

Latinas Take the Stage¹

Dr. Elizabeth Ramirez

The political turmoil of the 1960s greatly impacted the growth of contemporary Latina/Latino theatrical expression. In *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*, Vicki L. Ruíz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol write about the effect of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, galvanizing Latinas/Latinos into a political force: “As part of the global student movements, Mexican and Puerto Rican youth created a myriad of organizations to address continuing problems of discrimination, particularly in education and political representation.” As these historians point out, “bursting with cultural pride, some students dreamed of revolution, others of social reform,” hand in hand with an impetus on art and writing, encouraging Latinas in feminist studies, all contributing to an ideal setting for *la voz Latina*.² The growth of Latina/Latino theatre that developed through the 1980s resulted in highly diversified artistic expression that continues to make a significant contribution to U.S. theatre. Within this development, the Latina performance voice continues to bring distinctive cultural themes that are at once shared and distinct. (26)

In surveying the Latina/Latino theatre movement in the United States, “From El Teatro Campesino to the Gay 1990s,” M. Teresa Marrero observes that “since the 1960s, a significant amount of ground has been gained by Latina and Latino performers and playwrights: a ground they have fought for in the political and cultural arts arenas.” She adds: “A reading of the development of Chicano/Latino theater offers an oppositional dynamic, an impetus towards the interruption of the stereotype. The energy of this rethinking has been largely women’s, she states, and concludes: “Indeed, it is Latina women who now lead the Latino theater into the new

millennium.”³ Certainly, at the end of the first decade of the new century, where we are now, it is evident that the momentum of Latinas contributing to the annals of the stage continues. In effect, this compelling voice remains at the very forefront of Latina/Latino theatre in the United States, making an impact on the U.S. stage. Because of the importance of this creative voice, that is, *la voz Latina*, my primary goal as a theatre historian and critical writer, is to broaden its audience. (1)

In 2000, Catherine Casiano and I began editing a collection of plays and performance pieces by Latinas. It became clear that a compilation of plays written by Latinas was necessary to fill a void and ensure that those important Latina and Latino voices were heard by others. *La Voz Latina*, published by University of Illinois Press in 2011, serves as a “document of a key period in Latina performance history” by a select group of female playwrights from 1980 to the present, working in very distinct forms, styles, themes, and genres. Through this diversity we encounter the “rich multiplicity of cultural subject positions and artistic expressions encompassed by the term “Latina.” Contrary to the magical realism stereotype of Latina/Latino drama or to “the perception that politically engaged work among Latina/Latino artists must take the form of social realism and its Brechtian-inflected adaptations,” this compilation of work “shows that Latinas are not content to be limited to these forms” generally associated with Latinas/Latinos. (1)

Through select works and playwrights, these Latinas can serve as representatives from varying backgrounds that both set them apart from others as well as show shared common experiences. Collectively, these women’s roots represent great diversity. We learn about indigenous cultures as well as about urban Latinas and Latinos, and by representing distinct Latina/Latino cultures, great depth is added to the field. Since most of the plays were previously

unpublished, this collection makes a significant contribution to the field. The plays themselves are distinct in focus, structure, and interest. A further distinction lies in the fact that all of the playwrights are also theatre practitioners in either academic or professional settings or both. (2)

The intent of this collection from the onset was to give already known and new playwrights alike an opportunity to let our audiences know about new and different work as well as to revisit some of the works that have had viable lives on the U.S. stage. In addition, we wanted to show a variety in terms of cultural roots and place of family origin. (3)

This collection of performance work meets a sociological need, improving our understanding of Latinas'/Latinos' influence on the broader U.S. culture. This compilation also imparts insight into Latina/Latino culture and community. By examining select playtexts, their production history, and information about their creators, we can view particular cultural values, beliefs, and aspirations of this group. Thus, this anthology contributes to an understanding of the cultural contributions of Latinas/Latinos to U.S. and world culture. The intended audience for this collection includes scholars in theatre and performance history, English, ethnic studies, American studies, women's studies, anthropology, cultural studies, world history, and those interested in expanding cultural expression and exploration. We anticipate the greatest interest to be in Chicana/Chicano and Latina/Latino studies. In higher education and among researchers and professionals in the field, making performance works available broadens the repertoire, increases resources for teaching, and allows for the development of new courses in multiculturalism and diversity in the curriculum. In addition, the ever-growing Latina/Latino presence in the United States widens the appeal for the valuable contributions of Latinas/Latinos, both for U.S. audiences and for audiences abroad and the Americas who are interested in this aspect of U.S. history. (4, 5)

