

PERUSAL SCRIPT



a play by

Eric Samuelsen



Leicester Bay
THEATRICALS

Newport, Maine

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AMERIGO

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CAST OF CHARACTERS: 1F 3M

NICCOLO MACCHIARELLI — philosopher

AMERIGO VESPUCCI—merchant

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS — voyager

SOR JUANA INES DEL AL CRUZ — poet, nun

AMERIGO a play about who really discovered America, by Eric Samuelsen. (*For production by Professional Groups, College/University Groups, Community Groups*) 3M 1F. 90 minutes “Amerigo was a great play—one so brilliantly and beautifully written and executed that it revitalized my love for great theater over the course of its ninety minute running time. If I don’t entirely give it the essay it deserves, it is because I don’t want to spoil the many discoveries to be had in the experience itself. Merely relating the show’s premise is a delight—it concerns a debate between Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, as moderated by Niccolo Machiavelli and judged by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, while they are in purgatory. Samuelsen takes his premise and runs with it—the play is very, very funny in places, but it is also many other things: challenging, moving, educational, and, ultimately, spiritually uplifting ... Amerigo, ultimately, is a play about America. It is about the driving forces behind America—religion and commerce. It is about the land, and about the sins of the fathers—about capitalism and Catholicism, colonialism, sexism, racism. It is about how we are all inadvertent imperialists, whether our proselytizing be political or spiritual (or both). It is an amazing play—one that made me laugh, think, and moved me deeply.” — Davey Morrison of Utah Theatre Bloggers. Some mature content and themes would be better left to audiences over the age of 16.

ORDER #3029

Eric Samuelsen taught at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio before joining the faculty at Brigham Young University in 1992. He became head of the Playwriting program at BYU in 1999. He has also taught as an adjunct faculty member in the Religion department. He retired from BYU in 2012.

As a playwright, Samuelsen has had twenty-seven plays professionally produced in Utah, Indiana, Louisiana, New York, and California. Some of his plays include *Gadianton*, which has seen three professional productions across the country, *A Love Affair with Electrons*, *Family*, *The Plan*, and *The Way We're Wired*. He is resident playwright at Plan-B Theatre Company in Salt Lake City, who designated their 2013-14 season a 'Season of Eric, including productions of six of his plays.

He is a member of the Playwrights' Circle, and the Dramatists Guild. He is three-time winner of the Annual Award in Playwriting offered by the Association for Mormon Letters (AML) and he became president of AML in 2007. In 2013 the organization awarded him the Smith Pettit Award for his lifetime work as a playwright.

He has been a staff writer for the on-line satirical magazine *The Sugarbeet*. He was also featured in the book *Conversations with Mormon Authors*, edited by Chris Bigelow. He is a noted Ibsen translator, and has also published scholarly articles on 19th and 20th century Scandanavian Theatre, and more recently, on LDS drama and film. He blogged at *Mormoniconoclast.com*. Eric died in September of 2019 after a long battle with polymyositis. This has left a huge hole in the Theatre Community within, and outside of, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

AMERIGO

(Bare stage, a table with a few props, a crown, a few masks. Enter MACHIAVELLI, thoughtful and curious, endlessly courteous; the consummate diplomat.)

MACHIAVELLI: A theater! A dispute! An audience! Dominus vobiscum: it's good to be back! We have issues to debate, two continents to define and places in history to determine, and like any good Renaissance scholar, I wouldn't dream of proceeding without a proper classical model to guide us. And so:

(Throws back his head and chants.)

Brekekekex! Brekekekex! Ko-ax, ko-ax!

(Enter AMERIGO, SOR JUANA and COLUMBUS, masked, chanting and dancing chorally, with more enthusiasm than talent.)

CHORUS: Brekekekex! Brekekex! Ko-ax, ko-ax!

(They repeat, cavorting wildly, as MACHIAVELLI continues.)

MACHIAVELLI: We're in a theatre, so I thought I'd start with a play: Aristophanes' The Frogs, the ultimate exercise in comparative criticism. You know it, of course; chorus of frogs, afterlife visited, Aeschylus v. Euripides: you'll see the relevance soon enough. Oh, sorry, you'll be needing your sides.

(Hands out parts to SOR JUANA, COLUMBUS and AMERIGO.)

SOR JUANA: *(as AEACUS, awkwardly wearing a new mask.)* O yes, by Zeus,
The art poetic weighed in scales.

MACHIAVELLI: *(as XANTHIAS)* What, weigh out tragedy, like butcher's meat?

SOR JUANA: *(as AEACUS)* Levels they'll bring, and measuring-tapes,
Wedges and compasses: for Euripides
We'll test his tragedies, word by word.

MACHIAVELLI: *(as XANTHIAS.)* Aeschylus chafes at this, I fancy.

SOR JUANA: *(as AEACUS.)* He lowers his brows, upglaring like a bull.

(COLUMBUS, as AESCHYLUS, lowers his brows, glares like a bull.)

MACHIAVELLI: *(as XANTHIAS)* And who's to be the judge?

SOR JUANA: *(as AEACUS)* Skilled men were hard to find
So:

(She bows to him.)

They chose your lord, closest we could find to an expert.

MACHIAVELLI and SOR JUANA: *(Chorally dancing and chanting, they point at COLUMBUS as*

AESCHYLUS.) The thunder-voiced monarch is filled with wrath,
When he sees his opponent beside him, so clever with words, so artificial,
To battle! Splinters fly, phrases smoothed down with the plane,
His language so grand, his reputation enormous, his language gigantic,
The hero-creator of thought.
Carves out great ship-timber planks for the fray.

(They turn to AMERIGO as EURIPIDES.)

But here what do we find? Refined, urbane,
Sophist and propagandist: dissecting, detracting, maligning,
With subtle analysis paring
A ship down to boat-size.

AMERIGO: *(as EURIPIDES)* Don't talk down to me; I'm at least a better writer than he is.

SOR JUANA: *(quickly dons a mask, as DIONYSUS)* You hear him, Aeschylus: why don't you speak?

AMERIGO: *(as EURIPIDES)*

He'll do the grand dramatic pause to begin, the juggling trick
He used to play in all his tragedies.

SOR JUANA: *(New mask: now DIONYSUS.)* Patience, friend.

AMERIGO: *(as EURIPIDES)* I know this guy,

A savage, stubborn, self-aggrandizing,
And his language! So high-falutin'.

(Looks at his sides. Mutters.)

What the hell?

(Gives it a try.)

Unperiphrastic, bombastiloquent....

COLUMBUS: *(as AESCHYLUS, to SOR JUANA.)*

Hah! You insult me, woman/king,

(To EURIPIDES.)

And you, chattering babblers,
Social climber, nouveau riche sensationalist. . .

AMERIGO: *(as EURIPIDES)* Batten down the hatches, lads, Here's a typhoon about to burst.

COLUMBUS: *(as AESCHYLUS)* Sex obsessed agnostic!

AMERIGO: *(as EURIPIDES)* Puffed up fraud!

(Masks and play forgotten, they grapple awkwardly.)

MACHIAVELLI: Good, good, well played, friends.

(Sees them trying to kick each other.)

Gentlemen, please.

