THEATER REVIEW: *The Fifth Sun* from Artes de la Rosa in Fort Worth

By Charlie Bowles
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FORT WORTH — Oscar Romero may never be canonized by the Catholic Church but he’s already a saint to the El Salvadoran people. Romero stood up to the Salvadoran death squads in 1979, decried the murder of fellow priests and thousands of people in the tiny Central American country, and was assassinated in 1980 as he raised the chalice in celebration of Mass. When 250,000 people attended his funeral, the government sent snipers to kill mourners and this started a 12-year civil war.

Oscar Romero’s courage inspired the people of El Salvador. His history of El Salvador brought together the Catholic Church in the midst of its own transformation towards a more humanistic philosophy with a Mayan worldview, and together they collided with a brutal anti-human oligarch government. Whether Oscar Romero achieves canonization, he will always be the Hero of El Salvador.

Artes de la Rosa produced *The Fifth Sun* by Nicholas A. Patricca, professor of theater at Loyola University in Chicago. His play tells the story of Oscar Romero and celebrates the triumph of human spirit within a background of Mayan history.

This production was the result of a long-time vision of Adam Adolfo, Artistic Director and the Director of *The Fifth Sun*. In his vision, the story of Romero and his rise to the Archbishop of San Salvador and eventual fall was told through an impressionistic lens. Events were shown through music and dance, violence was shrouded in mystery, and exposition about violence was spoken through dialog and chant.

The bare stage included five small movable box cubes and three long white aerial silks falling from the grid. On the back hung a 14’ diameter Mayan calendar created by Scenic Director Oliver Luke. His Mayan green calendar sculpture matched his highlight colors in an otherwise neutral stage set, punctuated by the three white silks.

Those silks were the tools of the four Mayan Guardians, the Sun Gods, as they performed aerial ballet and acrobatics. They gracefully wrapped in the silks flowing with the musical score created by Adolfo. These young dancers, choreographed by Adolfo, as well as two of the dancers, Frieda Austin and Rebekah Ruiz, had many parts to play. They gave visual movement to the Guardians’ tribal songs, their aerial static poses provided a focal point to dialog among the priests, and the movement provided a beautiful flow to the show.

Parker Fitzgerald plays Apuch, Lord of Death in *The Fifth Sun* at Artes de la Rosa.
Lighting was important in creating sharp spots and shadows in the impressionist stage picture. Much of the acting took place in the house aisles so lighting had to extend into the audience. Lighting Designers Will Sancen and Aaron Sanchez also used rotating spotlights to project moving designs around the stage and audience.

The Guardians, the four suns in the Mayan creation story, were dressed in colors of red, white, blue, and black sheer wraps and their body makeup suggested their different god roles of rain, cultivation, life, and death. Adolfo created those flowing silk costumes and together, with makeup artist Kristi Taylor, painted their faces to reflect their purpose.

These gods conveyed important information within Adolfo’s vision. They played their own parts, as well as representing the God of the priests, and the citizens of the country who provided exposition. Ghanan (Eduardo Aguilar), Kukulkan (Frieda Austin), Chac (Rebekah Ruiz), and Ahpuch (Parker Fitzgerald) sang the opening song, “Alegria”, to introduce the story and danced their aerial ballet throughout the show. They created a constant picture of the ever-present nature of spirit in the Mayan world. Adolfo used them as his main impressionistic visual and their performance on the silks reminded me of the Cirque du Soleil. Very impressive, thanks to coaching by Lone Star Circus School.

One issue I had was the sound balance. When driving bass and drum beats of the tribal background music played, which was beautiful on its own, the actors’ lyrics and chanting were not understandable. It may have been that we didn’t need to hear lyrics as much as feel the impression of their chants, but this seemed like a show that cried out for mics.

The Colonel represented the tyrannical government. Joshua Sherman was dressed in full military garb and played his role with the violent gusto required of a character that killed priests. It seems he was the outward impression of the anti-Christ but he was not the antagonist of this story. While Sherman embodied the violence in Adolfo’s vision and Patricia’s story, there were times when it was hard to understand his words as he yelled his lines with a strong Spanish accent. But in Adolfo’s sensual painting Sherman was clear with his intention and motivation and violence followed wherever he appeared.

Anne Dunn was played by Laura L. Watson. The quintessential naïve American in a foreign country, Dunn wanted to make a difference. Listed as a “Mercy Sister from America,” Watson played Dunn more as an advisor to the Archbishop than a nun, but it was her monologues that provided much of the historical perspective. A bit cynical and harder than most nuns we’ve seen, she allowed us to see the struggle Romero was going through by forcing him to argue his own beliefs against her naïve ideas.

This story was about the Catholic priests, particularly Oscar Romero. How would they respond to the violence? As the new Archbishop, it was his struggle, walking a fine line between non-violence and supporting people who were being massacred, we watched. Could he become the leader the people demanded? George X. Rodriguez was perfectly cast in this part. From Romero’s opening profession of peace and goodness in all people, we watched Rodriguez transform Romero into the leader who had to speak against the violence he saw regardless of the
outcome. The inevitability of his fate was clear but the steps to reach that point was the powerful story of El Salvador and Rodriguez made that transformation visible.

In Romero’s diocese there were two Salvadoran priests. Friar Rutilio Grande, played with great sensitivity by Alejandro Sandogal II, was a voice of reason for Romero. It was the assassination of Grande which started Romero on the path to stand up against the government. Friar Hector Navarez was the young priest who got caught up in the Communist movement. Mateo Prada played him with the naïveté of a young man intent on being a martyr for his beliefs.

The antagonist of this story was the Nuncio, a Cardinal from Rome who anointed Romero the Archbishop. Kyle Trentham played Nuncio as a friend of Romero who wanted him to represent the official Vatican position supporting the oligarchy against the people and truly anguished when Romero did things to enflame the government. Nuncio was not evil as much as a man who represented the Church and was willing to fight Romero to do it. Romero had to overcome this view to discover his own beliefs and reach his own fate.

Alejandro Sandovall II plays Fr. Rutilio Grande and Kyle R. Trentham plays the Nuncio in The Fifth Sun from Artes de la Rosa.

"Let us not tire of preaching love: it is the force that will overcome the world." In the pre-show of The Fifth Sun, powerfully evoking music plays above a series of actual radio broadcasts in Spanish by Oscar Romero during the year before his death. In this we connected to the power of these true events immediately.

There are shows we see for fun and others we see for entertainment and some we see to connect with our classical roots. Adam Adolfo and Artes de la Rosa have brought a performance we should see for conscience. In these days of strife around the world, as we watch thousands of people being murdered by their governments, it’s important for us to remember that history repeats itself and will continue to repeat as long as we ignore it.

See this show for its content. See it for its visually-arresting beauty and haunting music and dance. Most of all see it as the vision of Adam Adolfo and a production team that caught fire bringing his vision to life.