativity. It's about how they light you and how

you look. I take acting seriously."

Besides, it takes decades to forge the kind of bond that exists between López-Morillas and troupes like San Jose Stage.

"When the cast comes together it's lock and load time," says King, who first got to know López-Morillas back in the '80s, "because there's a trust there. We've gone to the wire for each other over the years so we know we can pull it off no matter what the muses hand us."

Sadly, toiling in the same artistic ecosystem for several decades also means that his very best chums (James Carpenter, Robert Sicular, Jarion Monroe) are his fiercest competition at auditions. But he now receives an Equity pension, which takes the economic pressure off.

"My close circle of friends overlaps with my competition, yes, but we're all past that now. We've known each other far too long."

In "Seafarer," a stormy tale of booze, poker and redemption, he plays Richard, an inveterate sot with a mouth as filthy as his clothes. He's usually blind drunk, in addition to being actually blind, which explains why he has precious little good cheer on a fateful Christmas Eve. López-Morillas will be reprising the role he first played at Marin Theatre Company last year. It's yet another part where his verbal facility makes the text sing.

"The man knows how to handle language," says actor Carpenter, who recalls the time López-Morillas stepped into the Aurora Theatre's "Homecoming" as a last-minute replacement and almost stole the show. "And he's got a musical ear for dialogue — a sense for knowing how a particular passage should sound, or how the rhythms and tempo in a section of dialogue inform and drive the piece verbally."

Born in Providence, R.I., López-Morillas did not come from show folk. Indeed he was originally headed for the ivory halls of academe. His father was a Spanish émigré who founded the Comparative Literature Department at Brown. The actor went to Swarthmore, planning to become an archaeologist, but fell for the theater instead. He quickly decamped to Yale's revered Drama Department, nabbed his master's of fine arts from Carnegie Mellon and made his way west to Berkeley. That was 36 years ago.

"I instantly felt at home here in the bluest city in the bluest state in the country," says the actor.

Of course, sometimes that brain of his can ruffle feathers. He has little patience for directors who prefer gimmicky concepts to close readings of the text. But after all these years, he has learned the virtues of silence. In rehearsals with those

who don't know Shakespeare from Shaw, he now works hard to hold his tongue.
No mean feat for a master thespian.

"The Seafarer"

By Conor McPherson

Where: San Jose Stage Company, 490 S. First St., San Jose

When: Nov. 18-Dec. 20

Tickets: \$20-\$45;

408-283-7142;

www.thestage.org

SOUTH BAY ROLES FOR LÓPEZ-MORILLAS

Actor-director Julian López-Morillas' roles at San Jose Stage Company represent a return to the South Bay stage after a nine-year hiatus during which he was concentrating on San Francisco and East Bay work. Here's a brief history:

Upcoming: "Seafarer" at San Jose Stage (2009)

"Pillowman" at San Jose Stage (2009)

"Sons of Don Juan" at San Jose Rep (2000)

"Betrayal" at San Jose Stage (1996)

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" at San Jose Stage (1996)

"Equus" at TheatreWorks (1996)

"You Never Can Tell" at TheatreWorks (1996)

"The Living" at San Jose Stage (1995)

"Six Characters in Search of An Author" at San Jose Stage (1994)

"The Sea Gull" at San Jose Rep (1994)

"La Bete" at TheatreWorks (1993)

"Death of a Salesman" at San Jose Rep (1993)

"The Royal Hunt of the Sun" at TheatreWorks (1993)

"Servant of Two Masters" at San Jose Rep (directed, 1985)

"School for Scandal" at San Jose Rep (directed, 1984)