

From the Margins to the Mainstream: Latino/a
Theater in the U.S.

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In reviewing all that has happened in Latina/o theater in the last thirty-plus years, it is clear that we have come a long way. However, we have all heard the old adage, “You can’t know where you’re going if you don’t know where you’ve been.” As a theater historian I am interested in our history as Latina/o theater artists; as a theater director, I am concerned with the aesthetic evolution of our cultural work and workers. But you cannot analyze or write about Latina/o theater without also sounding like a sociologist, a political scientist, an ethnographer, etc., because these are all vital discourses in the understanding of our cultures as Latinas and Latinos. I propose here an overview of the theaters of the three major Latina/o groups, the Chicanas/os, Cuban-Americans and Puerto Ricans, focusing on their theatrical evolutions.

For my purpose, I define Chicana/o, Latina/o, Puerto Rican, Cuban-American, etc., both for readers who do not come from any of these communities and for those who do. All notions of cultural and national identity are fluid and constantly evolving. There is a preference among all of these groups, at least among the more progressive ones, to use the broad term Latina/Latino rather than Hispanic; I refer to these groups collectively as Latina/os. A person who was born and raised in a country south of the border, in general, would be considered Latin American but will also have a more spe-

cific country of origin, such as Mexico or Argentina.

A Latin American educated in her or his own country, who emigrates to this country has not experienced the marginalization that a Latina/o child who begins the educational process in this country has endured. There is a class distinction here as well, but in terms of identity, a sense of *self*, the children of immigrants will have a much different experience than their parents, who came with a national identity. Further, I would argue that all of the plays that have been written by Latinas/os deal in one way or another with issues of identity. Latinas and Latinos know that a Chicana is not the same as a *Puerto Riqueña*, but is different from her *hermana dominicana*. However, although Latina/os know they are not all the same, they are usually lumped into the same group, depending on the geography. In Florida, they're Cuban, in the Southwest, they are Mexican, and in New York, they're Puerto Rican. Earl Shorris, in his impressionistic overview of the people he terms "Latinos," indicates:

there are no Latinos, only diverse peoples struggling to remain who they are while becoming someone else. Each of them has a history, which may be forgotten, muddled, is represented, but not erased. Every people has its own Eden, and there are no parallel tracks. (12-13)

In this brief declaration, Shorris defines U.S. Latina/o playwrights and describes the people about whom the playwrights concern themselves. Yet, each group has its own history and culture, its own distinct relationship with the U.S. and its own relationship to the country of origin, a place they call "home." The notion of "home" differs from group to group and within each group. For the Chicana/Mexicano, the southwestern United States *was* home. Perhaps this is why they do not write plays about returning to live in Mexico. In contrast, the Cuban exile cannot readily go home, while the Puerto Ricans can go back and forth at will between the island and their (mostly) urban, mainland centers of population. Members of all three groups face certain scrutiny and even discrimination if and when they return to the homeland. The plays Latina/o playwrights have written affirm those tensions as the characters in their plays negotiate concepts of home.

Each of these groups experienced historic moments when their relationships to Spain or Mexico and to the United States were altered forever. For the ancestors of the Chicanos, 1848 marks the year they actually became citizens of the territories which would eventually become a part of the United States, creating what some political scientists have called a sense of “internal colonization.”¹ Ironically, 1898 is the year both the Cubans and Puerto Ricans were freed from Spanish domination only to find themselves in a quasi-colonial condition with the United States. As inhabitants of a commonwealth, the island Puerto Ricans suffer a colonial destiny which, some say, extends to Puerto Ricans on the mainland, creating what Fredric Jameson has termed an “internal Third World Voice.” Jameson writes: “...in the United States itself we have come to think and to speak of the emergence of internal Third World voices, as in black women’s literature and Chicano literature...” thus aligning the Chicanos with the Puerto Ricans (49). The Cubans’ connections to the United States ended in 1959, while the Puerto Ricans continue to live under a commonwealth status. Separation by water pervades the consciousness of both the Cuban and Puerto Rican writers, while a more metaphoric water, a river, sometimes separates the Chicanos from Mexico. History has shown that both the water that separates the three groups from home, and the fences, that are constructed along the U.S.-Mexico border are permeable, encouraging negotiations, tensions and crossings rife with drama.

