

American Theatre on a Latin Beat: Interviewing Pregones After 38 Years on the Stages of New York

Beatriz J. Rizk

The following interview took place at the Grupo Pregones headquarters in the South Bronx, on the 20th of October, 2015, with Rosalba Rolón, Alvan Colón Lespier, and Jorge B. Merced, Associate Artistic Directors. What follows is an in-depth view of the process that took the iconic group from the conventions of the popular (Latin American) New Theatre movement, at the end of the 1970s, to a multi-faceted theatrical enterprise enhanced by the recent historical merger with the late pioneer Miriam Colón's Puerto Rican Traveling Theater (PRTT). This is undoubtedly history in the making for a future recollection of Latina/o's contribution to the New York stages and a memorable opportunity to delve into what it takes to be a successful artist in these difficult times.¹ My gratitude goes to them for their generous time and knowledge.

BJR: Let's start at the beginning. Whose ideas blossomed into the initial show Pregones presented, a collection of scenes from Puerto Rican playwrights? I still remember some of the scenes from Manuel Méndez Ballester's Bienvenido, don Goyito, Luis Rafael Sánchez's Los ángeles se han fatigado, and René Marqués's Carnaval adentro, carnaval afuera, among others.

RR: In 1978 we began thinking about it and in 1979 we shook hands. I wanted to do a certain type of Puerto Rican theatre that was not being shown on Latina/o stages at that moment, at least not the way I wanted. Luis Meléndez and I began to talk about it. Given his prior involvement with the popular theatre movement on the island, he began to think about whether we could create something that could be movable, tour-able. Not that we wanted to create a company, but we wanted to fulfill an artistic need. At that time Repertorio Español, INTAR, Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, Nuestro Teatro,

IATI, and El Portón, were the Latina/o stages in New York. They were doing good work, and now I understand it more. And we said, “What if we do something on our own, and we get something to take out to the community rather than to have people come to the theatre?” We were only vaguely aware of how the audiences moved at that time. In other words, we knew theatre companies were coming from Philadelphia, from Baltimore, and Connecticut to Manhattan; they were touring companies and had been doing it for years. We were young and adventurous and wanted to test the waters like that. We wanted to put something together that was Puerto Rican in nature, in Spanish, that we could take to non-conventional stages, students halls, churches, and so on. We began to test the waters by talking to people.

Who are “we” and what were the major influences at the time?

RR: The first conversations that I had about this ever was with Raúl Dávila. We were doing a show together at the then Dumé Theater, now Thalia, and I said to Raúl: “I have this concern,” and Raúl answered: “Go for it, I love the idea, doing something that you can take everywhere. I always wanted to do it but you know my career is so different. It is already set in more conventional ways, but you should.” Luis was stage manager in that show and he kept talking about his experience with Latin American Popular Theatre, with the group Anamú in Puerto Rico. He was my biggest influence, shaping the target of where my idea could go. I didn’t have that previous experience at all.

My experience was more formal, first in dancing and then acting. I had stopped acting while in college and graduate school, but what always remained in me is when I was in high school. There was a theatre contest of all the high schools in Puerto Rico, and they would award the Leopoldo Santiago Lavandero Award for best actress. When I was in my senior year I won the best actress award. And they took our little play to many places around the island. Fast forward seven or eight years and I said: “My goodness, what if I could do that with this idea.” Luis asked me, I remember, “Where would we start if we want to do something like that?” And I said: “I would like to do all of the Puerto Rican plays ever in one night.” Raúl, who was putting on make-up, overheard us and said: “That is a good idea.” And then we said, “What if we do a collection where we can select scenes from the best plays?” The whole thing ended up being nine scenes from Puerto Rican plays from 1878 to 1978, from *El Gibaro* [by Manuel A. Alonso] to *Carnaval adentro*.

First, we began to do research; we were not in a hurry. Shortly after we began the conversations, David Crommett joined us. Then Socorro Santiago

and Martha de la Cruz came and stayed for a while. People came and went, but it was the three of us from the beginning. We ended up with 65 plays. Herminio Vargas came one day and said, "I want you to meet Víctor Fragoso." Víctor helped us to turn things around. He got Clemente Soto Vélez in our conversations and he challenged us. We were running around with sixteen scenes. Víctor kept saying: "This is too long. You don't need this scene, you don't need the other." We fought it out and we ended up with nine. We staged it under the name "*La Colección*" (later renamed "Migrants"). That last stretch is when we did our first reading. We presented it in living rooms of friends, and in odd places up in El Barrio. You were there in one of those presentations, and so was Emilio Carballido. Brenda Feliciano and Ángel del Toro had recorded a theme, *Yagrumo Opera*, to use as music. Emilio exploded at the end of the presentation, during the talk back. He said: "How could you Puerto Ricans, who can make music out of a tin can, have recorded music instead of using live musicians?" From then on we had live music on the stage. And Luis kept saying that he wanted Alvan to see the work. Alvan was directing the PRTT training unit at that time. It was very successful. We also got to know people; Dolores Prida became a fan.

