

October 12, 2005

THEATER REVIEW | 'THE ASPHALT KISS'

An Innocent Kiss Between Men Becomes a Tabloid Affair

By [PHOEBE HOBAN](#)

Everything in Nelson Rodrigues's "Asphalt Kiss" is exaggerated, from the deliberately melodramatic situation to the repetitive language, enunciated with Mamet-like emphasis. The Brazilian playwright, who died in 1980, wrote this play about the catastrophic results of a good Samaritan's act of mercy in 1959. And while today the extreme homophobia of the basic premise may seem dated (particularly since the action takes place in cosmopolitan Rio de Janeiro), the events leading to this tragic downward spiral are all too contemporary.

Arandir (convincingly played by James Martinez) is returning from the bank with his father-in-law when he witnesses a bus mow down a pedestrian. He kneels to comfort the dying man, who requests a kiss, and Arandir kisses him on the lips. Within 24 hours his compassion has been contorted into evidence of a homosexual affair by a reporter at the local tabloid, and before long everyone in Arandir's immediate circle, including his sensuous wife, Selminha (Jessica Kaye); his sister-in-law, Dália (Arlene Chico-Lugo); and his strangely hostile father-in-law (Charles Turner), becomes convinced that this total stranger was in fact Arandir's secret lover.

But nothing is quite what it appears, and the denouement is even more shocking than anything concocted by the fiendish police sergeant (Paul de Sousa) and the reporter (Joe Capozzi) who have turned Arandir's life into pure hell. (As operatic as it seems, the milieu of "The Asphalt Kiss" was familiar territory for Rodrigues. His father was a reporter who eventually started his own newspaper, for which Rodrigues began writing as a teenager, and his family, which included 14 children, had its share of major tragedies, including a high-profile murder.)

The set, designed by Lauren Helpert, perfectly serves the surrealistic material; it consists of a modernist-looking series of white platforms, with stairs, several alcoves and a trapezoidal pit that proves as precarious as it looks. The lighting is also quite effective; Traci Klainer illuminates first one part of the space and then another in flame-colored hues, at times creating film-noirish shadows.

The strange intensity of the play, and its consciously stilted dialogue and acting, will not be to everyone's taste. (Mr. De Sousa and Mr. Capozzi could be accused of chewing the scenery, if there were any.) But the production of "The Asphalt Kiss" at 59E59 Theaters, part of a monthlong celebration of the playwright 25 years after his death, is an intriguing sample of Rodrigues's highly original voice.

"The Asphalt Kiss" continues through Oct. 29 at 59E59 Theaters, 59 East 59th Street, between Park and Madison Avenues; (212) 279-4200.

Tabloid Victim

by Sean Michael O'Donnell

The Asphalt Kiss reviewed October 9, 2005

It is a great testament to Nelson Rodrigues's brilliance that his writings remain as relevant today as they were when first written nearly half a century ago. In his play *The Asphalt Kiss*, set in 1960's Brazil, Rodrigues takes on bigotry and media corruption. Forty-five years later, his meditations on homophobia and the media's propensity toward sensationalism over journalistic integrity are still very pertinent in contemporary America. The Lord Strange Company, as part of a monthlong celebration of Rodrigues's works at 59E59 Theaters, embraces this relevance with its premiere of a compelling new adaptation of *The Asphalt Kiss*.



From left, Jessica Kaye, James Martinez, and Arlene Chico-Lugo.
Photo Credit: Peter Dressel

Considered a seminal figure in the Brazilian theatrical canon, Rodrigues was seen as a successor to Eugene Ionesco and a precursor to Harold Pinter. Full of rapid-fire dialogue, his plays deal with the dark side of human existence, featuring larger-than-life characters haunted, even obsessed, by their inner demons. With *The Asphalt Kiss* he created the carioca tragedy, a play examining the lower classes of Brazilian life, an idea that was unheard-of before Rodrigues's works.

The Asphalt Kiss explores how a simple act of human kindness is perverted by a scandal-obsessed society. As Arandir (James Martinez) and his father-in-law Aprigio (Charles Turner) prepare to cross a busy intersection, a man is struck down by a bus. When good Samaritan Arandir fulfills the dying man's wish and kisses him, an unscrupulous reporter (Joe Capozzi) who witnesses the event turns the compassionate act into salacious front-page news. Tabloid journalism spins into overdrive, and Arandir's life is turned inside out as his friends and family slowly turn against him.

As Arandir, James Martinez is a revelation. Imbuing him with a quiet resolve, Martinez delivers a multilayered and thoughtful

THE ASPHALT KISS

59E59 Theaters

Category: Drama

Written by: Nelson Rodrigues, with English translation by Alex Ladd

Directed by: Sarah Cameron Sunde

Produced by: Lord Strage Company, in association with 59E59 Theaters

Opens: October 7

Closes: October 29

Running Time: 85 minutes

Theater: 59E59 Theaters

Address: 59 East 59th St.
New York, NY 10022

BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$15.00

10.50 for 59E59 members

Phone: (212) 279-4200

CREDITS

Creative Team

Written by: Nelson Rodrigues

Translation by: Alex Ladd

Directed by: Sarah Cameron Sunde

Produced by: The Lord Strage Company

portrait of a truly good man trapped in an impossible situation as his world disintegrates. It's a raw, compelling performance of astonishing depth.