When I began to research in 1970, the only mention of “Theatre-Mexican-American” that I could find was in reference to Spanish religious folk theater. The articles were often written by anthropologists rather than literature or theater scholars. Theater of all sorts had been happening in the Spanish-speaking communities of the Southwest, but no one knew outside of the participants and local audiences. In 1970 there were no books about Chicano or U.S. Latina/o theater and very few articles in scholarly journals. Nor were there any plays about the Chicano experience in print. If I had looked for mainland Puerto Rican or Cuban-American plays in English back then I would have been equally disappointed. Today, there are journals and several books as well as anthologies of critical essays about Latina/o theaters, playwrights and performers and enough plays in print to fill several seasons. These plays are be-

ing published by major houses and in journals and anthologies all across the country, thanks to the growing number of scholars and playwrights who are collecting these documents. If we add the plays that have not been published, we have come a long way.

The evolution of the theaters of the Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and Cubans in the United States before the 1960s are very distinct. All three groups have a history of professional theater in their homelands long before the twentieth century. The Chicanos became “strangers in their own land” in 1848; the Cubans and Puerto Ricans became a part of U.S. imperialist expansion in 1898. But the islands were islands, their own countries, not a part of the contiguous United States, like the southwest. According to Willis Knapp Jones, the history of professional theater in Cuba can be traced back to the late sixteenth century (392), while records of theater in Puerto Rico begin in the seventeenth century (358). In his landmark study, *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940*, Nicolas Kanellos reports records of professional Spanish-language productions in California as early as 1879 (1). He also explains that professional theatrical activity picks up in the late nineteenth century in the major centers of Mexican populations—Los Angeles (17-70) and San Antonio (71-103). Contemporary Latina/o theater artists have a history of performance that embraces Euro-American playwrights as well as Spanish-language classics from Spain and the *Américas*. Kanellos affirms the depth and breadth of what he terms Hispanic theater in the United States prior to 1940:

The Hispanic tradition in the United States is not one that can be characterized exclusively by social dysfunction, poverty, crime, and illiteracy, as the media would have us believe. Rather, if we focus on theatre, we can draw alternative characterizations: the ability to create art even under the most trying circumstances, social and cultural cohesiveness and national pride in the face of racial and class pressures, cultural continuity and adaptability in a foreign land. (xv)

Most of the plays produced by Latina/os in the past and present reflect a search for a better life. In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, Jill Dolan describes the process of using the-

ater to explore the possibility of a more perfect society: “My contention is that performance—not just drama—is one of the few places where a live experience, as well as an expression, through content, of utopia might be possible.” She is also:

interested in the material conditions of theater production and reception that evoke the sense that it’s even possible to imagine a utopia, that ‘no place’ where the social scourges that currently plague us ... might be ameliorated, cured, redressed, solved, never to plague us again. (37)

The list of “social scourges” that Dolan catalogues includes issues that have been crucial to progressive Latinas/os such as anti-immigrant legislation, racial and gender discrimination, and poverty—as well as HIV/AIDS, an issue that is still shunned by Latina/o communities at large. These and other socio-political and cultural issues have been at the forefront of the formation and creation of Chicana/o, Nuyorican and progressive Cuban-American identities. It is of interest to Latina/os in theater that performance, as Dolan argues, “can move us toward understanding the possibility of something better, can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change” (39). I cite Dolan because her project brings to mind the 1960s and ‘70s, a turbulent time in the history of the United States, perhaps because of its marginalized citizens.

In 1965 Luis Valdez and a group of farm workers on strike had formed the Teatro Campesino ‘Farm Workers’ Theater’ as the cultural and educational arm of the farm worker’s union, organized by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Under the direction of Valdez, this rag-tag troupe gave a face to the those invisible workers, collectively creating and performing *actos*, short commedia-like sketches that satirized the enemy while calling for a union contract. Other than Valdez, these farm workers-*cum* actors had no theatrical training; few had formal educations. But they had a cause and with “two boards and a passion” they moved audiences to join the union, donate to the cause and boycott grapes in support of the Union. The Teatro Campesino brought international attention to a struggle that continues to this day.

It is significant here that the Teatro's original comic *actos* were simple but not simplistic. I consider these *actos* as modern morality plays because they show the distinctions between Good (the campesino and the Union) and Evil (the grower and his henchmen). Although the aesthetic legacy is sometimes difficult to separate from the political, in the realm of aesthetics the Teatro Campesino developed what has sometimes been called the "*Rasquachi* Aesthetic." The Mexican term, "*rasquachi*," is defined by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto:

Rasquachismo is brash and hybrid, sending shudders through the ranks of the elite, who seek solace in less exuberant, more muted and purer traditions. In an environment always on the verge of coming apart (the car, the job, the toilet), things are held together with spit, grit and movidas. Movidas are the coping strategies you use to gain time, to make options, to retain hope. (156)