Thus, we committed to this project, which has subsequently led us on a long journey of bringing sample works by already prominent artists, by those who persevere in honing their craft and creative expression despite the struggle of finding venues for their work, and by those completely new voices that are making an impact on the U.S. stage. For us too, our own work and interests made it a necessary exploration that exclusively centered on women. Throughout our development of this collection, we respected and resolved to uphold the evident singularity of each woman as we determined the playtexts we would use. The result was that each playtext contributes its own individual perspective, and in many cases, the format of the chapters may vary as well. Just as we sustained our firm belief that the individuality of each playwright's words would stand out above all of the materials we had gathered, we became satisfied that we could maintain the integrity of the anthology despite the stylistic differences among chapters. For us, the dissimilarity conveyed the value of difference within a group that had long suffered from stereotyping and marginality. (6)

La Voz Latina presents English and bilingual playtexts that aim to inform others about this remarkable group of women in the United States. This anthology is distinguished by its variety in form and content. Through the creative expression found in this compilation, we examine the work of eleven playwrights who are also theatre practitioners to varying degrees. Of the twentysome Latina origins found in the United States, this first volume features Cuban, Puerto Rican, Chicana, and Dominican voices, as well as those whose origins are a blend of more than one background, with the expectation of including additional voices and worldviews in future volumes. (9)

Vicki Ruiz, the noted historian who writes on Mexican women in twentieth-century America, has written that “sustaining community can be as important as finding it.”⁴ The

playwrights we studied show how they have drawn from their own families and friends in their surrounding communities in order to tell us their stories. Sometimes filled with humor and often serious in tone, the characters they create are truthful depictions of their view of the world in which they live. Through these plays we are introduced to and often reacquainted with characters we may have known about previously, such as fathers, mothers, family, and friends in the neighborhood, but they are no longer presented as one-dimensional stereotypical figures, such as those we might find in the early Teatro Campesino *actos*. They are now shown from the cultural and ethnic perspectives these women bring to the stage. (14, 15)

Often these playwrights transcend the connection that they have to their community by crossing national and international borders. Just as Vick Ruiz notes that “through poetry, short stories, and novels, Latina writers engender region in ways that are instructive for historians,” so too we find dramatic expression revealing similar kinds of what Ruiz calls “physical landscape and mestiza soul.” Dramatic work also enables the same kinds of narratives that Ruiz describes in other genres, that is: “narratives as born of conquest and shaped by globalization, past, present, and foreseeable future.” Many of our entries help shape Latina history through the same kind of recounting that Ruiz delineates in the historical accounts she studies, “in which a fuller recounting of Latina history” emerges through “locating gendered ethnoracial identities within matrices of place as landscape and metaphor, of migration and settlement, and of political space,” along with other means (Ruiz, *Memories and Migrations*).⁵ (15)

About the Voices in the Collection

The structure of the book resulted in the following major topics: In “Creating a Performance Voice: Themes of Family, Religion, and Community,” both Milcha Sanchez Scott’s *Roosters* and Cherríe Moraga’s *Waiting for Da God*, a kind of play on words on Beckett’s

Waiting for Godot, allow for discussion about one of the central themes in Latina/Latino theatre, namely, *la familia* and how Latinas function within that unit. Layered upon family dominance in their lives is the part that religion plays. Hand in hand with both of these concepts, we witness how daughters, as central figures, experience love, family, and community. (17)

Milcha Sanchez-Scott's *Roosters*: The Most Produced Chicana/Chicano Play of the 1980s

Sanchez Scott's *Roosters* was the most produced Chicana/Chicano play during the 1980s. While we recognize that Milcha does not call herself a Chicana, being of Indonesian, Chinese, and Dutch origins on her mother's side, and Colombian, though partly raised in Mexico, on her father's side, as Jorge Huerta explains, "she has captured the essence of the Chicano spirit." Her prominence in the Chicana repertoire has become so embedded now that it is difficult to separate her from that group. (31)

When we asked her "why do you write what you do?" her response was: "I don't know if I know how to write anything else. I mean, the magical part, I know now where I get it—that's from my whole background, being in Colombia, being in Mexico, all that magical realism is from there, and that's how my mind always worked, even when I was a little kid writing in school, writing essays, they would go in that direction, and so, I guess I don't know how to write any other way." (35)

