

## On Collaborating: An Interview with José Cruz González

### Susan Vaneta Mason

José Cruz González is a playwright, director, musician, lyricist, creator of the Hispanic Playwrights Project at South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, California, and Professor of Theatre Arts and Dance at California State University, Los Angeles. His parents and grandparents were farm workers and he grew up on California's central coast. He went to college during the Mexican American Civil Rights movement where he was among the first generation of Chicano Studies students who defined and shaped Chicano theatre. González has a prolific career as a writer of youth and adult plays and has received numerous awards (Kennedy Center, NEA, TCG and others). During his development as an artist and throughout his professional career with commissions by numerous theatre companies, he has been committed to exploring diverse approaches to artistic collaboration. González's latest play, *Sunsets and Margaritas*, was recently produced at the Denver Arts Center in Colorado.

Susan Mason is González's colleague at California State University, Los Angeles. She has collaborated with him on professional and academic projects.

*When and where did you first begin studying theatre?*

I did my undergraduate work at University of California San Diego in the late 1970s where I majored in U.S History/Chicano Studies and minored in Theatre.

*Why theatre?*

I knew I wanted to go to graduate school and thought theatre would help my communication skills. So I began by taking beginning, intermediate and then advanced acting. Eventually the teacher asked me to help coach ac-

tors. I was also tapping into the creativity in my childhood: painting, sketching, making things with my hands.

*How did theatre and Chicano Studies come together for you? Were you aware of Chicano theatre at that time?*

I first became aware of Chicano theatre by taking a class at UCSD from Jorge Huerta. We studied Teatro history and read plays. With that course I found my calling. Besides that, companies such as Teatro de la Esperanza toured to the university with bilingual productions. I also got to see the work of Carlos Morton who was an MFA student there. He had worked with the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Tony Curiel was a graduating senior who went on to Stanford and then El Teatro Campesino. Silvia Cortez, Olga Villanueva, and Goyo Flores, a Vietnam vet, were undergrads in the program. So I got involved with the teatro group Jorge created on campus.

After UCSD I went to Arizona State University and worked on my MA in theatre. I poured over everything I could find on Latino theatre, the history of the movement, when, how, Nuyorican writing. I started a teatro there. We performed with local actors and created some of our own work. At this time my focus changed to directing. I directed *The Hands of God* by Carlos Solórzano that became my thesis project. I was also introduced to theatre for young audiences. At that time my overall goal was to work with El Teatro Campesino or Teatro de la Esperanza: to take my training and experience back to the theatre. So after ASU, I applied to the MFA program at UC Irvine for more training in directing.

*What kinds of directing opportunities did you have when you completed your professional training at Irvine? How did your employment at South Coast Repertory (SCR) come about?*

While I was at Irvine, I had a summer internship with El Teatro Campesino. I also directed a student production of a Mexican play, *Los Fantoches (The Effigies)*, that we took to the Edinburgh Festival. At Irvine I also worked with EOP [Education Opportunity Program] that had participated in a project called *Second Lives* at South Coast Rep. *Second Lives* was about immigrants and refugees of Orange County. I met with the project director, Michael Bigelow Dixon who invited me to assist him at SCR.

*And that lead to full-time employment at SCR?*

I began reading plays in Literary at SCR while I was still a student at Irvine. And I directed a play, *Terra Nova*, in a black box theatre at Irvine.

Michael came to see it and as a result David Emmes, the Artistic Director at SCR, nominated me for an NEA Directing Fellowship. I was just graduating when I got that award so I moved over to SCR as an assistant director.

*What was your inspiration for creating the Hispanic Playwrights Project (HPP) at SCR? Did you have funding? Did you have institutional support?*

At SCR what really interested me was working on new plays. So I began thinking about new Latino plays and talking about that with people there. Everyone was supportive and the company put about \$10,000 into it. I received funding from TCG [Theatre Communications Group] and SCR to promote it. We got about 109 plays submitted our first year and our artistic team chose three plays to workshop. It got a lot of buzz around the country. That was 1986. The program's success continued the following season when we produced two of the plays. And I was invited back. By 1996, when I left SCR, we had workshoped more than fifty plays.

