

PASO DEL NORTE

Carlos Morton

Players

IGNACIO “NACHO” BONILLA -- Chicano politician, attorney at law, State Senator of Texas. Fifty years old, dark-skinned, speaks Spanish like a “Pocho.” His Mexican wife died a year ago, but he still pines for her, tortured by guilt. She represents his conscience and comments on his often questionable political manoeuvres.

CORDELIA “CORDY” BONILLA -- Their only daughter, 30-year-old divorcee, graduate of Texas & M University. Wants to join her father in politics.

TED YOUNG – Geophysicist for TERCO Corporation and the State of Texas, thirty-three years old.

SAMUEL RAMOS – Chicano businessman from Sierra Negra

PEGGY O’NEIL -- Social activist living in Sierra Negra

CHUCKIE DALEY – Fifty-five year old West Texas wheeler-dealer. Congressman, then Governor of Texas with aspirations of becoming President of the United States.

Synopsis

Paso del Norte, set in the border town of El Paso, Texas is a fast-paced play that weaves together different stories of corruption and deceit. First, there is the story of a lying Hispanic U.S. Border Patrol Man who, while being on duty, shoots an innocent Mexican immigrant. Senator Nacho Bonilla, the play’s central character, decides to represent the officer in court in exchange for the police force’s political support. Second, there is the story of Congressman Daley, a politico who seeks Senator Bonilla’s support as well as the Hispanic vote in his quest to become Governor of Texas. Daley hopes to attract votes by promising jobs and increased tax revenues, which would materialize by a dubious, smelly project of dumping and recycling waste (first bio-solids, then nuclear waste) in the area. These two main stories are entangled with other tales of love and betrayal, of family ties, language and race. Together they evoke the rich social and political network in which environmental crimes are inevitably enmeshed. The play is based on true events that occurred during the 1990’s.

The following selection gives a taste of the start of the ecological story that is inevitably also about race. Or, as one of the characters puts it: “Let me play

devil's advocate. Why build waste depositories in places where the majority of people are poor and Mexican American?" We present three fragments from this exciting narrative on *environmental racism*.

Background:

Senator NACHO BONILLA, torn between his conscience and his political career, needs the help of the police to be re-elected. He therefore decides to take the case a Border Patrol Man who shot a Mexican men at U.S. Mexican border. While hotly discussing the case with his dead wife, other clients and businessmen are waiting for an opportunity to solicit Bonilla's support. Among them is TED, who presents his case to NACHO'S daughter CORDY.

Fragments

TED

(CORDY AND TED IN HER OFFICE.) Our company, TERCO, is part of the Federation of Ecological Water Treatment Plants.

CORDY

It says here "Federation of WASTE Water Treatment Plants.

TED

We 're changing the name – making it a more environmentally friendly.

CORDY

I see, well, how can we be of service?

TED

We want you to help us promote the use of bio-solids.

CORDY

What is that, exactly?

TED

In other words, "sludge," the final product of waste water treatment.

CORDY

Oh my! (CORDY STARTS GIGGLING.)

TED

What's so funny?

CORDY

Basically, Ted, you deal in "shit."

TED

We call it fertilizer.

CORDY

I'm sorry, Ted, let's call it fertilizer. (STILL LAUGHING.)

TED

Up in New Mexico we used it as fertilizer for cotton. It produced an excellent crop.

CORDY

I understand that you want to build a waste dump out there in Sierra Blanca?

TED

Yes, a fertilizer processing plant.

CORDY

(INCREDULOUS.) No way are the voters going to go for that!

TED

Ms Bonilla, that is a perfect example of NIMBY!

CORDY

What the heck is NIMBY?

TED

Not in My Back Yard! Don't you see -- this stuff has to go somewhere. Why not put it where it will do the most good, ecologically speaking.

CORDY

What role does our office play in this?

TED

We want you to help us convince the good people of Sierra Blanca that this project will benefit them and their community. It'll bring in more than \$100,000 in taxes.

CORDY

It's not going to be easy! Who wants to live next to a . . . well, you know, not in my back yard! (THEY BOTH LAUGH. BLACKOUT.)

Some scenes later

(THE SCENE SHIFTS TO A RESTAURANT IN SIERRA NEGRA, TEXAS. CORDY, PEGGY O'NEIL AND SAMUEL RAMOS ARE HAVING COFFEE.)

CORDY

It's "bio-solids," not sludge. More coffee, Sam?

SAMUEL

No, I better not. Else I'll be all morning in the toilet.

PEGGY

Your head is in the toilet, Sam.

CORDY

The bottom line is more money and jobs for the community. But it could also bring problems. You people decide.

SAMUEL

Let me tell you something. This town is dying. The annual per capita income is only \$10,000 dollars, half of the rest of the state.

