

## Josefina López's *Piñata Dreams* in East Los Angeles

### Trevor Boffone

*Piñata Dreams* played at CASA 0101 Theater in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, from December 4-28, 2014. Written by Chicana playwright Josefina López, the play marked her first project in theatre for young audiences since *Simply María, or the American Dream* (1988). López penned the script to celebrate Latina/o culture and to educate Latina/o youth about the rich history of *piñatas* and *alebrijes*. Additionally, she wanted parents to understand that some children are creative and meant to be artists. The 50-minute play was directed by longtime López collaborator Corky Dominguez. The production benefitted from a small cast that was uniformly strong throughout the one-act play. Young actor Noah Logan Martinez played the protagonist J.J. The remaining ensemble of Isaiah Cazares, Evy De La Cruz, Jose A. Garcia, Sophie Goldstein, David Guerra, and Suzanne Santos played a variety of parts. Through the use of commedia dell'arte-inspired masks and vibrant storytelling, these actors filled out the real and fantasy worlds of López's script.

*Piñata Dreams* presents the story of J.J., a young boy with a vivid imagination who dreams of becoming a *piñata* maker just like his father. When a wholesale *piñata* store opens across the street from his father's store, the family's traditions and livelihood are in jeopardy. Despite his father's objections and insistence that J.J. abandon the family *piñata* trade for a more practical career, the young protagonist is drawn to a fantasy world in which *piñatas* and *alebrijes* come to life and teach J.J. valuable life lessons. During the journey from the fantasy world back to reality, he encounters several obstacles that help him understand the importance of his culture and family. In the end, J.J.'s father allows him to continue to develop his artistic talents while J.J. agrees to continue his education until he is ready to take over the family *piñata* store.



Isaiah Cazares, Noah Logan Martinez, and Jose A. Garcia in *Piñata Dreams*. Photo: Ed Krieger.

López's script and Dominguez's direction take the audience on a journey into a world that privileges the arts and art making. In CASA 0101 Theater's intimate playing space (99 seats), the audience is immersed in the family *piñata* shop and the mythological fantasy world that J.J. experiences. Scenic designer Cesar Holguin has designed a bright and colorful world filled with *piñatas* and *alebrijes* that hang from the grid. Sohail Najafi's lighting design helps transform the space using bright colors to fill the stage in the reality scenes and using black lights during the fantasy sequence to create a



Evy de la Cruz, Martínez, and David Guerra. Photo: Ed Krieger.

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dreamlike ambiance. *Piñata Dreams* asks its audience to use its imagination to witness the transformation of J.J. as well as the different worlds that the performance occupies. The costuming and performance style draw from the commedia dell'arte tradition of mask work as a storytelling mechanism for the actors that play multiple parts. The use of masks forces greater physicality of each character, including exaggerated human emotions that embody each actor's distinct characterizations. As J.J. is the only character who remains unmasked, his growth and journey become the focal point of the performance.

In *Piñata Dreams*, Corky Dominguez's creative staging enhances Josefina López's TYA playscript. Consequently, the duo provides audiences with an example of how Latina/o theatre can be used to both entertain and educate future generations of theater-goers. The production of *Piñata Dreams* was a fitting end to CASA 0101's 2014 season, honoring the past while looking toward the future as the company celebrates its *quinceañera* season in 2015.