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Bilingual opera 'Pancho Villa from a Safe Distance' comes to Buskirk-Chumley Theater



Courtesy Photo

"Pancho Villa from a Safe Distance" will be performed at 7 p.m. on Thursday at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. This opera was written by Graham Reynolds, an Austin-based bandleader and composer.

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"Pancho Villa from a Safe Distance" will be performed at 7 p.m. on Thursday at Bloomington's Buskirk-Chumley Theater. The show will be free but requires vaccine verification or a negative COVID-19 test result within 48 hours of the event start for attendance.

This show is the third in the Marfa Triptych, a long-term commission from Ballroom Marfa, an art museum in the small, west Texas town of Marfa. It explores the life and legend of Pancho Villa, a Mexican revolutionary that played a pivotal role in the downfall of dictator Porfirio Diaz in 1910.

The opera examines the historical intersections of Mexico and the U.S. through the lens of Villa's accomplishments during the Mexican Revolution.

"Pancho Villa from a Safe Distance" was written by Graham Reynolds, an Austin-based bandleader and composer. He also wrote the other two shows in the Marfa Triptych.

"We were looking for someone who matches that melodramatic, over-the-top, huge sound that traditional operatic singing has," Reynolds said. "We wanted to make sure the character, the person, lived up to the quality of the voice."

Although the opera contains sections in both English and Spanish, the Spanish sections will be supertitled for English speakers.

Reynolds will also present a ticketed screening of "A Scanner Darkly" and answer questions at a talkback at 7 p.m. on March 30 at IU Cinema.

Alberto Varon, director of Latino Studies at IU and main organizer of "Pancho Villa from a Safe Distance," spoke about the uniqueness of this show and the feeling of collaboration between those who planned the event.

"This is one of over a dozen Latino-focused operas that have emerged in the last roughly decade or so," Varon said. "This, to my mind, is probably the most cutting-edge, the most avant-garde of the bunch."

Varon was responsible for bringing together a list of IU departments to put the show on, including the Latino Studies Program, the Latin American Music Center and the Department of Theater.

"The collaboration we saw on campus with my excellent colleagues here reflects what's happening in the play, in which one of the remarkable things about it is that it's a collaboration across borders," Varon said.

"Pancho Villa from a Safe Distance" will have something for everyone to enjoy, blending genres of rock, jazz, Latin and traditional opera.