PEGGY

But we can't turn it into a garbage dump. You want to live next to a pile of shit, Samuel? Pass the sugar, please.

SAMUEL

I'd like my son to get a job at the treatment plant. Jesus, Peggy, don't put so much sugar in your coffee, it's bad for your diabetes.

PEGGY

Samuel, the day you stop drinking beer, is the day I'll stop using sugar.

SAMUEL

Cordelia, let me tell you the history of this town. First the railroads stopped running. Then they built the Interstate so it wouldn't pass through the center of

town. Young people have nothing to do. As soon as they graduate from high school, they leave, and I don't blame 'em.

PEGGY

The challenge is to find other ways of generating income that won't spoil the natural beauty of the desert.

SAMUEL

Oh please, don't give me none of that touchy feely tree hugger stuff. Look how many stores are boarded up on Main Stree. I used to run two gas stations—now I barely keep one open.

CORDY

TERCO promised forty jobs for the community. They'll also build a waste water treatment plant.

SAMUEL

There you go, there's your ecology project. What more do you want, Peggy?

PEGGY

A library for the community.

CORDY

We could make it one of the conditions.

SAMUEL

I say we give 'em the go ahead, we got enough votes.

PEGGY

Not so fast, we haven't talked to the ladies from the PTA. Nothing's going to get done in this town without them.

SAMUEL

I gotta go -- some of us have to work. See you later, Cordy. Bye Peg. (HE EXITS.)

Soon after

(BACK AT THE SIERRA BLANCA CAFÉ SAMUEL, PEGGY, CORDY AND TED CONFER.)

SAMUEL

The fertilizer is used to grow alfalfa that becomes fodder for the cattle, which grow fat, slaughtered, then made into hamburgers that people eat. Brilliant!

PEGGY

Question: How does that affect the food chain? Doesn't sludge contain lead or anything dangerous to our health?

TED

No, the heavy metals are extracted before we deposit them in the desert. If there's a tiny amount of residue, the subsoil here contains alkaline that neutralize the metals. The application of this product is only recommended in places where the rainfall is less than 15 inches per year like West Texas.

CORDY

I'm impressed. Sounds like you did exhaustive studies.

SAMUEL

How far along is TERCO in the process? Haven't you already bought the land?

TED

Yes sir, we're ready to start operations. We have the deed to the land, and the permits from the State of Texas to begin application for a period of six years.

PEGGY

You got a permit to apply sludge on our land for six years! Why weren't we told of this?

SAMUEL

It's private property, Peggy, they can do whatever they damn well please.

PEGGY

Not when it affects our health and well being! How much of that stuff are you planning to dump?

TED

The permit is for one hundred and fifty tons per day.

PEGGY

One hundred and fifty tons per day? For six years!

SAMUEL

Talk about the jobs, Ted, talk about the jobs.

TED

We plan to have over 50 job openings. We want the community to be our partners in this venture. The pay will range from six to twelve dollars per hour, depending upon the type of job.

SAMUEL

There you go, what else do you want?

TED

TERCO will pay \$20,000 a week in salaries and more than \$100,000 a year in taxes. The company will also improve the infrastructure and build a wastewater treatment plant.

CORDY

Ted, our constituents don't have a public library in Sierra Negra, they have to go all the way into El Paso ninety miles away.

TED

I can't promise anything, but I'll talk to my boss.

CORDY

They could also use some new computers so the children can hook up to the internet.

SAMUEL

Let's try to make that part of the package.

PEGGY

Ted, where's this stuff coming from?

TED

The East Coast, New York City.

CORDY

New York City used to dump it in the bay, but the Federal Government prohibited that.

PEGGY

Why does New York City want to dump its sludge in West Texas, why don't they just dump it in their own back yard?

TED/CORDY

Not in my back yard! (THEY LAUGH.)

PEGGY

I don't get the joke.

CORDY

Peggy, the point is, why not put it where it'll do the most good?

PEGGY

Now tell me, how in the Sam Hill is TERCO going to transport 150 tons of New York sludge per day into West Texas?

TED

By train.

SAMUEL

Two thousand miles by train! I'll be damned.

PEGGY

So instead of a choo-choo train, they should call it the poo-poo train!

SAMUEL

(EVEN HE HAS TO LAUGH AT THIS.) The poo-poo train!

PEGGY

I'm sorry, I can't be a party to this. (GETTING UP TO LEAVE.)

SAMUEL

Let her go, we got the votes. It's a done deal.

CORDY

If they get Sierra Negra a library with new computers will you reconsider? (PEGGY STOPS.) Peggy, I promise you, our office will monitor this one hundred percent. We won't do a thing without consulting the community.