COLUMBUS: Credit stealer!

AMERIGO: Fanatic!

COLUMBUS: Slimy sniveling con man!

MACHIAVELLI: Gentlemen!

(They stop, glare at each other.)

Each to a corner, I think. If you please.

(They reluctantly retreat to opposite corners of the stage.)

Still, always good to see actors really into their roles. As long as you don't take it too far.

(Back to audience.)

Anyway. Quite a good choice, don't you think: Aristophanes? The Frogs? Grandeur versus. prosaic realism, larger than life vs. all too lifelike; the poetry even has an extended boat metaphor. Piety and patriotism vs. naturalist irony. At stake? Reputation, perhaps. Legacy.

SOR JUANA: It's infuriating!

MACHIAVELLI: Pardon?

SOR JUANA: How can you maintain this, this diplomatic pose, this abstruse literary...this isn't a matter for critical theory! Tens of millions of people died, murdered or diseased, entire civilizations exterminated. Cities wiped out; farmland gone fallow, homes abandoned. And if that doesn't excite your humanist sensibilities, this thought might: not just human beings gone, but their cultures, languages, art forms. And you start with Aristophanes! A genteel discourse on language. Stylistic preferences. Aeschylus v. Euripides: I want to talk about murder and rape and disease!

MACHIAVELLI: Precisely why I chose Aristophanes.

SOR JUANA: A jolly comedy with a chorus of frogs. That's your era: elitist antiquarian nonsense.

MACHIAVELLI: I didn't choose it because it was old. I chose it because it's good. Ancient Greece knew war, Aeschylus fought the Persians; Euripides opposed war with Sparta.

SOR JUANA: None of which can be found in the Frogs.

MACHIAVELLI: As opposed to, say, Lysistrata?

SOR JUANA: (After a pause.) Point taken.

MACHIAVELLI: We were all of us writers, you know. I was, Vespucci was: his Letter to Soderini was an international sensation. Columbus was: his journals, his theological works. You, of course, surpassed us all. Isn't it possible that questions of language and style might point to...more substantive differences?

SOR JUANA: And we're to take their documents and what? Compare the prose. Weigh it out, on a scale. Like butcher's meat.

MACHIAVELLI: Hear them out, listen to their arguments.

SOR JUANA: But what exactly are they arguing about?

MACHIAVELLI: Which of them discovered the New World.

SOR JUANA: That's easy enough. It didn't need discovering. It was home to fifty million or more.

MACHIAVELLI: But they arrived. They met natives. They fought battles.

SOR JUANA: Took slaves. Spread diseases.

MACHIAVELLI: We'll weigh it all out. Nothing's off the table.

SOR JUANA: What does it matter?

MACHIAVELLI: Power always matters.

SOR JUANA: That's your great interest, isn't it? Power.

MACHIAVELLI: The wielding of power. The consequences of it. And stories, especially founding stories, national stories, the stories cultures tell to define themselves, those stories are instruments of power. The soul of a nation rests, perhaps, in the balance.

SOR JUANA: Over the meaning of a tale.

MACHIAVELLI: And therefore the meaning of a place, a time, a society.

(He bows to audience.)

Nicolo Machiavelli. Diplomat, political theorist, functionary, military innovator. And playwright, though strictly in an amateur capacity. My dear?

SOR JUANA: Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. Sister of the Immaculate Conception. Poet and playwright.

MACHIAVELLI: And from an entirely different period and place than the rest of us.

SOR JUANA: I'm genuinely an American, I came a hundred and fifty years after this supposed 'discovery.'

MACHIAVELLI: And were, in many respects, the product of it.

SOR JUANA: I suppose.

MACHIAVELLI: Like our other distinguished guests, I'm a name that became a word. Like quisling, sadist, lynch. Sandwich. Machiavellian: devious, sly. A person who practises expediency in preference to morality; an unprincipled schemer. Flattering to be at least remembered, but completely unfair, of course, I was a student of power; I never ruled. An ambassador for Florence and Vatican, servant of prince and pope, in and out of favor with Medicis in both cities.

SOR JUANA: And dead.

MACHIAVELLI: Yes. In fact, in time, I died. We all died. You all will too. I don't recommend it.

(Looking about.)

Nor is purgatory at all what I'd expected.

AMERIGO: Signor Machiavelli?

MACHIAVELLI: Signor Vespucci. I trust you've calmed enough to join us.

AMERIGO: I do apologize. Yes, I'm ready to participate. Columbus, perhaps you'd care to join—

COLUMBUS: Impudent whelp!

(AMERIGO appeals to MACHIAVELLI.)

MACHIAVELLI: Signor Columbus. We do have to start eventually.

(COLUMBUS indicates with a gesture that he's ready.)

Good. So, gentlemen?

(COLUMBUS and AMERIGO defer to him.)

Signor Vespucci. Speaking of names that became words, you're the crowned champion there. Amerigo Vespucci, Discoverer of the new world.

(Bows.)

I honor you, sir.

(SOR JUANA turns away in disgust.)

COLUMBUS: Upstart, ingrate, puffed up ship's chandler, fraud and plagiarist.

MACHIAVELLI: And another, Lord Admiral Columbus. Discoverer of the new world.

(Bows to him too.)

I honor you, sir.

AMERIGO: Wait, you called us both—

COLUMBUS: You said this young—

AMERIGO: I thought the whole idea—

COLUMBUS: I preceded him! No one disputes that!

MACHIAVELLI: Calm yourselves, gentlemen. Merely establishing my own impartial bona fides.

COLUMBUS: You bowed to Vespucci!

AMERIGO: You bowed to Columbus!

MACHIAVELLI: Simple courtesy. Honestly, I don't care who wins this. Or indeed, if it has a winner. I undertook my present assignment out of naked self-interest.

SOR JUANA: As do all men, always.

MACHIAVELLI: Precisely.

SOR JUANA: Sort out a controversy, mollify two parties whose wrangling disturbs the repose of the penitent. What I'm doing here, I have no idea; I'm not particularly penitent, and my name is not a word.

But now I'm doing this, parceling out glory to genocidists.

MACHIAVELLI: Your judge, gentlemen. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz.

SOR JUANA: Wholly impartial, I assure you. I detest you both equally.

AMERIGO: We are still in purgatory, though? Provisionally damned?

COLUMBUS: Close enough to finishing my penance, can't imagine why it's taken this long.

SOR JUANA: You can't, can you?

COLUMBUS: God led me, I did His will. My sins, few and venial as they were, cannot have amounted to ten days absence from heaven.

SOR JUANA: And yet, here you are. What a riddle.

COLUMBUS: It's all politics, even here, in the afterlife. Miserable schemers keeping me from the glory I earned! Ferdinand still has it in for me, I expect. Even here, politics and politicians!

AMERIGO: I only wish that were true. Palms to grease, favors to bestow; I'd get on much better. So, Machiavelli. What's in this for you? Purgatory penance reduced, I expect?

MACHIAVELLI: The only coin of this infernal realm. But I've also been offered a transfer, a lateral move to the Protestant afterworld. I asked for the Hindu; that would be wonderful, wouldn't it?

SOR JUANA: A humanist like you? Coming back as a cockroach or termite?