Rasquachismo is a truly Mexican/Chicano term, a product of the working class understood by the people who have had to negotiate the uncertainties of life either in Mexico or "*en el norte*," 'north of Mexico'. Or, as Diana Taylor states in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, *rasquachismo* represents "the aesthetics of the underdog" (97). As an aesthetic, the earliest Teatro Campesino *actos* were truly *rasquachi*. Because the group had no money, they had to be prepared to perform anywhere (usually outdoors) and to design elements that came together by chance. The actors were inventive by necessity. Presentational theater was the norm, with the actors or characters breaking the fourth wall to get the audience's attention—because they were either performing at the edges of the agricultural fields or at a park or community center with the attendant noises and distractions. Even if the production was indoors, children would always be present, some supervised, others not. Therefore, signs around the necks of the actors marked the characters and masks delineated the villains from the heroes. Costumes were found and the exaggerated props were put together in somebody's kitchen. The *Rasquachi* Aesthetic cannot be "designed;" it just happens.

The Teatro Campesino inspired a national network of Chicano theater groups on university campuses, and in the Mexican and Chicana/o communities. These groups, too, were usually comprised

of actors who were untrained in theater and the *acto* served them as a training tool for future aesthetic and socio-political growth and development. Some of the teatros from the early period are still operating. Among these are: Teatro de la Esperanza, Santa Barbara (now in San Francisco, California), La Compañía de Teatro de Alburquerque, Su Teatro, Denver, Colorado, Teatro Dallas, Texas and Borderlands Theater, Tucson, Arizona.

Latina/o theater developed quite differently during this period on the East Coast. In 1966, Puerto Rican actress Miriam Colón and other professional and community-based actors, including a young Raúl Julia, produced René Marqués's *La carreta* (*The Oxcart*). According to Jones, "A number of critics consider this symbolic play not only the best in Puerto Rico, but outstanding in Latin American drama..." (374). *La carreta* follows a family of *jíbaros*, or country folk, who have to leave their little farm in search of a better life in the city of San Juan. When San Juan fails them, the family moves to New York City, where life is even tougher on them; they return to the farm after the tragic death of the sole provider, the adopted son. This play touched the lives of Puerto Ricans who had also sought the American Dream on the mainland, only to find discrimination and poverty. The successful run of this play resulted in the founding of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre the following year (De la Roche 59). Like the Chicanos in the Southwest, Colón wanted to bring the theater to the people and thus began the theater company's annual summer tours throughout the five boroughs of New York City, which continue to this day. The group has always performed its plays in both languages, Spanish or English, depending upon the venue and the audience.

In 1972, René Buch and Gilberto Saldívar, both Cuban-born, founded *Repertorio Español*, dedicated to producing the Spanish classics *en español* (De la Roche 107). The company soon gained national and international prominence and was the only Latina/o theater company recognized as a true ensemble by the National Endowment for the Arts Theatre Program during the 1980s. Under Saldívar's financial acumen and Buch's brilliant direction, the company of artists are able to make a living in the theater. In contrast to the Spanish-language productions at the Repertorio Español, Cuban-born Max Ferrá founded INTAR (International Arts Rela-

tions), dedicated to producing Spanish-language plays from Spain as well as Latin America in English only. Across the East River, in Queens, Cuban-born Silvia Brito was establishing Thalía Spanish Theater and again producing plays in Spanish. In Washington, DC, Argentine actor and director Hugo Medrano founded Gala Hispanic Theatre in 1976, originally producing plays in both languages. In Miami, Cuban-born Mario Ernesto Sanchez founded Teatro Avante in 1979, also producing plays in Spanish. All of these companies and many more are still operating today.²

Whereas the Chicano *teatros* were collectively creating their bilingual *actos* and other works during the 1960s and 1970s, the East Coast *teatros* were producing plays from the Puerto Rican, Cuban and Spanish repertoire. The East Coast theater companies were also producing plays from the emerging repertoire of Latin American theater. During that early period, Spanish-language plays were not/could not be reviewed by non-Spanish-speaking critics, thus records of those productions can only be found in Spanish-language newspapers and journals.

