

Chicanas/Latinas in Performance on the American Stage: Current Trends & Practices

Elizabeth C. Ramírez

Out of the five most produced Chicana/Chicano plays by mainstream theatres listed by Jorge Huerta in 1994, three were by women: Milcha Sánchez-Scott's *Roosters*, Edit Villareal's *My Visits With MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, and Josefina López's *Real Women Have Curves*. The other two were Luis Valdez's *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* and Octavio Solis's *Man of The Flesh*.¹ Until the early 1980's Chicana/Chicano theatre was only found within the Chicana/Chicano communities where *teatros* had been borne, producing playwrights from within that activity. However, with the critical acclaim and financial success of two notable productions, the New York Public Theatre's production of Miguel Piñero's *Short Eyes* (1974) and the Center Theatre Group coproduction of Valdez's *Zoot Suit* (1978) in Los Angeles, mainstream theatres took notice and began to produce in that vein.²

While Chicana/Chicano theatre groups still remain largely community-based or affiliated with universities from the Midwest to the West Coast, we now have theatre groups with some financial support as well as a growing number of artists and individuals working in various types of performance and production, both traditional and nontraditional. Today there exists an even wider body of work emerging from Chicanas/Latinas than ever before, and the product of their labor continues to stand out on the American stage.

Several Latinas have made their mark in Performance Art, including Marga Gómez, Monica Palacios, and Carmelita Tropicana. Perhaps the most widely known of these performance artists is Marga Gómez. Born in Harlem and based in San Francisco, Gómez has worked professionally in both theatre and comedy venues.³ She has performed with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Lilith Feminist Theatre, and Culture Clash. One of her best known works, *Memory Tricks*, premiering at the New York Shakespeare Festival at the Public Theatre in 1993, has toured extensively in the U.S. and in Scotland at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and has been optioned by American Playhouse as a feature film. Her

Elizabeth C. Ramírez is Director of Theatre and Fine Arts at St. Philip's College. She is also the director of the Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Oregon and is in the Theatre Arts Faculty there. She is a professional dramaturg and is Regional Vice President of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas.

more recent work, *Marga Gómez is Pretty Witty & Gay*, has also toured nationwide and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

The daughter of a Cuban comedian-impresario and Puerto Rican dance and aspiring female actor, two well-known stars in their Latino community in Manhattan where she grew up, Gómez started in stand-up comedy and moved to solo performance art when she was invited to perform in a multicultural theatre festival at the University of California at San Diego in 1990. Written as an autobiographical monologue, *Memory Tricks* deals with her mother's Alzheimer's and their relationship. *Marga Gómez is Pretty Witty & Gay (MGisPw&G)* is a powerfully staged performance monologue that, in her words, flaunts "my queer credentials," and at the same time says 'fuck you' to those members of the mainstream, and my own community," who had initially criticized her lack of gayness and excessively mainstream performance. The latter piece is well-written, impeccably staged under the direction of Roberta Levitow, and shows off Gómez's powerful mastery of comedy while also reflecting very difficult material to negotiate about her life, just as she tells us in her monologue: "I made sure to put that homophobic expression on my face. So my mother wouldn't think I was mesmerized by the lady homosexuals and riveted to every word that came from their lesbian lips."⁴

The central factors in the politics of Gómez's staged self have to do with how her identity has been formed and is being reformed. The published segments of her autobiographical trilogy in Perkins & Uno's *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color* takes us through her comic exploration of lesbian identity deeply rooted in her Latina family and heritage. Monica Palacios, on the other hand, takes what she calls "the Latin Lezbo approach" in her effort to reach "a segment of audience that has been almost out of reach." Al Martínez, writing for *The Los Angeles Times*, cites Palacios: "I didn't want to do just lesbian stuff," she says. "I am a Mexican-American vegetarian lesbian writer/performer and I wanted society to be aware we all exist, we all have human stories to tell."⁵

