Expanding the American and Latina/o Theatre History Canons: The Case of Josefina Niggli

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Despite the popularity of her plays in the 1930s and her accomplishments as a best-selling novelist, Hollywood screenplay writer and theatre educator, Josefina Niggli remains relatively obscure in US theatre studies. As Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez states, Niggli "rose to acclaim in an era when women were neither encouraged to pursue careers nor greatly distinguished [...] Like other great women trailblazers, Niggli was an independent woman ahead of her time" (2). The fact that she was a Mexican immigrant writing popular plays in English for people in North Carolina—and that she was college educated—makes her seem like both a quirky historical novelty and an unprecedented achievement of her time. Without a doubt, Niggli was a pioneer of both US feminist and Latina/o theatre.

Most of the attention this remarkable woman has received focuses on where to locate her in relation to the history of Chicana/o literature and centers on her novel *Mexican Village,* which was published in 1945. Raymund Paredes describes it as "the first literary work by a Mexican American to reach a general American audience. Even more important, *Mexican Village* was clearly intended to convey to American readers the distinctiveness of Mexican American experience and expression." Paredes adds, "[t]he overall result is a work of great originality that pointed the way to the hallmarks of the Chicano literary sensibility." Claims like these allowed Niggli a space, even if peripheral, within minoritarian literary culture. Even Niggli saw herself as a part of the Chicana/o literary timeline. In an interview in 1980, she stated: "I think it was when I started doing my thing that the door opened for Chicano literature" (qtd. in Martínez 2).

Early Chicana/o and Latina/o theatre historians, however, fell into the trap of identity politics, while most "American" theatre historians ignored her

career completely. Niggli's background became central to academic inquiries into her theatrical work and disagreement on where to place her on the theatre history timeline either became the sole concern of some scholars or kept Niggli out of studies altogether. Elizabeth Ramírez, for example, notes, "Niggli's parents are Scandinavian American and, therefore, discussion of her work will not be included in this study" (159). The fact that Niggli was born in Mexico and identified as Mexican does not seem to factor into this exclusionary act of historiography. Furthermore, Niggli wrote her plays in English and most of her work was performed in North Carolina, which proved problematic. *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940*, by Nicolás Kanellos, does not even mention Niggli, focusing only on Spanish-language theatre performed within Hispanic communities. Early omissions such as these have contributed to the continued limiting and/or ruling out of discussion of Niggli's work in both US and Latina/o theatre histories, resulting in a failure to acknowledge the unique place that she occupies in both fields.

In the following essay, I offer the life and work of Niggli as an example by which to expand the American theatre history canon. This often-overlooked feminist playwright also challenges the Chicana/o theatre history chronology that too easily chooses as its roots the work of El Teatro Campesino in the 1960s. Implicit in these two claims is a call to (re)interrogate and disrupt the traditional ways that we construct and disseminate theatre history in our scholarship and teaching. Whether Niggli was omitted from these timelines on purpose or by accident, the opportunity to challenge assumptions about her place in theatre history provides a valuable lesson from which to reevaluate the roles of historiography and identity politics in the construction of our theatrical past.

The revision of theatre history is constant and necessary; we must continuously reconsider and repudiate the histories that we produce, consume, and replicate in our work as theatre historians. Niggli challenges our assumptions of what constitutes Latina theatrical expression, especially in the early part of the 20th century. An examination of her work forces us to rethink the ways we separate the timelines of "American" and "Latina/o" theatre histories, precisely because her role and place in them defy a simplistic categorization and instead demand a more nuanced and intersectional approach. Niggli and her work are products of two revolutions: one politcal and one artistic. The first, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, was responsible for her move to the US and would serve as a major source of inspiration for her writing. The

second, known as the Little Theatre movement, was an artistic revolution that altered the state of American theatre and would set the foundation for Niggli's emergence and success on the US stage. Both are integral to understanding her biography and body of work, yet no study has merged the two in an effort to understand the ways each contributed to her place in theatre history.