In the 1960s and '70s Chicano/Latino theater in this country could only be found in the communities that had spawned their own *teatros*, playwrights, directors and actors. Further, the Chicanas and Chicanos were generally untrained and more interested in politics than aesthetics, while the East Coast theater artists had a national heritage and professional training. During this period mainstream theater companies did not produce plays that dealt with the Latina/o experience, either out of apathy, or, perhaps, because they assumed that much of that theater was being expressed entirely in Spanish or "Spanglish"—and it was. This attitude began to change when the New York Public Theatre produced Miguel Piñero's *Short Eyes* in 1974 and the Center Theatre Group and Teatro Campesino co-produced Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* in Los Angeles in 1978. Motivated by the critical and financial success of these two plays, other mainstream theater companies began to show an interest in what Latinas/os were writing and began to solicit their plays. This practice can be termed either "mainstreaming" or "infiltrating," depending upon one's point of view as well as on the results of such alliances. Major questions arise when non-Latina/o theaters produce Latina/o plays. Which playwrights get produced, which directors

are allowed to direct, what actors are cast and what audiences are being reached?

In October of 1978, *Time* declared that the 1980s would be “The Decade of the Hispanic,” a prediction that never really came to pass. Instead, I call this decade the period of “The Projects.” The Ford Foundation determined that it would assist Latina/o theaters to gain financial independence and to enhance their aesthetic development. Alongside this noble effort, the Ford also began to pump funds into mainstream theaters for their “Hispanic Projects.” Theaters across the country vied for these dollars as well as for major funding from the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Fund. However, the Lila Wallace Fund was only granting monies to companies with annual operating budgets in excess of one million dollars, which eliminated most of the Latina/o theaters from the competition. Nonetheless, the projects became development tools for Latina/o playwrights and theater artists across the country. Two of the projects were INTAR’s now-legendary Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Laboratory, run by Maria Irene Fornés and the South Coast Repertory Theater’s “Hispanic Playwrights Project,” under the direction of José Cruz González.³

Although the “Decade of the Hispanic” never really materialized on a national scale, Latina/o dramaturgy was definitely on the rise. Young Latina/o actors, directors, designers and playwrights were gaining entrance into prestigious graduate programs and Latina/o plays were being produced in Latina/o and non-Latina/o theaters across the country. A good way to gauge what is being produced by regional theaters, Latina/o and non-Latina/o, is through *American Theater Magazine*, published by the Theatre Communications Group, or TCG, the foremost coalition of professional non-profit theaters in the country. Every month, *American Theatre* publishes the seasons of the TCG membership. And while Latina/o playwrights and plays do appear in season offerings, many of these titles appear in listings for Latina/o companies who are members of TCG, a small percentage of the TCG membership. There are exceptions, as we will see later.

Four of the most-produced Latina/o plays since the year 2000 are: Luis Alfaro’s *Electricidad*, a Chicano adaptation of a Greek tragedy; Quiara Alegría Hudes’ *Elliot: A Soldier’s Fugue*, a poetic medi-

tation on Puerto Ricans in the U.S. Military; Eduardo Machado's *The Cook*, a Cuban-American statement on exile and loyalty and Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics*, a play about Cuban cigar makers in Tampa, Florida on the eve of the Great Depression. This is a very select list, by no means exhaustive, but it gives an idea of what four of the leading Chicano, Cuban-American and Puerto Rican playwrights are writing about.

One of the most produced Chicano plays has been *Electricidad*, freely adapted from the *Electra* of Sophocles by California Chicano playwright, performer and gay activist Luis Alfaro. Born and raised in the Pico-Union district of downtown Los Angeles in 1962, Alfaro has proven to be a highly regarded social critic in his poems, essays, plays and one-man performances since the late 1970s. *Electricidad* was commissioned by Borderlands Theater in Tucson, Arizona, where it received its world premiere in 2003, directed by artistic director, Barclay Goldsmith, a long-time teatro director and activist. That production was followed by a production at the prestigious Goodman Theatre in Chicago in 2004, under the direction of Cuban-born, actor/director, Henry Godinez. The play gained national exposure when it was published by *American Theatre Magazine* in 2006, making it readily available to other producers. Universities and colleges have produced *Electricidad*, bringing this controversial play to a younger audience as well.⁵

The professional production of *Electricidad*, which I saw at the Center Theatre Group (Los Angeles) in 2005, was directed by Lisa Peterson. It was a fine collaboration between the director and her design team. However, in our dialogic review of that production, Chicano playwright Carlos Morton and I felt that it was doomed from the start by its quirky and often confusing script that featured a family of *cholos* (Chicano slang for gang members) living in East Los Angeles. The Greek myth centered on the House of Atreus and the attendant generational curses; those people were semi-mortals, not mere humans. In Alfaro's vision, the dead body of Agamemnon, nicknamed "El Augie" has been placed in the front yard of his East Los Angeles home by *Electricidad*, his daughter. She refuses to bury him until she has achieved vengeance for his murder by goading Orestes to murder their mother, Clemencia (Clytemnestra), who murdered their father.