Born in San Jose, California, Palacios began doing open-mike stand-up acts at 23 in gay and lesbian clubs in San Francisco. She moved to Los Angeles in 1987, and like Gómez, she too is a founding member of Culture Clash. Palacios has become a voice in the Latina/Latino gay community, and is best known for her three one-woman shows: *Confessions*, described as a "Sexplosion of Tantalizing Tales," *Greetings From a Queer Seniorita*, encapsulating her life as a Chicana lesbian feminist, and *Latin Lezbo Comic*. In the latter, a 30-minute excerpt from a full-evening autobiographical work, she sees the political in personal details as she encounters her Catholic family's reaction to her coming-out. She gets laughs playing "the Don Juanita luring women into her 'girl trap' and portraying her life as a waitress trying to liberate her female patrons into giving her their order

directly instead of through their men.”⁶ Although her work focuses on the Latina lesbian experience, her humor is often described as universal in scope. Yet, with the mainstream largely “out of the question until attitudes change,” Palacios makes her own opportunities by self-producing and touring her show at alternative venues, art spaces, and theatres as well as pursuing writing projects. She recently received a playwright fellowship from the Mark Taper Forum’s Latino Theatre Initiative to develop an individual project and become more integrally involved with the Taper.

The New York-based, Cuban American performer, Alina Troyano, aka Carmelita Tropicana, began in theatre in the 1980s. Noted as a dancer and musical comedian, she says:

I went to acting classes, but I thought, “Forget about it.” Nobody’s going to pick me. I don’t look like Grace Kelly—I’m a little shorter than Grace Kelly, that’s the only difference. . . I thought, “I’m not in the mainstream, nobody’s going to want me, nobody’s going to want my accent.” But when you realize you’re not represented, you start writing your own stories.⁷

Candela, shows a “flaky Latino Lady” in a preposterous plot of Keystone Kops antics in which Tropicana’s character in a green polyester mantilla, a red feathered loincloth, and pink petticoat that turned her into walking cotton candy, is involved in a complicated murder plot. In *Milk of Amnesia* she provides a personal account about the identity problems of a transplanted child, and the work transcends social satire and humor to highly political proportions.

Described by one reviewer as a performer with two highly distinct personalities within one body:

One is Carmelita Tropicana, a tangy bon bon, a spitfire, the spiritual daughter of Carmen Miranda (sans fruit but just as smashingly bedecked with flora and fauna), the perfect hostess for a Havana-themed bacchanal; the other is Alina Troyano, a thoughtful writer who wears glasses and, being a bit on the shy side, barely attracts attention on a crowded city street corner.⁸

Milk of Amnesia Tropicana brings the two personas closer together than ever before. The writer views this work as: “definitely my most personal play,” in contrast to *Candela* and another work, *Memories of the Revolution*. The other works are autobiographical: “but you wouldn’t necessarily know that because they’re so stylized. The others are more about Carmelita, the persona: very

campy, humorous, ironic. In this one, there's a different tonality." Based on her 1993 visit to Cuba, she recalls not recognizing anything: "I had a lot more fear than if I had just been going to a Latin American country; this is the place where I was born. There were a lot of questions: Would I like the place? Could I relate to the people?"

The trip to Cuba proved "both traumatic and fruitful," we learn from an article in *The Chicago Tribune*: "For starters, Troyano arrived in Havana, where her visa was supposed to be waiting, only to be sent back when it wasn't found. Then, when she finally got there, she suffered a keen dislocation. She found her old house, now an office, and wandered the Havana streets hoping to recognize something." Troyano recalls: "There was so much personal fear, which, of course, Carmelita tells the story, which raises serious issues about identity and ethnicity, yet does so with a "rollicking good time" according to the reviewer. Her style seems to be surprisingly close to Cuban popular theatre, thus calling unusual attention to her sense of estrangement alongside this kinship to her sentimental journey.⁹

With regard to the critique of identity, perception and reception of crossing borders are manifested in the work of many Latina performance artists, yet at least in two cases the association to split borders and a post colonial history firmly fixed within their lives stands out. *Las Comadres* and *Coco Fusco* are excellent representatives of the complexity of a binary and bifurcated existence among some of the factors explored in politicizing performance. Here, intertextual connections are so finely entwined with the performative space and dislocation of being that the narrative itself assaults and challenges the very roots of cultural past, present, and future.