The Little Theatre practitioners and their endeavors were instrumental in changing the direction of the American stage during the early part of the century, and by the 1930s, when Niggli was producing the bulk of her plays, they had profoundly shaped the landscape of US theatre. Niggli's early work in San Antonio, her maturation as an artist with the Carolina Playmakers, her indebtedness to mentor Frederick Koch, and the public's welcoming reception of her "folk plays" are all directly related to the Little Theatre movement. It is for these reasons that this essay must first start with traditional American theatre history in order to understand the context in which Niggli's work was made possible. After that, I present highlights from her biography as they relate to her body of theatrical work and conclude with an analysis of the play *Soldadera*.

The Little Theatre Movement

According to Garff B.Wilson, "show business, like other businesses at the start of the twentieth century, was prosperous, lively, and colorful. But it was also complacent, commercialized, commonplace, and uninspired [. . .] In every art of the theatre there was a crying need for renewal and rebirth" (301-02). This call was answered by a group of artists that sought to reinvigorate the American theatre by rejecting over-commercialization and promoting artistic freedom, experimentation, and new plays created for local audiences. In communities and campuses across the US, younger generations began to create a new theatre that reflected these ideals. "That arch-foe of commercialism," as Constance D'Arcy Mackay would call it, became known as the Little Theatre movement (1).

In *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, Dorothy Chansky writes that "Little Theatre activists founded journals; renovated buildings; wrote plays and manifestos; taught playwriting; and produced, publicized, and acted in plays. They also worked with children, college students, new immigrants, and rural citizens who had little or no previous theatre experience, towards facilitating self-expression via dramatic work" (5). This renewed energy and blossoming of intellectual interest in new forms of artistry and performance drastically changed the

chronology of American theatre. In fact, some of the earliest Little Theatre groups and artists are now considered pillars of American theatre history. The Drama League of America, which was founded in 1910 in Evanston, Illinois, for example, was "conceived by a combination of clubwomen, college professors, and idealists of the professional theatre, its aim was to establish a chapter in every town and city of the country which would encourage the production of 'good' drama, and discourage (by non-support) the 'bad'" (Hughes 367). In 1912, the Chicago Little Theatre and the Boston Toy Theatre were established, followed in 1915 by the famed Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players. Clarence Stratton, writing in 1921, predicted that "[s]oon almost countless localities in this country will have houses in which good plays can be adequately rehearsed and performed. Then will drama, now restricted to so few cities and towns […] spread to nearly every part of the land to entertain, educate, and stimulate people in ways which no other human agencies can ever equal" (3).

The Little Theatre movement was not limited to community theatre playhouses and amateur groups. Perhaps its biggest fight was when it found itself poised against the powerful US university system. As noted in *Theatre in America: Appraisal and Challenge*, the "epic struggle of this century was the effort of a small group of realistic idealists to create an educational theater. It was not easy to bring this sprawling, suspect, and often misunderstood bastard within American college halls" (Gard 73). George Pierce Baker, professor of English at Harvard University and a key figure of American theatre studies, believed that universities should provide education for *work* in the theatre (at the time, most theatre studies at the college level were limited to discussions of classic plays). Baker hoped that proper instruction in theatre would lead to a prosperous artistic future. As a result, he started teaching English 47 (playwrighting) to such students as Eugene O'Neill, Sidney Howard, Percy MacKaye, George Abbott, and Thomas Wolfe (all of whom would become key figures of the Little Theatre movement). Then, in 1913, Baker created his revolutionary 47 Workshop as a venue for students to produce their work.[1] Because Harvard would not yield him any additional freedom in developing theatre courses, Baker moved to Yale University in 1925 and created the Department of Drama (Macgowan 113-17). Soon other professors followed in Baker's footsteps, pioneering the cause of theatre education.[2] Professor Frederick Koch, a former student of Baker's (and Niggli's future teacher), would found the Carolina Playmakers in 1918. Teachers and students benefit-

ted from the work of these early theatre professors, using their examples to start theatre programs at other universities throughout the nation.

The growth of the Little Theatre movement in towns and universities across America was dramatic. In 1924, Kenneth Macgowan listed in *Theatre Arts Monthly* approximately 500 theatre organizations across the US (579). By 1929, in his study *Footlights Across America*, he noted:

> I should estimate that there are 100 organizations of laymen making from 4 to 25 productions a year, and 100 universities doing about the same amount of work. There are at least 1000 groups that give one or two plays each season, 6000 high schools that produce as part of their class work anywhere from one bill of short plays to 25 bills of long and short, and 6000 more high schools that give at least one play a year. (12)

Adding together the details of his extensive study, Macgowan notes a total of 23,500 plays produced a year with the help of 335,000 theatrical workers, for a total of approximately 12,500,000 theater admissions (12).

