



Ana Villafaña, left, portrays A and Holland Taylor portrays N in Mario Correa's play "N/A." The two-woman show follows the story of Nancy Pelosi and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from AOC's 2018 primary win through Pelosi's exit from leadership in January 2023. (Daniel Rader)



by Jim McDermott

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

August 23, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Say the name "Nancy Pelosi" or Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's acronym "AOC" to anyone at any time (let alone in a campaign season), and you're sure to generate immediate and strong emotional reactions.

Though AOC has only been in Congress a handful of years next to Pelosi's 19 terms and 35 years, the two have been paired as one another's *bête noire* in the press ever since Ocasio-Cortez first defeated Pelosi's protégé and Democratic Caucus Chair Joe Crowley in the 2018 Democratic primaries. Truly, there are probably few in the United States who don't have an opinion on these two women — and their relationship with one another.

I certainly did when I went to see Mario Correa's new play "[N/A](#)," currently playing at New York's Lincoln Center Theater. A two-woman, 80-minute show starring Holland Taylor and Ana Villafañe, "N/A" sets out to follow the story of Pelosi and Ocasio-Cortez from AOC's fateful primary win through Pelosi's exit from leadership in January 2023.

Given everything I knew and believed about these two women — Ocasio-Cortez's progressive politics and social media acumen, Pelosi's old-school approach — I expected the play to chart AOC's rise and Pelosi's struggle to adapt. The play's opening scene reinforces that expectation: Ocasio-Cortez visits Pelosi's office after winning her primary and almost immediately begins picking fights with her.

But Pelosi herself shows no interest in squabbling or putting AOC "in her place." Instead, she invites AOC to sit down, pulls out a notecard and starts asking her questions about herself, trying in an unexpectedly folksy way to actually get to know her. AOC can't help but challenge Pelosi as she refers to herself as a radical or notes that Ocasio-Cortez came out of nowhere, but Pelosi remains unruffled.

"Turn the page," she advises AOC. "You ran on anger, the state of this country ... But anger isn't enough. The moment you walk into that chamber and take your oath of office, the only thing that matters is results."

As the play progresses, Pelosi continues to push AOC to consider a more pragmatic approach to politics while still proceeding with the same generosity of spirit, no matter their conflicts. We quickly discover that the story of Pelosi and Ocasio-Cortez is not, as the press has often reported it, the tale of an old-school politician being confronted with present-day irrelevance, but that of a canny and experienced leader

fighting to teach the next generation to ground her fiercely-held ideals in the step-by-step work required to achieve actual progress. In the end, what is important is not simply what stands you take, but what laws you are able to get passed.



Holland Taylor, left, portrays N and Ana Villafañe portrays A in Mario Correa's play "N/A." Many of the play's conversations come from transcripts or public accounts. (Daniel Rader)

Correa's portrayal of Pelosi came out of extensive research. Many of the play's conversations come from transcripts or public accounts. Pelosi, he says, "is just adamant about building blocks. She sees things in a linear, sequential fashion." And so in the play she tells Ocasio-Cortez, "Hope is for posters. I don't hope. I do the work."

We see Pelosi refusing to write people off, understanding the dismissal of one's immediate opponents as a luxury of the foolish and shortsighted. Correa points to the recent book [The Squad](#) about AOC and her fellow young progressives, in which it is revealed that Pelosi fought to make sure that Muslim Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar would be able to wear a headscarf in the House.

"Ilhan Omar is a member that's given her a lot of heartache," Correa notes. "Pelosi's caucus has some characters that I think many would have written off. But she is not of that school."

In fact, he argues, Pelosi actually appreciates the need for members of the caucus to attack her and the party's positions from time to time: "She allows public dissension from her because she understands that her members need to be on the outside of her to the public." What's important is always the broader goal: "She really does always keep her eye on that prize."

While the play offers just a few brief references to Pelosi's Catholic faith, I was struck by how deeply the character, as informed by Correa's writing and the performance of actress Holland Taylor, seemed to exude a Catholic sensibility. The Pelosi of "N/A" is a confident but also vulnerable and gracious woman who has no qualms about sacrificing her own well-being or her standing for the benefit of others.

To Correa, who was himself raised in a strong Catholic family and spent years working for Catholic Congresswoman Connie Morella, a Republican from Maryland, Pelosi's faith is central. "I think she's Catholic with a big 'C' and a little 'c,' " he says. "She is an includer, and she has a real sense of duty and service that comes from her upbringing."

Correa notes one story that didn't make it into the play: on January 6, 2021, Pelosi held a Zoom session with the House Democratic Caucus before the vote to confirm President Joe Biden (and before the impending attacks). Leading the session, "She said, 'Today is the feast of the Epiphany,' and then explained the significance of that and how it builds on what they were doing that day."

"A lot of the members on that Zoom are not only not Catholic, they're not Christian," Correa points out. "And she has no trepidation of saying, 'Hey, it's the feast of the Epiphany, let's say a prayer' — and then adding, 'whatever way in which you believe.' I don't think she hesitates to lead from a place of faith."

Throughout the play, Correa eschews actually referring to any politicians by name, including Pelosi and Ocasio-Cortez. He felt that doing so would allow him and us some space in which to explore these women without giving in to our immediate, instinctive impressions. "I wanted to give myself that breath of distance so that we could come in and listen to what they are debating, as opposed to getting mired in what you think these real-life characters are or are not," he says.

Advertisement

In fact, he admits, laughing, "I did stick very, very closely to real events and real things these women said." And yet, even as the reduction of their names to single letters seems to indicate a flattening or archotyping of their characters, the play itself really does allow us to see Pelosi in a new and fuller way. It's as though Correa has taken the two-dimensional version which the press is constantly churning out and turned it on its side to reveal her rich and complex three dimensionality. No matter where one might stand on her positions — and there is no doubt some in the audience, including even the mother of Correa's partner, do not walk in as fans — you leave understanding Pelosi on a much deeper level, and appreciating the total lack of ego she has in the service of what she believes to be the greater good.

Recent weeks have seen massive change within the Democratic Party, as President Joe Biden removed himself from the presidential race in favor of Vice President Kamala Harris and her new vice-presidential pick, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz. Correa confides that his actresses have been texting him every day. "They're living this story in and out of the theater," he says.

As we finish our phone conversation, I wonder what Correa thinks Pelosi might advise the Democratic ticket at this point. "Pelosi brings a lot of strong conviction and ideology to her work," Correa replies, "but she doesn't lead with it. I think that's probably the advice she would give: How do you broaden the tent?"

As I've sat since with that question myself, I keep going back to the end of the play. As Pelosi leaves the leadership, she reminds Ocasio-Cortez of the personal motto she shared with Pelosi when they first met: '*Más que menos*': "Leave it better than you found it." It sounds like a great mission statement for either party — and for the church, as well.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 13-26, 2024** print issue under the headline: At Lincoln Center Theater, a deeply Catholic portrait of Nancy Pelosi.