



# OLIVER MAYER: THE SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTIST WITH A CAUSE

## Up close and personal with a critically acclaimed playwright

By Michel Khordoc

**C**ritically acclaimed Los Angeles playwright and Professor of Dramatic Writing at USC School of Theatre, **Oliver Mayer** is readying to bring to the theater stage his new work, **Yerma in The Desert**.

The play is inspired by **Federico Garcia Lorca's** play **YERMA**, but brings the story into an immediate present informed by current issues of immigration, racism, sexual identity and gender inequality.

Lorca himself means so much in this historical/political/cultural moment for us. He was murdered in 1936 by Spanish fascists for being gay, and for being a cultural lightning rod for the times who wrote about characters fighting the constraints of cultural and **political fascism**.

Though fascism has not overtaken our country (yet), these themes are back in our daily lives making headlines. Sexual difference, child-bearing, changing and hypocritical roles of men and women (particularly among folks of color), **Power** in the workplace, and Shifting relations between men and women at work and in the bedroom—these are Mayer's big themes, and with *Yerma In The Desert* they fuse with Lorca to speak loudly towards liberating us all from political constraints and cultural **extremism**.

No stranger to provocation Mayer, already in his 20s ignited a firestorm with his controversial play "Blade to the Heat" about a 1950's nobody-turned-championship boxer forced to confront his own sexuality after a dethroned champion accuses **him of being gay**.

Mayer himself was more often than not accused/rumored to be gay because of the recurring homosexuality theme in his plays. And while Mayer, who is married to the talented Latina actress Marlene Forte, might not be gay but holds the **LGBT** community close to his heart and close to home as his mother has been with her partner for over 20 years (since the passing of Mayer's dad).

A talented playwright, Mayer continuously excels at delivering socially-engaged artistic creations that ultimately represent a rich historical record of the multicultural landscape of our society and the very socio-political-economic issues **affecting it**.

With this new play, Mayer gives us a cautionary tale that reminds us to stand together.

The Lesbian News caught up with this talented playwright - one of the most influential faces of Los Angeles Arts & Theater community - to talk about *Yerma*, Women, and the role of the artist in times of Trumpism.

**LESBIAN NEWS:** Can you tell us a little bit about *Yerma in the Desert*? What is the story about?

**OLIVER MAYER:** It's a new play about a woman desperate for love and sexual expression. *Yerma* is dying for intimacy with her husband, who refuses to give her what she needs. The plot follows that painful mystery.

When Federico Garcia Lorca wrote "Yerma" in 1930's Spain, it was a shocking portrayal of female desire that infuriated the macho Fascists who were about to seize power. Full frank sexuality was like Kryptonite to Generalissimo Franco.

My "Yerma in the Desert" brings elements of the Lorca play to our present American moment as we ourselves teeter on the edge of Fascism, and as our expressions (sexual and otherwise) feel more and more under fire. Hopefully our play **will be Kryptonite to Trumpism**.

**LN:** What was your impetus for wanting to give Lorca's *Yerma* a modern version?

**OM:** For one thing, Lorca is a playwrighting god; he can look Shakespeare in the eye, and give Sophocles a few pointers. But his "Yerma" has haunted me for a long time. We now are beginning to understand and define gender and



sexuality, not to mention types of attraction, in ways that better describe who we really are. In the way that Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Nilo Cruz took Tolstoy's novel "Anna Karenina" and created "Anna in the Tropics" to try to better understand Cuban American identity, I'm taking "Yerma" and using it to try to understand the behavioral patterns and power relations that still make problems between lovers, and that create a totem pole of power that extends beyond the bedroom into our economic and societal identities. These are questions worth asking.