MACHIAVELLI: With a termite's perspective on power? More tempting than you'd think.

SOR JUANA: Still, the Protestant after-life?

(Makes a face.)

MACHIAVELLI: No, I doubt I'll take it. Too much weight on faith, not enough on conduct. Plus, I find their heaven/hell dualism a trifle zero-sum-game for my tastes. Not sure I see an edge.

AMERIGO: Still, I can see the appeal. Sort out who discovered the New World. What a role for a diplomat!

(He goes to SOR JUANA.)

And you're judging? Could we talk? Privately.

SOR JUANA: You want to bribe me?

AMERIGO: Certainly not! Merely offer a token of esteem. This can't be an agreeable assignment.

SOR JUANA: I'm already being compensated.

AMERIGO: Of course, of course. But when this is over, eh? I'd be more than happy to introduce you to a special friend.

SOR JUANA: A woman?

AMERIGO: Your leanings, am I right? Your tastes run that direction?

SOR JUANA: We're disembodied spirits, I don't see the point.

AMERIGO: There are ways. We'll talk.

COLUMBUS: Disgusting wretch.

AMERIGO: (*Shakes his hand.*) And I'm Amerigo Vespucci, happy to make your acquaintance.

(COLUMBUS slaps his hand aside: they scuffle again briefly.)

MACHIAVELLI: Gentlemen? You accept my jurisdiction?

(Both nod.)

I'll mediate; ultimately, as you suggested, Vespucci, Sor Juana will judge. She should have a unique perspective, as she's from the New World itself, from the home of Pizzaro's conquest, Mexico. For you, Signor Columbus, I choose someone of unquestioned piety. For me, I chose someone of genuine literary merit and accomplishment. And for you, Signor Vespucci. A beautiful woman.

AMERIGO: And, forgive me, but one bearing the most astonishing resemblance to someone I knew. La bella Simonetta. My cousin.

MACHIAVELLI: Simonetta Vespucci, merely married to your cousin.

AMERIGO: We can begin our discussion with any topic, am I right? Any starting point?

SOR JUANA: So you want to begin by talking about women.

AMERIGO: What subject could be more agreeable? Consider, Columbus, that you and I both fathered a woman, the same woman.

COLUMBUS: I certainly reject the very suggestion that—

AMERIGO: America? Or don't men refer to America as a her? Isn't Columbia depicted in statuary as a female figure? As with ships, so with countries, we see the new world as she.

SOR JUANA: A virgin land, with resources to be raped and plundered.

AMERIGO: Precisely. And a suggestion of treachery and unreliability.

SOR JUANA: Mother Nature, untamed, wild.

AMERIGO: So it appeared..So Juana, you're so astonishingly like her, though, my Simonetta. Your eyes a trifle darker, perhaps.

SOR JUANA: I was a poet. What was she?

AMERIGO: A renowned beauty. And my cousin.

MACHIAVELLI: Married to your cousin.

AMERIGO: Simonetta Vespucci, favorite model of Botticelli. I introduced them, actually. She married my cousin, Marco—he met her in Genoa and brought her home to Florence. Made our fortune, actually.

COLUMBUS: In what way?

AMERIGO: We weren't even Florentine. My grandfather was exiled for debt, my father had a small income from a vineyard. Who were the Vespucci? At best, a once noble family, in precipitous decline? Then Marco married the most beautiful woman in the world. Simonetta.

SOR JUANA: Her story: suitably tragic, one presumes? The conventional narrative for women of rare beauty.

AMERIGO: Yes! Tragic, unbearably tragic! She had no dowry, no learning, but a wondrous innocent face, white teeth, flashing eyes, perfect breasts. I took her to church, to a matins I knew the Medici attended. Two of them fell in love with her, Giuliano, and his brother, Lorenzo, who men called The Magnificent. Botticelli immortalized her, as did Piero. She died young, or was about to, but Giuliano arranged for her immortality by hiring a vampire to bite her neck, rendering her eternally undead. Twenty years later, her face and figure were still perfect, and she still was the model for Venus, for Cleopatra, for Pallas Athena and the Virgin.

COLUMBUS: A Florentine whore.

AMERIGO: She was no whore. Generous in love, I'd call her, and a loyal friend. Without Giuliano's patronage, I would never have advanced in the world.

SOR JUANA: You whored her to a prince.

AMERIGO: I arranged for two friends to meet.

MACHIAVELLI: You did? I knew Florence; She met Giuliano through your uncle, Giorgio Antonio Vespucci.

AMERIGO: And you know this, you know Uncle Giorgio didn't use me as his instrument? Ah, she was lovely. Graceful, charming, a wonderful dancer. Simonetta Vespucci.

(Perhaps, on a screen, Piero di Cosimo's painting Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci as Cleopatra could be shown.)

Giuliano commissioned her most famous portrait—bare to the waist, so all could see the splendor of her body. With an asp curled around her neck; a figure of Cleopatra, of course, but also suggesting death overcome, decay conquered. Timeless beauty, eternal loveliness, the endless sadness of perfection.

SOR JUANA: A figure for America, perhaps?

AMERIGO: Yes! Devastating beauty, draped with death. We saw the new world, and marveled at the loveliness that surrounded us. Birds of the most extraordinary plumage, fish of the most astonishing luminescence. And women.

COLUMBUS: Trust you to have noticed the women.

AMERIGO: How could I not? Naked and unashamed, as Eve in the Garden, innocent and sensuous. And yet, our touch was death to so many, and their touch caused a plague that ravaged Europe.

MACHIAVELLI: Ah yes. The pox. The French disease.

SOR JUANA: And the French called it the Spanish disease, and in Venice they called it the Turkish disease, and the Germans called it the Englishman's curse. Syphilis. And it came from America.

COLUMBUS: God's curse on us.

AMERIGO: No.

COLUMBUS: Marry as virgins and stay faithful to your wife and you need never fear the pox. No one caught it who didn't deserve it.

SOR JUANA: Really? And it never touched the innocent wives of philandering husbands? Never hit victims of rape, destitute women driven to prostitution?

COLUMBUS: Rarely, if at all.

SOR JUANA: All right, Columbus. You had a lieutenant, did you not, named Michele de Cuneo?

COLUMBUS: (*Uncomfortable.*) I knew Signor Cuneo.

SOR JUANA: (*Finds a sheet of paper.*) This is from his account of the new world. Would you read this aloud, please?

MACHIAVELLI: Sor Juana, please. You're a woman, with a woman's sensitivity, and a bride of Christ. Is this really necessary?

SOR JUANA: I'm a judge, and this is evidence.

COLUMBUS: I know what's on that paper, and I absolutely decline—

SOR JUANA: I'll read it if you won't.

AMERIGO: I'll read it.

SOR JUANA: (*After a moment.*) Very well.

AMERIGO: So this is . . . ?

SOR JUANA: Cuneo's account, of what was likely the first private meeting between Spain and New World.

AMERIGO: (*Reading.*) I took a beautiful native woman to my cabin.

SOR JUANA: I would remind you, Columbus, this occurred with your knowledge, with your blessing.

