

## Queer Representations in Latino Theatre

Melissa Fitch Lockhart

Once the petri dish of all things hip, incubating the most out-there elements of the worlds of fashion, entertainment, media and politics, gay culture these days is beginning to sport a Wonder Bread aura of mainstream assimilation.

— Rick Nelson, *Utne Reader* [March-April, 1997]

Is there anything left that is subversive about queer theatre? Has it lost its transgressive edge? It has experienced a veritable boom with such plays as *Love! Valor! Compassion!*, *Angels in America*, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. And yet, as Jay Blotcher of the American Foundation for AIDS Research has said “Let’s face it, when you’re a story line in *Friends* it’s hard to keep thinking you’re a radical.” It would appear that queer theatre has taken its place in the most unqueer of traditions, the mainstream. How has this happened? What is the history of queer theatre that has led it to such a ho-hum existence?

Eric Lane, in the preface to *The Actor’s Book of Gay and Lesbian Plays*, talks about the evolutionary stages of gay theatre in the US. They begin with the plays in which the “fussy bachelor” or the “maiden aunt” were the theatrical codes for homosexuality. Many have termed this the “closet” stage of gay theatre history. This was replaced by plays that examined precisely what it was like to be in the closet such as *The Boys in the Band* by Mart Crowley or Harvey Feirstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy*. Gay identity became central in these “Mom, Dad, I have something to tell you” plays common in the seventies (Lane viii). In the 1980s, the AIDS plays became popular, such as Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* and William Hoffman’s *As Is* (vii). In the final category of queer theatre, the one presently occupied, being gay is no longer the central dilemma in the majority of the plays.

So what, then, is so queer about queer theatre as it is practiced today? Critic Charles McNulty has stated that the term “queer” seeks to “encompass

that which has been excluded, ridiculed, oppressed” in other words, “life caught in the margins” (12). And yet, the inventory of plays mentioned above primarily come from white, middle-class mainstream gay males who often times did not take into account the issues of race, class, and cultural diversity. If one accepts McNulty’s definition of “queer” as dealing with the marginal, then queer *Latino* theatre essentially becomes hyperqueer by enacting the multiplicities and contradictions of living within multiple marginal subjectivities.

The purpose of this article is to examine how queer representation is played out in Latino contexts. It must be underscored at this juncture that I am using “queer” as a term related specifically to theatrical representations of gender disruption. While in the case of the plays discussed here the queer characters are gay, this is not always necessarily so. A man who is gay is inherently queer by virtue of not adhering to a model of compulsory heterosexuality, but a man who is queer is not inherently gay (i.e., the significant number of straight men who engage in gender disruption, or “queer” behavior by cross-dressing). The question is whether the double or triple subalternity that serves as a subtext for any representation of queer life on the Latino stage enables playwrights to present images that are perhaps more radical and multifaceted than those of the queer mainstream, plays better able to present the diversity of the community. How does Latino socialization impact queer representation?

In order to address these issues, first, I will briefly identify some of the key issues to understanding the complexities of queer Latino theatre and then concentrate, specifically, on the work of two performance artists-playwrights, Guillermo Reyes and John Leguizamo, to determine how these ideological concerns are translated onto the stage. I will also examine the theatrical resources used to represent gender and sexuality. The inherent theatricality and performative nature of sexuality (understood as the manner in which verbal, visual, auditive, body, and gestural signs configure “gender” for an audience) as well as the transformative nature of dramatic characters and staging will be underscored.

Queer naming, it must be noted, is performative in and of itself. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that performative speech acts construct queer identity as much as sexual experience. To say “I am homosexual” is to perform the act of coming out (“Socratic Ruptures” 134). One should clarify here with regard to sexuality that Latinos are working within two distinct systems in which homosexuality is defined, both the Anglo and the Hispanic. The system of naming based on the Anglo-American paradigm is one in which

any homoerotic experience is enough to call into question a man's masculinity and/or dominant sexual practices. The mechanisms used to prevent arousing the suspicion of any such "deviant" behavior is what forms the basis for Sedgwick's "epistemology of the closet" and contributes to the practice of compulsory heterosexuality.