*What was your salary?*

I think it was about \$15,000 in my second season.

*How did you make the transition from director to playwright?*

Maria Irene Fornes came to HPP to do playwriting workshops and I took one of them around 1987. There was also a children's program at SCR called Neighborhood Conservatory. One of my jobs was to teach theatre to kids in local communities. I needed a culminating experience for these kids to show their parents so I began writing plays.

*Besides working with young people, I know that creating collaboratively is a vital part of your work. Is this a recent development or have you always been committed to collaboration? What has influenced your collaborative approach to creation and production?*

Collaborating began early for me and a lot of it has been on the job. Trial and error. The first, early influence was probably Teatro. At UCSD and ASU I was creating collaboratively. A second influence is new play development at SCR: workshoping a play that is already written and working on it with various artists (composers, designers, etc). Third is TYA [Theatre for Young Audiences] in a professional setting that helped me formalize methods and process of collaborating. TYA has more flexibility than adult play development.

*Why is that? What kind of flexibility?*

I feel TYA folks tend to be more open and willing to try the nontraditional methods. They're not so locked into new play development formats.

*Would you describe a few of the diverse collaborations you have participated in with musicians, designers, visual artists, students, community members, professionals, etc?*

*Earthsong* is a theatre-music-movement piece I created at Metro Theatre in St. Louis where I was commissioned to write a winter solstice celebration piece they called *Earthsong*. I brought in eight to ten lines (such as "Peel an Orange and You Peel Back History," "There Are Giants in the Earth," "An Iguana Talks to God") for the director, producer, and actors. They brought in local artists (percussionists, dance companies, choirs). And we began to explore what "earthsong" meant. In the three-day workshop in October 2003 we searched for what the title and the lines I provided meant to us through drawing, movement and sound. We also worked with a geologist that presented us with sobering news about humankind's destruction of the earth. I came away from that with: "We're all going to die...go the way of the dinosaurs." So I went away to write and got really depressed. But two red nose characters, Chaos and Order, came out of that. I worked alone on the drafts eventually writing four in several workshop phases before *Earthsong* was produced in December 2004 for the community. It was unique in my commissioned work because it just started out with a few sentences and images. At Cal State L.A. I used these techniques with students to create *The Cloud Gatherer*, a student production we premiered in 2007. We just got everyone who was involved together in one room.

*What was the wonderful music-theatre workshop you did with ASK [Audrey Skirball-Kenis Theatre Projects]?*

Nautilus Music-Theater. ASK brought Ben Krywosz to Los Angeles for an invited two-week workshop with five playwrights, five composers, and five performers. The purpose was to create new musical theatre projects. This workshop gave me a love of new music theatre. We created pieces every two days using exercises. One was to brainstorm a large-scale musical with a playwright and a composer writing a scene and a song and then sharing it with our company. Another involved a playwright and a composer creating a piece for a specific performer: my technique of interviewing came from that. Another was a composer-generated piece.

*How about work created with communities?*

I've done three projects with Cornerstone Theater. One, *Waking Up in Lost Hills*, began from the ground up. We identified five communities and selected one: Lost Hills, a town of about 1200, about two hours north of Los Angeles. For eight months I went back and forth interviewing people. I was working with civic leaders and schools. The participants were five years old up to folks in their eighties. One of the interviews was with a woman who was a recovering meth addict. When she was clean, she realized she was part of the problem of drug and alcohol abuse in the community. So "Rip van Winkle" and the concept of waking up became the center of the project. I had discussions with Cornerstone people about "Rip van Winkle." I worked with about three to five Cornerstone members bringing the story to the community, reading it together in English and Spanish. I began thinking about how to adapt it for the community. Then when I had written a first draft, I took it back to community. We had Story Circles with ten to thirty people. I wrote multiple drafts working closely with Bill Rauch who directed it. Then we spent five weeks in the community with about twelve institute students (interns) as production assistants, plus Cornerstone staff. We auditioned and cast everyone in the community. Rehearsals were at night. This culminated in one weekend of performances. Because it is a community piece with a cast of forty local actors and one Cornerstone actor in the lead, there were constant casting changes. I wrote twelve drafts of the script in rehearsal. I wrote all the songs as well as the text.

