

# LATIN AMERICAN THEATRE REVIEW

*a Journal devoted to  
the Theatre and Drama  
of Spanish and Portuguese  
America*

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Critical studies:	25 pages	Reviews:	500 words for critical study
Interviews:	2000 words		750 words for published play
Festival Reports:	2000 words		1000 words for play collection
Performance Reviews:	500 words plus photos		

Submissions that exceed these limits will be returned without consideration.

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## US Latina/o Theatre From the 60s to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: We've Come a Long Way, Baby!

**Jorge Huerta**

I would like to thank Stuart Day for honoring me with the opportunity to edit this special issue of the LATR. Initially, Stuart asked me if I was interested in focusing on Chicana and Chicano theatre and performance. I thought for an instant and responded that it should include research on as many US Latinas and Latinos as possible, because we now have so many scholars and theatre artists from our various Latina/o communities involved in theatre across the country and abroad. So the Call went out in the Fall of 2008 and by June of this year (2009) I had received dozens of articles and interviews. Submissions came from across the country and represented a wide range of scholarship, aesthetics and topics. But before I introduce these articles let me go back in time, the prerogative of Special Editors.

When I started researching and writing about Chicano theater in 1970 there were no plays by or about Chicana/os or Mexican-Americans written by members of that community in print. In terms of scholarly research, there were several articles and newspaper accounts about the Teatro Campesino but few references to other Teatros Chicanos. On the East Coast, similar lacunae existed in English although there were certainly articles and plays about the Puerto Rican and Cuban communities both on and off those respective islands, *en español*. But as this volume demonstrates (along with the many anthologies of plays and critical essays that have been published to date), we've come a long way, baby!

As many of our readers know, the Chicana/o/Mexican-American is the largest of the US Latino groups, followed by the (mainland) Puerto Ricans and Cuban-Americans. All three of these groups now have two or three generations of theatre artists actively expressing their realities (and fantasies) on stage and on the page since the 1960s. Dominicans and Colombians have

begun to express themselves in theatre and many of our community-based and professional theatres employ artists from across the Latino and Latin American spectrum. What I find very interesting is the fact that the majority of articles and interviews in this issue are by junior scholars. Indeed, some of the contributors were not yet born in 1970. The topics vary, as they should, and hopefully will add to the discourse and analysis of US Latina/o dramatic literature and performance.

We begin somewhat historically with Zack Whitman Gil's article on the early Teatro Campesino and Luis Valdez's anti-Vietnam War *actos* and plays, "Whose Country to Defend?: The Chicano Soldier on Stage." Unfortunately, these dramatic statements are just as relevant today as they were 40 years ago and thus merit our attention and concern, as Gil asserts. This is followed by Caroline Caballero's intriguing account of a recent play by a Cuban-born playwright, "*Una cubana* in the Borderlands: Teresa Dovalpage's *La hija de La Llorona*." Here we have a unique triad of Latina cultures represented in a family drama set in New Mexico: the Cuban daughter-in-law, her Puerto Rican best friend and her Mexican-American mother-in-law in a re-telling of the Llorona myth. I know of no other play to tackle these "culture clashes" in this manner.

The third article in this issue is Jon Rossini's apt analysis ("José Rivera, Neoliberalism, and the Outside of Politics") on *School of the Americas*, a play by one of our leading Puerto Rican playwrights. From this critical analysis of Rivera's play about the last days of Che Guevara we go to Patricia Tomé's discussion of Cuban-born Coco Fusco and Chicana Nao Bustameante's creative collaboration in "Performing el cuerpo femenino como menú gastronómico: *Stuff* de Fusco y Bustamente." Here again, we have two Latina cultures represented and analyzed in a fascinating deconstruction. This is followed by our senior scholar, David William Foster, and his intriguing discussion of *place* in a play by Chilean-born Guillermo Reyes, in "Phoenix in Guillermo Reyes' "Places to Touch Him." I like the inclusion of a play about a gay Chicano politician and the play's relationship to the geography of the desert city. The sixth article, by Anne García-Romero, looks at three distinct Latina voices, Caridad Svich, Cusi Cram and Quiara Alegría Hudes, from the perspective of transculturation, a theme that continues to occur in this volume, whether overtly or implied.