Cherríe Moraga: Latina Feminism Hits the Stage

Cherríe Moraga, known for her acclaimed anthology of feminist writings, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, which she co-edited with Gloria Anzaldúa, became the single publication that would put her writings on cultural, political, and literary maps. She is now recognized as an acclaimed poet, essayist, and playwright who has brought a new and powerful voice to the theatre. (68, 69) When we asked her: What has been

your biggest and/or most difficult struggle/challenge in life, in completing a play or getting it produced? She responded: “The very subject matter of my writing queer, feminist, and indigenist in perspective and sensibility automatically removes my work from mainstream consideration in terms of production. . . . Further, with cutbacks in the arts, alternative (including Chicano) theatres dedicated to producing marginalized work are virtually nonexistent.” Her words of advice to aspiring playwrights/performers/directors/ audiences are: “Self-discipline and rigorous devotion to your art form, regardless of monetary award or recognition, is what fundamentally distinguishes one’s work. Through fearless commitment to removing self-censors and the daily discipline of writing and revisioning the work, the original voice will finally emerge.” (73)

Diana Rodriguez’s Path to Divadom: Chicanas Can Do it All

On the topic of “Chicano Teatro and Chicanas: Staging Identity,” the framework of the Chicano Movement provides the context for understanding why and how Chicanas have been driven to appropriate the stage in order to give voice to their ideas. Diane Rodriguez, whose experience in theatre is vast, including being a leading female actor in the legendary El Teatro Campesino, and currently an accomplished actor, anthologized writer, regional theatre director, and now a producer at Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, recognizes that *The Path to Divadom, Or How to Make Fat-free Tamales in G Minor* lies within her grasp, altering cultural traditions and enacting social change along the way. (17, 18)

In this one-woman piece,⁶ *The Path to Divadom*, she writes: “Diva Rachel is brave. Real Brave. She decides she’s going to make her masa from scratch. Masa from scratch? This is unheard of by any standards. Only the most experienced tamal maker attempts the difficult feat of creating the perfect blend of ground corn, lime and fat. Is this a foolish attempt or a brilliant

one? I who have been around masters of masa making, have to admit, am impressed.” Rachel’s plan is to make fat-free tamales. But “Aunt Liz,” “the authority on everything,” arrives and soon puts a stop to that plan. Aunt Liz tells Rachel: “You are defying tradition, woman. This recipe has been in our family for hundreds of years.” “Rachel was humiliated.” She says: “Can’t you people see I’m fat! How long are we going to perpetuate this madness. I’m trying to make things better, improve the quality of my life, and I get shot down like some ranchera in a bad channel 22 movie.” (99)

When Rachel tasted the tamale made with lard, however, Rodriguez writes: she “became in front of us la Diva Royal. “Diva Rachel proclaimed: I’m a sexy, bossy, nalgona, mandona, big ole hips and thunder thighs. Hug me and get lost in the softness of my 40 DDs” “Women, why do we shrink ourselves, make ourselves small, wrap ourselves, hide ourselves . . . Some women move it forward, others move it back. We are the priestesses of la cultura. We are the keepers of the tradition. *La cultura*. La Cultura is an ever-changing, ever-growing big ole woman. La Cultura is a woman.” (101, 102)

Dramatic Monologue: Yareli Arizmendi’s Many Voices

In the same vein, the “many voices” of Yareli Arizmendi reveal, as in the playtext title, “who buys your shoes.” (18) You may know Yareli from *Like Water for Chocolate*, and she wrote and starred in the film, *A Day Without a Mexican*. She is Cuban, Spanish, and Mexican, and considers herself a Chicana. When we asked her why she writes what she does, she said: “My passion is acting. Interpreting reality in an attempt to expose an angle of the “same old story” the audience had not considered. Concerned with an individual’s responsibility to the larger social reality and vice versa, I found that many of my concerns and perspectives were not being written about. I tried to create politically charged work with others (collective creation

theater). It was not an easy task to get a group to commit and concentrate on creating work that would result in an actual play delivered before an audience, when the ideological figures erupted. It was exciting but not very productive. That's what made me sit down at my kitchen table, take pen and paper in hand, and start writing . . . The freedom that gave me was fantastic; performance art and the one-woman show became a very dynamic and immediate venue for me.” (105)

Both Diane and Yareli exemplify how a Chicana can undertake anything she sets out to do, from directing to acting, to producing, to spearheading special projects that serve as vehicles for political and sociological expression. Through these theatre practitioners we also delve into the evolution of Chicano teatro, which has resulted in Chicanas' present-day dramatic expression. (18)