In the state of Texas, between 1925 and 1931 (when Niggli was living in San Antonio), Clarence Arthur Perry lists 51 Little Theatre groups actively producing work (26). Of these, three were located in San Antonio: Lady of the Lake Dramatic Club, Temple League, and the San Antonio Little Theatre (SALT). The SALT, where Niggli would work for four years, had its roots in the San Antonio Dramatic Club, which was founded in 1912 by Sarah Barton Bindley (Almaráz 12). Bindley had studied theatre with David Belasco—the renowned playwright, director, producer, and theatre critic—and taught dramatic arts at the Mary Keener Institute in Mexico City for a little over a decade (Almaráz 10). She, like Niggli, fled the Mexican Revolution for San Antonio and after arriving in Texas formed the first amateur theatre group dedicated to presenting full-scale productions to local audiences. The group met for the last time in 1920, but Bindley immediately founded the San Antonio Players Club, which later renamed itself the Little Theatre Workshop, though most knew the organization as the SALT.

In 1928, Bindley and Carl Glick (director of the SALT) successfully petitioned the mayor of San Antonio for the construction of a small auditorium in San Pedro Park. As a result, Macgowan later ranked the SALT "as one of the thirty-five leading Little Theatres of this country" (qtd. in Almaráz 43). When Glick resigned in 1930, his replacement was Coates Gwynne, an actor who had appeared in numerous Broadway productions. Gwynne's first season, in the fall of 1931, coincided with Niggli's first work with the

SALT; she would study playwriting under Gwynne from 1931-1935. During Niggli's time there, *Theatre Arts Monthly* rated the SALT as one of the "First Ten Community Theatres in the United States" (Almaráz 54).

Niggli had three one-act plays produced by the SALT: *Sorella*; *Yes, Nellie*; and *Grapes Are Sometimes Sweet.* Her association with the theater continued well after her departure from San Antonio. She was instrumental in helping secure Joe Salek[3] as director of the theater after it reopened in 1947, and her play *Lightning from the East* was produced there in 1965. Undoubtedly, Niggli's preliminary training with the SALT, along with the leadership of those who pioneered it as an influential force in the Little Theatre movement, helped lay the foundation for her future successes on the stage and page.

Biography: Josefina Niggli

Niggli was born on July 13, 1910, in Monterrey, Mexico. Her father was the manager of a cement plant and her mother a concert violinist. Because of their upper-middle class standing, they reacted to the onset of the Mexican Revolution with great fear. When Mexican President Francisco Madero was assassinated on February 22, 1913, Niggli's parents, within hours of the news, sent their daughter to San Antonio. The next seven years were unstable for Niggli, as they were for all Mexicans on both sides of the border, forcing her family to roam between Texas and Mexico.

When civil war broke out a second time in Mexico in 1925, Niggli was again sent to San Antonio. There she completed her high school education and at the age of 15 began studying at the College of the Incarnate Word, where she majored in philosophy and minored in history. Because San Antonio had no college for women at the time, and because the chaos of the Revolution made parents unwilling to send their daughters away to study, college courses for women were added to the curriculum of the religious institution. It was during this time that Niggli began to find her talents in writing: She took first and second prize in the National Catholic College Poetry Contest and second prize in the *Ladies' Home Journal* College Short Story Contest. She also became very popular in San Antonio as a writer and producer for KTSA Radio (Martínez 18-19). While at Incarnate Word, Niggli began developing an interest in theatre; she wrote and sometimes directed plays and skits. The St. Mark's Players and the SALT were the sponsors of her first staged performances, and several of her original plays were presented to an audience of World War I veterans at the Fort Sam Houston Hospital Barracks (Martínez 21). During the 1931-32 season, Niggli would act in the SALT production

of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. She would also direct plays for the SALT and serve on its board.