Perhaps most closely allied with interculturalism, these performers attempt to "probe the confrontations, ambivalences, disruptions, fears, disturbances and difficulties when and where cultures collide, overlap or pull away from each other," in Richard Schechner's words.¹⁰ These "intercultural fractures, ideological contradictions, and crumbling national myths," as Schechner describes the type, explore "misunderstandings, broken messages and failed translations—what is not pure and what cannot successfully fuse." In the first case, *Las Comadres*, described as a multicultural women's group active in the U.S./Mexico border region that includes Tijuana and San Diego, began in 1988. Several women artists, including Chicanas and EuroAmerican non-Women of Color, came together to "counteract the isolation they felt, as a result, they thought, of jobs, family responsibilities, and the male domination of the arts community," as chronicled by Marguerite Waller in *Negotiating Performance*.¹¹ What these women had in common was their "sense of invisibility, claustrophobia,

isolation, or exploitation in relation to the webs of sociality and power” within which they usually operate.”¹²

Through a collective version of performance art, this group has explored issues of border conflict and the notion of representing the border. In *Border Boda (Border Wedding)*, the performance drew from past and present, and, as Waller describes: “The strategy of destabilizing subject/object relationships operated in Las Comadres’ work with astonishing consistency and incalculable cumulative effect. Maria Teresa Marrero describes the visual and spatial effects of this performance/ritual:

Here La Virgen de Guadalupe is deprived of a literal body . . . Since the space is empty, it suggests that any woman can occupy it by positioning herself there. The border, then, can be seen as a construct, a state of being, which those who literally “place themselves” there can experience . . . The Virgin, taken out of the institutional patriarchies of the Catholic Church and the Mexican government, and also taken out of the sanctity of the Mexican traditional home altar, becomes an appropriated icon.¹³

The point of the drama is not to reach an Aristotelian resolution, but rather to confront the complexities of identity as constant issues for negotiation, filled with “painful histories and conflicted relationships.”¹⁴

In the second case, Coco Fusco, born in the U.S. of Cuban parents, views herself as a “border crosser.” Until recently most closely associated with performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña as his artistic collaborator, the two met in 1989 and have performed together nationally and internationally. Born and raised in New York, the daughter of a Cuban immigrant mother, Fusco recalls: “my parents weren’t directly involved in politics, but anybody who grew up in the shadow of Cuban immigration had politics thrust on them whether they wanted it or not.”¹⁵ After earning a B.A. in Semiotics at Brown and an M.A. in Literature at Stanford, her link with an artist known for his exploration of the crisis at the U.S./Mexican border resulted in numerous highly political and controversial performance works.

One of the most talked-about pieces was “Two undiscovered Amerindians Visit New York,” described as: “an exercise in faux anthropology based on racist images of natives,” where both decked themselves out in primitive drag and appeared for the public in a locked cage. The piece was presented eight times in four different countries from Madrid to Sydney while exhibited in a cage in various museums. This “Couple in the Cage” shows two members of an

indigenous tribe from the Gulf of Mexico locked in a cage like exotic curiosities. In the comedy "Year of the White Bear," performed in 1993, one critic tells us that the work argues the "need to rethink five centuries of New World history. It is not an anti-Columbus diatribe."¹⁶ The two artists tell us in their accompanying statement: "We are not trying to bury Columbus, or to deport all European-based culture back to the Old World. We are reviewing the many legacies of the conquest and colonization of the Americas in order to understand where to place ourselves in that history." Their work shows how this split culture of the border reveals the Latina/Latino politics of community struggling with a politics of identity.

The Nuyorican theatre has had numerous women playwrights. Perhaps the most produced is Migdalia Cruz, whose work has been seen in London, Montreal, New York and numerous U.S. stages, including Playwrights Horizon, New York Shakespeare Festival's Festival Latino, and the Cleveland Public Theatre. This prolific artist has written over twenty plays, musicals and operas, and her most recognized plays are *Miriam's Flowers*, *Telling Tales*, *Lucy Loves Me*, and *Frida: The Story of Frida Kahlo*. Stemming from that generation of Latinas who studied with María Irene Fornes in her INTAR playwriting workshops, her work focuses largely on women's lives in the Bronx and the difficulty of surviving poverty. In *Miriam's Flowers*, Cruz tells about a Puerto Rican girl who witnesses her family's slow self-destruction following the accidental death of her six-year-old brother. Drawing from the magical realism style, one critic notes Cruz' abilities to paint "a dramatic mural full of the ironies of life and death in the city."¹⁷ In recent years she has premiered numerous works with the Latino Chicago Theater Company with which she is affiliated. Her most recent work, *Another Part of the House*, produced at Classic Stage Company in New York, was praised for its glimpse of a "desperate world" seething to life in this production, "enticing us as irresistibly as Pepe el Romano beckons the daughters of Bernarda Alba" in this "magic-tinged tragedy" inspired by Federico García Lorca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*.¹⁸