In contrast, within the Hispanic tradition, there is no underlying sexual suspicion that characterizes the Anglo model. Rather, the prevalent view of a "homosexual" is defined in terms of a man being penetrated. Furthermore, the penetrator maintains and even enhances his machismo by virtue of the encounter (Manzor-Coats, xxiv). The question then becomes, how do queer Latino plays negotiate this fundamental contradiction between the two systems? Furthermore, are dramatists able to write plays that affirm gay identity in a world in which to be gay "is almost universally perceived as a transgression of the frontiers separating being a 'woman' from being a 'man' [and] is considered to be profoundly repugnant and is therefore vigorously chastised?" (Foster 6).

The number of Latino plays dealing with queer sexuality has been on the rise over the last ten years and while queer theatre is still primarily a white male genre, these plays are fast gaining ground. Latino writers such as Cherríe Moraga, Luis Alfaro, Paul Bonin-Rodríguez, Michael Martínez, Beto Araiza, and David Zamora Casas have all included queer themes in their repertoires. Luis Alfaro was recently distinguished for his writing by receiving one of the most prestigious awards in the United States, the so-called "genius" grants conferred by the MacArthur Foundation. The plays by these writers deal with the problems of discrimination, violence, and exploitation in the Latino world. While queer mainstream theatre may be said to highlight sexual difference, the queer Latino plays typically highlight ethnic and class differences as well as the need to negotiate one's sexuality within the two paradigms that essentially view it in conflicting ways.

Antonio Prieto Stambaugh has affirmed that it is important to examine queer Latino theatre: "Las ideas que tienen otros sobre un individuo o una comunidad son la fuerza con la cual y en contra de la cual ese individuo o esa comunidad forjará un concepto de sí mismo/a y una proyección al exterior" (290). It is by way of this projection, in the form of performance, that images are circulated and visibility is increased. Thus queer representations can have an impact upon the collective identity of the Latino community. Beyond this, the representation of gays in Latino theatre affirms their existence in a community that for many years has worked under the assumption that ethnicity

was the only factor that needed to be taken into consideration in order to understand one's identity.

*Mambo Mouth* was written by Colombian-born artist John Leguizamo and performed by him in 1991 at the Orpheum Theatre in New York under the direction of Peter Askin. *Men on the Verge of a His-panic Breakdown* was written, though not performed, by Chilean-born Guillermo Reyes and presented at the Celebration Theatre in Los Angeles in 1994 under the direction of Joseph Megel. Felix Pire was the versatile actor who starred in *Men* both during its run in Los Angeles and during a subsequent run in New York in 1997.

Both plays share many commonalities. They are one-man performances, consisting of a series of monologues presented by an actor who depicts various Latino characters easily recognizable to the audience. There are South Americans fleeing dictatorships, Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Central Americans. They are first- and second- generation Latinos in the United States, some of whom speak only Spanish, while others can barely pronounce their Hispanic surnames and still others speak in a hybrid of the two languages. Both plays stress the need for solidarity among all Latinos, underscoring the need to feel pride in one's heritage, and they convey this message in a humorous and often poignant fashion.

It must be kept in mind that while *Men* was billed as a "gay" play, reviewed extensively in the gay press in both Los Angeles and San Francisco, and at least in one review referred to as "a play that has plenty in it for everyone, including straights," *Mambo Mouth* cannot be considered a specifically "gay" play. Of the six characters in the play, there is only one who is openly gay. Nonetheless, *Mambo Mouth* may be considered part of the "excluded, ridiculed and oppressed" queer continuum discussed above in which overtly gay characters are not always the exclusive determining factor in the categorization. It is perhaps because *Mambo Mouth* is not promoted as a gay play that Leguizamo's version of queer sexuality, as expressed by his transvestite prostitute, is presented with greater subtlety than the rampant bump'n'grind lust exhibited by his heterosexual characters.