How long did the show stay with you?

RR: It stayed in repertory for five or six years. In New York we did a formal presentation at what was La Tertulia, later to become LATEA. Víctor opened a lot of doors for us, because he was coming from the university system, at Rutgers University, where we went often, and Princeton, too. We received calls from Taller Puertorriqueño, and then we began to call ourselves a touring group, not a company. We didn't have a name at first, but then we realized that this started to look like a company. The name came from the collection. At first it was "Yagrumo," which is the name of a tree. We took a vote. Víctor was there. He was adamant about calling the company "Pregonos." A friend of Clemente said that the translation into English of "pregonos" is "street vendor chants," and I found the translation to be beautiful. For a moment we thought of calling the company "Chants of Street Vendors Company." Anyway, to go back to the original question, it was Luis's political guidance that led us to the idea of popular theatre to be done everywhere.

Alvan, when did you come into the picture?

ACL: I was here, I was living here. I had been working at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in the training unit. I directed it for a couple years. I saw

Pregones Theater's work at La Fonda Restaurant, in El Barrio, and found it very interesting. It was in 1981. I approached the group feeling that they needed some technical support. I felt there were things that could be done in a more efficient manner. So, I got involved with them, and I also did some performing. I had the influence of Latin American theatre very present, particularly Colombian theatre with Enrique Buenaventura's TEC [Teatro Experimental de Cali], Santiago García of La Candelaria, Atahualpa del Cioppo from Uruguay. I had them very present in my view of what theatre could do in terms of engaging the audience, with new proposals and having some fun with them. From then on, I have not stopped. I assumed different roles, but the majority were production-related. Slowly my artistic career took another turn, but at that point in our development we were wearing many hats. It was all a big pharmacy; we were all doing literally everything. There was no lighting department, scenery department, or literary department. With the years and with exchanges of work with other companies in the U.S., we started to see that there is this division of labor that can make things a little more efficient. So, I put aside my artistic edge and kept my production side. Even though I never left the artistic side; I wrote a children's play [*Caravana*] and participated actively in the development of all the key plays such as *Voices of Steel/Voces de acero* [1989]. That was a big jump aesthetically for the company

In 1984, I went to Cuba, to one of the ITI [International Theatre Institute] Festivals, and there I saw Teatro Foro. Then, I came back and proposed to the team that we do it. I thought that it would help us to engage the audience in a very active fashion. We were dealing deeply with the AIDS crisis. It was a terrible thing that was affecting us because we were losing our friends. So, we worked on a piece that later developed into several pieces using Forum Theatre techniques. Jorge was able to go to Brazil to take a workshop with [Augusto] Boal. Actually, Boal came here to New York. We were doing a performance in a homeless shelter and we invited him. People who were living in the shelter were there. They were the participants; we had no public in the sense that we talk about public now. He was taken aback by it.

RR: Back then we were solely a touring company with no roof over our heads, from 1979 to 1985. The aesthetics of our work was one that could survive moving around.

Jorge, what about you, when did you join the group?

JM: I came to the company once it had established roots in St. Ann's Theater, in the South Bronx, thanks to father Roberto Morales. He offered us

the gym at St. Anne's Church as a permanent home. It was an opportunity to develop a repertory, in our own home, and a relationship with an audience in a more on-going and consistent basis. I came as part of a second wave of artists that have joined the company from a different generation, some of us bringing the experience of another voice of Puerto Ricans who were born and raised in New York City. Some of us, like myself, were born and raised in Puerto Rico but established a career and an identity here. For me this is interesting because I was a student from a school system that had no access to Latin American theatre practices per se. I was in a conservatory of dance after studying architecture and planning for a year and a half. But politically I had a very different upbringing and background. I was beginning to be very curious about Marx, about socialism and communism. I was taking classes at a Marxist school and meeting people who were related to those types of movements. That was part of my background and where my mind was going, which I was not getting at the conservatory. Then, I moved to City College to continue my dance training there as part of the BFA program (no longer in existence). Again, there was no connection with Latina/o theatre or culture in there. So, for me, Latin American theatre was completely unknown except for the fact that there was some theatre in Spanish, mainly classical Spanish theatre.

