

The Latin American Writer: Writing in English

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I am not one to create genres, but a subgenre will do. I'm the practitioner of a craft already obscure to most people, playwriting. Furthermore, I'm a Chilean-born US citizen who writes mostly in English for an American audience that may not always know what on earth Latin Americans are talking about when we call this land "America." To be certain, in this complex age of border and gender and other forms of transfigurations, one cannot even remain constant. I am a Latin American writer when writing on Latin American issues; I'm a US Hispanic writer when addressing North American issues; and I'm even out further on a limb when addressing gay/bisexual issues in either the US Latin American immigrant communities or in Latin America itself. But so much for genres and genders. I cover several of them. I'm a subgenrist, and proud.

My theory is: in the age of e-mail, cellular phones, faxes and satellites, the modern writer may belong everywhere at once, his words and his message crowding a universe awash in sensations not always verbal and yet ever in need of writers to bring it together and punctuate meaning on the runaway, run-on sentences of modern satellite culture. The writer therefore could belong to all his groups, his subgroups, and yet be universally American or Americanly universal. Yet, in spite of the many advances in communication, American culture remains concerned with group categorization, the census box number, the ethnic survey. If we are so universal, why are we so alone in our respective little boxes? Why aren't we all Americans as in "Americanos," north, south, central? Technology has shattered isolation, yet our culture has reverted to isolationism. We have now Hispanic theatre in English, yet another subgenre of theatre, belonging to the others, African-American, Asian-American, Gay/Lesbian American, all these separate theatres that are supposed to be good for us. Playwright August Wilson even celebrates isolation, separateness, the need for us to have our own theatres and rule our own castles. I agree in part with Mr. Wilson. We do need our theatres, we need to command our own forums, but the need to connect to other fellow

citizens, whatever their race and creed, seems to me the essential promise of this continent we call "America."

So, therefore, I'm even suspicious of this new subgenre of Hispanic theatre in English where I am more or less boxed in. I agree to its essential need, and I also sense that it will never be enough to address and speak only amongst ourselves. It's not even a question of assimilation and separation: it's a question of finding a common ground on which to speak, which includes ways to communicate culturally beyond our subgroups. The challenge for any playwright of any group or race is that of finding an audience. Writers such as Eduardo Machado, writing in English about Cuban characters in their homeland or as exiles in the US, and Maria Irene Fornes in *The Conduct of Life*, addressing issues of Latin American dictatorship in English for an American theatre that still sees us as exotics and foreigners. Where do we English-writing Latin Americans belong really? The Cuban audience has not seen the works of Machado and Fornes in English, and I have not translated myself into Spanish – yet. On the surface of things, we don't belong in either world. Who is the audience for this type of writer? Other Latinos perhaps? Interested tourists of culture? Certainly not a mainstream American audience.

Yet, I'm constantly defying the odds. I seek to reach a universal audience of friendly listeners whoever they might be. I see my mission as a playwright to de-exoticize our experience. We've been stuck with images of ourselves as the funny, sexy, salsa-ridden foreign people – and I do hope it's true we're as lively as our images say we are, but sometimes these images are used to condescend toward us. How can one take these people seriously? I seek to create our experience as Latin Americans for a North American public without creating too much of an issue. It's as normal for me to write about a family in Santiago coping with the Pinochet dictatorship in my play, *Chilean Holiday*, as it is for me to write about a married Mexican-American border patrolman in San Diego who one day has an affair with a Mexican undocumented male in my other play, *Deporting the Divas*. These are not foreign people to me. Chileans are part of my family as are other Latin Americans. Chicanos are part of my Los Angeles lifestyle as Nuyoricans, Cuban-Americans, Colombianos and Salvadoreños have become part of my life alongside the presence of Korean-Americans, African-Americans, Jews and Moslems. I am a product of the Los Angeles experience combined now with Manhattan where I'm being produced and the Southwest where I now reside. My plays refuse to be foreign, and refuse to let the audience off the hook. These plays are not about exotic events, I tell the white American audience defiantly, they are about all of us. I'm not a separatist, I'm an elbowist, I seek to elbow my way onto the dinner table and expect to make a

place for myself there. I refuse to believe in the foreignness of our experience. I believe in the uniqueness of our American experience, both an emigrant and immigrant experience. My new play, *A Southern Christmas*, takes place in the South, in Chile to be exact where people celebrate Christmas in the summer heat. That's not exotic; half the world lives like that. It's that increasing inversion of the real that I seek to depict until a US audience gets the point, that we exist, we're here, we're not foreigners, we're neighbors, and many of us are US citizens or about to become citizens, and our experience is as much a part of the experience of all other Americans. For this continent is not just a North, but a South and a Central.

For me, writing in English has allowed me to put the various subgroups in my life together. Meanwhile Spanish remains my native language which has allowed me to keep in contact with the immigrant community as well. I am proud of my bilingualism as a form of power, a cross-generational, cross-national communication. I'm not interested in separateness and shielding myself from the majority. I'm interested in seeing Hispanics contribute to the majority culture without having to sacrifice any form of uniqueness. Our diversity is our strength, our languages create a distinct culture that some people apparently envy when they seek to create English Only ordinances. Monolingual people will always envy our bilingualism as people who can't read will envy our literacy, for it is part of the greatness of life, of learning, of growing, and of treating the mind to the many delectations and nuances of knowledge and language which irks those unfortunate enough not to know better.

In the American theatre, we have begun to make inroads. Some of our most successful Hispanic writers writing in English have established themselves both within the Latino theatre community and without; writers such as Eduardo Machado, José Rivera, and Maria Irene Fornes have been produced frequently by regional mainstream theatres while contributing in English to this growing subgenre of Latin American theatre in English. This is a subgenre that cannot help but grow as the Latino community itself expands and becomes a part of the North American mainstream. For too long, we were considered distant neighbors who wore funny hats. Our theatre, like our music and our art and literature, is no longer foreign. It is American, and that is what I seek to be a part of, a growing American theatre that need not fear our contributions, but welcome them.