The men in Leguizamo's play are classified more by type than by country of origin. For example, there is the exceedingly macho, egomaniac talk show host, the love'em-n-leave'em cliché of masculinity who tells the audience the story of a movie role in which he played a Cuban cabana boy who makes love to a gringa for the purpose of getting a green card. There is the Mexican illegal alien, speaking to a guard from behind the bars of a jail cell; a dorky Latino street kid named Loco talking about his first sexual

experience at a brothel; the jailed wife-beater placing calls to anyone who can help get him out of jail, and the Latino who has “crossed over” and has learned to pass as Japanese. The latter hosts seminars for other Latinos on how to abandon their heritage asking them “Why settle for being Latin trash?”(104). Finally, there is the ironically named Manny, a transvestite prostitute.

As mentioned above, in *Mambo Mouth* only Manny is openly gay, although hints abound with respect to the possible alternative sexuality in both the other monologues and in Leguizamo’s portrayal of the characters, most especially the talk show host. As mentioned previously, within the dominant Hispanic paradigm, homoerotic encounters are not necessarily the indicator of “gay” identity but are often considered merely as alternative manifestations of a hypermachismo often times associated with the Latino male, thus opening up the possibility that other characters in Leguizamo’s play may also have had such experiences.

In Reyes’s play, in contrast to *Mambo Mouth*, six of the characters are openly gay, while two are still coming to terms with their sexuality. These include the young Latino ESL teacher who states, “Hey, I hang out with women myself. I married one. I’m very comfortable with my sexual repression” (420) and the “Demon Roommate from Hell” who asserts, “I’m looking for someone like myself, openly asexual, which is very acceptable out here in Burbank” (433). The monologues in Reyes’s play are threaded together by letters from Federico, a Hispanic refugee from an unnamed country who arrives in Los Angeles during the riots of 1991 with a list of addresses of all of the “courageous American students of native ways” with whom he has slept in his native country (405). Federico is hoping to make good on their promises to orient him in the US and to enable him to live an openly gay lifestyle (405). Other characters suffering from the *Men on Verge of a Hispanic Breakdown* are Vinnie, a thirty-year-old Colombian whose Sugar Daddy has just replaced him by someone ten years his junior; Edward Thornhill III, a Chicano LA “valley boy” who has bleached his skin, changed his name, and pretended to be straight in order to become an actor; Paco, who arrived via the Mariel boat lift, and moved to Phoenix to open an authentic Cuban restaurant, only to find that his efforts are undermined by a younger, non-Spanish speaking Cuban-American gay man who has his own “authentic” Cuban restaurant. Finally, there is the Spanish drag queen, La Gitana, dying of AIDS and telling her life story from a hospital bed while putting on a Flamenco dress, a wig, make-up and dance shoes. La Gitana finishes her monologue by standing and doing one last performance of her *zapateo*.

Both plays emphasize in a comical manner the vast differences that separate Latinos. The issue of “crossing over” is of paramount importance in each work. In *Mambo Mouth*, the audience is treated to the range of Leguizamo’s talent as he portrays a Mexican illegal alien trying to persuade his guard that he is Swedish, Irish or Israeli in order to be set free. However, ethnic “passing” is not the only passing found in these plays on the Latino experience. Similarly, gay characters are trying to pass as straight, and those of the lower classes are trying to pass for wealthy. This is most humorously illustrated by the Reyes character Edward Thornhill III who, when faced with unexpected guests at his apartment while his parents are visiting, instructs them to put on “cute little butler and maid uniforms” (411) in order to mislead his visitors as to the true nature of his economic status.