As Arandir's lovesick sister-in-law Dália, Arlene Chico-Lugo is engaging, effervescent, and brimming with childish naïveté; she adds a whimsical joie de vivre to the prevailing Sturm and Drang. Dawn McGee takes on four very different roles, from the gossipy neighbor to the bereaved widow, all to great effect. Whether playing comedy or drama, she is in top form, effortlessly delivering everything from hearty laughter to quiet heartbreak.

Sarah Cameron Sunde's direction is a mixed bag. Her staging is nearly flawless as she embraces the challenges of the unconventional, multilevel, multiroom space. She uses it to maximum effect, with the action occurring from above, below, and even partially offstage. Her work is beautifully accented by Traci Klainer's inspired lighting design. In particular, Klainer's use of shadows adds a haunting element to the play's tragedy.

But Sunde fails her actors and the script in moments of complexity. Particularly suffering from her unrealized direction are Turner and Capozzi, neither of whom allows his character a natural development. Turner never settles into his pivotal role, giving a frantic one-note performance that fails to go anywhere. He falls particularly short during the shocking climax. As the reporter who sets everything in motion, Capozzi is all blustery hot air, which leaves him nowhere to go and undermines his well-delivered eleventh-hour repentance.

While the jumpy, emotionally heightened language is an acquired taste, it is one worth sampling. Alex Ladd's translation keeps the action moving while remaining faithful to Rodrigues's storytelling. *The Asphalt Kiss* may ultimately suffer from uneven direction and inconsistent performances, but the power of Rodrigues's drama and the courage of his themes are reasons enough to see this unforgettable work.

Associate Producer:

Mike Everett

Technical Director:

Seth Allhouse

Light Designer: Traci

Klainer

Sound Designer:

Jeremy Lee

Set Designer: Lauren

Helpern

Costume Designer:

Wade Laboissonniere

Props Designer: Yana

Babev

Choreographer:

Melissa Riker

Dramaturg: Marie-

Louise Miller

Cast

James Martinez as
Arandir

Jessica Kaye as

Selminha

Charles Turner as

Aprigio

Arlene Chico-Lugo as

Dalia

Joe Capozzi as Amado

Paul De Sousa as Cunha

Paul Klementowicz as

Aruba, Werneck

Dawn McGee as Barros,

Dona Matilde, Judith,

The Widow

Crew

Production Manager:

Sam Tresler

Stage Manager: Angela

M. Adams

Associate Production

Manager: Gillian Reeve

Assistant Stage

Manager: Sean Thorne



Off-Off Broadway *October 12, 2005*

The Asphalt Kiss

Reviewed By Andy Propst

At its most basic, Nelson Rodrigues' "The Asphalt Kiss" examines the expression "no good deed goes unpunished." When a bus strikes a pedestrian in a Rio de Janeiro street, a bystander, Arandir, rushes to the aid of the victim, who, approaching death, requests a kiss. Arandir complies, kissing him squarely on the mouth.

As interpreted by an unscrupulous reporter named Amado (Joe Capozzi), however, Arandir's act is fodder for front-page news. He turns the story into something salacious, implicating Arandir's sexuality. With this, the play scathingly comments on the media's abuse of its power. When Arandir's unbearably changeable wife, Selminha (Jessica Kaye), and the police easily accept Amado's imprecations and criminal charges are considered, "Kiss" looks blisteringly at Brazilian society's homophobia 45 years ago.

Rodrigues' storytelling and the dialogue in Alex Ladd's arch translation have a certain Kafkaesque quality to them, as events and assumptions about Arandir's character spiral out of his control. Sarah Cameron Sunde's production (best described as a B-movie on steroids) beautifully enhances the sense of this world's eerie menace (as does Lauren Helpert's set design, with skewed Escher-like platforms, staircases, and walls that are lit with painterly precision by lighting designer Traci Klainer).

Sunde's fine staging and Helpert's handsome environment, however, do not remedy the play's more soap opera-like elements, involving Arandir's strangely bitter father-in-law (played with force by Charles Turner) and his school-girlish sister-in-law (played with spirit by Arlene Chico-Lugo). Rodrigues seems to want to make a statement about passion versus kindness, but his point remains murky.

At the center of the playwright's swirling storytelling is James Martinez's charming and bewildered Arandir. We desperately want to see the persecution of this man end (particularly whenever Paul de Sousa's sadistic police detective is on stage) even though it's abundantly clear that Rodrigues' world will not tolerate such compassion.