Analola Santana's discussion of two of Migdalia Cruz's most produced plays is a welcome addition to critical essays about this Nuyorican playwright's vision. Cruz's plays have received little critical attention and

we hope that this article will inspire others to investigate her very distinct poetic aesthetic. Ashley Lucas's article is about the two plays that I have argued ushered in the era of professionalism for Latina/o playwrights and theatre artists across the country. In her essay, "Prisoners on the Great White Way: *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit* as the First Latina/o Plays on Broadway," Lucas compares and contrasts these plays as prison dramas, offering a new perspective on both. And, of course, no special issue on US Latina/o theatre would be complete without a contribution from the ubiquitous Caridad Svich, whose musings are always stimulating, provocative and well-thought out.

I am very pleased to include the five interviews here, each one a distinct look at Latina and Latino theatre artists from the first generation, Diane Rodriguez and Carlos Morton, to the next generation, José Cruz González, and the more recent theatre artists, Olga Sanchez and Antonio O'Campo Guzmán. With the exception of Morton, who is a playwright, the others have demonstrated a wide array of theatrical talents: actor, director, producer, playwright, performer and educator. Not enough attention has been paid to these and the many other practicing theatre artists across the country and, hopefully, these interviews will inspire others to continue investigating how theatre practice relates to the history and theories surrounding US Latina and Latino theatre and performance.

Finally, we have included reports from the field (Yael Prizant's account of her latest trip to see theatre in Cuba; Jade Power's discussion of two very distinct plays and productions in Puerto Rico this summer; a report from Osvaldo Obregón on the Festival Internacional de Teatro de Almada) and — of course — book reviews.

From what we have in this special issue, to the many-conferences around the country, the Americas and Europe, US Latina and Latino theatre is alive and well, sustained by a continuing commitment to educate and entertain; to question and to offer alternatives to the status quo. Latina/os in this country are not going away and the contributions to this issue bode well for the future of the field as an academic and aesthetic enterprise.

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## Abstracts

### **Zack Whitman Gill, “Whose Country to Defend?: The Chicano Soldier on Stage.”**

As the debate on the role of Mexicans in the US persists, and while the number of Chicanos serving and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan escalates, Chicana/os must expose the hegemonic erasure of their role in defining and defending “America.” Chicanos/as have a long history of sacrificing their lives in service to the US only to suffer their contribution erased from the historical narrative. However, five Chicano plays, Luis Valdez’s *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* and *Dark Root of a Scream*, El Teatro Campesino’s *Vietnam Campesino* and *Soldado raso*, and Culture Clash’s *Chavez Ravine*, foreground the figure of the soldier to dramatize the hypocrisy wherein “America” is defined against Chicanos who in turn are rejected as only *Mexican-American*. (ZWG, Article in English)

### **Carolina Caballero, “Una cubana in the Borderlands: Teresa Dovalpage’s *La hija de La Llorona* by Teresa Dovalpage.”**

In *La hija de La Llorona*, Teresa Dovalpage ushers in the latest development in Cuban theater written in the US. Lacking in the nostalgia and politics characteristic of exile theater, Dovalpage represents an emerging transnational identity through her protagonist Caridad that more accurately mirrors the relationship of recent Cuban émigrés to their homeland and adopted country. To this end, the *Llorona* folktale is re-envisioned and the Southwestern US becomes a contact zone where a Cuban *balsera*, her traditional Mexican-American mother-in-law and a liberal Puerto Rican friend bond in their shared experiences as women and mothers despite their divergent cultures and histories. (CC, Article in English)

### **Jon D. Rossini, “José Rivera, Neoliberalism, and the Outside of Politics.”**

José Rivera’s play *School of the Americas*, which recounts the last days of Che Guevara’s life in a Bolivian schoolhouse, presents a self-conscious example of the problem of political thinking in the contemporary period of US neoliberalism. The limits of political thinking are shaped by a focus on character and rhetorical persuasion, which forecloses the possibility of systemic or structural thinking, a concern the Guevara character voices within the play. Engaging negative production reviews, the author argues that problems may emerge because Rivera is foregrounding the difficulty of thinking differently about politics. The essay concludes with the ambivalent legacy of Che’s Bolivian mission suggested by both the play and a contemporary neoliberal development project in Bolivia: La Ruta del Che. (JDR, Article in English)