By focusing on the need to “pass” in some way, both plays highlight the performative aspects of race, sexuality, and even class. None is as fixed as the viewer might assume and all may be changed according to the particular needs of the individual. As Bradley Boney has said “To understand the passing/not passing dynamic requires some overview of the forces and conditions that make passing both possible and necessary” (54). Racism, classism, homophobia and the very real consequences these may have related to housing, education, and employment opportunities all demonstrate the reasons one might find passing desirable. However, as Boney points out, passing is also a way of erasing one’s identity (54). In *Mambo Mouth* and *Men on the Verge of a His-panic Breakdown* such behavior leads, at best, to confusion and at worst to self-loathing. This is best evidenced in the character of Reyes’s ESL instructor who sees his command of English as his “proof” of American identity and who has nothing but disdain for the pupils in his class who are unable, or, he suspects, unwilling to assimilate in such a manner. In *Mambo Mouth* the issue of passing and assimilation is treated with a more light-hearted touch. The Latino cross-over Japanese businessman shows slides of Hispanics and pokes fun at them for the audience (understood to be Latino cross-over wannabes) describing what he refers to as the “art of passing” which he defines as “pretending to be something you are not, in order to get something that you have not, because there is no room in the upscale corporate world for flamboyant, fun-loving, spicy people” (103). And yet, in both plays, the most “assimilated” characters, in the case of *Men* the ESL instructor and with *Mambo Mouth* the Latino “Japanese” seminar leader have moments in which their glossy facade of assimilation is broken and their Latino roots slip in. In the case of the ESL instructor, it is the use of an occasional Spanish word, with an apology calling attention to the “mistake” each time. In the

case of the cross-over Latino, it is revealed in the character's incapacity to control his dancing feet and hips when he hears the rhythms of Latin music.

Both plays bring to the fore the exploitation that Latinos often suffer, and yet when it comes to the queer characters in these plays the indignities are not related to their sexuality as much as to their status as subalterns within United States society. They suffer hostilities not because of their gayness but because they are not wealthy and they are not white. In fact, in Reyes's play most of the characters see their gayness as a way to insure their mainstream respectability in the US, a sort of guarantee that they will be able to partake in the American dream and have a good life (407).

While the queer characters in both plays may be considered fighters, they are not fighting their sexual impulses, as one might expect. Rather they are fighting the US system and many times their own heritage also. Reyes's play offers an overt critique of the white gay male, something very similar to what Prieto Stambaugh has identified in the work of Luis Alfaro when he speaks of the need to "fetichizar al 'otro,' es decir, de no ver al sujeto en toda su dimensión humana, sino etiquetarlo de la misma forma colonialista contra la que ostensiblemente luchan estos grupos" (309). This view of the white gay male and his desire to experience the "exotic" Latino is best illustrated by the Sugar Daddy octogenarian who keeps the Colombian Vinnie for ten years and by the countless former Anglo lovers who slam the door in Federico's face when he arrives in the US, after having slept with him when they were visiting his own country.

The staging of both *Men on the Verge of a His-panic Breakdown* and *Mambo Mouth* is similar. In *Men*, Leonard Pollack's ingenious set features props hanging from a red-tiled roof portico. The actor changes costumes silhouetted behind a screen while dancing to various pop and Latin songs. The props used are minimal – specifically a cigarette, a suitcase, a cigar, a wig and the Flamenco attire of La Gitana. There is also the ubiquitous handkerchief that the ESL instructor takes out of his pocket to wipe his brow throughout the monologue. Although such few props would lead one to believe that both plays would be easily transported and presented to a wide segment of the population virtually anywhere, the music and lighting requirements would make this difficult in both in *Men* as well as the similarly staged *Mambo Mouth*.

In *Mambo Mouth*, set designer Philipp Jung uses lighting effects and music as semiotic cues to set the stage and introduce each character. On the stage are three screens upon which images are projected to indicate where each scene takes place. These are used for wonderful visual effects,

transporting the audience from a city street complete with neon lights, to a barrio alley with graffiti filled walls or a palm tree lined beach. At one point, the screens are simply blackened with the exception of the cut away light framing a doorway, from where Leguizamo's imprisoned wife-beater character emerges. In *Mambo Mouth*, each character's monologue begins with a silhouette of Leguizamo behind the center screen before he moves to center stage, emerging fully costumed for each monologue. This is in marked contrast to Reyes's actor who dresses in front of the audience, changing clothes as quickly as he morphs into the next character. This "before your very eyes" transformation and transition from monologue to monologue demonstrates the fluidity of identity much more so than that of the "ready made" version presented by Leguizamo when he emerges from behind the center screen.