Staging Myth/La Indígena: Celia Herrera Rodríguez & The Colorado Sisters

Another topic is “La Indígena/The Indigenous: Staging Myth.” Both through Celia Herrera Rodríguez's artist's canvas and the stage, in *Cositas Quebradas: Performance Codex*, and through Elvia and Hortencia Colorado's re-creating myths in *Chicomoztoc: Mimixcoa—Cloud Serpent*, we investigate the indigenous connections that have shaped contemporary Latinas, whether through language, identity, blood, or other factors. (18)

Rodríguez's artwork stems from working with the famed Chicano artistas in the Royal Chicano Air Force, a group of largely male artists during the time of her work with them, in northern California, that included Jose Montoya and his brother Malaquias. Her stage work, as described by Cherrie Moraga, is “based in the language of the symbol,” as a “directed gesture toward the recuperation of a history, a way of knowing,” which had been “lost to Xicano/as.” As such, through her work, the artist-performer is making history, as well as the “living practice of

ceremony as understood through the elemental.” For Rodriguez, the performative act is ritual, and she profoundly immerses her audiences into this experience.⁷ (121)

Rodríguez says about her method: “I can only say that I feel the symbols, that the practice of painting is a prayer, a meditation that allows a conversation with the symbols that releases ideas, something close to words but visual in meaning. It is this form of “writing” in the “Old Way” that grew into the “text” for performance.” When we asked for whom she writes, she responds: “I am speaking to the Xicana/o Indigenous Peoples of our time. I’m using the current meaning of the word Xicana/o, which is inclusive of the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico, Central America, and South America, who are in diaspora across the United States. I am making this work for my mom-abuela, my mujer, our children and grandchildren because my nation resides within them. I am trying to reach us, nuestro pueblo, nuestro futuro—our youth—and I’m trying to reach us all as human beings.” (130, 131)

The Colorado sisters, founders of their performing group, the Coatlicue Theatre Company, bring an exploration of language, incorporating Nahuatl, Zapotec, and other indigenous languages often mixed into English and Spanish dialogue. Elvira tells us: “Female sexuality was never addressed” when she was growing up, “so I was ashamed of my body. But later I discovered the power of female sexuality in all the deities, Coatlicue, Coyolxauhqui, and Chimalma. I feel a responsibility to members of my community and to the women I write about because I have been gifted with many stories on my journey and I am committed to telling the stories of women whose voices have been silenced, such as the murdered women of Juárez [Nuevo Leon, México], the victims of human trafficking, the Zapatista women who had to cover their faces in order to be seen and heard, the men and women in my family who were abused and were afraid to speak out. Stories were told to teach a lesson. They have a moral. Telling these

stories and connecting them to what is happening now, the cultural, social, and political wars.” Hortencia adds: “It is that something knocking at my heart wanting to be released, to be expressed—one word among many. Ya no más silencio, ya no más secretos, say the grandfathers and grandmothers. I hear how their voices were silenced to their spirituality, traditions, and language. It can be a headline, a snatch of words overheard, that scream out to be written and heard. Our generations to come need to read and see these words of how we existed.” (144, 145)

Spoken Word & Other Forms: Dominican, Chicana, & Cuban Voices

We also examined “race matters” through the role of “dando palabra” (spoken word) in Josefina Báez’s *Dominicanish*, and Evelina Fernández’s *Luminaria* sheds light on “race, gender, and the professional woman,” and culminate with a discussion revolved around the centrality of home and how we get there. In an exploration of Carmen Peláez’s *El Postre de Estrada Palma* and *My Cuba*, two short pieces centered on going back to Cuba and the memory of homeland, Peláez writes: “My Cuba isn’t a tropical paradise or a communist example. It isn’t captured in a foreigner’s dollar or a government’s yard sale. My Cuba seeks freedom and isn’t limited to its island’s borders. It exists in the stretch of a teenage girl’s back and the gaze of an exile trying to figure out what happened. My Cuba lies in the argument of a Conga drum, not because it turns me on, but because it sets my rhythm, no matter where it may find me. My Cuba blows away like ashes, while those that need it try and keep it safe in their longing. And when all is said and done, my Cuba will forgive those that have ravaged it and welcome me home.”⁸

Puerto Rican Playwrights: Carmen Rivera & Migdalia Cruz

Two other longer plays also deal with a longing for home: a young woman’s return to Puerto Rico in Carmen Rivera’s *La Gringa* and the complexity of desire in Migdalia Cruz’s

Another Part of the House, an adaptation of García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