Alfaro's transfer from a myth about larger-than-life archetypes to *el Rey del Barrio* 'King of the Barrio' pushed the limits of credibility. Still, there is great pathos and humor in the play. A chorus of three *vecinas* 'neighbors,' representatives of the *barrio*, keep watch on the house, lamenting and commenting upon the sad fate of the family of *cholas* and *cholos*. Alfaro describes the women, Connie, Cuca and Carmen, as "A Griego 'Greek' chorus in housedresses and aprons; Very *mitoteras* these mujeres" 'Very gossipy these women'" (67). Although the audience will not have read these comic descriptions, the women's humor is delivered through their dialogue. Whereas Iphigenia was sacrificed by her father King Agamemnon in the original, Alfaro keeps her alive, a fascinating touch. In the following exchange, a nicely comic set-up representative of Alfaro's humor, the Chorus discusses "La Ifi" wondering what happened to her:

LA CONNIE. Ran off.

LA CUCA. No?

LA CARMEN. How can a *chola* run off?

LA CONNIE. That's like a coyote in the city.

LA CUCA. Spiritual death for sure.

LA CARMEN. And she used to be the meanest of them all.

LA CONNIE. Didn't like the boys too much.

LA CUCA. Cut them up for no razon [reason].

LA CARMEN. Danced with girls.

LA CONNIE. You mean she was . . .

LA CUCA. Yes . . . A Catholic schoolgirl. (68)

As in the original Greek tragedies, the Chorus serves to reveal exposition; unlike their Greek precursors, however, these are three women, not a chorus of fifteen male actors. Further, the three women in Alfaro's chorus have a job to do—they are sweeping. The stage directions inform us that “Their *chisme* ‘gossip’ is accompanied by the rhythmic sweeping of their brooms” (68). These three women provide comic relief, as does the grandmother, simply called *Abuela*. When *Electricidad* asks, “How long you been a *chola*, *abuela*?” the grandmother answers, “Oh since I was an infant. I used to shop-lift from my baby carriage,” and they both laugh. A few lines later *Abuela* tells *Electricidad*, “I been a *chola* so long they should have named a beer after me” (77).

Ultimately, *Electricidad* is a very entertaining play, especially as a “text;” but it is a troublesome production challenge, given the subject matter. Morton and I wondered about the efficacy of producing this play for audience members outside a Chicana/o context. The code-switching would be lost on a non-bilingual audience member, as would many of the references to a Chicana/o and even *chola/o* reality, a reality with which Alfaro is very familiar. Here is yet another example of major regional theaters and even universities producing a play about people who are their own worst enemies. With gang warfare at a fever pitch in Los Angeles and other major urban centers, a play about those very people does nothing to assuage anti-Latina/o sentiments across the country.

One of the most produced Puerto Rican plays is Quiara Alegria Hudes' *Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue*. Born in 1978, Hudes is the youngest of the playwrights I am discussing, and has already gained national recognition. This play was first produced in 2006, off-Broadway by Page 73 Productions, directed by Davis McCallum.⁶ The play was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 2007, a first for any Latina playwright. Hudes, whose mother is Puerto Rican and father is Jewish, was born and raised in West Philadelphia, where her parents owned a number of small businesses. After earning a B.A. in Music Composition from Yale University, she earned an M.F.A. in Playwriting from Brown University. With this musical background, *Elliot* is indeed a fugue, a poetic, idiosyncratic view of three generations of Puerto Rican war veterans: the grandfather, Grandpop,

fought in Korea; the father, Pop, fought in Vietnam; and the son, Elliott, is an injured Marine home on leave from the current invasion of Iraq. Balancing the male characters is the mother, Ginny, who met Pop while serving as a nurse in Vietnam.

The construction of the play is unique, relying on the rhythms of the four speakers as if they were musical instruments. The playwright labels some of the scenes “Fugues” in which “people narrate each others actions and sometimes narrate their own” (4). In the first scene of the play, titled “1/Fugue,” after the three elders describe the setting, the title character walks on stage describing his own entrance and actions:

ELLIOTT: A man enters.
(Elliott enters in a towel. It's 2003. He's 18.)

GRANDPOP: Clean, deodorized.
Some drops of water plummet from his nose and lips.

The shower was ice cold.
(Elliott shivers. He picks up the underwear.)

