

## Living the Politics of *teatro* in Los Angeles: An Interview with Diane Rodriguez

### Chantal Rodríguez

On June 23 2009, I met Diane Rodriguez in her office at the Music Center Annex in downtown Los Angeles to discuss her impressive career. An OBIE Award winning actor and multi-disciplinary *teatrista*, Diane's work is distinguished for its deeply political bend and use of humor to confront oppression. A founding company member of El Teatro de la Esperanza, El Teatro Campesino and Latins Anonymous, Diane has become an expert in activist performance and ensemble work. Committed to diversity and equal access, Diane was appointed Co-Director of the Latino Theater Initiative at the Center Theatre Group (Mark Taper Forum) along with Luis Alfaro in 1995. A self proclaimed "theater geek," Diane is currently an Associate Producer at Center Theater Group. I have followed her career with great interest as she continues to produce, direct, and write new work whose reach extends far beyond U.S. stages.

#### *How did you get started in teatro?*

I come from a performing family; my father was a singer and sang in a Baptist church. My mother was the church pianist. That sanctuary, holy place, was where I learned how to be in front of people and perform in plays. In the late 60's my cousins were members of El Teatro Campesino and I saw them perform in *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, which was the first time I saw the *teatro*. Then my uncle and aunt sold their house and moved to Delano, CA, worked on the paper "El Malcriado" and belonged to the farm workers' union. So, the notion of church and a social consciousness was in my family before there was really a Chicano Movement. But I think the real seminal moment was going to UC Santa Barbara and studying theater with Jorge Huerta.<sup>1</sup>

*When did you begin working with El Teatro Campesino (ETC)? How did your experience there shape your artistic perspective?*

I performed with ETC during my summers in college and then became an ensemble member after graduation. When I went into ETC, I basically learned the concept of activism in terms of both social and theater activism: using theater to inspire and move a people to social action but also as a way of making choices as an actor. You have to make artistic choices and commit to them to make the moment work, and so in that way you are an activist, you activate a moment. It's also a metaphor for being an activist in life. That's the main concept that I took away and always carried with me. The other was building a foundation for our work. We used to do exercises based on the steps of the Mayan Pyramid that would build some part of your character as you climbed each step of the pyramid. You would listen to your heart, or simply your breathing. These rigorous exercises made me look inside and learn to follow my heart and listen to my instincts. It was instrumental in shaping my *rostro*, the Nahuatl concept of face or character.

*When did you leave ETC and why?*

Honestly, the resources began to change in the 80s with Reagan and it just felt like it was time to move on. The money wasn't there to support a full time ensemble so we had to think about what we were going to do. It was a natural evolution and so we packed up our stuff and left, it always makes me sad to think about it though. I wrote a testimonial about it called "Searching for Sanctuaries: Cruising through Town in a Red Convertible."<sup>2</sup> It was very hard and traumatic, I came of age in the ETC and I learned how to create work on my own which was very empowering because I had to create the work, no one was going to create it for me and I've carried that through my whole career.

*When you left ETC for Los Angeles what did you hope to do?*

I was going to be an actor. I was very lucky, I knew I had a presence, I don't know that I was a great actress but I knew I had a presence and that sustained me for quite a while as I studied acting. In between that time I founded Latins Anonymous (LA) in the late 80s with Rick Nájera, Luisa Leschin and Armando Molina. Cris Franco later joined us when Rick went on to pursue other projects. The four of us felt strapped because in Los Angeles and especially during the 80s, you were slotted into one thing, it was a stereotype, and that's what you did. So I felt more corralled here, and that's

why we created Latins Anonymous because we all felt that way. It was during this time Luisa Leschin and I brought the female voice to the center. We were character actresses and were willing to poke fun at ourselves and therefore were able to shine a lot of light on a plethora of social issues.

*LA was really groundbreaking because your pieces addressed broad Latina/o issues and homogenizing stereotypes. I believe LA was one of the earliest groups to move in this direction and discuss multiple facets of Latinidad, would you agree?*

Yes, that's right. We even explored internal differences between Mexicans and Chicanos. For instance, Rick Nájera, he was a Mexican-American and didn't refer to himself as Chicano, he had a different view of things than I did. I came from a grassroots background and he was more middle class, so it was interesting to explore those differences. It was very important work, and it really hit a note in the community. We all saw each other last night and we were like, "Can you believe it? It's still pertinent! It's so sad; we are still talking about these issues 20 years later!"