AMERIGO: (*Reading. The more he reads, the more involved he becomes, the more overcome by self-*

disgust.) And she being naked as is their custom, I conceived the desire to take my pleasure. I wanted to put my desire to execution, but she was unwilling for me to do so, and treated me with her nails in such wise that I would have preferred never to have begun. But seeing this, I took a rope end...

(He pauses, then continues.)

A rope end. And thrashed her well, following which she produced such screaming and wailing as would cause you not to believe your ears. Finally we reached an agreement such that, I can tell you, she seemed to have been raised in a school of harlots.

COLUMBUS: *(Uncomfortably.)* All right.

SOR JUANA: With your permission, Columbus. You were his commander, he told you his intentions.

COLUMBUS: Yes.

(Clears his throat.)

Yes. I saw it as a...a way to maintain morale.

SOR JUANA: And so we see how you defined your mission to the New World, the priorities you established.

COLUMBUS: You would have us be supermen.

SOR JUANA: I would have you be Christians!

COLUMBUS: But we have the benefit of hindsight now!

AMERIGO: You forget how new it all was, how unexpected.

COLUMBUS: I had on board, men fluent in Arabic and Hindu.

AMERIGO: Presents for the Emperor of Japan and China.

COLUMBUS: We expected cities, merchants, diplomats, trade.

AMERIGO: Instead, we found ourselves in paradise.

COLUMBUS: And we'd been at sea for weeks.

AMERIGO: And our crews were entirely male.

SOR JUANA: Yes. All men.

AMERIGO: I never knew Cuneo, I never acted as he did. But I knew men who did, and I understand their actions. We were in a new place, a new world. We were...off-balance.

SOR JUANA: But you were hard-headed enough to think of profit. Gold and spice, and when those weren't found in great quantities, pearls. And slaves, always slaves. A two way traffic—from the New World to Europe, then from Africa to the New World.

AMERIGO: Slaves sold us by tribal chiefs, captured in combat with rival tribes.

SOR JUANA: Not always. Not often.

AMERIGO: We were entrepreneurs. We hoped for gold, we settled for servants. How were we to know how fragile they'd turn out?

SOR JUANA: But perhaps we have our first definition?

MACHIAVELLI: What do you mean?

SOR JUANA: Colonial ventures are by their nature risky. Profits are often slender. And businessmen have always known how much more profitable business becomes when you don't plan to pay labor costs.

AMERIGO: You condemn us for acts done in every nation on earth.

SOR JUANA: But the New World would be built on it more thoroughly than any other place. The New World receives its first definition: land of slavery. Columbus, you were the most assiduous slaver, so to you goes first blood.

COLUMBUS: Slavery was hardly something I even contemplated.

SOR JUANA: And slavery means something else, does it not? To men? Free sexual favors from someone you need hardly even consider human. And Cuneo was your lieutenant.

AMERIGO: You misrepresent us.

SOR JUANA: Do I? And what of you, Vespucci. To profit from paradise, you needed more men to follow. And so you became a kind of travel guide pornographer.

AMERIGO: I described what I saw, I wrote what might appeal to investors.

SOR JUANA: As with this perhaps?
(Brandishes another paper.)
Read please.

AMERIGO: *(Reads.)* The lustful appetites of the women are such that when they had the opportunity of copulating with Christians, urged by excessive lust, they prostitute themselves.

SOR JUANA: Not quite the experience Cuneo described.

AMERIGO: Some maidens were most willing to—

SOR JUANA: Or this:
(Another paper.)
Read it.

AMERIGO: *(Increasingly reluctant.)*
One of the girls was all dyed from head to foot with that paint of theirs, and she was so well made, and so rounded, and her private parts, of which she had no modesty, were so comely that women of our country would be ashamed if they saw such perfection, that theirs were not equally perfect.

SOR JUANA: I can see how that might inflame investors.

AMERIGO: All right.

SOR JUANA: Or this:

(Another paper.)

Read.

AMERIGO: I don't....

SOR JUANA: You wrote it. Read it.

AMERIGO: *(Reads.)* They have another custom, very shameful and beyond all human belief. For their women, being very lustful, cause the private parts of their husbands to swell up to such a huge size that they appear deformed and disgusting, and this is accomplished by a certain device of theirs, the biting of certain poisonous animals. And in consequence, many lose their organs which break through lack of attention, and they remain eunuchs.

SOR JUANA: Come to the New World, where beautiful women will use it 'til it falls right off.

MACHIAVELLI: I think that's enough.

SOR JUANA: You sold the New World as a land of exotic eroticism, a gentleman's playground. Painted naked women, biting poisonous animals to create the ultimate aphrodisiac. If you're a Christian, they'll become your sex slaves, and if you're man enough, you can become a prodigious sexual acrobat. That was the fantasy you sold; that was the New World you created. Columbus had found middling amounts of gold, and hardly a single spice; you found pearls, but hardly enough to recoup your own expenses. You were getting desperate. So you reverted to your old profession, didn't you, Vespucci? You pimped out the New World.

AMERIGO: I wrote what I saw; I saw what I wrote.

SOR JUANA: Did you?

(Another paper.)

Read.

AMERIGO: No.

SOR JUANA: It's in your book. Read!

AMERIGO: Fifteen leagues inland, on an island on a lake, there lives a race of giants. The women resembled Penthesilea, and the men Antaeus. One woman, though naked without embarrassment, appeared to be a woman of discretion and taste, and urged us to stay with her. We thought to kidnap her and a few others and make a present of giants for our king, but a party of male giants thwarted our intentions.

SOR JUANA: Giants. How very frightening.

AMERIGO: All right.

SOR JUANA: And that's not all. Men with the faces of dogs. And cannibals, everywhere cannibals.

COLUMBUS: I saw cannibals.

SOR JUANA: Or heard of them?

COLUMBUS: From the Tainos, on Hispaniola.

SOR JUANA: Always on another island. Always somewhere else.

COLUMBUS: They told us of a people, the Caribs, that consumed human flesh.

SOR JUANA: You met these Caribs, you saw this for yourself?

COLUMBUS: We fought Caribs.

SOR JUANA: Who were fighting invaders, a foreign army.

COLUMBUS: And the Caribs were cannibals. We knew it from the Tainos.

SOR JUANA: And of course you were fluent in their tongue.

(Turns to AMERIGO.)

What about you?

AMERIGO: I saw what Columbus saw.

SOR JUANA: So you wrote:

(Another paper.)

Read.

AMERIGO: No.

SOR JUANA: Strange. Writers, in my day, loved to read their own....

AMERIGO: I don't want to read anymore.

SOR JUANA: Then I will. "They have an evil custom, for they will eat human flesh more gladly than any other. Merchants bring children to sell, and people of the country buy them. Those that are plump, they eat right away. Those that are not plump, they feed up and fatten, and then kill and eat them. And they say that it is the sweetest flesh in the whole earth." And they told you this in Spanish? Italian? Or Latin?

COLUMBUS: They were savages, without civilization of any kind, without any notion of family or nations, without religion, without Christ.

SOR JUANA: Living in paradise, they became a nation of savages?

AMERIGO: That was certainly what we saw.

SOR JUANA: Or was it what you read?

COLUMBUS: My journals were written daily, as I explored.

