

SYNOPSIS OF *The Spell Caster*

Two acts; fifteen scenes

TIME: 1933, during The Great Depression

PLACE: Gastonia and Shelby, North Carolina

SETTING: Various campsites bordering the carnival midway. The scenery should be minimal, with crates, cots, draped tent materials and a careworn sign reading “Gambollini’s International Amusements.”

CHARACTERS: Five women; three men: Louisa Gambollini, Patch Rubenstein, Ray Poole, Maxine Poole, Veronica Hickey, Gertrude Marks, Howie Shiller, Mayra Rios-Benitez.

PLOT SYNOPSIS: *The Spell Caster* is a comic drama revolving around a group of ragtag carnies who earn a precarious living by picking pockets, rigging games, and shortchanging the marks. The story begins with the troupers taunting Louisa, the carnival’s eldest member, for being too feeble and foul smelling to attract customers. Knowing she is the target of their enmity and fearful for her life, Louisa employs her powers as a fortune teller and healer to conjure her salvation: her own youth. Louisa’s child-self emerges from another time, another plane, as Mayra Rios- Benitez, a gifted hypnotist with the power to tap into the unseen potential of the carnies, transforming them from con artists to genuine artists: the tattooist acquires the genius of Michelangelo; the lead barker acquires the voice of Caruso; the kooch dancer becomes a prima ballerina, and so on. For months they enjoy fame, fortune, and blissful harmony until it becomes apparent that Mayra is not the virtuous child that Louisa remembers. While Louisa had repressed her passions as a girl, Mayra is bold, restless, and seductive, wreaking havoc in the interrelationships of the carnival and threatening its survival. As Louisa attempts to control Mayra’s impulses, the play becomes a battle between old age and youth, culminating in Louisa reclaiming her youthful spirit, becoming the carnival’s featured attraction: the world’s oldest old lady, ministered to by the other carnies who are eager to keep her alive.

THEMATIC SYNOPSIS: The play attempts to explore issues of ageism, racism, the transcendent power of imagination, and the instant gratification syndrome endemic in America. There is also a parallel between the Great Depression of the 1930s and the current economy. While there were many homeless drifters in the 30s, there was a different spirit, a stronger desire for renewal. Today there appears to be a more cynical attitude, a lack of faith that society can ever bridge the ever widening gap between rich and poor. Louisa’s dream of youth is a call for the unity and preservation of life, and this is what transforms the carnival.