

Interview with Elizabeth Ruiz, author of *Death by Survival*

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Jamie Chapman of the WSWS interviewed Elizabeth Ruiz, author of the play Death by Survival, in New York City where she resides, after the premiere of the play in San Diego.

WSWS: Would you comment on the main character in your play, Rosana. Is she crazy?

Elizabeth Ruiz: Absolutely not. In my mind, Rosana by birth has a very lighthearted, funny whimsical nature. However, because of everything she has been through, a lot of that has been sublimated.

We are seeing now someone who has been severely beaten down and pummeled. She has grown angry, fearful, allergic and agoraphobic. Nevertheless, she is still courageous and hopeful, if not for herself, then for others, for life itself.

I think some audience members would be more comfortable thinking she was crazy. If she is not, then everything she says is true. If that is so, all of us have a lot of work to do.

WSWS: Do you identify with Rosana?

ER: For the most part, yes. She, like me, has really started to see these insidious connections between all kinds of things both in her past and in her present. Besides the great types of tortures, she sees as well the little daily tortures that are the part of the life of any worker.

We lease our lives out for 8 to 14 hours a day in order to merely survive. A very small number of people live off of our energy and labor, which we provide for very little.

WSWS: One of the most effective scenes had a woman only in shadows describing her experiences of torture. Would you talk about that scene?

ER: She was giving testimony of her detention in torture. I wanted her to be a mystery to the audience at least a part of the time. I hoped the audience would start to realize that this victim of torture in shadow was, in

fact, the precocious and glib little girl that we saw at age 11, preoccupied with sex and neglected by her wealthy mother.

WSWS: Another scene that stands out was the one with the small girl asking her father about the maps. Where did you get the idea for that scene? Was that an important scene for you?

ER: I thought about what a seven-year-old might ask of a parent in analyzing the significance and purpose of a map. After September 11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan, I started to think that a country is a completely artificial construct. It is not necessary.

There was a sudden superficial surge of patriotism then. It hit me when I saw a neighbor walking his Chihuahua with an American flag stuck into his collar.

This got me thinking about patriotism, and the Emma Goldman speech I used to give to my writing students to read. She questioned the meaning of patriotism, and whether true patriotism was a love for the land and culture where we grew up, or an excuse for ethnocentrism and a tool for governments to get their citizens to do their dirty work.

In the scene, the father can't answer the child's questions. He has to ask the mother to come out and try to explain. Everything she says makes absolutely no sense, however.

WSWS: In the program you inserted a quote from Benjamin Franklin, as follows: "People who are willing to give up freedom for the sake of short-term security, deserve neither freedom nor security." Do you see an inherent conflict between freedom and security, or is it something that is resolvable? What did you want the audience to ponder in reading this quotation?

ER: There was a lot of terror-mongering going on after September 11. The media was bombarding us with all these unclear, undefined threats of terror coming from everywhere.

Intelligent people I had known for years agreed we had the right to invade Afghanistan. This was needed to keep our way of life secure. This was the same reason used to justify the Patriot Act, with its threat to our civil rights and the Constitution. That's what I was thinking about.

We need to eat. We need a roof over our heads. We need the security to attain these things without too much turmoil. In my view, as human beings, we have not evolved enough spiritually. We tend to create false needs, especially in the US and Western Europe, such as the accumulation of wealth, while others live on next to nothing. In my opinion, these wealthy people also have great insecurity.

A torturer has convinced himself that he is acting for his country's security. He is also acting for his own security, since this is his job. He needs to enchain other people, not realizing he is also enchaining himself. At any moment, if he feels he can no longer torture and murder for his country and he wants to give it up, he's a dead man. There's a scene in the play that depicts this: a torturer starts feeling bad for his victim and gives her some food. She warns him he's a dead man.

These torturers are also prisoners.

WSWS: In the program you explained that you felt you had to write this play after attending a human rights conference where some of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo spoke. What in your background made you predisposed to writing a socially conscious play?

ER: My first semester in college at New Paltz, I took Introduction to Sociology. The professor in that class debunked the myth of Horatio Alger.

I had watched my father struggle as a semi-skilled factory laborer. I saw how hard it was for him to survive and to maintain his dignity. He was very fearful of the American culture and of the bosses. There were times when he came home humiliated at work. The managers would make him do something, and he would just have to take it.

I had an awareness of inequality. We were okay—we were working class—but I saw homeless people. From my earliest school memories, I was told that this was America, and I could do anything I wanted to do and be anything I wanted to be as long as I followed the rules. I was skeptical of the freedom and democracy that was claimed. I suspected lies. For the first time, this professor verbalized my thinking for me.

At that point, I became very interested in politics from a left standpoint. I didn't want to be an activist, but I felt it was important to learn about politics.

WSWS: My impression is that most Cuban-Americans are strong Bush supporters. How did you escape that fate?

ER: My parents left Cuba in 1955. I was born in New York. I was two years old at the time of the Cuban Revolution. My mother supported Castro, but my father was skeptical. He was not a fan of communism, but he understood why the revolution happened. He knew how people had been treated under Batista.

I was lucky to have a father who was not a knee-jerk anticommunist fanatic. So I was able to read up on socialism and communism, and come to my own conclusions.

Most Cuban-Americans have been taught that communism is the world's worst evil. They don't even know what they are hating!

I think we have a lot to learn from communism. I wouldn't classify myself as a communist or a socialist. Ideally, the world would be one, with organized cooperative communities, but no government.

There is one more thing I'd like to say. More than expressing any kind of political view, what I was hoping the play would do would have people question not only our or foreign governments, but everything about how we live our lives, and whether or not the ideas we have are our own, or just implanted in us at an early age. That's what the map scene is about.

Why should going to work be a miserable, draining thing? Most people hate their jobs. Why is being *human* at work so often considered unprofessional? Peer pressure is full of the same fascism that is turned against us in little ways. There are a lot of little throwaways in the play that I hope people will pick up on.



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