SOR JUANA: And extensively revised for publication by your son. Gentlemen, I don't fault you. I'm a reader myself. But all of this, dog-faced men, islands of giants, insatiably lustful women, lesbian islands, and cannibalistic savages, it's all found in other books. I read your Soderini letter, Vespucci, your big best-seller, and I annotated it: 'ah, this passage lifted from Sir John Mandeville, this from Marco Polo, this from Carpine.' You wrote erotic fiction, pretended it was gospel truth, and attracted investors by the scores. Your book accomplished its purpose. Let's just not pretend you wrote what you saw. Heaven knows what you saw.

MACHIAVELLI: (*Again chants.*) Brekekekex! Brekekekex! Ko-ax, ko-ax!
(*They all stare at him.*)

Brekekekex! Brekekekex! Ko-ax, ko-ax!

(*They half-heartedly join in.*)

CHORUS: Brekekekex! Brekekex! Ko-ax, ko-ax!

MACHIAVELLI: A chorus of frogs, to divide up the episodes.

SOR JUANA: I understood what you were doing.

MACHIAVELLI: I thought perhaps, we needed a break.

SOR JUANA: After such a pleasant conversation?

MACHIAVELLI: And for a change of pace, I wonder if perhaps we could talk politics.

SOR JUANA: I was talking politics. Sexual politics, the politics of slavery....

MACHIAVELLI: Sor Juana, please. We speak of the New World as a woman, we talk of exploitation, seduction, eroticism, rape. But I look at your era, gentlemen, and I see actual women, women of influence and power. Perhaps we could start there, with female intelligence and beauty, in Spain, in Seville.

COLUMBUS: Queen Isabella. She sold her jewels to pay for my voyage.

AMERIGO: Nonsense, your three little caravels weren't worth the cost of a single earring.

MACHIAVELLI: She sponsored you. She ruled. And that, my friends, strikes me as the heart of our dispute: power, who has it, who wields it, to what end.

COLUMBUS: It's about discovery.

AMERIGO: It's about profit.

MACHIAVELLI: Power. You weren't the first, gentlemen, neither of you were. The Norse preceded you—your visit to Iceland taught you that, Columbus. Others as well, Irish priests, the Chinese navy. And as you pointed out, Sor Juana, you can hardly say you 'discovered' a land already home to millions. No, the

question is what became of your voyages, and the land you say you found. Ultimately, it's a question of power.

COLUMBUS: I settled the land, I built forts and opened trade.

AMERIGO: I, at least, knew what land I was looking at.

SOR JUANA: And you both took slaves, and mutilated those who didn't bring in enough gold.

MACHIAVELLI: (*Courteous as always.*) If we could proceed?
(*They subside.*)

Take a table, cover it with iron shavings. Plunk down a magnet, and watch the iron shift and slide. Add a second magnet, add a third: concentric circles of power form. The emperor was French, but a weak-minded fool. A small magnet there. Florence is one magnet, Milan and Venice two more. The Fuggers in German lands: a big magnet there. Add one for the Vatican, another for Portugal; because their caravels could sail around Africa to trade in the wealth of the Indian Ocean. To the east, the biggest magnet yet: Islam, but it too is divided: Moors and Arabs and Turks and Persians, rival caliphates and factions. Now arrives a woman. Isabel of Castile.

AMERIGO: A woman of great beauty.

COLUMBUS: And piety.

MACHIAVELLI: Actually, a bit plain to my eye. But her tenacity! Age ten, she's summoned to court. The King was her half-brother, Enrique. Called the Impotent, as weak as his title implies, and like many weak men, vicious. He had his first wife poisoned, after repeatedly proving himself incapable of impregnating her. The nobility of Spain revolted, the land was convulsed in civil war. At sixteen, Isabella, as the favorite of the nobility, appears close to victory. At which point, she turns on her supporters, acknowledges Enrique's legitimacy, submits to his rule. Her supporters were sent to the rack, drawn and quartered. Sixteen, and so far-sighted.

SOR JUANA: You admire her treachery.

MACHIAVELLI: If Isabella gained power through a revolt of the nobility, she would be in their debt. And Enrique had the support of Portugal, and cast doubts on Isabel's legitimacy. She read the situation, thought it through, and submitted, as a woman. She knew Enrique, knew him to be unstable and sickly. His daughter, Joana was worse, sexually insatiable and cruel. Isabella got Enrique to agree to make her his heir. He chose various mates for her. She smiled and curtsied, then found ways to refuse the matches he contracted, with Milan, with Florence, with Sforza and Medici and Borgia. Within a year, she was free of him, and without scandal of any kind. She then looked over every eligible prince in Spain, and selected Ferdinand, the poorest and most ruthless, as partner.

COLUMBUS: She married for love.

MACHIAVELLI: I suppose that's possible too. But she knew her man. Ferdinand proved an able military commander. First, he defeated Portugal, then the other kingdoms of Iberia. And within a few years, we were faced with a new fact, the strongest magnet yet plunked down on the table of Europe. We'd never

seen its like: A state, a modern nation. Not France, torn between Burgundy and Provence. Not the warring cities of Italy. Spain, unified and strong. Internal enemies? Ferdinand crushed every rival prince. External? he gave us a new term: reconquista. He drove a wedge between Moorish factions, divided and conquered and slaughtered until Spain was fully Christian. Next: ideological unity, creating a cult around this peculiar new notion: unified Christian Spain. Not Aragon vs. Barcelona, no more Madrid vs. Cordoba. Just Spain, just Catholic, just Christian. To drive home the point, Ferdinand and Isabella drove out their Jews. Convert or die, and those who converted were persecuted and mistrusted. They established a holy secret police, they put to the rack anyone unconvinced of the new reality.

SOR JUANA: You admire her.

MACHIAVELLI: I admire anyone who knows what they want, and goes after it. Is she so different from yourself?

SOR JUANA: I was never a queen.

MACHIAVELLI: You were a poor girl, from lesser nobility. Your one asset: the most devastating beauty. All men wished to court you, and what did you require of all those who pursued you?

SOR JUANA: A book.

MACHIAVELLI: Many many books, And you thereby amassed the greatest private library of your era. Like Penelope with her suitors, you played them off against each other, accepted their gifts, then cut them off at the knees. Retreated to cloistered seclusion, and became something your day refused to think possible for a woman: a scholar, a writer.

SOR JUANA: I knew what I wanted, and discovered how to get it.

MACHIAVELLI: As did Isabella. I fault her for just one weakness. I think she genuinely believed. In her own myth, in Christ militant and victorious.

COLUMBUS: You fault her for her piety! You fault her for her hatred of heresy!

MACHIAVELLI: Genuine piety can cripple a real prince. I served a Pope who knew that, who believed in nothing but power.

COLUMBUS: The anti-Pope, Alexander, the Borgia pope! Poisoner, adulterer, incestuous and vicious!

MACHIAVELLI: And the man who saved all the Jews in Spain when Isabella would put them all to the rack.

SOR JUANA: You are right, Machiavelli. One need not believe to have a vocation. It certainly turned out well for me. Convenience and comfort and solitude and all my books. Just what a writer needs.

COLUMBUS: (*Aghast.*) But you didn't believe?
(*She smiles.*)

SOR JUANA: I believed in many things.