After receiving her BA in 1931, Niggli applied to the University of Iowa, Yale University, and the University of North Carolina, which were renowned for their playwriting programs (Martínez 23). In 1935, Niggli moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, after being accepted into the master's program. The Department of Drama, created in 1925, was the second theatre department to be established in the country, and Chapel Hill was considered one of the centers of theatrical activity in the US. It was also home to the famed Carolina Playmakers, which was founded by Professor Frederick H. Koch in the fall of 1918 in order to help him achieve his vision of "a folk theatre for America" (Spearman 27). When the group's first bill of plays was presented in 1919, Koch noted that the program, titled *Carolina Folk Plays*, "as far as he could determine was the first use of the term 'folk play' in the American theatre" (qtd. in Spearman 16). He explained that folk drama, the trademark of the Playmakers, was "concerned with folk subject matter: with the legends, superstitions, customs, environmental differences, and the vernacular of the common people. For the most part they are realistic and human; sometimes they are imaginative and poetic" (qtd. in Spearman 16). According to Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez, "Koch's program was a perfect fit for Niggli's goals: his emphasis on down-home 'folk' drama suited her purposes of adapting small-town Mexican life to dramatic presentations" (23).

Niggli's move from the Southwest came with an enthusiastic endorsement from Ezio Pinza, attaché at the Bolivian Embassy in Mexico City and himself a well-known playwright. Niggli had spent time in Mexico working as a stage manager for famed Mexican dramatist Rodolfo Usigli, then directing head of the Theatre of the National University of Mexico. Usigli would later write in the foreword to Niggli's *Mexican Folk Drama* that, "[a]s a Mexican author whose lot has been to live in this pioneering period of our native drama I have this regret: that Josephina [sic] Niggli has written her plays originally in English" (xv). Usigli continues, "I will, therefore, take this opportunity to excite Miss Niggli to write something along this line in Spanish to give the contemporary audiences of Mexico an occasion to appreciate her talents and to rejoice at the appearance of a new Mexican playwright" (xx). Recognizing the contribution she had made to the theatre, Usigli saw Niggli as a woman who could help shape the future of Mexican art, especially within a society still coping with the consequences of revolution.

Although Niggli was the only Mexican to work with the Carolina Playmakers, she was not the only foreign-born student to produce work with the program. Over the years, the Playmakers' vision of creating theatre from multiple perspectives resulted in work by other international students, including Gwen Pharis (Canada), Gerd Bernart (Norway), Kai Jurgensen (Denmark), Lily T'ang (China), and Mary-Averett Seelye (Lebanon), as well as plays by an African-American (Rietta Bailey) and a Jewish-American (Violet Fidel) (Spearman 72). Although the subject matter of the Playmakers varied greatly because of the contributions of these individuals, the idea of the folk play carried on, allowing "folk" to represent people of all backgrounds living within the US.[4] It was under these favorable conditions of diversity and inclusivity that Niggli was able to foster her art and work alongside people who did not see her position as a woman and foreigner as a limit to her talents and aspirations.

Because she wrote in English, Niggli was able to foster a Mexican folk drama that became successful with American audiences. During her first year with the Carolina Playmakers, the group produced six of her one-acts. In 1938, Koch edited an anthology of five of Niggli's most popular pieces under the title *Mexican Folk Plays*. In his introduction to the anthology, Koch calls Niggli "a new poet of the theatre [who] understands the lives of her people, their restless history, their legends and the childlike wonder of their folkways" (vii). Combining her intimate knowledge of her country with the stories she heard and the people she knew while growing up along both sides of the border, Niggli created plays that were entertaining and educational. For most audience members, Niggli's plays introduced them to Mexico, which had always seemed alien, distant, and even dangerous. Her pieces offered theatergoers a way of learning about the customs and traditions of the Mexican people. As a result of her positionality, these dramas were unique explorations of multiculturalism and feminism in a time when neither was promoted or even commonplace.