**Patricia Tomé, “Performing el cuerpo femenino como menú gastronómico: *Stuff de Fusco y Bustamante*.”**

In the midst of the political and economical disenchantment suffered by most Cubans during the “Special Period,” sexual tourism became a means of survival for many, particularly for women. It is precisely within this framework that Coco Fusco and Nao Bustamante write the performance *Stuff*, where, as examined in this essay, women become gastronomical menus who satisfy the appetite of the “other.” While searching for a means to obtain food, these female entities must create “alternative bodies” to indulge tourists’ sexual needs. They openly portray the woman’s body as the cultural myths that most foreigners tend to associate with women, food, and sex in Latin America. (PT, Article in Spanish)

**David William Foster, “Phoenix in Guillermo Reyes’s *Places to Touch Him*.”**

Guillermo Reyes is one of the most important contemporary Chicano dramatists, as much for his ingenious use of language as for his perceptive and unflinching treatment of gay male culture as it affects Chicano men. Reyes is particularly attuned to the urban culture of the American Southwest, and the bulk of his plays focuses on the urban implications of Chicano life, which include issues of gay life. While the majority of Reyes’s plays are set in Los Angeles, which has experienced in recent decades an important accommodation of visible gay life, Reyes’s 2002 play, *Places to Touch Him*, is situated in the greater Phoenix area, where Reyes lives. Phoenix, while it has a measure of visible gay life, presents significant differences relative to Los Angeles, and this is no more apparent than in the matter of political fortunes for openly gay men (and women). This article discusses how *Places* engages with the particular parameters of gay life in a U.S. city like Phoenix. (DWF, Article in English)

**Anne García-Romero, “Fugue, Hip Hop and Soap Opera: Transcultural Connections and Theatrical Experimentation in Twenty-First Century U.S. Latina Playwriting.”**

This article examines theatrical experimentation in three plays by U.S. Latina playwrights: Quiara Alegria Hudes’ *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* (2007), Caridad Svich’s *Tropic of X* (2009) and Cusi Cram’s *Fuente* (2009). Each playwright engages with an existing artistic form, fugue, hip hop and soap opera, as a means to develop the structure, characters and language of her play. The article argues that these playwrights’ innovations, created by exploring and subverting diverse artistic models, reflect the dynamics of transculturation and that the resulting plays are not only commercially viable but vital to twenty-first century U.S. theater. (AGR, Article in English)

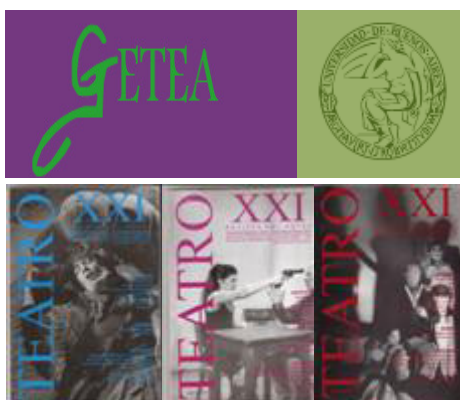
**Analola Santana, “Una máquina teatral: Forma e identidad en el teatro de Migdalia Cruz.”**

Migdalia Cruz’s work stands out for its aesthetics, and because of the themes and characters that she so carefully develops through a focus on the scatological elements that compose the body as a form of grotesque beauty. This essay studies two particular plays, *Miriam’s Flowers* (1992) and *Fur* (2000), focusing on the aesthetics that compose her works in relation to two specific dominant issues: love and sexuality. It is through these themes that her characters develop a sense of agency and it is possible to identify a concern towards identity construction that forms part of Migdalia Cruz’s theatrical corpus. (AS, Article in Spanish)

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**Ashley Lucas, “Prisoners on the Great White Way: *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit* as the First US Latina/o Plays on Broadway.”**

The first two Latina/o-written and directed plays on Broadway were Miguel Piñero’s *Short Eyes* in 1974 and Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* in 1979. Both plays use Latino prisoners as their central characters. Though the reception of the two plays in the popular press differed, with *Short Eyes* receiving glowing praise and *Zoot Suit* largely dismissed, the critics used the same rubric to judge them: the plays were overtly evaluated in terms of received notions of cultural authenticity and criminality. Ultimately, the commercial success of *Short Eyes* and *Zoot Suit*’s failure on Broadway both had to do with the ways in which New York critics registered the playwrights’ differing representations of racialized criminality. (AL, Article in English)



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