MACHIAVELLI: I admire women who know what they want and get it. You, Isabella, and another, the Borgia girl, Lucrezia. Lovely child, and hardly the poisoner she was made out to be; I doubt she killed more than two of her husbands, and neither of them were men deserving of our pity. Her father was pope, her brother, Cesar, the greatest politician I've ever met. Lucrezia was willing political partner to her brother and father, and her marriages accomplished what armies often could not. That was our world, venal and violent, the world from which you both sailed. And Columbus, you would have commanded a ship under Alexander's flag, or Borgia's, just as you nearly sailed under Portugal's flag, or Venice's. You conquered Hispaniola for Spain, because only Spain would listen.

COLUMBUS: True. I would have sailed under any flag, pledged allegiance to any Prince.

MACHIAVELLI: I'm a little puzzled, though. Vasco had sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and found a new trade route to India that cut out the Moslem middle man, and made Portugal rich. You claimed to have found yet another, even simpler route. Why wouldn't Spain be interested, or France, or Britain? What you asked for was surely modest enough, a few caravels.

COLUMBUS: Fools. Those courts, with their astrologers and sycophants. A man of science makes them a proposition, and they carp and cavil, raise abstruse mathematical objections.

AMERIGO: Well, your math was wrong.

COLUMBUS: They had no true conception of the world.

AMERIGO: They knew it was round. Everyone knew that.

COLUMBUS: But they thought it preposterously immense. My correspondence with Toscanelli, I proved the earth to be manageably small, my voyage correspondingly simple.

AMERIGO: You didn't even accept Toscanelli's figures, and he was twenty percent short.

COLUMBUS: I knew Asia lay to the west. I knew one degree of longitude at the equator would equal 52 statute miles. At the higher longitudes, where I proposed to sail, it would be less, 45 statute miles. Asia lay west, just 2,760 miles from the Canary Islands. And I found it, more or less where I said it would be.

AMERIGO: You found a new world.

COLUMBUS: Asia!

AMERIGO: Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica. You weren't within 9 thousand miles of what Polo called Cipango.

COLUMBUS: I said I'd find land and I did. It was right where I said it would be.

AMERIGO: Well, something sure was. Columbus, we talked about this, when I was supplying your third expedition. I asked repeatedly—are you certain this is Asia? I had enough skill with astrolabe and chart to know your figures were unlikely.

COLUMBUS: You loved to vaunt your skills, yes, you certainly did that. I saw your famous charts: you located Hispaniola just off the coast of Crete!

AMERIGO: But look what I laid in for you. Supplies not for trade with India, but for exploring a new continent. You never complained.

COLUMBUS: I knew we were in Asia. I simply thought we'd found a previously unknown part of China.

AMERIGO: China! China still lay thousands of miles to the west. Ferdinand's councilors discouraged funding your journey because they knew your mathematics were faulty. At the equator, one degree of longitude equals 70 statute miles; at thirty degrees north, it's a little shy of sixty. Ferdinand's councilors were neither fools nor sycophants. They were scientists, and they were better at math than you were.

COLUMBUS: I made landfall precisely where I said I would.

AMERIGO: And you found people and you named them Indians and so they remain today. But you got it wrong all the same.

SOR JUANA: But Isabella's court rejected you, not only because your mathematical skills were poor, but your ego far too huge.

AMERIGO: There you go, Columbus. She's got you there.

SOR JUANA: Titles, revenues, rewards. Who were you? A vagabond, a fanatic, a strange man who spoke bad Spanish and wrote worse Latin.

MACHIAVELLI: Grenada fell in January 1492. The reconquista was complete; Spain was now unified and Christian. You were called before Ferdinand and Isabella at the palace at Santa Fe. The answer was no, finally and completely, no.

AMERIGO: You rode your mule away to catch a boat to France, one last appeal to Charles VIII.

COLUMBUS: It was the lowest moment of my life. I considered my choices. I had a mistress in Spain; we had two children. I could stay, find work as a ship's navigator or coxswain. I could return to Genoa, I suppose. I won't deny that suicide had a place in my thoughts.

SOR JUANA: But still, you set off towards France.

COLUMBUS: God had sent me on this quest. If there was one thought I clung to, it was that one. I knew where God was sending me. I knew it was God sending me.

SOR JUANA: You had found your vocation.

COLUMBUS: I had.

MACHIAVELLI: And on the road, another mule.

COLUMBUS: A message from Luis Santangel. Councilor to the queen. She would sponsor my journey.

MACHIAVELLI: But why? Why would she change her mind so completely?

COLUMBUS: She realized I was right.

AMERIGO: I don't think so. In fact...

MACHIAVELLI: What is it, Signor Vespucci?

AMERIGO: Well. If I may. A modest assay into drama...

MACHIAVELLI: But how delightful! By all means, let's hear it.

AMERIGO: (*Handing out sides.*) Sor Juana, if you would be so good as to portray Queen Isabella.

SOR JUANA: An actress? You want me to be an actress?

MACHIAVELLI: Please?

AMERIGO: I even wrote the part with you in mind.

SOR JUANA: Oh, all right. Shouldn't add more than a millennium or two to my penance.

AMERIGO: And I'll play Santangel, councilor to the queen.

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA, reading, her acting improves as the 'play' proceeds.*) That wretched rascal!

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*) The cost of three caravels is very low.

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA*) That galling Genoese!

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*) But I do think the possible return on investment could be astonishingly high.

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA*) Lord High Admiral, he wants me to call him.

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*) Probably nothing will come of it.

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA*) If he sails under my flag, I'm the one who'll prosper from it. Not him!

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*) But perhaps if we look at this from a different perspective?

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA*) What different perspective?

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*) Most likely, Columbus sails west until his ships founder and nothing more will be seen of him.

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA*) Likely enough.

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*) But what if he's successful? What if there is a western route to India, China, Japan?

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA*) I can see it now. The heroic march into my court, the arrogant demands, the insufferable presumption...

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*) And then, the money. The spices, the silks, the precious stones.

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA*) Shall I bow and scrape? Shall I prostrate myself?

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* The riches. All for your majesty. All for the glory of God.

SOR JUANA: *(as ISABELLA)* For the glory of God.

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* It's galling, is it not, to see Portugal with a monopoly on trade around the Cape.

(She stops, gestures for him to continue.)

We can send him from Palos.

SOR JUANA: *(as ISABELLA)* From Palos? Not Seville, not Cadiz?

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* Both ports crowded full of Jews. Cost of passage from Spain has doubled, and still they pay it. They're desperate to make it out before the decree falls on their backsides and heads.

SOR JUANA: *(as ISABELLA)* Christ-murdering wretches, we're better off with them gone. Present company excepted, of course.

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* Of course, your majesty.

SOR JUANA: *(as ISABELLA, patting him on the head.)* Where would I be without my conversos.

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* Blessed be Mary, ever Virgin.

SOR JUANA: *(as ISABELLA)* So, Palos?

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* And I thought, perhaps, you could make Palos pay for the ships.

SOR JUANA: *(as ISABELLA)* Yes. Take this down. I will issue a royal proclamation.

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* A proclamation.

