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**Border-town play stuck on the border between genres**

Two hours after Donald Trump referred to “bad hombres” illegally crossing the border in the Wednesday, Oct. 19, presidential debate, Magic Theatre, in collaboration with Campo Santo and Tucson’s Borderlands Theater, opened a show that marked a stunning rebuke to the Republican candidate’s racism, xenophobia and demagoguery.

That’s as debate rebuttal, though. As theater, “Nogales” compels less.

Written by Richard Montoya and directed by Sean San José, and starring both artists, the play, whose full title is “Nogales: Storytellers in Cartel Country,” was motivated by the 2012 killing of an unarmed 16-year-old boy, José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, by the U.S. Border Patrol. Rodríguez was on the Mexican side of the border town of Nogales when, breaking international law, the Border Patrol on the Arizona side shot him, allegedly for throwing rocks, at least 10 times.

To create the play, Montoya and San José, along with fellow lead artist Joan Osato, conducted a series of interviews not just in Nogales but also with the notorious Sheriff Joe Arpaio, whose brutal policies and hateful rhetoric, the play posits, “lead to more deaths in the desert.”

While “Nogales” isn’t strictly documentary theater, text from those interviews makes up about 60 percent of the script, and video recordings from those encounters get projected onto corrugated metal walls at the rear of the stage.

The heart of the drama is a series of conversations between an Interviewer (San José) and Arpaio (Montoya), and as a character study of the sheriff, the show excels.

Montoya delivers the officer’s ceaseless blather with the rat-a-tat rhythm of a muffled machine gun. Spookily at ease, he doesn’t have to speak loudly to be heard and heeded; his Arpaio is a vigilante tyrant whose patter is as static a part of his office as the chintzy Southwestern tchotchkes vomited, the sheriff jokes, upon every surface.

A co-founder of the pioneering Latino performance trio Culture Clash, which specialized in satire, Montoya is wonderfully restrained with his punch lines. He makes you lean in and work to keep up, much as it must be like to play audience to the real-life master manipulator.

The show’s greatest strength is that he’s evenly matched to the Interviewer, whose righteous, provocative questions — “Is it open season on Mexicans?” — you’d think might flummox, or at least fluster. But in “Nogales,” Arpaio is no blustering buffoon; each time he’s trapped in the crosshairs, he wends his way back out, as if he could turn the tables at any moment and sic his deputies on the Interviewer.

The segments of the play set outside the sheriff’s office are much less strong. They’re meant to create a collage of the town, but they don’t drive the central story forward: A young American Indian woman (Laura Espino) speaks with the vagueness and naivete of a typical American adolescent about her people’s suffering; “justice warrior” Kat Rodriguez (Carla Pantoja) displays a “death map” showing all the deaths along the border that she says are the “direct result” of U.S. policy; José Antonio’s abuela (Eliana López) laments the injustice of her grandson’s death, but doesn’t say anything you wouldn’t expect a mourning grandmother to say.

Each of these scenes could be interesting, but it’s not clear why they were chosen to be in the play over any other interview one might conduct with a resident of either side of Nogales. The human-rights crisis at our southern border is such a massive, complex problem that opening the play up from a human-size interaction to take stabs at it — yet also forgoing the full documentary theater route — is a choice doomed to fall in between.