GINNY: He performs his own military-style inspection.
(4)

In Hudes' poetic vision we learn about the family's history and the men's struggles with their duty as soldiers as well as husbands, fathers and sons. The play also honors those men and women from the island and the mainland who have fought valiantly for their country. Ultimately, *Elliott* is a love story as tender as the foliage in Ginny's urban Philadelphia garden, her utopic refuge which transports her back to the island. Hudes describes the “garden space,” contrasted with the “empty space” on the opposite side of the stage, as “teeming with life. It is a verdant sanctuary, green speckled with magenta and gold. Both spaces are holy in their own way” (3). In the last moments of the play Pop narrates as Elliott prepares to return to Iraq:

He walks down the gray carpeted ramp.

Boards the plane to Camp Pendleton.
Where he will board his second ship to
Kuwait.
Where he will cross the border north into
Iraq.
Again.
Happy he has an aisle seat.
Going back to war.
END OF PLAY (81)

More to the point, although the play's narrative exposes the horrors of war, the play does not ask the audience to take sides for or against the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. In the words of Brook Stowe:

Hudes' *Elliot* crafts an interwoven elegy that is testament more to identity than horror, familial connection than political resistance. By opting not to shade her story as either pro-occupation or antiwar the whole of Hudes' play becomes something larger than its individual parts: a meditation upon the cyclical nature of destruction and renewal... (*The Brooklyn Rail* 2006)

Eduardo Machado is, after his mentor, Maria Irene Fornes, one of the foremost Cuban-American playwrights today. Born in Cuba in 1953, Machado was shipped off to the United States at the age of eight when Castro took over. All of his major plays have to do with immigration, displacement and a longing for a long-lost Cuba, as well as issues of homosexuality in the Cuban community. Machado became the head of the M.F.A. Playwriting Program at Columbia University in 1997 and became the Artistic Director of INTAR in 2004. One of his most recent plays, *The Cook*, was first produced by INTAR in New York City in 2003, directed by Cuban-American, Michael John Garcés. In this beautifully-written play, Machado follows the lives of the cook, Gladys, and her husband, Carlos, the chauffeur, who work for a bourgeois family in Havana. The action happens in the kitchen of the mansion. The first act takes place on the eve of Castro's triumphant entry into Havana. We are introduced to Gladys and Carlos as well as the lady of the house, Adria. When

Adria and her husband escape the island, Gladys vows to protect their home until they return. All the while, Carlos is exultant over the possibility of revolutionary change: "We're going to get rid of all the fucking foreigners that are trying to control our country," he tells Gladys (8). The second act takes place in 1972. The main action revolves around Gladys' cousin, Julio, who is gay and is being persecuted by the authorities. Carlos has become the Sub-Minister of Transportation and threatens to reveal Julio's homosexuality if Gladys does not allow his pregnant mistress to move into the house. The third act takes place in 1997. We soon discover that Carlos's illegitimate daughter, Rosa, is living with them and that her mother has passed away. Gladys is now a highly regarded chef who runs a "*paladar*," a state-sanctioned restaurant in the home. The main action of the third and final act is the arrival of the exiles' daughter, Lourdes. Machado paints his characters as neither good nor evil, but human in their frustrations and desires. When the rather obnoxious Lourdes reveals that her mother never even mentioned Gladys, Machado's critique of the Cuban bourgeoisie is affirmed. Ultimately, Gladys is the real heroine of the piece, and we are left with the impression that all will be well in her household as she and Rosa prepare the meals for the day's eager customers.

The most produced play by any Latina or Latino in the regional theaters as well as universities and colleges is *Anna in the Tropics*, by Nilo Cruz. He was born on the island of Cuba in 1960 and came to the United States on a Freedom Flight at the age of ten. He grew up in Miami and completed an MFA in Playwriting at Brown University, having first studied under Maria Irene Fornes. First produced by New Theatre in Coral Gables, Florida, in 2002 under the direction of Rafael de Acha, *Anna in the Tropics* was the first play ever awarded the Pulitzer Prize without having been produced on Broadway. It is also the first play by a Latina or Latino to be awarded the Pulitzer. The play then went on to the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton directed by Emily Mann. That production moved to Broadway in 2003, starring movie actor Jimmy Smits and Broadway actors Priscilla Lopez and Daphne Rubin-Vega, among others. The actors were all Latinas/os, so the casting was appropriate, but the Broadway production lacked passion in a play about passion.

