

TWENTY MINUTES WITH THE DEVIL

LUIS GÓMEZ ROMERO & DESMOND MANDERSON



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‘Some of the events described here are real. All of the characters are invented.’

—Jorge Ibarguengoitia
The Dead Girls (1977)

I like to walk in the mountains
I grew up in the bush
where I learnt maths
just by counting sacks.
I like to get away from the nets
cast by the feds

*Me gusta andar por la sierra
me crié entre los matorrales
allí aprendí a hacer las cuentas
nomás contando costales.
Me gusta burlar las redes
que tienden los federales*

—Teodoro Bello
Pacas de a kilo (narcocorrido)

They are monsters,
I’m surrounded by monsters!
They do not devour me.
They devour my yearned repose,
they shape me into a self-developing
 anguish,
they make me a man,
a monster among monsters.

*¡Son monstruos,
estoy cercado de monstruos!
No me devoran.
Devoran mi reposo anhelado,
me hacen ser una angustia que
 se desarrolla a sí misma,
 me hacen hombre,
monstruo entre monstruos.*

—Dámaso Alonso
Hijos de la Ira

Twenty Minutes with the Devil was first produced by at The Street Theatre, Canberra, on 21 August 2021, with the following cast:

EL TICHÓ

PJ Williams

ANGELA BASSOLS GUZMÁN

Joanna Richards

RÓMULO GARCÍA HERNÁNDEZ

Raoul Craemer

Director, Caroline Stacey

Production Design, Imogen Keen

Sound Design, James Tighe

Lighting Design, Antony Hateley

Movement, Zsuzsi Soboslay

Stage Manager, Brittany Myers

CHARACTERS

PATRICIO JESÚS HORTENSIO PRIETO CHÁVEZ, aka EL TICHO or JESÚS: Southern businessman and drug lord. About 60, short, dark-skinned, stocky, dressed in a long singlet that is covered in shit, long johns and sneakers.

ANGELA BASSOLS GUZMÁN: Police officer. Mid-30s, pale-skinned, blonde. She is dressed in an impeccable blue military-style uniform with brilliant leather patrol boots and a bulky police vest. The word 'POLICÍA' is printed across its back. She wears a cross on a thin golden chain around her neck, which she touches nervously from time to time. She is armed with a semi-automatic pistol.

RÓMULO GARCÍA HERNÁNDEZ: Police officer. Maybe a little older than Angela, dark-skinned, medium height, asthmatic. His uniform and boots are by no means immaculate. He is wearing a jacket with multiple pockets; the word 'POLICÍA' is printed above the front pocket. He is armed with a semi-automatic rifle which he carries in a sling. He has a tattoo of a green bird with a red breast on his arm.

SETTING

Cheap hotel room, tackily decorated. Double bed, small white blanket on the end. Small bedside table and clock radio, flashing 12:00 a.m. Kitchenette and coffee machine with two cups stage left, bar fridge, rubbish bin, old air conditioning unit. Window, upstage centre, covered by a heavy curtain. Downstage, a coffee table with some cheap magazines and a mobile phone on it, two chairs. Main entrance upstage left with a fading sign on the door: 'PROHIBIDO FUMAR'. A small door leading to an offstage bathroom downstage right.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Lines that should run on without a pause are indicated by the symbol —

Lines that should overlap are indicated by the symbol /

SCENE ONE: THE HOSPITALITY BUSINESS

Rhythmic flapping sounds, like a distant helicopter—or a moth. A single candle or bright light; moth wings cast anamorphic shadows on the walls.

Spotlight—a man, hands tied with metal handcuff, leg cuffed to a bed. A big black moth has landed on his hand and he examines it. EL TICHO appears to be talking to it.