*After LA did you move right into working at the Taper?*

There was a fabulous tension in Latins Anonymous that worked for us, but part of it was that the politics of the group were not strictly Chicano and that was hard for me and it was hard for me to figure out how to adjust to that even after six years. Then we started working together a little less, everyone's careers started taking off which was great, but I started feeling unsatisfied and I wanted to do other things. Then I began to work for the Center Theater Group as a consultant and decided to apply for the position of Director of the Latino Theater Initiative. I thought there was an opportunity to have a home and to open doors to artists and audiences. So I had the idea of partnering with someone, Luis Alfaro, and seeing if that would make us stand out among the crowd that was applying and it did. Together we ran a program for ten years that was quite extensive and quite exciting.

*Can you describe the significance of the Latino Theater Initiative (LTI) on US Latina/o Theater?*

I think it was immensely significant. We created an archive of hundreds of scripts that were submitted, developed and/or produced by the LTI. In some instances the most important part of LTI was the process, less in some ways than the actual producing of the work and more about develop-

ing the voices of actors and playwrights here in L.A. who were able to hone their skills. A new generation of actors emerged who were very good, better in some ways than actors from my generation who did not receive formal training, I think there was a kind of formality that we offered to writers and to actors that then shaped a generation: Nilo Cruz, Octavio Solis, Oliver Mayer, José Cruz González, Ricardo Bracho and even back East, Jorge Cortiñas...it goes on and on, so it had a really significant impact you know along with the HPP (Hispanic Playwrights Project) at the South Coast Repertory Theater.

*You have gained acclaim as an actress, director, writer, and producer. Can you comment about these different roles? Would you recommend a similar trajectory for people who are pursuing a career in the theater?*

I think it depends on what kind of theater you want to do. I did all those things because sometimes acting wasn't happening for me and I had to find an alternative so that I could make a living. So I would write, direct or design costumes. Basically, I've always said that it's important to be a spherical artist, a well-rounded artist and that you're able to roll with the punches. The idea of not waiting for work but making your work has been a very important component of my career, you empower yourself to produce your own work, get it out there and that brings success. I am proud to say that I've never done anything else outside of the theater, I never had to have a "straight" job, well, aside from the first summer I was in L.A. and worked as a waitress at *La Golondrina* on Olvera Street, but that was more fun than anything else!

*Can you comment a bit on the general state of Latina/o Theater in the US? Who do you think are its leading artists/playwrights?*

I wish there were more up-and-coming writers; my suspicion is that they are not choosing this as a viable career because it's a difficult one. You have a slew of American playwrights living in Los Angeles and working for T.V. shows, some who are still committed to writing plays but they are making their real money as T.V. writers. I think that's the state of American Theater, it's hard to make a living as a playwright. Then there are others who are teaching at universities and writing as well, that being said, there isn't enough of a generation of young writers coming up. Certainly the Octavio Solis's of the world — he's 50 now and has been working in Chicano Theater and writing plays for over 20 years — are now finding success. Jose Cruz González is out there being produced quite a lot, and Nilo Cruz has

his Pulitzer. Then we have Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes from *In the Heights*, which is a little more commercial. There is certainly a whole generation of hip-hop theater artists like Mildred Ruiz from Universes who are writing and being supported by NY Hip Hop Festival. Playwrights have it tough. I can think of people like Janine Salinas and Virginia Greis and Adelina Anthony that are early career. But it's hard to come up with the names. There are not enough. On top of everything we need to develop an economic model to sustain the work, its what a lot of us haven't been able to do, but that's what we must do because, when we have that in place more people will take it seriously as a viable career.

*Do you still see the activist vein that was the impetus for the early Chicano Theater Movement, within US Latina/o Theater today?*

Very rarely. Part of it is because that activist strain was Mexican-American and came from the Chicano community and if we don't have those young writers from that community writing, then that thread is not visible. That is why I've started to write more, I feel it's so necessary to get the female voice out there and now I'm writing about professional Latina women in struggle. But when you think about it, a playwright who writes a great play that comes from one of our communities is performing a political act.