Anna in the Tropics is set in a small, family-owned cigar fac-

tory in Ybor City, near Tampa, Florida, in 1929. The action revolves around whether to abandon hand-rolling in favor of mechanization while the arrival of a new *lector*, or reader, from Cuba is a cause for celebration and concern. The men are opposed to spending money on a *lector* while the women relish the idea, especially when the *lector*, Juan Julian, arrives and turns out to be charismatic and handsome. Juan Julian chooses to read from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and the action in real life begins to mirror the melodrama of the Russian novel when the married daughter, Conchita, has an affair with him. It is a charming play with language that elevates many of the scenes to poetic heights. In a confessional scene Conchita tells her husband about the affair:

I thought it would be impossible. That nobody could occupy that space in me. But he did. And everything seemed so recognizable, as if he had known me all along. His room became a theatre and his bed a stage, and we became like actors in a play. Then I asked him to play my role, to pretend to be me and I dressed him in my clothes. And he was compliant. It was as if I was making love to myself, because he knew what to do, where to go and where to take me. (Cruz 64)

Of the three professional productions I have seen of this play, by far the best was the South Coast Repertory's version, directed by Juliette Carrillo, a Chicana with an M.F.A. in Directing from the Yale School of Drama. In each of the three productions the casts were Latina/o and the actors had impressive professional résumés. However, the dialects posed a problem for me in two of the productions I witnessed. The language in the text of *Anna in the Tropics* is poetic, sensual and demanding; language that must be savored for its imagery, rhythms and cadences. In reality these Cubans should be speaking *español*, not *inglés*, and as I listened to the New York production I longed for the Spanish. Instead, Mann apparently asked her actors to assume some kind of Spanish accent. The female actors were excellent, with Priscilla Lopez as Ofelia, the mother, Daphne Rubin-Vega as Conchita and Vanessa Aspillaga as Marela. They were elegant, beautiful and truly believable. However, on Marela's part, her accent varied from sophisticated to heavy and I often had trouble

understanding her. In sharp contrast, Victor Argo as Santiago and David Zayas as Cheché, spoke with New York/Bronx accents. Cheché is the product of his and Santiago's father's philandering, "from a town up north," not New York City or any of its five boroughs. As Palomo, John Ortiz did not have a distinguishing accent, adding to this linguistic confusion.

Rounding off the male roles there's the critical role of the *lector*. Broadway continues to be dependent upon the nineteenth-century "Star System" to fill those expensive seats, and although Smits looked good, he is not a *lector* for one reason: no voice. Great actors (men and women) generally have full, resonant voices that send the language and the audience into heavenly heights. Neither the big nor little screens prepare an actor for the rigors of the stage, especially in a large Broadway theater. I do not know how much stage experience Smits has, but in this role, he seemed out of his medium. In my review of this production I wrote: "The New York production was hampered by so much yelling and screaming that the actors all sounded hoarse. And this, from the beginning of the evening" (Huerta "A Tale" 162). In sharp contrast to the New York production, all of the actors in the South Coast Repertory production spoke without an accent. I attribute this to the fact that Juliette Carrillo understood that these people should really be speaking Spanish; thus there was no need to give them heavy-handed accents.

In 1999 Alberto Sandoval Sanchez affirmed in *José, Can You See?: Latinos on and Off Broadway*, that only four plays written by Latinos had played on Broadway before the Millenium: Miguel Piñeros *Short Eyes* (1974), Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* (1979), Reynaldo Povod's *Cuba and His Teddy Bear* (1986) and John Leguizamo's one-man piece, *Freak* (1998). After discussing the first three plays, Sandoval-Sanchez concludes: "The Latino productions staged on Broadway . . . are disturbing and problematic regarding issues of representation: they can easily perpetuate the stereotyping of U.S. Latinos as delinquents, gang members, criminals, drug users, or as the underdogs of the disenfranchised American working class" (115).⁷

However, the new musical *In the Heights* won the Tony for Best Musical on Broadway in June of 2008 after a very successful run off-Broadway the previous year. Indeed, this musical received fourteen Tony nominations, more than any other production of the season.

Quiara Alegria Hudes wrote the book, making her the first Latina playwright to be produced on Broadway. Mainland-born Puerto Rican, Lin-Manuel Miranda, wrote the music and lyrics and also stars in the production. Both Hudes and Miranda were nominated for a Tony. The excellent reviews, ecstatic audiences and the coveted Tony will assure that this production will have a life on Broadway. The Miranda/Hudes story revolves around the very pan-Latina/o barrio of Washington Heights, from denizens to visionaries, and is ultimately a feel-good story about success. The music is eclectic, the (here-to-fore-unknown) cast is, according to the reviews, excellent. No more criminals and junkies but a multi-ethnic cast of singers, dancers and actors that get standing ovations every night.