Niggli's first play, *Tooth or Shave*, was produced as a part of the Playmakers' northern tour in November 1936. An audience favorite, the play was revived for additional touring purposes the following season. Her two most successful plays were her comedies *The Red Velvet Goat* and *Sunday Costs Five Pesos.* Both were originally staged on April 25, 1936, and later published in her 1938 anthology.[5] *The Red Velvet Goat* revolves around a play-within-a-play, as Esteban tries to mount an original production as a means of earning money to purchase a goat. When he cuts up his wife's old red velvet dress to

decorate his stage, he infuriates her, making a path for the ensuing comedy. By the end of the play, the wife has taken the profits from the performance to purchase a new dress. The comedy was immediately successful and later produced on Broadway by the One-Act Repertory Theatre and revived several times by the Carolina Playmakers. It was also presented in England during World War II, and according to newspaper sources, was performed at various locations during each night of the Blitz in May 1940 (Martínez 40).

Sunday Costs Five Pesos was also an international success in England, where according to *San Antonio-Express* critic Amy Freeman, "one performance of it is presented to an English audience somewhere every night" (qtd. in Martínez 40). The play and its title are inspired by an old Mexican folk custom. Koch, in his introduction to *Mexican Folk Plays*, describes the show:

> The author tells us it is based on an old Mexican law that is still enforced in many of the small villages of the Republic. No one knows the reason for its existence, but its paraphrasing goes straight to the point: 'A woman who starts a fight on Sunday must pay a fine of five pesos.' Since Sunday alone is stressed the result is that what fighting is done is generally held over for week days. (xii)

The play was so successful it was republished in 1938 in *One Act Play Magazine*, in 1956 in *Invitation to Drama: One Act Plays for Secondary Schools*, in 1969 in *15 International One-Act Plays*, and in 1972 in the first anthology of *Mexican American Authors* (Martínez 41).

During her years with the Carolina Playmakers, Niggli worked as a director, actress, and costume and set designer. Her other plays staged with the Playmakers include *The Cry of Dolores*, *Soldadera, Azteca,* and *The Fair God.* She was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship in playwriting in 1936, and her three-act play *The Singing Valley* was submitted as her master's thesis in 1937. These historical plays, all set in Mexico, demonstrate Niggli's awareness of the sociopolitical elements of her work. Writing during a time when Mexico was not accurately portrayed by popular film, Niggli admits her desire to stage her version of Mexico—the one she loved—to a public prejudiced by cinematic misrepresentation, saying that "[w]hen I was a young kid, starting out as a writer, I had a shining goal. I was going to present Mexico and the Mexican as they had never before been presented" (*The Carolina Playmakers*, Josephina Niggli Papers).

After leaving Chapel Hill with a master's degree in drama, Niggli continued to work in theatre. In 1938 she received her second Rockefeller Fellowship in playwriting from the Bureau of New Plays, as well as a fellowship to the

Bread Loaf Writers' Conference (Orchard and Padilla x-xi). From 1940-1942 she worked as a secretary and assistant to fellow Carolina Playmaker Paul Green.[6] In 1945, Niggli published her first novel, *Mexican Village*, to wide acclaim, and her second book, *Step Down, Elder Brother*, was published in 1947. She also completed a residency fellowship at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. She wrote screenplays for MGM, including *Sombrero*, which was based on her first novel. She later became a professor at Western Carolina University, where she helped found the Department of Theatre and taught classes on radio script writing, playwriting, drama, and English. She was appointed chair in 1955 and worked there until 1975. She also continued to write plays, including *The Bull Ate Nutmeg*, *This is Villa!, Miracle at Blaise*, *The Faces of Deka*, *The Ring of General Macías: A Drama of the Mexican Revolution*, *A Crime in Granada*, and *Lightning from the East*. She passed away on December 17, 1983, after a distinguished career that made an indelible mark on both American and Latina/o theatre histories.

Depicting the Mexican Revolution in *Soldadera*

Niggli's most famous play, and the one that has received the most academic attention, is *Soldadera.* The Carolina Playmakers first presented it February 27-29, 1936. The text offers insight into Niggli's style of historical drama, as well as her early contributions as a feminist writer. With this play she became the first dramatist (north and south of the border) to write about the unique role women played in the Mexican Revolution. The one-act about *soldaderas* (soldier-women) who fought for agrarian reform and social change features seven women, led by Concha, who guard valuable ammunition from federal troops and keep watch over an enemy prisoner. The *soldaderas* are women of all ages and are described as "broken shells whose only desire was revenge for all they had suffered during those horror-ridden years before 1910" (Niggli x). It is in this text that the mark made on Niggli by the Mexican Revolution shows its full effect.

