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## ***Pinkolandia***

Gwendolyn Alker | New York University

*Pinkolandia*. Written by Andrea Thome. Directed by José Zayas. INTAR. INTAR Theatre. New York, N.Y. 4 May, 2013.

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Maria Helan and cast members

Photo: Rahav Segev

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2013 marks the 40th anniversary of Chile's brutal military coup. This history stands as the ever-present backdrop to *Pinkolandia*, Andrea Thome's political drama at INTAR, New York City's central theater space for Latino authors staging works in English. In the press release, Thome invokes recent artistic works produced both within Chile and by the diasporic Chilean community that are currently engaging with this legacy. "I think this is why people of my generation and younger feel such a need to tell these stories: because our parents haven't always been able to. And, fundamentally, these are our stories too. We experienced the dictatorship too—just through a different perspective." And this, perhaps, is what is most fascinating about this play—the way that Thome uses her characters' stories and various emotional and physical locations to convey the visceral presence of a distant event.

To write a pedantic plot summary of *Pinkolandia* would be to violate the temporal periods, political locations and emotional substance that this play weaves together. It is, above all, the story of Beny (played ably by Maria Helan), an eleven-year-old girl who grapples with distant memories of her infancy in Chile, and her current adolescent alienation in the pro-Reagan Wisconsin of 1982. As a typical young teen, the alienation she feels has no boundaries; thus, she ties her particular brand of oppression to her murky cultural heritage in ways that are both profound and tragically ridiculous. We watch as she tries to become a young activist: she accuses her classmates of being Nazis; she demands more and more information from the elders in her family who have protected her from their histories, and even

more traumatically, she redirects her own pain onto her younger sister Gaby (beautifully played by Heather Velazquez).



Maria Helan and Gabriel Sloyer

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Photo: Rahav Segev

Throughout the span of the play, both girls cope with their particular experiences of alienation through the creation of a rich imaginary landscape, barely held inside (and often escaping from) Gaby's "Closetland." This land, populated by polar bears (revealing Gaby's prescient knowledge of global warming), Cora Pora (an invisible friend), and ghosts, allows the girls to reconcile the demons of their past that cannot be faced outside a world of their own control. Throughout the play, Thome eschews realism through aesthetic choices that match the psychological experiences of her young protagonists. The staging (by Raul Abrego) turns this hybrid world of Closetland, the family home, and the U.S. in the early 1980s into a fully realized landscape. Projections (by Alex Koch) and direction by José Zayas allow the audience to gain some sense of the clairvoyance of a world that cannot exist in a singular space or time.

In a way, Thome invokes the typical American kitchen sink drama, beginning the action of the play with the arrival of a stranger, Tio Ignacio (played by José Antonio Melián). For Beny, her uncle represents a true "revolutionary," someone who "believes in things" and who will provide a more direct link to a past that her family insists she can't remember. As the story unravels, Beny prods her mother into sharing the family's past by cruelly accusing her of being a "dictator." Finally, when Mama (Annie Henk) reveals the family's experience, Beny learns that Tio Ignacio has been destroyed by the disappearance of his son during the coup. This disappearance is set against a brief disappearance of Gaby into Closetland, where she had taken refuge against her sister's cruelty.

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Maria Helan

Photo: Rahav Segev

For those who are not familiar with the deep historical references, or unwilling to travel into wild flights of fantasy, *Pinkolandia* may be a tough show to watch. Yet with some knowledge of the INTAR aesthetic, *Pinkolandia* can more clearly be appreciated. This play was developed between 2007-2009 at INTAR Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory (founded by Maria Irene Fornés in 1981). As with many plays developed in the Lab, Thome demonstrates a fierce loyalty to her character development, even as the finer subtleties of plot development become secondary. While some mainstream press outlets are quick to dub such writing unclear, or perhaps part of the “magical realism” developed by Latin American artists in the 1980s, Thome’s influences are a bit more specific. Playwrights whose work cohered in the Lab (such as Thome, Migdalia Cruz, Caridad Svich and others) demonstrate a fierce honesty to the rich inner worlds of their characters who have faced intense and even traumatic external experiences. It is only through the questioning of the very nature of an American theater aesthetic that these playwrights can map such inner worlds onto the stage. *Pinkolandia* is one such beautiful example, in which the audience is made to comprehend how the influence of a violent national event can only be staged through the collapsing of boundaries that we often imagine are

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impermeable.

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