It was at the school that I met Judith Rivera. We became good friends. We did a play together: *Prohibido suicidarse en primavera* [by Alejandro Casona] and that's because we were looking for plays in Spanish. Judith told me that she had joined this theatre company. I was hungry for a space where I could join my artistic interests with my political points of view that would make sense to me. I had no idea that Pregones was two places in one. Judith asked me to come to a rehearsal, in 1987, when the company was going through their first full season at St. Anne's. One of the actors was leaving *Migrants*, which was the show that was opening the theater. I was brought in just for a conversation. I came and saw these people who were conducting a conversation where art was part of it, music was playing at some point, and then I read some scenes. It was a very unconventional way of working at a rehearsal. I left the meeting thinking, "Wow, there is a space for the type of interests that I want to pursue." Then I came back for the next rehearsal, and next thing I know the show is opening. And we did a whole run of *Migrants* at that theatre. I said to myself, "This feels like a family of artists who are trying to search for new ways to understand ourselves." So, I say, "I'm going to stay in this space for a little while." And it's been now almost 30 years.

Let's talk about the repertory, how do you choose the topics?

JM: One thing that I would like to add is the imprint an idea could have, in our way of approaching our art making, and how that has evolved throughout the years. If you look at our repertory, it has been very varied and not one-sided. But there is an imprint that I think began with the idea that Rosalba had of the collection of ideas, of voices, of languages. And it has been very consistent through the years in our repertory, and our way of developing art, that episodic understanding that very often is about bringing together different voices, scenes, and poems. This then would allow you as an artist to surrender to and find a new path, a new way of understanding art. Now, I think that that "finger print" is what set us apart, not just the political questioning that we are doing in most of our plays. We ask people to question themselves: "We are not here only to entertain you, but also to make you question things about your life that perhaps can be improved."

ACL: I see it as a "sine" curve that goes through the line of all our work. Our work is different in style when Rosalba approaches something, when Jorge approaches something, and when I approach it, too. We have differences in our styles but the sine curve is prevalent and is the through line in our work.

Has there been an organic development from one play to the next?

JM: I think it has to do with urgency, and relevance, what makes us gear towards a topic, a playwright, or a way of language. We are always talking, having these conversations about things that matter to us. And out of these conversations each of us goes back to their own process and says, "This is resonating with me, it interests me as an artist." And then we bring it as a project. We discuss them again, and we go back and forth, so there is an ongoing conversation taking place. But I think before we address topics we have to address what is the diaspora, and how diaspora influences and shapes the way an artist approaches themes and topics. For instance, by being part of the diaspora you first go back to what you know, your language, your culture and your people. That's the first thing that you hold on to understand who you are. Once you feel a little more certain that this is where you stand, you open up, and you begin to understand that you have out there a mire of voices around you that are similar and may even inform you more than if you go to the Dominican Republic or South America. You begin to hear voices and say what is it about in those voices, those writings, that poetry, that is resonating with my experience. I can never talk about something that I don't know, but this is something that is influencing me rather than going through writers.

You are all transplanted Puerto Ricans in New York City, which is also culturally an extension of Puerto Rico. Your first impulse was to make community by bringing Puerto Rican playwrights to the stage, but there is a moment when you started to work on topics that originated in the U.S. Puerto Rican community. There is such thing as a Nuyoricana aesthetics out there. Now, your aesthetics has been very different until rather recently. I'm thinking of Dancing with My Cockroach Shoes, by Magdalena Gómez, which you brought to the Encuentro in Los Angeles, in 2014, and which displays a distinct Nuyoricana style. When and why did the conflation of those aesthetics take place?

RR: There is an existential, sort of emotional shift in us. When we started, we were recent arrivals, just ten years here, but that is not a long time to make you see something else. Our emotional tide was with the island and our behavior was of islanders here in the city. I remember the first time that I realized there was a different kind of me; it was on a panel at one of Teatro 4's Encuentros at the Museo del Barrio. Evelina [Fernández] was on the panel and the discussion was about "What is bilingual theatre?" We saw all those Chicano plays and said, "That's not bilingual, Rulfo is bilingual." And we got into this discussion. What I think we discovered is that there are two ways of being bilingual. I think I began to understand Chicanos before I began to understand Nuyoricans in that I felt I could study them at a distance, while the latter were more personal. These are Puerto Ricans too, Nuyoricans, but "My god we are so different."

