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THE ROMANCE OF MAGNO RUBIO: 'MIDDLE-CLASS WHITE GUY' WRITES ABOUT A FILIPINO IMMIGRANT.

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If the Rainbow Coalition had a playwrights' wing, Lonnie Carter would be a leading candidate to chair it.

Long established as a distinctive talent but not widely known, he has spent nearly 30 years writing plays that jump racial and ethnic boundaries. Many of his lines are tuned to the rhythms and rhymes of rap and its antecedents in black street jive. His language is often densely packed with wordplay and allusions, for which he grazes omnivorously, ranging from the shoals of pop culture to the mountaintops of classic literature and the Bible.

Carter spent years in the late 1980s and the 1990s building his magnum opus, "The Gulliver Trilogy," a sequence of plays patterned after Jonathan Swift's 18th century satiric classic, "Gulliver's Travels." Carter's version centers on an idealistic preacher-politician from Chicago who, though transported to fantastical realms, is a near-ringer for the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

Now, at 61, Carter arrives at the Laguna Playhouse as an honorary Philippine American, which is not anything this self-described "middle-class white guy" could have expected growing up in an all-white neighborhood on Chicago's North Side.

Ralph Pena, artistic director of the Ma-Yi Theater Company, an Asian American troupe in New York City, conferred the honorific title after commissioning Carter's adaptation of "The Romance of Magno Rubio." It's a faithful, rhyme-driven staging of Carlos Bulosan's short story about a simple farm worker in 1930s California who won't let hardship, heartbreak or his lot as an exploited immigrant mar his hopeful spirit. The Laguna Playhouse is importing the New York staging that won Obie Awards for Carter, Pena, director Loy Arcenas and the five-man cast of Filipino American actors.

Carter has cranked out plays since 1969, when he graduated from the Yale School of Drama, but this is his first professional production on the West Coast.

For Pena, Bulosan is a seminal literary figure, a migrant farmhand who came to America from the Philippines and transformed himself into a labor organizer and a powerful writer on the immigrant experience. Bulosan battled tuberculosis for many years and died of pneumonia in 1956 at age 44.

Ma-Yi (the ancient Chinese name for the Philippines) had been trying without much success to translate his writing to the stage. Pena, a playwright whose childhood was divided between the Philippines and Orange County, had taken a crack at adapting "Magno Rubio" himself.

After Pena gave up, Arcenas suggested Lonnie Carter for the job. The director, who is also a set designer and also from the Philippines, first connected with Carter in 1999 at New Dramatists, a New York organization that nurtures playwrights.

Ma-Yi's mission, since its founding in 1989, has been to develop Asian American theater talent. Pena says it was "kind of scary" having to sell his company's directors and its community of artists on a writer who hails from Hungarian, Czech and Nebraska farm stock. One of his arguments was multicultural: "We don't want to be isolationist and say Filipino plays should be written by Filipinos for Filipinos only. That's not the world we live in today."

The other was artistic: Pena and Arcenas were won by the strength of Carter's words and by his willingness to weave ideas from the cast and director into his script. Pena contributed lyrics in Tagalog for the songs sung by Magno Rubio and his bunkhouse mates.

Speaking recently from his home in Falls Village, Conn., Carter said he was enchanted by Magno Rubio's capacity to endure and keep his innocence. "He's an amazingly resilient character. It makes me feel good, it makes me optimistic."

Carter has needed to be resilient himself. His works have not made it onto the regional theater circuit whose imprimatur typically is needed for a playwright to be ranked as a player. He makes his living mainly by teaching playwriting at New York University. But Carter has pockets of support in New York and Chicago. He has never written for television, and his film work consists of a few rewrites of unheralded independent screenplays. "I'm about 99 and 44-hundredths percent pure playwright," he says.

Dennis Zacek, the artistic director at Victory Gardens, and Neel Keller, associate producer of the Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson Theatre, regard Carter as a rare delight for language lovers who relish unfettered, unpredictable flights of kaleidoscopic dialogue. They applaud him for his constant probing of overarching moral themes, especially the nature of justice. But he's a tough sell to the majority of theaters, which are geared toward meat-and-potatoes storytelling. It also probably doesn't help that he's a white guy who persists in crossing racial borders.

"It's hard to categorize him, and that makes people unsure," Keller says. "They have not discovered him because his plays don't fit neatly into a normal slot, a normal way of thinking."

Carter says he writes so often about black characters (and now the Asian American experience) because "if I weren't writing about that, I would not be paying attention to what's going on in the country. The [black] influence is everywhere, and I have to respond to it. I have no illusions -- I'm a middle-class white guy -- but I know what I hear and observe. You always have to be careful, but if you trust your ear, you're not going to go too far wrong."

Broadway star Andre De Shields ("Ain't Misbehavin'"), who has directed or played the lead in all three parts of "The Gulliver Trilogy," recalls in his introduction to the published "Gulliver" that he was thrilled when he first encountered Carter through one of the playwright's earlier scripts, "The Sovereign State of Boogedy Boogedy." Here, De Shields assumed, was a "Bible-literate Brother whose dramatic voice spoke with such Afrocentric juice." Only on meeting Carter in person did the surprised actor realize that this voice issued from a white man. That kind of thing happens regularly, the playwright says, and he takes it as a sign that "I must be doing something right."

Lately, Arcenas has been lobbying regional theaters to stage "China Calls," based on Carter's experiences during a time when he was shuttling between Chicago and Beijing. And Pena wants the playwright to take on another Bulosan adaptation for Ma-Yi, this time dramatizing Bulosan's signature work, a novel-length memoir called "America Is in the Heart," which details the racist horrors inflicted on Filipinos in Depression-era California.

After "The Romance of Magno Rubio," Pena says, there is no need to defend the appropriateness of an Asian American theater collaborating with a middle-class white guy.

"I don't think I have to make a case for Lonnie Carter with anybody."

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