Carmen and her husband, Candido Tirado, wrote the highly acclaimed *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*, performed in both English and Spanish for a nine-month Off-Broadway run and extensive tours. Migdalia, with enormous success on regional stages, especially in Chicago and New York, is arguably one of the most important Latina dramatists working in the United States today. (306)

The State of Latina Theatre in the United States

We were fortunate to be able to end with commentaries by women who have made a difference in terms of women's voices for the stage, with Kathy Perkin's essay, "Contributions by Women of Color" and Caridad Svich's "NoPassport: Dreaming the Americas." Perkins and Svich bring us to the present with their assessment of the state of Latina performance on the U.S. stage. Kathy Perkins co-edited the award-winning and highly acclaimed *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color* with Roberta Uno, the first anthology to show the far-reaching diversity of women writing for the stage, and she has subsequently edited numerous collections of plays by women of South Africa and Black women in the U.S. among other topics. Caridad Svich is important for her work on NoPassport, a highly influential theatre alliance and press, recognized both nationally and internationally, that allows for dialogue and support among theatre practitioners interested in gender and ethnic diversity. Both of these women provide a valuable context in which to insure that la voz Latina continues. Kathy says: "We simply must see the work by women of color on our stage," and Caridad adds: "The choices we have as artists and presenters are vast. It is up to us if we want to continue to live in the bordered spaces that govern the divide between US and THEM, or take the glorious and perhaps confounding risk of living and making art without a passport." (18, 361, 365)

A Final Word

Thus, I have given you some glimpses of the voices that must be heard!

This collection brings to the forefront how varied the work by many of these playwrights has become, either due to being nurtured and sustained through collaborations with some of our most distinguished regional stages or because they have been driven to seek or create their own venues in order to ensure that their voices would not be silenced. In addition, through the playwrights' own words, we are able to discover how these women have been able to give life to their work under extraordinary circumstances. (19)

There is little reason to doubt that the Latinas whose work appears in this collection will endure as productive contributors to world theatre. Furthermore, these women are also known for their work beyond writing for the stage. While some of these playtexts may be available elsewhere, they have not been compiled within a theatrical history that highlights their particular significance. In our view, this volume is a springboard for theatre practitioners and others to broaden their scope in terms of world theatre. These representative plays serve to introduce—in some cases to reintroduce—and to disseminate this vital work in theatre, and it is up to theatre practitioners and those who study theatre and women's contributions to reach beyond this volume to the ever-growing body of work by these women. (19)

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Endnotes

¹ Elizabeth C. Ramírez and Catherine Casiano, eds., *La Voz Latina: Contemporary Plays and Performance Pieces by Latinas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 1-365.

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Note: Page numbers from text appear in parentheses in this article.

Note: Accents are omitted when these markings are not used by the playwrights in print.

Note: The spelling I use for “theatre” is to indicate all aspects of performance, unless individual playwrights or others in a quotation use the spelling of “theater.”

² Vicki L. Ruíz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15.

³ M. Teresa Marrero, “From El Teatro Campesino to the Gay 1990s: Transformations and Fragments in the Evolution in Chicano/a to Latina/o Theater and Performance Art,” in *The State of Latino Theater in the United States: Hybridity, Transculturation, and Identity*, ed. Luis A. Ramos-García, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 61.

⁴ Vicki Ruiz, “Claiming Public Space at Work, Church, and Neighborhood,” in *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family*, ed. Vicki Ruiz (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2000), 31.

⁵ Vicki L. Ruiz, intro., in Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua and Chicana Histories, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and John R. Chávez (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 3, 7.

⁶ In addition to the permission from the University of Illinois Press, the text from the play, The Path to Divadom, is used with the permission of Diane Rodriguez. See note 1 regarding use of accents with regard to this playwright's name in print.

⁷ The biographical narrative and interview responses on Celia Herrera Rodríguez were developed by Celia Herrera Rodríguez in conversation with playwright Cherríe Moraga, who edited the work. Their commentary is used here with permission from these playwrights. Copyright © 2010 by Celia Herrera Rodriguez and Cherríe Moraga. Ramírez and Casiano, the editors of La Voz Latina, retain copyright for the questions on the biographical questionnaire, for the “About the Play/Sobre la Obra” section, and for the endnotes. Additional information from email-correspondence with Celia Herrera Rodríguez, October 24 and 31, 2010.

⁸ In addition to the permission from the University of Illinois Press, the text from the play, My Cuba, is used here with the permission of Carmen Peláez.