

THE PLAYWRIGHT:  
Gonzalo Rodriguez Risco

*Gonzalo Rodriguez Risco is a playwright and translator living in Lima, Peru. A recent graduate of Yale School of Drama, his works include "The French Play," "Journey to Santiago" and "Dramatis Personae." Fluent in English and Spanish, Rodriguez has also translated such classic American plays as "A Chorus Line" and "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" for South American audiences.*

As a writer, is dealing with universal subjects rather than local or fleeting subjects a better way to reach a global audience? Or does something that appears local, deeply grounded in a particular culture, translate to a broader audience just by the act of telling it? My personal approach comes as a Spanish-speaking playwright who decided to write in English. I had to discover my way into this "foreign" language, and that way has become my particular voice as a writer in English. It's neither English as written by a natural English speaker nor a translation by a Spanish speaker. It lives somewhere in the middle.

As I was struggling to write my first plays in English, I quickly discovered that my efforts to write in a form of "street speak" would inevitably seem like sound bites from an action movie—not believable, filled with clichés. As my English came from formal education, it was too proper to sound real. All my tenses were the correct ones, the syntax matched perfectly and phrases were constructed so as to convey the exact meaning of what was being said, but with little nuance. My characters spoke too well to sound real. I found my solution in poetic language. My first play in English, "Journey to Santiago," was written in such a form. It had no meter or rhyme, but the lines were written in what I call "impossible speech," which acknowledges that we are indeed watching a play and that no one speaks like that in real life. But then, a play isn't real life.

I've spent the last few years writing in English, and now my efforts to write "street speak" are more successful. However, my upbringing in Peru, the way I look at the world through the eyes of a South American writer, that will never change. There will always be something a bit off in my plays in English. Embracing this difference, letting that be my voice, has changed my outlook as a writer in both languages. My themes are hopefully universal and relate to a broader audience. But the way I write, and the way I see the world, is deeply rooted in my experience as a Peruvian who grew up in the midst of civil war battling terrorism and economic instability. That has changed the way I—and, therefore, my characters—look at the world. I've been told that there is a matter-of-factness to the way my characters take life in stride, and it's that same attitude that allowed me to live in a very unstable environment growing up. It's impossible to separate my writing from my life.

As someone who spent 10 years writing in Spanish and, through a radical change in language, had an equally radical change in style of writing and subject matter, I've still retained the essence of what makes me Peruvian. My English sounds a bit foreign, but my Spanish has also become a bit foreign as well. Writing in English required precision and focus, much more than I had ever used while writing my plays in Spanish, but it has now backfired (in a good way), since my Spanish writing has also become more precise, more to the point. The most recent example was doing my play "Threesome" at the Yale Cabaret. I had written the play in 2000, it had been staged three times in Lima and once in Mexico City, but as I was translating it into English, I started cutting a few lines and changing details. It became a more precise play, and one I actually liked much better. After it closed at the Cabaret,

I got the offer to publish it in Lima. I had to re-translate my own translation. So the play, as it stands right now, is not the original play, but it's not the English one either. It is somewhere in the middle.

The first line in the first song in "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" begins, "Michael Rennie was ill the day the earth stood still." When I staged this in Lima, I realized immediately that I would have to reinvent the lyrics without losing the meaning. To be honest, I had no idea who Michael Rennie was. I knew that "The Day the Earth Stood Still" was an old sci-fi movie, but that was it. I did my research and found out what all the references meant, but they were still very foreign to me. I started to look for the "soul" of the song, the meaning behind the words: "Impossible and exciting things can happen at a late-night sci-fi double feature. Nothing is impossible at the movies." "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" is all about the impossible and the campy. My translation switched from references to "It Came From Outer Space" and "Flash Gordon" to more common and universal movie references: vampires, werewolves, "Godzilla" (Japanese, but huge in Peru), killer robots, "King Kong." This may seem like an oversimplification, but I believe that the meaning of the song remains. Everything you see at the movies seems impossible, and yet it exists, and this show is all about that.

Translating lyrics has, for me, three basic rules: The most important one is that the song has to tell the same story, even if the words are very different. The second is that the translation has to match the music, beat by beat, but the pronunciation rules in Spanish have to be respected. We can't choose the way a word is accented. There is only one way to pronounce every word. This is not exactly true of English, but it is a rule in Spanish. And then it has to rhyme. I'll say that's the third rule, but sometimes rhyming turns out to be almost impossible while

retaining the meaning and metric. Still, I strive for it.

My versions of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" and "A Chorus Line" have, when re-translated to English, very different lyrics, but I have tried to find, in translation, a meaning that conveys the intent of the artist that created the original show—that at the same time feels close and familiar to a Spanish speaking audience in my home country.

### "Space Rhythm"

*(Re-Translation of the Peruvian Production Lyrics)*

It's bizarre—madness  
Soon starts to affect you  
But listen: this will all end soon  
And we must withstand it  
I remember when time was empty  
When the darkness  
Seemed to defeat me  
And the emptiness called me  
Let's feel the space rhythm  
Let's feel the space rhythm

It's just a jump to the left  
And a step to the right  
The hands on your hips  
And the knees together  
But it's the pelvic twist  
That will drive you insane  
Feel the space rhythm

It's like fever—my fantasies are so free  
And it's impossible to breathe  
In a parallel dimension  
With voyeuristic intention  
I'm an artist—I am real  
With mind game  
You are allowed to be imprudent  
And everything will change forever  
You get lost in your senses  
It's like being seduced  
Feel the space rhythm