PEGGY

Where is your father? He should be here!

CORDY

He wanted to come, but he has a big court case.

PEGGY

It's going to stink like shit, Samuel.

SAMUEL

But it's the sweet smell of money, honey! Nice doing business with you, Ted. (EXIT SAMUEL.)

PEGGY

(ALSO GETS UP TO LEAVE.) I really need to talk to your father, Cordelia, we got some unfinished business.

CORDY

Anything I can help with?

PEGGY

No, it's between him and me. (EXIT PEGGY.)

CORDY

I think this might work out, Ted!

TED

I hope so, Ms. Bonilla.

CORDY

Please, call me Cordy, all my friends do. (THEY STARE INTO EACH OTHER'S EYES.)

TED

What kind of name is "Cordy?"

CORDY

It's short for "Cordelia." Some of my friends at Loretto Academy where I attend high school had problems pronouncing "Cordelia," so I just shortened it to Cordy.

TED

Well, I'm Theodore, but most people call me "Ted." Say, Cordy, do you know of a good Mexican Restaurant where we could go for dinner?

CORDY

Why, sure! (BLACKOUT.)

DALEY

(WITH NACHO IN HIS OFFICE.) *Nacho, hombre, gracias for, uh, venir a mi oficina.*

What would you like to drink?

NACHO

Mineral water with a slice of lime.

DALEY

I'll have the same. Good to see you're not drinking, Nacho. Ain't worth it. I woke up one morning when I was forty years old and said, "that's it, no more!" Haven't had a drink since. Nacho, I'm going to be the next Governor of the State of Texas.

NACHO

Well, you're ahead in all the polls.

DALEY

How did I do it? I'll tell you, *amigo*, I raised *mucho dinero*. That's how you win elections. And courting the Hispanic vote.

NACHO

You have a real good chance here in El Paso.

DALEY

Le vamos a dar en la madre al demócrata Gary Martínez, son of a bitch.

NACHO

En la mera mera.

DALEY

Thanks for your help, Nacho.

NACHO

It was nothing.

DALEY

I owe you, *amigo!* Now, I heard TERCO's building a water treatment plant and that Cordy successfully lobbied for the funding of a library for the town.

NACHO

Yes, Cordelia did all the negotiating.

DALEY

Takes a lot of moxie. Cordy's one smart cookie. (BEAT) Nacho, is the community happy? Do you think I could go out there and do a photo op? You know, for my electoral campaign.

NACHO

Oh yeah, sure if you want.

DALEY

I don't understand, why aren't they jumping for joy!

NACHO

Well, you know, there's a few *malagradecidos*, sourpusses, who are complaining.

DALEY

About what, for Christ sake?

NACHO

Well, the bad smell.

DALEY

What smell?

NACHO

The fertilizer, shit, *caca!*

DALEY

It's the smell of progress, Nacho. You know, there's going to be a lot of other opportunities for Crocket County, especially in the recycling and waste treatment business.

NACHO

(SUSPICIOUS.) Recycling, waste treatment?

DALEY

Keep this under your hat. I'm talking low level nuclear waste facility for the state. *Mucho, mucho dinero, Nacho.*

NACHO

A low level nuclear facility! Why that! Why not something high tech, a clean industry?

DALEY

Nacho, get real, this ain't silicon valley or Austin. The population out here barely has a high school education.

NACHO

In other words, we're just a bunch of dumb Mexicans.

DALEY

And a bunch of dumb rednecks. Nacho, it don't have nothing to do with race, it's business. I'm trying to bring some economic development to your constituents. Ain't nothing wrong with that? People got to eat, don't they?

NACHO

Yeah, but they don't have to eat never mind.

DALEY

Say, you think your daughter would like to come and work for me in Austin after I'm governor?

NACHO

Jeezz, I don't know, you have to ask her.

DALEY

OK, I will. (TOASTS HIM.) *Salud, Nacho, sabes que tengo que practicar mi español.*

NACHO

Pues sí, demasiado! (BLACKOUT.)

Summary of the Ending

The climax of the play occurs when Nacho decides not to testify in the favor of the low level radioactive waste dump. During the heated negotiations with the Governor of Texas he meets a Mexican politician, Dolores Terrazas, from the neighboring State of Chihuahua who reminds him very much of Lola. (It is played by the same actor.) As it turns out the radioactive waste dump is to be situated only 26 kilometers from Mexican border, which is against all international treaties. Building the dump could contaminate the drinking water of West Texas and the northern part of Mexico. The dump is defeated but in order to save face Governor Daley, with assistance from his publicist and future wife Cordy Bonilla, claims it to be a "victory for Texas" and he is proclaimed a "great defender of the ecological cause."