

Truth Be Told

The soul-stirring devised work *Crossing the Line*, a co-production by Cry Havoc Theater Company and Kitchen Dog Theater, is a piece of "necessary theater" at this time of chaos and crisis.

by Teresa Marrero
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Photo: Karen Almond Photography

Rodrigo Fuentes and ensemble in *Crossing the Line* from Cry Havoc Theater and Kitchen Dog Theater

Dallas — “Necessary theater” is a phrase that repeatedly came to mind as I watched *Crossing the Line*, a co-production from **Cry Havoc Theater Company** and **Kitchen Dog Theater**. Choose eight talented Dallas-area high school performing arts students, take them to the contested southern border of Texas to

interview detainees who seek refuge and asylum in the U.S. (but instead are prosecuted as criminals), and what do you get?

An eminently important and artistically sophisticated verbatim docudrama.

Every single word uttered in the piece is a direct quote from one of numerous sources. Every. Single. Word. Truth be told.

Crossing the Line is a devised work, meaning it was collectively created. It stands as a living historical document as well as a work of art. Its title not only alludes to the shifting U.S.-Mexico border, but to the ways in which we, as a nation, have crossed (and continue to cross) the line of human rights violations.

I wish I had invented the phrase *Necessary Theater*, but it is actually the title of Chicano theater scholar Jorge Huerta's 1989 edited anthology of six Chicano plays. While some of the topics have changed, immigration remains a constant. *Crossing the Line* condenses into a two-hour performance more than 200 hours of interviews collected by the teen actors (and the adult theater-makers who accompanied them, including San Antonio artist-activist Marisela Barrera) as they traveled to the cities of Mc Allen, Harlingen, and Brownsville, Texas (and briefly into Mexico) during their spring break in March. The lobby of Kitchen Dog Theater displays an installation of images, and headsets that let us listen to the actual voices of the interviewees detained.

Raw interviews were turned into a script by Cry Havoc's founder and visionary artistic director Mara Richards Bim and Kitchen Dog managing director Tim Johnson. *Crossing the Line* delivers the facts, an emotional punch, and a complex experience. According to their press release, the group volunteered at a Catholic Charities respite center, observed juvenile immigration and federal courts, and interviewed I.C.E. agents, aid workers, human rights activists, civil servants, and migrants, including teens their own age.

What might be the purpose of such a socially relevant and timely play? One of the points made throughout is the need to humanize people whose human rights are being violated under our very noses, by an administration that has politicized immigration to an unparalleled degree in U.S. politics. In other words, to give them a voice, to allow their very real and often harrowing stories to be told.

Why do they come? Reasons include violence from drug cartels, who in one story send parents a picture of their chopped up son, with the threat of doing the same to their other children if they do not join the cartel. And there is always rape, the violation of the male and female body as a weapon of war. These

cases can be described as involuntary migration, caused by conflict-induced or disaster-induced situations. The website migrationdataportal.org states that “Under international law, migrants have rights by virtue of their humanity. International human rights instruments, or treaties and documents such as declarations, are of general application and therefore apply to migrants.” This is a point well-made in the play in reference to the U.S. constitution, which guarantees the rights of *persons*, not just *citizens*.

In order to separate facts from emotions (if that is possible when children are being permanently separated from their parents without any recourse to law?), the play is divided into two acts, each lasting one hour with a 10-minute intermission. Act One is entitled “The Politics,” and Act Two, “The People.” Within each act there are numerous subtitles that further provide order and flow to the piece.