EL TICHO: Where I'm from, nothing's on your side. The sun is too strong. The soil is too hard. The wind twists the trees and makes them cry. For all the fuckin' good crying does. No roads, no doctors, no teachers, not even a mouldy priest. That's where it starts. Where it ends up, who can say? A beach; a city; north, south; it gets around more than I do. I'm just a glorified travel agent. You think that's easy? Someone's out to screw you, every step of the way. The competition, the government. My boys, I pay them good money but even they are not always to be trusted.

He raises his hand to look closely at the moth, then tries to blow or shake it off. The moth does not budge.

You see, my friend, I am a humble businessman with a knack for success and no time for weakness. Things don't always go according to plan. Don't flap around, feeling sorry for yourself. You want to survive, you need to adapt. Sometimes there is collateral damage. Just be sure, at the end of the day, the collateral damage is not you. It's a risky business, but then again, all business is risky.

He suddenly slaps the moth with his right hand. The moth falls, dead. Blackout.

The wing shadows, accompanied by the flapping sound, move closer to the candlelight. The sound of crackling fire.

Lights up. EL TICHO is sitting between RÓMULO and ANGELA.

RÓMULO: [*wearing earbuds*] ¿*Qué hacemos aquí?*

ANGELA: [*nervously touching the cross around her neck*] *Nuestro trabajo.*

EL TICHO: *Quiero presentar una queja formal.*

There is a slight shift in the light, like the sun coming from behind a cloud. We are entering another world—a world in translation.

RÓMULO: What are we doing here?

ANGELA: Our job.

EL TICHO: I wish to file a formal complaint.

RÓMULO *takes a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.*

ANGELA: You know the law forbids smoking in a hospitality facility, Sergeant.

RÓMULO: We're in the hospitality business now?

RÓMULO *takes out a bag of crisps and a sachet of chilli sauce which he squeezes on them. He puts the earbuds in and starts listening to loud salsa music*

Hoo, that's some hot sauce I reckon. Waddy say, Boss. Want some?

ANGELA: I'm fine.

RÓMULO: I said, this *salsa Adelita*, man—

ANGELA: I *said*— [*pulling his earbuds off*]—I'll save my taste buds— if it's all the same to you.

ANGELA *starts to gingerly inspect the room and straighten things up. She looks at the clock radio, checks the time by her own watch, and corrects it. She places the clock back on the bedside table. The characters should be able to see the digits, but the audience should not.*

RÓMULO: Waddy saving 'em for? A rainy day?

ANGELA: It's poison.

RÓMULO: One man's poison is another man's meat, know what I'm sayin'?

ANGELA: [*under her breath*] *Cholo* food.

RÓMULO: Are you for fucking real, lady? Hot chilli sauce, it runs in our veins. Where you *from*?

ANGELA: As if you didn't know.

RÓMULO: Oh wait, right, cold as a nun's pussy up in the highlands, man. Mother Mary.

ANGELA *bristles.*

I couldn't stand it. Ice is for drinks.

ANGELA: All you get in this place is sleet and acid rain. My father was posted to the North one year, though, when I was a girl. Snow on the mountains, like a fresh white blanket over everything. I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

[Interior voice] Making angels in the snow, papa. Blood-splashed angels.

RÓMULO: Yeah, well, the old man was no big shot so I guess I missed out on the ski trips.

ANGELA: True, Sergeant, we come from different worlds, you and I. *No sea igualado.*

RÓMULO: Come again? You know, I'm not the one who's into the law, Boss, but I'm pretty sure you can't go round saying shit like that.

ANGELA: Stating the obvious is not a crime, Sergeant García.

RÓMULO: Different worlds? Shit, you got that right. I like my sun like my chilli—so hot you can feel it burn.

ANGELA: Is this one of those real man things—?

RÓMULO: Tell ya what, I'll stop acting like a real man if you stop actin' like a real—a—a real—

ANGELA: Like a real commanding officer, Sergeant?

She takes out a notebook.

EL TICHO: Well, as the superior officer, *señora*—

RÓMULO: What are you doin', man?

ANGELA: I'm taking notes.

RÓMULO: Notes about what?

ANGELA: Notes about you.