In *Soldadera*, Niggli gives names and faces to those who had been hidden and forgotten from history: "[R]omanticized symbols to the movements they came to serve, 'she-devils' to the societies they spurned, they have rarely been sensitively or clearly portrayed as the women they really were" (Mullaney 243). Despite women's active roles in the revolutionary cause, the years following the Mexican Revolution did not do much to change the gender differences that existed prior to 1910. Instrumental during the Revolution, and even recruited by military leaders, the *soldaderas* were expected to return to

their traditional roles as wives and mothers when the war ended; those who did not return to their expected place in society were deemed dangerous. It is rare to find first-hand accounts of the activities of the *soldaderas*, especially since many of the women were illiterate. Denied a platform from which to voice themselves after the war, and without any textual evidence left behind as testimony of their involvement, the stories of these brave women were destined to be forgotten. In this way, Niggli's play works to fill in the gap of our knowledge of the *soldaderas* and their role in history.

Niggli's drama drew its inspiration and the name of its central character from one of the most popular songs of the Mexican Revolution, "La Adelita." The song, which has over 100 known versions, is sung from the perspective of a male soldier who is going off to battle. Before leaving he asks his love, Adelita, not to forget him and to remain loyal. As presented in the popular songs called *corridos*, Adelita is an object—a passive observer who stays at home during the war, obediently awaiting the return of her brave lover. The version of "La Adelita" included in the play states:

> I'm a soldier and now I must leave you,
> For my country has called on me to fight.
> Adelita, Adelita, my loved one,
> You must not, dear, forget me tonight.
> So farewell once again, Adelita,
> So farewell to all your grace and your charms,
> Now I go with the hope of returning.
> To come back once more to your arms. (89)

Niggli, aware of the popularity of the song and the way that it portrayed the role of the *soldadera*, used her position as a female playwright to counter the objectification and misrepresentation of the soldier-women, going so far as to change the lyrics. She incorporates the *corrido* into the text on five different ocassions: the first time it is heard offstage as Concha is returning to the camp; the second time Concha sings it to Adelita as the young girl laments the lack of letters from her lover; the third and fourth times the song is used in a singing contest between the enemy (the Rich One) and Concha; and the fifth time the song is heard at the end of the play after Adelita has sacrificed herself for the revolutionary cause.

The use of the *corrido* within these different contexts reveals a feminist critique of the song and transforms the figure of Adelita from its original form of passivity and sexuality into one of revolution and strength. In her analysis of the popular *corrido* and its role in the play, Alicia Arrizón notes

that "Adelita's revolutionary subjectivity represents the feminist spirit of the Mexican Revolution, but in many well-known renditions of the 'La Adelita' song, that spirit has been distorted by the romanticization of her subject position as a lover of men" (98). Relegated to a submissive role, the Adelita of the song stands in direct opposition to the women portrayed by Niggli. Although they sing the *corrido*, the women's actions speak louder than their words, providing a counternarrative to the revolutionary figure chained within the song. In the play, the singing contest between the male federal spy and the revolutionary female leader yields the woman as victor. Declared the winner, Concha is metaphorically reclaiming the popular *corrido* in the name of the feminist revolutionaries.

The Adelita that Niggli presents in the play is very different from the other women. Described by Niggli as "the poetry of the Revolution, and the beauty, and she who has seen almost nothing of death" (56), Adelita is not the warrior-woman whom one would expect. Naïve, vulnerable, and too trusting, Adelita is referred to as "the innocent child" (96). Orphaned and adopted by the hardened *soldaderas*, Adelita remains innocent to the horrors of war and looks upon the Revolution as beautiful. Adelita is tricked by the Rich One into giving him valuable information about the camp and women; her naivety places them in danger. The finale of the play, however, redeems the female heroine. Sacrificing herself to throw the bomb that will kill the federal soldiers riding toward the camp, Adelita runs offstage while yelling, "This is the Revolution! The sun will be in my face!" and "Long live the Revolution!" (113).