In both plays, props are used economically. For the monologue of the jailed illegal alien Leguizamo simply holds up a square frame with bars running through it and speaks to his jailer (the audience) through the bars. His vato homeboy, Loco, carries a boom box, and his Japanese cross-over character uses a pointer to show the defects of Latinos on a screen where slides are projected. Manny, his transvestite prostitute, is wearing an impossibly tight Lycra mini dress, spiked heels, and a long blond wig. She flips her waist-length hair sporadically throughout her monologue while puckering her lips. In both plays, the ubiquitous Cuban cigar is put to strategic use as an effective symbol of Latino manhood.

The unifying thematic thread that runs through *Men* is the story of Federico, the "gay little immigrant that could." His letters, describing life in the United States, frame the six monologues. They range from the optimistic, wide-eyed innocence with which he misinterpreted the looting taking place during the Los Angeles rioting ("Such enthusiastic consumer appetite!" [406]) to the somewhat jaded, sardonic, survivor selling oranges by the freeways one year later who writes that he is among "the upper crust of the homeless" (423). This final scene of Federico, showing how he has essentially become one of the exploited Latino immigrant workers, may be juxtaposed with Leguizamo's illegal immigrant who tells his guard through the bars:

It's not like I'm stealing anything or living off of you good people's taxes. I'm doing the shit jobs that other Americans don't want. Tell me, just tell me, who the hell wants to work for \$2.25 an hour picking toxic pesticide-covered grapes? (77)

In *Mambo Mouth*, while there is no recurrent theme that may be said to link the monologues, the characters will on occasion refer to one another and thus establish a sense of continuity. An example is when Manny, at the end of her



monologue, tells her inferred interlocutor, "Call me at Nilda's – cuz she wants me to play a little practical joke on this boy named Loco" (90). The audience met Loco in the previous monologue when he described his experience of losing his virginity with Nilda the prostitute.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Leguizamo's *Mambo Mouth* as well as Reyes's *Men* is precisely how unremarkable the presentation of homosexuality is. The drag queen figure in Leguizamo's play is not problematized in any way, she is simply "one of the girls." Like *Victor/Victoria*, the audience is cued to the fact that Leguizamo is acting as a drag queen instead of trying to incarnate any sort of "real" woman in the way that he was the street thug, the adolescent dork, or the macho talk show host. The scene opens with Manny relieving himself in an alley and attention is called to his transvestism with such lines as "Your daddy's a faggot, and he likes it. I know – I had him!" (84) as well as at other times throughout the monologue. Nonetheless, Leguizamo elects not to problematize the drag queen's life in any way that relates to her sexuality. She is presented as yet another Latino in the spectrum, neither privileged nor trivialized. While it may be argued that any representation of drag destabilizes gender categories and calls attention to the constructed nature of gender itself, there is nothing particularly transgressive about Manny. She tends to reinscribe rather than undermine the dominant cultural paradigms. Leguizamo's presentation of a gay character is not shocking for the public, and yet one is tempted to believe that there are other factors at work that render this presentation so non-threatening.

Judging from the enthusiastic reception of audience members during the performance of *Mambo Mouth*, there is an immediate recognition of the machismo of the talk show host and the play's other initial characters, including the adolescent homeboy and the illegal alien. It is clear that the public identifies with the cultural references readily. Their reactions are noticeably more subdued during the drag queen monologue. By placing his gay character fourth in the repertoire, after having presented other easy to recognize types for a Latino audience member, Leguizamo had already established a trust with the audience and was counting on their comfort level in order to introduce his gay character. Manny strains, or possibly even suspends the level of trust among some audience members, but this is restored with the introduction of the next and subsequent characters presented during the duration of the show. His performance begins and ends humorously with these stock Latino "types," thus allowing him to slip in, I would argue, a figure that may have proved to be received less sympathetically in a different context.