*You've also worked extensively with Childsplay in Tempe, Arizona. How did you develop Tomás and the Library Lady with them?*

*Tomás and the Library Lady* is based on Pat Mora's book. David Saar, the artistic director of Childsplay, asked me about adapting the book. I began by reading everything Tomás Rivera wrote. I went to his archive at UC Riverside. I interviewed his wife and his brothers. I also wrote the music and lyrics — my first time writing music. I had learned with an earlier collaboration at Childsplay to bring everyone together in the room: always an open room with everyone contributing. I love that. You don't know where ideas will come from. We explored the book on our feet: we broke into three groups. David and I would chat about how to organize these open groups. I would take the lead in terms of what I wanted to explore (puppetry, video technology, music, scenery, etc). We knew it had to tour. I wanted to use only two actors. I would go away and write: back and forth to Los Angeles. By

having the design team there in the room, the process was organic. I really loved having the designers there. They would bring stuff in that influenced what we created: "Let's explore using these suitcases." As a result we found the language to tell it in theatre. Most exciting was the process. It's just had a three-month run at Seattle Children's Theatre. We created it in 2006 and now about 200,000 people have seen it and it is published in Coleman Jennings's anthology of my plays [*Nine Plays by José Cruz González*, University of Texas Press, 2008].

*Would you describe some useful strategies in collaborative work?*

I'm not sure if I call these strategies. They are more like guides. The word "No" should never be used. Any idea can come from anyone no matter how insignificant. Exploration, experimentation and risk-taking are crucial. Reflection and rebuilding are vital to the artist and the art piece. Theatre making is like cooking a meal for guests. You have to plan it, shop for what is in season and use what you have at home. Be flexible. Improvisation and patience is key. Believe and trust in the people you have brought together.

One of my most memorable new play experiences was working on *Lily Plants A Garden* at the Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman Playwriting for Youth National Symposium at Indiana Repertory Theatre in 2003. J. Richard Smith, an MFA student from the University of Texas at Austin, was assigned to our workshop. Rick served as a dramaturgical intern. During our workshop Rick sketched moments from the world of the play for me. His drawings were visual dramaturgy. Later, in the workshop process, we worked with children to see how they tracked the world of the play. We asked them to draw moments from it. We placed their drawings together and found where they followed the story or where they got lost. This process allowed us all to come together and share in a way not usually possible with new play development. Our target audience was involved in the very evolution of a play. The children became invested and served as our dramaturgs.

The process of having children in the development of a play for young people is crucial. I can't see creating new work without them. They are honest and care just as much as you do. When *Lily* was presented as a staged reading we projected Rick's and the children's drawings of the world of the play on stage; that reading was truly magical. Later, at the Mark Taper Forum, we extended the workshop process involving more artists and children. I felt safe and trusted the artists I worked with in both workshops. They were invested in helping me find the play. This isn't always the case. Not everyone

---

has experienced how new plays evolve. It's important to discuss the goals with your team before launching into a project. I also believe you should bring in smart and talented artists that will challenge you and make your work even better. The collaboration workshop environment should be a safe place where ideas, images and dreams can be given life through exploration and experimentation.

*What are you working on now?*

I have several commissions. *Invierno* is an adaptation of *The Winter's Tale* for PCPA [Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts], and *Mighty Miracle Saves the World* is a play for young audiences for Metro Theater. It's about a dog that performs miracles. In 2010 I'm beginning another youth play for Childsplay with composer Daniel Valdez. It's titled *The Sun Serpent*.