The other women in the play portray a spectrum of heroic images that attempt to represent the historical *soldaderas.* Assigned the task of guarding valuable ammunition and dangerous spies, the women answer to Hilario, who never appears onstage. Although the person in control is male, the strictly female community created by Niggli turns the harsh and characteristically "unfeminine" campsite into a female space. In addition to the dresses, cookware, and sleeping blankets (traditionally feminine objects) found in the site, the women are equipped with rifles, guns, ammunition, alcohol, and men's sombreros (objects of hypermasculinity). Blurring the line between what is strictly feminine and masculine, Niggli displaces and disrupts the gendered connotations of these images. In a conversation between Concha and the Rich One, the two discuss the new roles the women occupy and the contradictions they offer to the traditional gender roles of the past:

> CONCHA: It's Tomasa and the Old One. They've suffered a lot from your kind, and Hilario never would let them play with any of his prisoners, so they've been looking forward to you.
> THE RICH ONE: *(to whom this idea is very new)* You mean… you mean they want to torture me?
> CONCHA: Why not?
> THE RICH ONE: But you are women…. Not hardened soldiers.
> CONCHA: *(more to herself than to him)* Are we women? Sometimes I wonder. The Old One who cooks our food… she saw her son crucified by men of your kind… another one saw her son hunted down by dogs for the sport of it. That doesn't make women, my friend. That makes something worse than the devils in hell. (94)

Concha does not retract from or look down upon her female counterparts. Instead, she affirms the reasons for their transformation, blaming the military for their gender inversion.

As victims of the class struggle, these women made a choice to become active warriors in the Revolution. The older women, suffering from the loss of their children, are not satisfied with playing the expected role of the silent and weeping mother. Tomasa, remembering her son, exclaims, "I want to think of him all the time, and every moment I think of him, I want to have a Rich One between my hands" (61). Maria, when speaking about the *federales*, says, "I'd like to stand them up in front of me like *mescal* bottles and practice shooting their ears off" (82). Concha, the more level-headed and informed of the women, states, "Yes, this is the Revolution. We have to forget how to weep, and how to be kind and merciful. We are cruel, because the Revolution is cruel. It must crush out the evil before we can make things good again" (109). And, in perhaps the most revealing line of the play, the male prisoner, aware that he cannot regain control as the figure of authority, realizes that "[y]ou're not women, any of you. You're vultures… flying around to see what dead bodies you can pick on" (111).

Even before any dialogue is spoken, Niggli creates a revisionist world where women are allowed access to areas previously denied to them and where gender relations are inverted to privilege the female. In the opening image of the show, Maria (played by Niggli in the original production) is first seen standing atop a high rock, with the bare and bitter Sierra Madre Mountains as the backdrop. In her hand is a gun, the butt at rest on the ground, symbolic of the image of military power that has allowed men to colonize women and the "other" throughout history. As the women sleep across the campsite, the

play opens devoid of men. After this brief yet revealing setup, the Rich One enters the scene. In the stage directions, Niggli notes, "[h]e moves slowly, cautiously, seemingly fearful of disturbing the women" (56). As the action continues, the audience becomes aware that his hands are tied behind his back and that he is a prisoner. The first line of the play is spoken by Maria/Niggli ("Look behind you, tenderfoot!") as she shoots her gun and marks her victory over the man by spitting on the ground (57). The Rich One is not killed, but his body and pride are wounded. In this world, woman is in control, and it is this approach toward writing about the Revolution that marks Niggli as an early feminist in American theatre history.

In her plays Niggli affirmed a commitment to early feminist ideals, which is especially significant given the time in which she was working. She wrote from a post-revolutionary position in the 1930s and 1940s and engaged in historical topics that ranged from pre-Columbian Aztec culture to Mexican history of the 19th and 20th centuries. Niggli was conscious of the gender divide and insisted on using her art to present women who opposed the limited stock of female characters circulating in popular culture. Writing about the almost forgotten stories of Mexican women, Niggli challenged their erasure from history and worked to guarantee, through publication and the possibility for future production, that these women would have a voice and presence within the public sphere. By restaging the Mexican Revolution and the feminist contributions of the *soldaderas* for future generations, Niggli provided future Chicana leaders with a historical legacy of female activism. Even more so, Niggli's struggles and successes in claiming a space in the male-dominated/Anglo sphere of American theatre provided future Chicana artists with an example and role model of a Mexican-American female writer and theatremaker.