What is the status of Latina/o theater today? Along with a greater degree of professionalism have come higher ticket prices, an unfortunate inevitability: you want to pay the artists a living wage. *In the Heights* may have won a Tony but the tickets for that Broadway production range from \$110.00 to \$300.00. Even at the major regional theaters in the larger cities, tickets are nearing \$100.00—not readily accessible to the working class. However, there is a growing segment of the Latina/o population that can, indeed, afford professional theater and they are willing to support productions that speak to them.

I hope that this overview has demonstrated that we have come a long way, but still have a long way to go. Play development programs like the Hispanic Playwrights Project (and others) had been a tremendous boon for the playwrights, even if only as observers. However, in the words of Juliette Carrillo, the out-going Director of the Hispanic Playwrights Project, “Many regional theatres still consider our work too foreign, too outside their aesthetic, to venture into producing. HPP was disbanded for budgetary purposes, and, with budget tightening, the likelihood that this work will be developed properly is unfortunately low” (Svich 60).

On the positive side, there are Latina/o theater companies across the nation, serving the needs of audiences that want to see themselves onstage. Many of these companies are able to pay union wages and still produce affordable theater. The *rasquachi*-ness of the early 1960s and ‘70s is still apparent in the many non-professional, community-based *teatros*. Spanish religious folk theater is still be-

ing produced, especially in the Mexican parishes where you can find productions of “Los pastores” “The Shepherds” or “The Four Appearances of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego” every December. In most instances, these productions are truly community-based, with participants who harbor no aspirations to professional standards. Rather, the players are performing a centuries-old expression of their Roman Catholic faith.

On the secular plane, many of the community-based *teatros* are comprised of community activists whose main purpose is to educate and entertain their audiences, as in the early days of the Chicano and Nuyorican Theatre Movements. Alongside those community *teatros*, Latina/o playwrights, actors, designers and directors are working in professional theaters, both Latina/o and non-Latina/o, adding a touch of authenticity to the productions. Furthermore, the formerly male-dominated Latino theater scene now includes Latina playwrights, directors and producers, women whose voices were basically ignored before the 1980s. Yet it is no coincidence that three of the four most produced playwrights I discuss are men; the Latino playwrights still dominate, especially in the regional theaters. However, the fact is that after thirty-eight years of researching and writing about these theaters and artists, I am able to talk about professional Latina and Latino playwrights, directors and producers. I can also make reference to a growing number of scholars in several disciplines, including theater, performance studies, literature, history and ethnic studies, who are recording and theorizing Latina/o theater. Despite the current xenophobia, Latinas/os are not going away, and their theater is here to stay.

Notes

1 See Mario Barrera, Carlos Muniz and Charles Ornelas, “The Barrio as an Internal Colony,” in Harlan H. Hahn, ed., *Urban Affairs Annual Review*, (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972), 6: 465-98.

2 Of the many *teatros* still in operation today, I list the Bilingual Foundation for the Arts, Los Angeles, CA, 1970’S; Latino Chicago Theatre Company, 1979; Gala Hispanic Theatre, Washington, DC., 1979; Pregones, the Bronx, 1980s; Teatro Vision, San Jose, California, 1985.

3 Among the more prominent “Projects” were: Teatro Meta, Old Globe Theatre, San Diego, California; Latino Theatre Initiative, Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles; Latino Theatre Lab, Los Angeles Theatre Center; “Festival Latino,” New York Shakespeare Festival; Hispanic Playwright’s Project, South Coast Repertory Theatre, Costa Mesa, California. Of these, none exist today. The only project that still exists is the San Diego Rep’s Teatro Sin Fronteras.

4 See Huerta, “Looking for Magic,” in Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas, eds. *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, And Theatricality in Latin/America* (Duke 1994): 37-48.

5 In 2007, *Electricidad* was produced by two different college theater departments, San Diego State University and Southwestern College. I saw the SDSU production, directed by Peter Cirino with varying degrees of success.

6 According to the manuscript of the play, an earlier version of *Elliot: A Soldier’s Fugue* was produced by the Miracle Theatre (Teatro Milagro) in Portland, Oregon, in 2005.

7 Perhaps because his book was in press or because Paul Simon is not a Latino, Sandoval-Sanchez did not include Simon’s 1998 musical, *Capeman* in his list of Latino plays on Broadway. This production would also fit Sandoval-Sanchez’s critique above as it is based on a real-life troubled Puerto Rican youth known as “The Capeman” in New York City during the 1950s. Unfortunately for the highly talented cast, many of whom were Latinas and Latinos, *Capeman* closed soon after opening.

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