

In defense of memory

Artistic caretaker Paul Bonin-Rodriguez on stage

BY JOHN EWING

'My family says that the worst thing about me is that I remember everything that is said. And when I'm mad, I hear everything as I thought they said it, which is something different." Paul Bonin-Rodriguez speaks these lines midway through *Memory's Caretaker*, a new solo work at Jump-Start Performance Co. As the gay, bi-racial narrator of this multi-layered family portrait, Bonin-Rodriguez finds himself in the middle of an emotional tug-of-war. On one side there is a traditional family with strict codes of conduct and even stricter silences. On the other side is a rich tapestry of family lore and spiritual wisdom, lost to the past except through stories. Armed with a verbal, two-edged sword of fact and feeling, the San Antonio wunderkind charts a raw course through the suppressions and revelations of one family's history. By turns hilarious and harrowing, *Memory's Caretaker* is a poetic commingling of opposites, something only a family tale can pull off.



PHOTO OF PAUL BONIN-RODRIGUEZ AT BLUE STAR ARTS SPACE BY TOMMY HULTGREN

Bonin-Rodriguez navigates familiar territory. In his earlier *Texas Trinity*, the writer/performer created the heroic Johnny Roy Hobson, a small-town "sissy boy" who defines and asserts his personal identity against formidable odds. With *Memory's Caretaker*, the stakes are even higher; this time out, Bonin-Rodriguez' narrator is "acting-up" at home, defending his identity in order to claim and celebrate his family's multicultural heritage. The struggles for individuation and reconciliation are complicated and inextricably woven together. Like all families, it takes a crisis to force the big issues.

In one scene, the mental breakdown and hospitalization of an older brother exposes the family secret of homosexuality and forces the narrator's own tumultuous "coming out." Dis-mayed, angry, and sad, the narrator sketches key scenes using multiple voices. With lighting, sound, and dance-like movements, Bonin-Rodriguez re-creates the cadences and repetitions of the family dynamic. Across several generations, strict Catholicism permeates the family's attempt to suppress sexual information. "It's the love for Jesus that makes

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men nelly and self-loathing," says the narrator, skewering religious ironies and alluding to a legacy of family pain.

"Why do we constantly speak of one sacrifice made 2,000 years ago and not look at the daily sacrifices happening all around us? I can't stand the condescension of 'hate the sin, love the sinner,' as if they can presume that my life is

more sinful than theirs," says Bonin-Rodriguez, challenging the current fundamentalist position on homosexuality. "They don't know any of the covenants I've made."

The remainder of *Memory's Caretaker* explores a beautiful and poignant array of family covenants. Bonin-Rodriguez has a pitch-perfect ear for the nuances of family speech and an eye for the telling detail. There's the uncle who brings roses to his mother every payday and plays her favorite record, "Lara's Theme," from the film *Dr. Chicago* (read: *Dr. Zhivago*). There is the reconciliation between mother and son when, "giggling and fuming," the mother confronts the narrator: "I want to call your boyfriend and tell him I'm not at all the evil person you write about!" "Have at it," the narrator responds, "rage, rage away." There is the grandmother,

"Buddy," who is dying and the caretaker grandson who sits at her bedside. As they say her last rosary, the narrator searches for solace in his grandmother's spiritual faith, uttering a personal prayer: "I am memory's watcher, I am memory's caretaker, and I am here for my discharge papers. Where could I possibly go from here?"

Bonin-Rodriguez has at last reconciled his own "gay flight" with the assimilationist credo to "be outstanding, but not to stand out." After graduating with an English degree from the University of Texas at Austin, he trained at Austin Ballet Theater and later danced with the Tampa Ballet and Colorado Ballet. Eleven years ago, he came back to San Antonio, his mother's home, to get his master's degree in English. He was soon performing in *Out of a Time of Plague*, a movement piece about sensuality in the AIDS era and a first collaboration with Jump-Start Performance Co. The next seven years were a flurry of writing and touring. *The Texas Trinity* and other solo works have taken him from Josie's Cabaret in San Francisco, to the Actors Theater of Louisville, to Joseph Papp's Public Theater in New York.

Bonin-Rodriguez says that *Memory's Caretaker* is the result of Jump-Start's commitment to community stories and the production of original works. The give and take of a theatrical company has taught him to listen and observe. "People often say some really powerful things and don't realize it," he says, "and that to me is what the theater is about — the great, unhealed thing being stated, with or without irony." What Paul Bonin-Rodriguez demonstrates in his work with honesty and lyricism is the extent to which communication forms the heart of family life. Good, bad, for better or worse, family is only as strong as the stories it can tolerate. ■

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez's performance of Memory's Caretaker runs through October 17. For details, check Theater Ongoing listings on page 35.