I think our shift began early, when we joined the Union 1199, with the whole idea of doing the play *High Noon/Al Mediodía*. We began to see our other-selves that were fighters in that Union. We were Puerto Ricans, but we were different; I call it an emotional shift. By that time we were already a group. We had five or six people, and we were always traveling. The more we traveled, the more we learned that there was another side of us that was not present in our work. And then we began those conversations. Originally it was with visual artists. I remember, with Jorge Soto, and he was saying, "Why don't you get it?" We were not getting each other. And when José García walked in here, it was like a very familiar stranger coming in. He started vocalizing, and the more that relationship blossomed, the more we realized we were one family and we had to figure it out. Also in *High Noon* we started to deal with bilingual words. By the time we did *El apagón* [*The Blackout*]¹—based on a short story by José Luis González—it came naturally. These two men sharing that one role [originally played by Jorge Merced] as the two sides of us in one place. It is one person splitting into two.

ACL: *High Noon* was really important; it had multiple facets that developed on the stage. It was our working with organized labor, with the Syndicate Local 1199 that was undergoing turmoil. The founder had died; the one who had assumed leadership was tyrannical, an anti-democratic leader. The Latina/o voices within the Union were being shut down. We started talking with some of these folks and came up with the idea of developing a play with them, but that was one involvement. The other involvement that occurs with *High Noon* is that at a point in time a Spaniard worked with us, Miguel Camarero, along with a Dominican actor, Manuel Herrera, who did not know a word of English, and an Anglo actor who came from the Mass Transit Theater Company. So, working in this play *High Noon/Al Mediodía* we are bringing in all these folks who come from different cultures than ours and we were able to come together, do a play, perform it, and elicit the response that we were expecting. That was another thing that I found interesting and just remembered when Rosalba mentioned it. How these processes will affect you and affect what you want to work on.

JM: What happened then is also that the relationships in the company changed. I was working with the gay movement here, so I had a lot of contact with other non-Latinas/os. I was many times the only Latino at meetings; I knew how to deal with that. But there was another aspect of it that I knew; it was coming back from those places into Pregones, and part of that was my artistic understanding of what a place it was. Judith, José, and I were part of a trio, able to test and challenge each other. I remember in conversations after rehearsals we talked about our upbringing. It was an awakening for them, and for me, that our experiences were similar, in different languages, but they were also complementary. That was a great process, a great political awakening that you cannot get unless you have the space where you can surrender to all those things that make you stand where you are. That kind of a breaking down, or a notion of what we could do, what the language should be, what works we should do. That was happening in the company. After that critical process of understanding what the language was, Alvan brought the idea of working in *Voces de acero* [*Voices of Steel*]. That was happening at the same time that the company was shifting the understanding of ourselves. Alvan brought the material to the table, some choreopoems that had nothing to do with what we were expecting to be working on. It was 1987. Alvan started to test us and push us to find meaning that had not necessarily surfaced. *Voces* set the path for us to follow.

Defining identity, in cultural nationalistic terms, was a big concern during the 1970s and 1980s. Taking into consideration what you just said, how compelling is it today and how is it communicated?

RR: There are expectations that the main themes of a company like ours have to be all about being Puerto Rican or our identity. So we began to challenge the notion that we can talk about whatever we want. For instance, our children's program, or when we did our first collaboration with the Appalachia's Roadside Theater Company, and with Junebug Productions, an African-American company based in New Orleans. Thanks in big part to the continued theatre movement in Latin America, every time we went there for the Encuentros, we got filled with energy. We came back here and started to look at other options. I remember when we had that collaboration that we were struggling with what we were going to talk about. We had our own issues, the Appalachians had their own, too, and the African-Americans in New Orleans also had their own. We ended up doing a play about love. We wanted to conquer that territory of talking about whatever issue was important, but the work did not necessarily have to be issue-oriented. Everything is a social issue and affects us socially, so the final product was *Promise of a Love Song* (2001). That is why today we can afford, and have the luxury to have a play about astronauts.² It's all integrated. We did have backlashes, though; actually a well-known director told us, "So, I hear that you're not Puerto Rican anymore."