While Manny's sexuality is not problematic, it is also not dealt with in the much more explicit manner with which the playwright approaches the sexuality of his exaggeratedly heterosexual characters. There is never a time in which Manny discusses his sexual practices or preferences in the same way as the macho male characters do, each of whom is exceptionally graphic in his depictions of heterosexual lust. It would have ultimately proved to be more gratifying to hear Manny discuss her sexuality, as opposed to merely echoing the typical female lament that she repeatedly sings throughout her scene, "Girlfriend, how could you let him treat you so bad, uh, oh, oh, girlfriend, you know you were the best he'd ever had, uh, oh, oh," and alluding to a relationship that was primarily romantic (84, 89, 90). Similarly, while Reyes's *Men of Verge of a Hispanic Breakdown* does not adhere to the romanticized and sanitized version of homosexuality presented by Leguizamo, more often than not sexual practices are merely hinted at. In other words, gay lifestyle is foregrounded as opposed to gay sex.

It is unfortunate that there be an apparent reluctance to present a more openly gay lifestyle that includes sexuality among its components, at least to the same extent that heterosexuality is presented in mainstream theatre. Moreover, this would seem to indicate that such openness is still considered taboo. As Teresa de Lauretis explains "the conventions of seeing, and the relations of desire and meaning in spectatorship, [remain] partially anchored or contained by a frame of visibility that is still heterosexual" (33-35). Some critics of queer cultural production, such as Jill Dolan, have made an "immodest proposal." Dolan contends that the only way for queer theatre to regain its radical edge would be through the graphic depiction of queer sexuality, "making sexual practices blatantly visible on gendered bodies that wear the deconstruction of compulsory heterosexuality might still be a productively alienating act" (288). While this clearly is not territory into which either John Leguizamo or Guillermo Reyes would like to venture with their queer characters, I would argue that they nonetheless elect to widen the spectrum of gay representation in a way that is not quite as jarring and yet more powerful through their effeminate queer characters.

It must be underscored that effeminacy served for many years as a derogatory cue to gay characters in drama (Boney 38). Bradley Boney argues that even within gay theatre recently there has been an effort to repudiate and even "annihilate" the effeminate male from the repertoire of gay characters, an effort he believes is directly related to an internalized homophobia within the gay community. He argues "Now is not the time to erase the sissy boy, but to intervene, understand, and reclaim him as a site of queer power" (39).

It is precisely in this vein that Latino queer representations in the two plays discussed here are so provocative. They showcase characters who are both tough *and* effeminate. Neither Leguizamo's Manny, who offers what may be the most poignant line of the play with "Life is just too short to let someone crush your world" (89) nor Reyes's Federico, the weary immigrant whose hopes of living the good life in the United States have all but been crushed, is portrayed in a negative light. Make no mistake, these are two strong effeminate men, not victims of the hard life has dealt them, but rather the victors for their sheer will to survive.

A popular slogan of the gay movement has been "we're here, we're queer, we're fabulous, get used to it!" It would appear that, in fact, at least mainstream theatre has in fact "gotten used to" queer theatre. Characters in both *Mambo Mouth* and *Men on the Verge of a His-panic Breakdown* voice a similar concern. In *Mambo Mouth* the illegal alien yells at his guard "Go ahead, go ahead and try and keep us back 'cuz we're gonna multiply and multiply so uncontrollably till we push you so far up you're gonna be living in Canada. You might have to learn a second language – oh! the horror!" (78). In *Men*, a defiant Federico says "So you see, I survive whether or not you help me, whether you like or not, and whether I'm legal or not. I am an immigrant. I am the future of this great country of ours. They call me Federico, the gay little immigrant that could. I'm here to stay . . . get used to it!" (424). Although the United States has "gotten used to" alternative sexualities presented in the theatre as long as they are discreetly clothed, the issues of class and race still require some "getting used to."

*Arizona International College of the University of Arizona*

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