RÓMULO: What? About me? About what about me?

ANGELA: About your attitude. Not to mention your language.

RÓMULO: Jesus ... fucking ... oh, man...

ANGELA: I have been advised to keep a paper trail.

RÓMULO: What the fuckin'—what for?

ANGELA: Let us just say, to fully document your ability. To monitor your performance.

RÓMULO: What is this? Boot camp? The army?

ANGELA: If only. They know the importance of discipline in the army.

We could learn a thing or two from them, that's for sure.

RÓMULO: Hey, I got nothin' to prove, a man of my calibre.

He pats his rifle in a lame gesture.

Chilli. It's not about the pain. It's like that song, you know? Life gives you surprises, and surprises give you life.

ANGELA: If you say so.

RÓMULO: [*sucking the sauce off a crisp right in her face*] It's one of life's hot salty surprises. You should try it, man.

ANGELA: You like surprises? Look around.

EL TICHO: [*asking what appears to be a question, in a tone he will often employ, to make a demand*] For how long do you plan on keeping me here?

ANGELA: Until we're told. *Señor*. Shouldn't be much longer.

RÓMULO: Headquarters...

He gets up and tries to get the air conditioning to work, with rising frustration.

I'm not holding my breath. Though you smell so ripe, man, what choice we got?

EL TICHO: Is this a joke to you—?

RÓMULO: Could be. Depends on the punch line.

EL TICHO: I am serious. I have never been so humiliated in my life. I need clean clothes.

ANGELA: I'm afraid not, sir. Evidence.

EL TICHO: *Evidence*? Evidence of what?

RÓMULO: Sewage spill? Dirty weekend? Sure, that must be it. Bet that perfume of yours drives the *chicas* wild, man. Am I right? *Eau de toilette*—

EL TICHO: Or at the very least, a shower—

RÓMULO: Get it? Get it?—Toilet water, see?

ANGELA: Sergeant, *basta*—

RÓMULO: Hey, you writing this down, Boss? Don't want my jokes goin' to waste.

ANGELA: Grab a wet towel from the bathroom and give him a sponge bath.

RÓMULO: You gotta be kiddin' me.

ANGELA: You heard me. Let's get this over with before we all choke to death on the methane. He smells to high heaven.

RÓMULO: No fuckin' problem, Boss. Cleaning up other people's shit, that's what we *cholos* are good for, right?

ANGELA: Don't be ridiculous.

RÓMULO exits to bathroom offstage, leaving his rifle leaning against the door. Sound of a tap running.

RÓMULO: [*offstage*] Know what, I have no problems with the smell of shit. I grew up with it.

ANGELA: I'm well aware.

RÓMULO returns with a wet towel.

RÓMULO: I wasn't talking to you, Lieutenant. You don't know what shit is.

ANGELA: [*writing in her notebook*] Well, I'm sure you two have a great deal in common. Just clean him up as best you can and make it snappy.

RÓMULO begins to wipe him down. During the following conversation, EL TICHO stares into the middle distance, but gradually pays attention to what RÓMULO is doing.

RÓMULO: Grew up right next to the biggest dump in the whole city, man. Wind blew in the wrong direction, you could smell it. Fuck, wind blew any old direction you'd smell it, man.

EL TICHO: Is that a fact.

RÓMULO: [*rolling up one of his sleeves, revealing a tattoo*] That's what this is for. So I don't forget where I'm from, man.

EL TICHO: Some kind of bird, is it?

RÓMULO: A story. An old story. Make believe. I guess... [*Interior voice*] *Sponging him like the old man. Viejo pendejo.*

For a moment, there is a relaxation in EL TICHO's body, a study of his muscles in RÓMULO's actions. Power hovers between RÓMULO's servitude and EL TICHO's vulnerability. Suddenly, the spell is broken. ROMULO steps away.

EL TICHO: You missed a bit, son.

RÓMULO: Lick it off yourself, *señor*.