*How do you feel the Los Angeles theater scene contributes to the trajectory of US Latina/o Theater?*

I think the work that Center Theater Group is producing this season is important like Solis' *Lydia* and *Palestine, New Mexico* by Culture Clash. And we've produced the work of Luis Alfaro, Jose Rivera, Oliver Mayer, Nilo Cruz, Culture Clash and Richard Montoya. There is the Latino Theater Company, which is really a viable organization, and I really hope they are able to produce more work in the future. Then you have a very important part of the eco-system which are the smaller companies like Casa 0101, East L.A. Rep and Breath of Fire that provide a way for young writers to get work done and train actors. The challenge there is always to work with someone better than you are so that the bar can be raised. I don't think we have enough of the mid-size companies that are giving platforms for work like Teatro Visión in San Jose or Teatro Vista in Chicago or Milagro Theater in Portland. That is a very important triangle for US Latina/o Theater.

*As one of the few Chicana directors working in the regional theatre today, what is your advice to young Latina/os who wish to also work in the “mainstream” and maintain a balance with their communities?*

First of all, I think you have to be very good at what you do. You can never feel like you’ve arrived, there can never be that feeling like “I don’t need to take class, or learn more about this....” The feeling has to be that there is always more to learn and that you have to learn it and that there is an unending amount of curiosity that you have to maintain. You must be a very good listener which means that you are silent a lot as well. I love that *listen* and *silent* are made up of the same letters, love that! I think that there are not enough of us who listen. I’m always on the look out for designers to collaborate with when I direct. I love the visual palette. And I love actors. Many of my friends are actors and good actors; really good actors make all the difference. I also have relationships with many playwrights. Playwrights work with people they know and trust with their work. So, I always tell directors, that playwright relationships are where it is at especially if you want to direct new work. Generally, as an artist who produces I have learned to survive here because you have to be strategic. Think about things before you say them. Have a plan. Get people on your side. When LTI ended I was ready to be taken out of that box and given a larger canvas to work with but I brought all of the tools of my activism with me, my sense of community, and just applied it to more of a diverse pallet of artists but never ever forgetting that I still wanted to work with my community.

*What have been your most satisfying achievements?*

I was very proud to have been part of ETC when its aesthetic was at its highest and we were respected internationally for the work that we did. We would travel to Europe for months on end going to festivals. This was during 1976-1981 and I was a contributor to that. I’m also very proud that physically in many instances, my face, which is very Indian, represented an image that people associated with the *teatro*. It’s hard for me to look at myself in pictures sometimes, but nevertheless it’s like, “wow, they’ve embraced that image of this Indian featured woman and that’s really cool.” Ultimately, what I am most proud of is that I went from a very grassroots, political group and have made this big arch in my career to a very mainstream theater without losing the integrity that I started out with. And that, I think, overall has been my biggest accomplishment.

*So what's next for Diane Rodriguez?*

You know if I had known at the very beginning what I know now as an artist, I would have been a writer because writers create stories that are lasting. That is the essence of what the theater is, and we don't have enough of those stories yet that have entered the canon. So, I want to write more plays. What I'm doing in my next step is developing a slew of projects. One being the Lalo Guerrero project that I'm working hard to get off the ground, I'm also working on Dan Guerrero's next solo show and I'm writing my own plays, comedies, that have women at the center. I'm directing two new plays by Erik Patterson and Kenneth Robins. Both are comedies and one is about George and Martha Washington. I'm working with Linda Ronstadt and creating a short music piece about women in the Mexican Revolution. I wrote the libretto for the first ever Barbie musical for Mattel Toy Company that premiered in Argentina last year in 2008 and I will direct the English U.S. version for Mattel most likely in 2011. As a producer I'm leading a program, the first of its kind in the country, that acknowledges that ensembles are a way of developing new work through collective creation, and we'll experiment over the next 3 years to see what development models are the most viable for regional theaters to take on. It's vital work that engages and inspires me.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Diane went on to co-found El Teatro de la Esperanza in 1971, a student-based *teatro* directed by Jorge Huerta and run out of *El Nido* Theater in Santa Barbara's *La Casa de la Raza* community center. Diane's work during this period, while well documented, bears mention here as she adamantly expressed how crucial this mentorship and training has been to her development as an artist and activist.

<sup>2</sup> This testimonial was published in *Puro Teatro: A Latina Anthology* edited by Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, p. 313.