Some Latinas have gone the more traditional route of training in playwriting to develop their craft. Edit Villareal is one of those artists. Villareal, who received her M.F.A. in Playwriting at Yale, teaches playwriting at the University of California, Los Angeles. This playwright grew up in a bilingual, bicultural Texas border town. Her most notable work is *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, first presented in the 1989 Hispanic Playwrights Project at South Coast Repertory Theatre, one of the leading producers of new works by Latinas/Latinos, and later produced at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. The play revolves around a young Chicana's exploration of her relationship to the two women who raised her, her grandmother and her grandmother's sister. Described

as a light-hearted comedy, this piece “demonstrates the vital place the deceased often occupy in Hispanic culture,” according to one critic.¹⁹ However, the reviewer adds: “But in its fond, humanizing depiction of a unique senior relative, it’s more about breaking down stereotypes of handwringing, dependent Mexican women.” Villareal’s work is also noted for the use of the magical realism style.

From the Midwest we have some important voices who have reached toward an Hispanic indigenous past way before the Conquest. The “Colorado Sisters,” as they have come to be known, are Elvira and Hortensia Colorado, the co-founders of Coatlicue/Las Colorado Theatre Company. Born in Blue Island, Illinois, a small town south of Chicago, these sisters were part of a large Mexican community formed around men working at the stockyards, steel mills, and railroads.²⁰ While the Mexican Revolution brought their mother north from Mexico, the railroads brought their father to the Midwest as they did countless other Mexicanos.

The Colorado Sisters draw from stories they heard from their grandmother who was the center of their lives when they were growing up. Their reason for writing reflects their deeply rooted origins that go far beyond the border identity that political necessity and economic hardship could have imposed on their parents. In Perkins and Uno’s interview with these artists, the two women speak about their drive to write: “We became writers out of necessity to speak in our own voices instead of being spoken for. We come from a lineage of strong Indian women who have been silenced for too long and it is through our work that we give voice to their stories, the unsung heroines.”²¹ Their work confronts racism and their indigenous blood: “Growing up with racism—the thing about color and the denial of being Indian. The denial in our family is so imbedded that we didn’t know our father’s side of the family—they were too Indian! We had to say we were Spanish and not Mexican. Least of all Indian.”

The work of these two Chicanas/Native Americans is largely educational theatre and they work with Mexican and Indian communities in New York City as well as in various other Mexican communities. *1992: Blood Speaks* uses humor as it chronicles the Conquest and celebratory hope for survival, incorporating three languages, Zapotec, Spanish and English for the hope of future generations of women. *A Traditional Kind of Woman: Too Much Not ‘Nuff* has toured to reservations, health care facilities, HIV/AIDS outreach events, the Public Theatre’s “Free at Three” Series in New York, and numerous Native American and women’s conferences. One of their central goals is to empower Mexicans with a sense of pride in their heritage and traditions: “It is a way for recognizing, reaffirming and reinforcing our indigenous culture by having indigenous people from both sides of the border dialogue and share traditions.”²²

Some women have pursued various directions in the theatre besides playwriting, reaching far wider audiences through their extensive work and passionate perseverance to keep a Latina voice in the forefront instead of lost with the masses with more commercial venues. Evelina Fernández is one of these women. Born in East Los Angeles, her career has taken her from acting in such notable roles as the female lead in Luis Valdez' *Zoot Suit* in its original stage production at the Taper and numerous TV credits and film roles, including the female lead in *American Me* where she starred with Edward James Olmos. It is clear that this individual's professional career has stretched far and wide beyond her work as a playwright. Yet, it is this voice that must be singled out for our purposes here.