**LN:** Federico Garcia Lorca was an out writer who tragically was assassinated for his homosexuality. What similarities do you draw between his time and now? How have

**we evolved, or not?**

**OM:** We have evolved in many ways, and yet here we are again—at a moment of national danger, with people in positions of power who would limit us in so many ways if they could. By being out, Lorca showed future generations how to be fearless in a dangerous time. But the Spanish Fascists not only murdered him but silenced his work for generations in Spain. The scars are still there. The stakes were high. The stakes are high now, and it is essential for artists to be fearless and outspoken whenever possible.

Fascists past and present are scared of sexuality because it can't be controlled; the laws of attraction reveal that the fascist system is unsexy and out of touch. Lorca

outlived his silencers because his message is universal, compassionate and life-affirming. It appeals to our innate sense of freedom. I'm appealing to that part of us now.

**LN:** You tackle a variety of socio-political topics that are making headlines right now such as gender inequality and women empowerment. What's your inspiration for getting involved in the movement? Do you think it belongs to women only or should more men rally behind the cause to move the needle effectively?

**OM:** As an artist, I must be involved where the drama is: And the drama in this country has always been race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. I'll never get writer's block (knock wood!) because there's always something

# YERMA

## IN THE DESERT



dramatic and meaningful to write about, and always so much at stake. "Yerma in the Desert" opens the frame to show us the lives of people we don't often get to see on stage: custodians, public safety officers, staff who clean up after us, whose jobs are **supposed** to make them invisible. But their dreams and secrets, their fears and desires, are real. I hope I'm awake when it comes to using my art to open the frame. It is something I check myself on just about daily. I call it my compassion quotient: Am I ready to take on the injustice in the world with an open heart and mind? Am I willing to listen to what's really going on? That's harder than it sounds.

**LN: "Yerma in the Desert" has a very subtle "lesbian" theme running throughout the play. Can you tell us more about it?**

**OM:** The play investigates how the women characters hate and love and dream about one another. In my play, Yerma identifies cisgender. But she begins to see that her choices may not have to be written in stone.

Her best friends, and worst enemies, are the women she works with. The passion she feels when around them, and the intimacy when they share their dreams and secrets, is stronger than anything she has with Juan.

Having a child is one reason for her commitment to straight marriage, but when an important woman in her life connects her with a fertility doctor, she realizes that she can have the child without Juan. Yerma has the chance to re-make her life choices. But of course Juan is letting go that easily!

**LN: What is your personal connection to the LGBTQ community?**

**OM:** I've tried to be an ally. I have a long connection to LGBTQ primarily through the theatre. I was on the artistic staff of The Mark Taper Forum when Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" first came to be, and I learned a great deal from him during the development and production of that milestone.

My own play "Blade to the Heat" pushed gender and sexuality to the very edge through a portrayal of Latinx boxers, gay and straight.

Of the thirty plays I have written to date, I keep coming back to sexual identity as a way to understand what's really going on with my characters.

**LN: How do you see the LGBTQ community moving forward under Trump presidency?**

**OM:** There's going to be trouble. Trump himself seems neutral around LGBTQ individuals, but he's sold his presidency to the Ultra Right, who would regulate every American bedroom if they could.

Violence goes hand in hand with their totalitarian views of governance. I expect a frontal attack on what they would call "morals" at any point, but there's strength in numbers, in history, and in being right. I say don't cower, don't run. Some fights are worth **fighting**.

**LN: Your wife, Marlene Forte (who is quite a prolific "working" actress) is co-directing this play. This is not the first time you team up with her. What do you think her artistic contribution will add to your play? And what is it about her on a professional level that you find attractive?**

**OM:** Marlene is the not-so-secret key to my artistic success and happiness in life! I often tell her that I wrote roles for her before I ever met her. I dreamed her, and then she came true to my life. A marriage between an actor and playwright has a kind of **natural** fit; she flat out inspires me.