Photo: Karen Almond Photography

Crossing the Line from Cry Havoc Theater and Kitchen Dog Theater

Thank goodness for overhead projections giving a “face” to each of the real-life persons being enacted by the performers, who all play multiple roles. The cast members, who range from 14 to 18 years of age, include:

- Leonela Arguello, a junior at Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (henceforth abbreviated as BTW-HSPVA)
- M. Bandy, a recent graduate of W.T. White High School, soon to attend Bennington College in Vermont
- Joshua Bowman, a senior at BRW-HSPVA
- Ollin Barraza Fernandez, a recent graduate of BTW-HPSVA, soon to attend Chicago's DePaul University for a BFA in Film and Television
- Rodrigo Fuentes, a junior at Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy
- Angie Hogue, a senior at BRW-HSPVA
- Laurel Mora, a senior at BTW-HSPVA
- Larsen Nichols, a senior at BTW-HSPVA
- Sadie Redmond, a sophomore at W.T. White High School, and at age 14 the youngest cast member
- Landon Robinson, a junior at BTW-HSPVA.

Hats off to each and every one of them for their strong performances and commitment to their craft! This piece is not only politically and socially relevant, but of the highest aesthetic quality. Lines delivered cleanly, perfect timing, and a balance of pathos and straightforward reporting—all are on display in this well-coordinated ensemble piece. Hats off to director Mara Richards Bim for harnessing such energy and talent into a cohesive theatrical experience.

Visually, a particular emotional chord was struck by a river crossing scene (the river is made of a cluster of blue umbrellas) with a young man bobbing among them, coming up gasping for air and trying to reach the shore. While the play may not have had in mind the recent photograph of a young father and his child—Salvadoran Oscar Alberto Martinez and 23-month-old Angie Valeria Martinez—who drowned while attempting to cross the Rio Grande on Monday, June 26, 2019, the scene resonated in me, and brought to mind the image (which sparked outrage worldwide) of their bodies face-down in the shallows of the river. The play boldly calls attention as well to the fact that these are *brown* bodies whose human rights are being violated.

Frankly, I found it daunting to review this play due to the dense nature of the arguments on both sides of the political fence. I ran out of note-taking paper by the end of the first act, and had to run to a Kitchen Dog staff member who kindly lent me a few more sheets of paper! However, as I began writing this review, it became clear that the important thing is to offer readers an idea of what to expect, rather than to detail who said what, and when. This is all clearly stated in the overhead projections as the play unfolds.

If you have closely followed news of the organizational and political mayhem created by the current administration's policies and actions on immigration, *Crossing the Line* will not present many surprises.

If, on the other hand, you've missed some details along the way (as I have), this play will help dispel many ambiguities. If your name happens to be Rip Van Winkle, and you know nothing of the unlawfulness and human rights violations happening along Texas' southern border, welcome to 2019!

Crossing the Line is for mature audiences of all ages (there are some graphic descriptions of violence) who are interested in witnessing a well-acted yet disturbing look at this historical moment, told from the perspective of our youth.

During the talkback that followed the play, an audience member asks the cast how devising and performing the play has affected them personally. Several hands go up simultaneously. Each actor has something urgent to contribute, from how this work has made them more politically aware, or has prompted them into reading and gaining solid information (rather than just bi-partisan sound bites). They speak of the importance of humanizing those detained. The face-to-face encounters have made them aware of the pain these migrants suffer. They are real people, and no longer statistics.

During the play, one of the actors shares a disturbing autobiographical experience, and when an audience member asks about it, the young actor clearly is still processing the emotions. Most importantly, these adolescents have come through a process that has left them deeply aware of their role as future voters, as artists, and as agents of social transformation.

What was my personal takeaway? Although I am not a religious person, I found the segment on the biblical Jesus' teachings on wayfarers and wanderers particularly poignant. From Matthew 25:35-40, *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."* True Christianity has never been more germane.

The play ends with a segment entitled "Hope" that offers suggestions of ways to make a difference. The lobby is full of brochures and information on local and state organizations that could use our assistance. On Sunday, July 28, following the 2 p.m. performance, Cry Havoc and Kitchen Dog Theaters have partnered with the Human Rights Initiative of North Texas for a panel. Go for the show, stay for the work that needs to be done.

The play runs through August 4.

» Read our feature on the making of *Crossing the Line* [here](#)

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