

## Mario Barrantes Espinoza - El cantar del playo or... a song is a rose is a thorn

A performance that is bound to grab you by the throat.

[English Translation of a Dutch [review by Charlotte Durnajkin in Etcetera, 23.09.2022.](#)]

With the idea for *El cantar del playo or... a song is a rose is a thorn*, Mario Barrantes Espinoza won the Roel Verniers Prize at TheaterFestival in 2020. Two years later, Espinoza took to the stage at CAMPO to finally showcase the finished product to the live audience at this festival. The modest turnout did not reflect what a gem the performance was.

Upon entering, the audience moves onto a dance floor. After all, Espinoza had decided to install a large disco ball in the centre of the theatre hall: glittering lights embracing the audience as they choose their seats. This setting, along with the first taste of *plancha* music, make the audience feel as if they're entering some kind of dream world. *Plancha* - a genre of Spanish-language music from the 1960s that waxes lyrical about romantic love, heartbreak and nostalgia - is the common thread of the performance *El cantar del playo or... a song is a rose is a thorn*. With this music, Espinoza sings, dances, and - as a vehicle - shares his personal love story with the audience. *Plancha* allows the creator to bring to life memories of his motherland and express the love he as a gay man feels.

The lights are dimmed and immediately, Espinoza treats the audience to the first potent image of the evening. He enters the stage with a garland of flowers around his face and begins to serenade the audience. *El cantar* sets in. Basking in a colourful light that only shows his face, Espinoza turns into a kind of singing angel, a plaintive saint, a hopeless lover or a languorous dreamer. After this serenade, the creator quietly takes his time to bring his next scene to life, namely Costa Rica. For this, don't expect an abundance of props or frills. Costa Rica lives on only through a soundtrack and subtitles. This, by the way, is the strength of *El cantar del playo or ... a song is a rose is a thorn*. Espinoza sets the scene employing subtle methods. With a kind of hypnotic calm and ingenious use of technology, Espinoza manages to transform CAMPO's stage into different, gripping scenes. Each time, music, projection and lighting are used to their best advantage. In each 'tableau', Espinoza is both creator and protagonist. For example, at one point, he portrays a *sabanero*. A declaration of love is dedicated to this unattainable hero. Espinoza subsequently manages to bring to life a figure who seems to transform with swaggering movements from man, to dancer, to bride, to grandmother.

Several times during the performance, this creator coalesces with a character who shapes his love story, where both his family and the men he's loved play key roles. Espinoza manages to portray the vulnerability of a gay man in the culture of his motherland, while

fully celebrating his queer sexuality and identity. During this celebration, Espinoza dares to look us straight in the eye. He dances, seduces and gives sexuality a place on stage. Never do we get the feeling, however, that the creator is trying to shock in the process. Sex is explored, but never obvious. Using metaphors and poetry, Espinoza tries to make his experiences tangible. Except when singing the Plancha songs, the audience don't hear Espinoza himself speak during the performance. This is a wonderful and telling detail. The creator will act, sing and dance, but never engage in the recounting of his narrative himself. The narrator is vulnerable and leaves it to the written words to bring his story to the audience. English subtitles are used to translate the Spanish-language songs. On several occasions, however, the written text deviates from what is being sung. This is where Espinoza seizes the chance to bend Plancha to his will, to become the creator of his own love story. *El cantar del playo* or... a song is a rose is a thorn is a performance in which text, dance and song come together to reveal a moving account of hidden love. This performance is bound to grab you by the throat.