SOR JUANA: *(as ISABELLA)* "Know ye that, whereas for certain things committed by you to our disservice, you are condemned and ordered, at your own proper charge, to provide three caravels to one Christopher Columbus, who will sail them to certain regions of the Ocean, to perform certain things for our service."

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* And in what respect does Palos displease your grace?

SOR JUANA: *(as ISABELLA)* Does it matter? They surely have sinned, smuggling or the like. Let them search their consciences. Beneficial for them anyway. And meanwhile, let them provide Columbus with ships and crew.

AMERIGO: *(as SANTANGEL)* Or, you could sell the royal jewels to pay for the journey.

(And he and ISABELLA share a hearty laugh.)

AMERIGO: Well. It's just a trifle. . .

MACHIAVELLI: But it's delightful!

(Applauding politely.)

SOR JUANA: (*Thoughtfully.*) So. If it cost her nothing, and the potential rewards were great....

AMERIGO: That was my thought. The court had good reason to reject you, Columbus. But the gamble, on her part, was small enough.

COLUMBUS: That's certainly true. Half my crew were convicted criminals, and of the three ships, only Niña was new. Santa Maria was hardly sea-worthy.

SOR JUANA: (*Turning over her sides.*) There's just a bit more.

AMERIGO: Right, let's finish.

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*) If it turns out, he deserves a reward.

SOR JUANA: (*as ISABELLA*) He shall receive it!

AMERIGO: (*as SANTANGEL*)

More likely, your majesty, you've promised nothing you need worry about paying out.

AMERIGO: So....

MACHIAVELLI: That's a queen, all right. No selling of jewels. A command, a threat, instant obedience.

COLUMBUS: I didn't care. I had my ships. I had my crews. The weather was fine, the winds fair from the east. We sailed.

AMERIGO: And found: a few small islands, and one somewhat larger one.

COLUMBUS: Eventually, we made a fortress from the timbers of the worthless Santa Maria. I left some men behind, and returned to Spain. A storm separated Niña and Pinta, and Pinta's captain, Pinzon, made it back to Spain before I did, leading to a brief controversy over my reward. But, by the grace of God, Pinzon died, and I was named Lord Admiral Columbus. And Isabella gave me command of a much larger fleet.

AMERIGO: I was there, in Seville. I was in the employ of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, and his business dealings required frequent visits to Spain.

MACHIAVELLI: And in what, exactly, did you trade?

AMERIGO: This and that.

COLUMBUS: Serving those caught in debtors' prisons. Better food and clothing, a book or bedclothes.

AMERIGO: Only sometimes.

COLUMBUS: I knew you, Vespucci. Fence, pimp, procurer.

AMERIGO: I did favors for friends.

COLUMBUS: I knew you. Since we're all writing plays....

SOR JUANA: You have a part for me.

COLUMBUS: Just a few modest lines.

(Handing out sides of his own.)

AMERIGO: *(Reading.)* Surely I shouldn't be expected to play myself.

COLUMBUS: Who is better qualified?

AMERIGO: Still. It's hardly a flattering...

MACHIAVELLI: Oh, please, Signor Vespucci. It's all in good fun.

AMERIGO: It's accurate enough, I suppose.

SOR JUANA: *(as a WORRIED WIFE)* Signor Vespucci! My poor husband, imprisoned for debt! Can you help me?

AMERIGO: *(Taken by surprise, not expecting it to start so quickly.)* Perhaps. Who's his jailer?

MACHIAVELLI: *(as a JAILER)* Yes, I know the man. What of it?

AMERIGO: *(Whipping around.)* What? Oh, um.

(Looking for his place.)

Um. 'Food, some wine. Fresh air.'

MACHIAVELLI: *(as a JAILER)* I need a good pair of women's shoes.

AMERIGO: Of course. For a jailhouse masquerade?

MACHIAVELLI: *(as a JAILER, laughs.)* That's right. A masquerade!

AMERIGO: Her size?

COLUMBUS: *(as LOVE-SICK MERCHANT)* I've met a girl, Vespucci, by the Fuerta de Jerez. So lovely, and studious too.

AMERIGO: A novice, then. Could I suggest perhaps a bibelot?

COLUMBUS: *(as LOVE-SICK MERCHANT)* A bibelot. How will that do anything?

AMERIGO: An illustrated manuscript of the Song of Solomon?

COLUMBUS: *(as LOVE-SICK MERCHANT)* Good stuff, is it?

AMERIGO: 'Thy breasts are like two young roes, which feed among the lilies.'

COLUMBUS: *(as LOVE-SICK MERCHANT)* What's a roe?

AMERIGO: A small deer. Trust me, she'll love it.

SOR JUANA: *(as a WORRIED WIFE)* He says the food's not much better.

AMERIGO: You have a sister, perhaps, a daughter? With feet smaller than yours? I need her shoes.

MACHIAVELLI: *(as a JAILER)* The shoes did nothing. She won't even speak to me.

AMERIGO: I asked around, she's very ill, you'd do well to forget her. As it happens, though, I know another woman. I'd be happy to introduce you.

COLUMBUS: *(as LOVE-SICK MERCHANT)* She loved the bibelot! She meets me tonight!

AMERIGO: Yes, and I've learned she's a novice at the convent San Ysidro de Campo. The food there's notoriously plain; bring aloes, perhaps some paprika.

COLUMBUS: *(as LOVE-SICK MERCHANT)* Aloes, where will I find aloes.

AMERIGO: For a small fee, I might be able to introduce you to someone.

(Looks at his 'script,' there's nothing more.)

MACHIAVELLI: Why, Columbus, that was delightful.

COLUMBUS: I call it: 'Vespucci in Seville.'

AMERIGO: I was doing honest enough work.

COLUMBUS: Pimps, debtors, petty criminals and thieves.

AMERIGO: I found people with items they wished to dispose of, and others with items they wished to possess.

SOR JUANA: It never troubled you, life among the demi-monde?

AMERIGO: I never thought of it such. I made friends happy,

MACHIAVELLI: But with your education, your background.

AMERIGO: I studied at the feet of the Medici. But I lacked their capital. They made deals with shipments of cloves and nutmeg, silk in bulk, wines and grains and fabrics. I made smaller deals, a pair of shoes for an evening with a courtesan, a bibelot for a novice.

COLUMBUS: And then you introduced yourself to me.

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Plan B's 'Amerigo' Explores the New World

April 8, 2010 by [Davey Morrison](#) | Utah Theatre Bloggers

SALT LAKE CITY — I must confess upfront that I often have the hardest time writing reviews of shows I love. An uneven play warrants criticism—pointing out, in one's own opinion, what works, what doesn't, what could have, and why. But a great play deserves better than simply recycling the same old superlatives—it demands an essay.

Amerigo was a great play—one so brilliantly and beautifully written and executed that it revitalized my love for great theater over the course of its ninety minute running time. If I don't entirely give it the essay it deserves, it is because I don't want to spoil the many discoveries to be had in the experience itself.