**LN: What do you hope to accomplish with your work; what's the message you want your audience to leave the theater with?**

**OM:** You write plays to try to move the world. James Baldwin said that "the

**LN: Your plays are known to have a recurring homosexuality theme as well as a strong focus on women. What is the engine that drives you to be socially-engaged? Why do you seem to always stand up for the "underdogs"?**

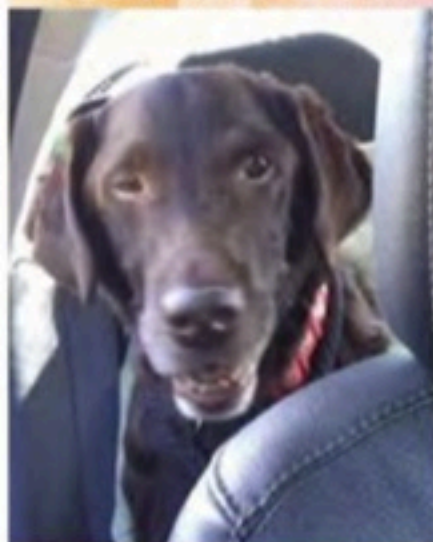
**OM:** My spiritual godfathers in the theatre are William Saroyan and Luis Valdez, two underdog California writers who are nothing if not socially engaged.

**My** obsession with sexuality is something I cannot deny. And I think you can fairly accurately judge the quality of a writer—whichever gender—by their female characters. So many writers forget to give the women in their stories three **dimensions**, dreams, secrets, fears, and agency. I work hard to make sure that never happens in my plays.

**LN: Tell us more about Urban Theater Movement?**

**OM:** Urban Theatre Movement (UTM) is LA's most diverse young theatre company. Last year, I wrote "Blood

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Match" -- based on Lorca's "Blood Wedding," directed by Edgar Landa—and Marlene played the towering role of the Mother. With "Yerma in the Desert," she will be co-directing with Edgar.

UTM commissioned both plays. I'm writing roles expressly for company members, and Marlene is excited to mentor them through the process. Marlene was a founding member of LAByrinth Theatre Company in NYC, whose members include Phillip Seymour Hoffman, John Ortiz, Judy Reyes, Sam Rockwell and David Zayas, among others.

She swears that UTM reminds her of the early LAB. That's good enough for me. But I think UTM is destined to blaze its own unforgettable path in the American Theatre scene.

**LN: In your opinion, what is the ultimate role of an artist in this world?**

OM: E. E. Cummings says it best: "Always the beautiful answer who asks the more beautiful question." The artist asks with all their heart, mind, soul and intelligence, with all the passion they can muster.

**LN: What female writer would you love to collaborate with?**

OM: One day I want to direct Maria Irene Fornes' musical play "Sarita" -- that would be cool.

**LN: What's in store for Oliver Mayer in 2018?**

OM: On March 22 2018, my play "Members Only" opens at LATC, produced by Jose Luis Valenzuela and The Latino Theater Company. It's

a big deal for me, because it's the sequel to "Blade to the Heat"—20 years later, not only for the surviving characters from the first play, but for me the writer.

The first play ended around 1962, so this begins in 1982, that fateful year when AIDS was named. Hopefully, people will feel the pumping heart of that time through my characters, the world of boxing, and that amazing music. Also, people can see a scene from "Blood Match" at LATC (Nov 2-4) in a late-night microtheater festival that's part of the larger Encuentro (Nov 2-19).

**LN: How can people get more info about the play and buy tickets?**

OM: Yerma in the Desert will perform at the Greenway Court Theater: 544 North Fairfax Avenue (one block from Canter's).

We play from November 17 to December 16. We perform Fridays at 8pm, Saturdays at 2pm and 8pm.

Call for tickets: (323) 673-0544 or find us online at : [www.greenwaycourtheatre.org/yerma](http://www.greenwaycourtheatre.org/yerma)

**LN: What is your favorite quote - the one that helps you going through hard times?**

OM: "A person is a person through other persons." Desmond Tutu

**LN: What is the ONE question you wish we would have asked you?**

OM: Where did you find such a great dog?