Fernández' writing credits include an original screen play, *Luminarias*, that is currently being filmed, and she has written a screenplay for Columbia Pictures and a television sitcom for Disney. Driven by the lack of significant roles for Latinas in any performative venue, including film, television, and the theatre, she has tried to make strides in creating notable roles in order to portray Chicanas as a viable and real part of life. Fernández states: "I am concerned that our stories will not be told. That they will not be passed on. That my daughter and other young Latinas will not know that their legacy is that of strong, courageous, passionate, intelligent women."²³ Her goal is to provide positive Latinas and Latinos in all performative media, in order to build community self-esteem and encourage visibility for the otherwise invisible in today's media market.

Fernández' *How Else Am I Supposed to Know I'm Still Alive* arose from her aim of giving opportunities for Chicanas to play leading roles. The brief story revolves around two middle-aged Chicanas talking about their life and difficulties facing the possible pregnancy of one of them. Highly humorous, the issues become serious as they each draw from their barrio life and traditions and sincere friendship. This work was first produced at La Plaza de La Raza in East Los Angeles as the winner of the "Nuevo Chicano L.A. Theaterworks" contest of 1989. The piece went on to be produced by El Centro Su Teatro in Denver, Colorado, Teatro Vision in San Jose, California, and toured nationally with El Teatro Campesino before it was adapted into an award-winning film through the Hispanic Film Project at Universal Studios under the direction of her husband and former Director of the Los Angeles Theatre Center's Latino Lab, José Luis Valenzuela.

There are many other Chicanas/Latinas writing plays and performance work. We must acknowledge the work of other notable pathfinders, including Lynne Álvarez and Dolores Prida, largely in New York, Denise Chávez in New Mexico, and Silviana Wood in Tucson, Arizona. There are also those emerging new voices that are continuing to broaden the scope of this unique group, including Lourdes Blanco, Ana Maria Simo, Sylvia Morales, Lina Gallegos,

Yareli Arizmendi, Sylvia González, Lisa Loomer, Nancy De Los Santos, and Amparo García. Many are breaking away from traditional models while others draw from standard forms, yet all seem to have a major goal in common. The drive to write politically seems to be at the heart of the entire body of work by this group of artists. It seems that these women are challenged to break from an invisibility that has been pervasive in contemporary “Chicana/Chicano” history, and they are making great strides in finding their voice as evidenced all across the country. These women are providing vital new opportunities to study the representation of women as subject on the American stage. We should also keep in mind that while their contributions as playwrights and performance artists have been considerable, there are many other directions that these women and a host of other Chicanas/Latinas have taken that insure their lasting presence in many aspects of the American stage. We can find these women’s emerging presence in an even wider spectrum than ever before, adding to a long history of Latinas in performance in American theatre and making it vital to continue to chronicle their contribution to the multicultural richness of American society and world culture.

Notes

1. Jorge A. Huerta, “Looking for the Magic,” *Negotiating Performance*, eds. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke U P, 1994) 42–43.
2. Huerta 37–38.
3. Kathy A. Perkins and Roberta Uno, *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 191.
4. Perkins and Uno 196.
5. Al Martínez, *The Los Angeles Times* 26 Feb. 1991: B 2.
6. Nancy Churnin, *The Los Angeles Times* 23 Nov. 1991: F 1.
7. Renee Graham, *The Boston Globe* 14 Apr. 1994: 58.
8. Achy Obejas, *The Chicago Tribune* 25 Oct. 1996: 34.
9. Obejas 34.
10. Richard Schechner, “An Intercultural Primer,” *American Theatre*, October 1991: 30.
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14. Waller 82.
15. Kristine McKenna, *The Los Angeles Times* 14 Sept. 1993: F 1.
16. Robert L. Pincus, *The San Diego Union-Tribune* 19 Sept. 1993: E 1.
17. Lawrence Bommer, *The Chicago Tribune* 30 Aug. 1991: 6.
18. Alisa Solomon, *The Village Voice* 11 March 1997: 11.
19. Jeff Rubio, *The Orange County Register* 3 June 1992: F 6.
20. Perkins and Uno 79–80.
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23. 159.

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