Merely relating the show's premise is a delight—it concerns a debate between Christopher Columbus (Mark Fossen) and Amerigo Vespucci (Matthew Ivan Bennett), as moderated by Niccolo Machiavelli (Kirt Bateman) and judged by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (Deena Marie Manzanares), in purgatory. Samuelsen takes his premise and runs with it—the play is very, very funny in places, but it is also many other things: challenging, moving, educational, and, ultimately, spiritually uplifting.

Director Jerry Rapier's casting is perfect. There could not have been a better actor for Christopher Columbus than Mark Fossen. He has a quiet, commanding presence—a voice that can boom as well as it can whisper—and even in his silences he evokes a lofty sense of authority, as well as a searing, anguished intensity.

Matthew Ivan Bennet's Amerigo Vespucci is his opposite in almost every way—a little rodent of a man who is willing to do just about anything for a buck, but who also is animated by an ennobling and passionate zest for life.

Deena Marie Manzanares plays Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (probably the least familiar of the four characters for most, de la Cruz was a 17th century nun, and a wonderful poetess and playwright). Manzanares' de la Cruz is strong and smart, and her moments of vulnerability give the play much of its shape and emotional gravity.

Kirt Bateman fully embodies Machiavelli's delight in logic and power; Machiavelli could easily have been written one-dimensionally (as the play points out, he's a man who's been reduced to a word: "Machiavellian"), but Samuelsen is a better and smarter writer than that. Each of the four characters in *Amerigo* is a study in the good and evil that exists within every one of us, and Machiavelli here is less Machiavellian than he is a naturally brilliant and enthusiastic student of the politics of human behavior. (Bateman's funny, energetic performance reminded me more than anything of Tom Hulce's Mozart in *Amadeus*.) This not only makes for a more fun and complex character, but one that also, to me, feels truer to Niccolo Machiavelli the writer and political theorist.

Indeed, one of the many wonderful things *Amerigo* does is take these characters that have become words ("Machiavellian", "America", "Columbia") and deconstruct their legend to remind us that they too were people—as real, layered, flawed, and noble as any of us. In this sense, Eric Samuelsen is both playwright and historian. The play speaks to the amount of research that must have gone into it—and, even as it reconstructs history for us, *Amerigo* is constantly reminding us of the inherent artifice and construction of history itself. The play's intricate metatheatricality adds even more layers to this commentary-on-a-commentary, and Samuelsen manages to weave in not only his own character's writings, plays, and

reenactments, but also those of Aristophanes, Euripides, and Aeschylus. The result is a tapestry of history, historiography, and theater that still manages to be, I think, accessible to both layman and scholar alike.

Amerigo's spare, striking set design—a mandala with the earth's globe at its center—speaks to the play's sense of historiography, and, coupled with the quiet, constant sound design, it also manages to feel like purgatory itself—a sort of non-space, abstract, haunting, and ethereal (I'm not sure if it was intentional, but the lack of an intermission added to the effect: there is no escape). The actors' blocking orbits around this fundamental design of the circle and the square, and the message speaks powerfully and subtly: this is purgatory—Earth, America—and we, too, are here to work off our sins. And, we hope, eventually find a paradise.

Amerigo, ultimately, is a play about America. It is about the driving forces behind America—religion and commerce. It is about the land, and about the sins of the fathers—about capitalism and Catholicism, colonialism, sexism, racism. It is about how we are all inadvertent imperialists, whether our proselytizing be political or spiritual (or both). It is an amazing play—one that made me laugh, think, and moved me deeply—incredibly brought to life by director Jerry Rapier and his extraordinary cast and crew, and it is well worth the cost of admission. I can't recommend it enough.

Plan-B Theatre Company: *Amerigo*

By [JC Carter](#) | [April 8, 2010 - 12:15 PM](#) | [Backstage Review](#)

PHOTO MISSING

Mark Fossen as Christopher Columbus (standing) and Matthew Ivan Bennett as Amerigo Vespucci (prone), in Plan-B Theatre Company's production of *Amerigo*. Performing April 8-18 at the Rose Wagner Center for the performing arts

We are a country divided by two extremes. Piety and Greed. At least, that's the idea put forth by playwright Eric Samuelsen in Plan-B's *Amerigo*, performing April 8-18 at the Rose Wagner Studio Theater, and I think he's correct. He's also managed to balance those two extremes with two other extremes for America: power and guilt.

Plan-B's latest production is a fascinating argument between Christopher Columbus (played by Mark Fossen) and Amerigo Vespucci (played by Matthew Ivan Bennett), about which one deserves to be called the true "discoverer of America". An argument that is causing an uproar in Purgatory, and forces the issue to be moderated by Niccolo Machiavelli (played by Kirt Bateman), and judged by Mexican poet Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (played by Deena Marie Manzanares). The argument, funny at times, poignant in its modern relevancy at others, is both thought provoking and engaging, and well worth experiencing for yourself.

The play opens with Machiavelli leading the characters in presenting a scene from Aristophanes "The Frogs." The scene, is an argument between Euripides and Aeschylus over which was the 'best tragic poet', with Columbus taking the role of Aeschylus and Vespucci taking Euripides. Naturally this argument between tragedians can't last long without the two men dropping their 'characters' and resuming their dispute.

COMMENTARY

As the play continues, the arguments of each man is held up to the glaring light of history and their own words. Sor Juana accuses the men of raping and enslaving America as much as they raped and enslaved the natives they found there. Machiavelli does his best to moderate, interrogate, and dissect the arguments, as Sor Juana becomes just as much a participant as a judge in this dispute. Further usage of the play-within-the-play is utilized to shred arguments and bring the characters closer and closer to a resolution.

Now the fact that I've just devoted three paragraphs to explaining the plot tells you just how much I was drawn into this piece, to the point where I was more caught up in the discussion than in the presentation. Which, naturally, is a high compliment of the script, performances and direction of this play. Yes, there were elements that caught my attention, drew me out of my revelry, and reminded me that I was watching a play. Most were intentional, by both the playwright and director Jerry Rapiere; they were necessary distractions to give everyone a break. A couple of times I felt the direction was holding perhaps too closely to the classical style, and did pull me out of the production as I wondered about the reasoning behind it. But to pull me out to make me think about the meaning of a direction is far different than pulling me out to wonder what the director was thinking. Ultimately, my highest praise is that I find myself thinking about this play even today, and know there are elements in it that will leave me considering it for weeks to come.

The set by Randy Rasmussen was simple, yet powerful. The characters had the world literally at their feet as they argued the relevancy of the discovery of America. In a beautiful moment, Machiavelli was explaining the power centers of Europe, kneeling and pointing to a very small portion of the map, and I realized just how tiny Europe is in comparison to the rest of the world, and to consider that it was the power-center of the 15th century really put all of this into a different perspective for me.

Bateman (Machiavelli) took a bit to warm into his role. Once he was settled, however, his performance was solid; both realistic and sympathetic. Fossen's pious Columbus and Bennett's restless Vespucci in the hands of lesser actors would have been distracting and annoying, to say the least. These two brought out a welcome realism in their performances, giving us multiple dimensions for their characters. The stand out performance for this production for me was Deena Marie Manzanares' portrayal of Sor Juana. Everyone had a character arc, but Sor Juana's was by far the most dramatic and most demanding, and Manzanares performed it with a talent and grace that drew me into her character and left me wanting more.