Conclusion

Fortunately, recent scholarship dedicated to Niggli has brought necessary attention back to this extraordinary woman. With the publication of the first full-length critical biography of her life and a collection of her previously unpublished plays, the opportunities to enagage Niggli in the classroom and in research are more possible than ever before.[7] Although she continues to be marginalized in the larger history of American literature and theatre studies, these publications provide new possibilities for overcoming the previous exclusionary practices in scholarship and teaching. A pioneer in a number of areas, Niggli's work in theatre is perhaps most interesting when examined

in relation to the theatrical activities taking place during the Little Theatre movement precisely because she challenges the expectations that people have of Latina/os during the first half of the 20th century. Without a doubt, Niggli is a product of American theatre history and makes a unique mark as a Mexican-American woman creating popular performance and publishing works in an unprecedented way at a time when so few Latina/os had access to stages, colleges, and publishing houses. Even more astounding is the fact that she was a college professor—perhaps the first Latina/o to teach theatre in a US university setting. Niggli's profound mark on theatre education is also evidenced by the publication of two books that she authored: *Pointers on Playwriting* (1945) and *New Pointers on Playwriting* (1967). We can never know how many playwrights and artists were influenced by these books, but what is certain is that Niggli—a Mexican immigrant—was teaching people how to contribute to and succeed in the American theatre.

Interestingly, the opening image of Niggli in the original production of *Soldadera*, standing above the audience and the other actors, can be read as her taking a position of authority and prominence in theatrical history. Staking her place as a historical figure and trailblazer, Niggli stands with weapon in hand, indicating that her career is going to challenge the expected gender behavior and social roles that privilege white male dominance in the public sphere. Sue-Ellen Case, writing about women pioneers, says that "[m]ost of the history of patriarchal culture, ownership of property, the public arena, written language and theatre itself have been exclusively, or almost exclusively, male. For centuries the theatrical achievements of women remained largely invisible" (28). Challenging this erasure, Niggli stands strong, a warrior-woman who implemented her own form of revolution throughout her career. As a result, both American and Latina/o theatre histories must take into account the valuable lessons that she offers to scholars and students and the challenges that she poses to our ways of framing and thinking about the past. Arguments about whether or not Niggli should occupy a place in the genealogy and legacy of these theatre histories cannot continue if we are seriously committed to revising American history to include the work of women and people of color. Latina/os, even more so, will benefit from her inclusion in the geneology, as she offers a pivotal and extraordinary example by which to discuss their impact on the national theatre scene. Niggli's mark on theatre history is too important to limit her to a peripheral location.

The College of Wooster

Notes

[1] Here, such notable theatre greats including Winthrop Ames, Sam Hume, Kenneth Macgowan, Robert Edmund Jones, and Frederick Koch learned the techniques of acting, directing, and design.

[2] Some of the more notable names include Brander Matthews at Columbia University, Arthur Quinn at the University of Pennsylvania, Thomas Wood Stevens at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, and A.M. Drummond at Cornell University.

[3] Joe Salek was one of the most important directors of the SALT. Leading the organization for several decades, he was responsible for reclaiming the San Pedro Playhouse. He also founded the monthly newsletter *The SALT Shaker* and the theater's drama school. He met Niggli while studying music and drama at the University of North Carolina. He would later return to Chapel Hill as a staff member of the Drama Department with Niggli (Almaráz 93-95).

[4] *Itchin' Heel*, written by John W. Parker and produced on February 17, 1934, is said to be "the first full-length play of negro people played by an all-Negro cast" (Spearman 55).

[5] *The Red Velvet Goat* was previously published in *One Act Magazine* in July 1937 and was later anthologized again in the 1949 collection *International Folk Plays* (Martinez 39).

[6] Green was a playwright who studied theatre at the University of North Carolina and Cornell University. His plays were performed by the New York Theatre Club, The Provincetown Players, and The Group Theatre. In 1927, his play *In Abraham's Bosom* received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. He was a professor of drama at the University of North Carolina until his death in 1981.

[7] *Josefina Niggli, Mexican American Writer: A Critical Biography* by Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez and *The Plays of Josefina Niggli: Recovered Landmarks of Latino Literature*, edited by William Orchard and Yolanda Padilla.

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