He throws the towel on the bed.

ANGELA: Are you going to leave that lying around, Sergeant?

RÓMULO: You gonna take notes 'bout my personal hygiene too?

ANGELA: No, I think we better focus on areas where we can hope for improvement.

RÓMULO: Think I was born dirty, Boss?

ANGELA: Not at all, I just think you've had plenty of practice.

RÓMULO: Reckon I better get a notebook of my own, Lieutenant.

He snatches the towel up, exits to the bathroom. Sound of a tap running.

EL TICHU: What is this place?

ANGELA: It's a motel.

EL TICHU: I can see that.

ANGELA: I believe it's called 'The Soft Touch'.

EL TICHU: Is it? I can't wait to hear what the Human Rights Commissioner has to say about your touch, Officer, which is far from soft—

ANGELA: The incident / has been reported—

EL TICHU: What 'incident'? My colleague Víctor and I are driving down the highway. Late, not another car in sight—

ANGELA: We clocked you doing 130 / in a hundred zone, *señor*.

EL TICHU: Do you expect me to believe that this is someone's mad idea of a speeding blitz, *señora*?

ANGELA: I'll ask the questions here, *señor*—

EL TICHU: By what authority do you photograph me without my consent, without my consent I assure you?

ANGELA: If you don't have any identification papers, it's hardly surprising that we sent through a photo. If you're in the database, *señor*, we'll find out who you are soon enough. So why don't you save everyone some time—?

EL TICHU: You leave my driver out there—handcuffed to the steering wheel like a tethered goat. You know it's not safe in the desert when the stars and the cockroaches come out. Tell me, *señora*, is he your prisoner or is he bait?

ANGELA moves a chair beside the bed and begins an interrogation.

ANGELA: Okay, *señor*, you need to calm down. Let's start with / your name—

EL TICHU: You haul me off the street. You take me to some sleazy motel room. You tie me up half-naked—

RÓMULO: [*re-entering*] Par for the course in this joint, / don't ya reckon?—

EL TICHU: Since when has the Highway Patrol stopped arresting people and started kidnapping them?

ANGELA: Hey! Name!

EL TICHO: [*snapping*] I am El Ticho.

Sudden silence. Then ANGELA and RÓMULO burst into gales of laughter.

RÓMULO: The most wanted man in the country, my bum crack. It's way past knock-off time, I shoulda been off duty already, I'm meant to pick up my little girl. So cut the crap, man, we all know this has fuck-all to do with your driving. Look at you. Some weird shit has gone down tonight, man, that's for fucking sure, and it's just my lousy luck that we're the ones stuck with mopping it up. Tell me, Mister Mystery, who are you—?

ANGELA: Just answer the question, sir—

EL TICHO: Have it your way. My name is Jesús. / I am sixty years old.

RÓMULO: *Jesús*. Hear that, Lieutenant? Praise the Lord, we're saved—!

ANGELA: Let's not bring the Lord into this, / Sergeant—

RÓMULO: He started it, man.

EL TICHO: I am a farmer. A farmer and a businessman—

ANGELA: And the guns in your car—?

EL TICHO: I hunt from time to time.

RÓMULO: Oh, that's *camouflage* you're wearing.

RÓMULO picks up the phone from the coffee table and proceeds to examine it carefully.

EL TICHO: Feral pigs, mostly.

ANGELA: No, *señor*, you'll have to do better than that. We find you hiding under a rug on the back seat, dressed in nothing but a soiled singlet—

RÓMULO: And the briefcase—?

ANGELA: What briefcase—?

RÓMULO: *No importa*.

ANGELA: What are you *doing*? Haven't you heard of the chain of evidence? Oh wait, you *skipped* that workshop.

RÓMULO: Waste of time, man. What I'm tryin' to figure is how come our farmer here got a fancy new phone but only one contact. You got no friends, man? See, bad B.O. will do that.

EL TICHO: Since I do not appear to be under arrest, I would like my phone back.