What is in the works for Pregones?

RR: We don't have that many single line stories in our repertory. We are fascinated with the classics, two specific classics. What is it that we have to say today about these lives? I'm working with *Marianela*, by Benito Pérez Galdós, and the *Quijote*. In the future, I hope to get both of them off. Don Quijote will be a subway conductor who has been back and forth from the same station for over twenty years and he is about to retire. And he wants to take the train, in his mind, and take it all the way down to the tip of South America. After he disengages the wagon, —the wagon is Rocinante— he realizes that someone is sleeping in the car, and that is Sancho, and the journey begins. So that's the premise of it. That's our way of infusing ourselves in something wonderful. Yes, it is in Spanish, and yes, it is European. I'm not worried about that part. It is a great story and I have found out that we live in a global "aldea." The first line is: "En algún lugar de Manhattan, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme."

Now, with regards to *Marianela*, what is interesting for me is what surfaces today, the use of her image, the meaning of beauty. The whole mining culture, having worked with our friends in the Appalachia for twenty years, I figure this could take place in Kentucky, in Chile, or any mining country, in South Africa, for example. I realize that these are universal themes that I'm fascinated with as well as other contemporary issues, such as the meaning of capitalism, or how we run our lives. We have these existential yearnings and ambitions and you never know which one should land first. We have created something that is called *remajo*, and that is our ideas that are soaking in water until the creative juices are ready to come out. About two or three years ago, we began to share those ideas with the public, even on occasions taking a vote. "Which ideas do you think we should do first?" we have asked them. Even in *Promise of a Love Song*, we had three titles. We took a vote and we selected the one the audience voted for. It's good to take the audience's opinion. What is urgent for me would not be urgent for everyone else, and at the end I also want to be satisfied.

Bearing in mind the work you have done with groups from other cultures, what do you believe is the future of Latina/o theatre? Because, when we are qualitatively but one more voice in that multi-cultural and multi-ethnic quilt that represents U.S. society, won't our work cease to be specifically Latina/o?
RR: I have not resolved that because I do believe there is a value in qualifying things that bind us culturally. There is a value in giving a name to identify these things, not to limit it but to identify it. And I do believe that it is something that connects whatever we are talking about that is existential in nature and still has our imprint that connect us culturally. So, I won't disregard it completely... That is our corner and what we are bringing to the table. Luis Valdez said something courageous in that Encuentro [Latina/o Theatre Commons's convening in Boston in 2013] that "We are American theatre," and he is absolutely right. We have a show called *The Harlem Hellfighters on a Latin Beat*, and I would love to push the title and call it *American Theatre on a Latin Beat*. That's what we are! There has to be a generosity and understanding that we are all sharing the space. If I had any power, I would label white theatre as such because that's culturally specific, too. So, we are forcing them to diversify. And the reality is that we have all diversified one way or another. For us to be American theatre we have to bring down that barrier among dominant culture's understanding that it is not inclusive of South America.

ACL: As a way for us to affirm our identity, our self-value, very recently, we rejected being denominated as part of the American culture. We do theatre here in New York and in the United States, but we wanted to be identified as Latin American theatre, too. Surprisingly, we got great support from Latin American theatre makers. Now, our theatre *is* American theatre. It doesn't have to be about pigeons, the grandmother, and the beans. Several years ago we did a play titled *Game Over*, which was a musical take of the *Book of Job* from the Hebrew bible. And some people were asking, "Where are the rice and beans in that?" We can address any issue we want and we address it from our own perspective, without meddling with who we are, or pretending to be somebody else.

You have your own space here in the South Bronx Cultural Corridor, at Walton Avenue, since 2001. Now, did the stability that comes with the new space change you as a company? After all, you are one of the few Latina/o companies that effectively make a living out of your own work.

RR: It has changed the way we work even though sometimes I miss the life of a nomad that we had before. The bigger change came when we had to invite artists to share our space because we continued to travel. We picked up funding, too, and realized that that combination was going to sustain us in the long run. A few years passed before we were able to have a play running while we were rehearsing another. In the presenting program, we have featured hundreds of artists over the years, and we have also toured eleven countries and 37 states. That's a huge touring life! We tour less now and present more. So, whenever we can, we tour, but now we have the theatre and once you have a place, there are community expectations in place and you have to pay attention.

What about the company's structure?

RR: The company is structured in teams. We have transitioned from driving a company to leading a company. We have a managing team and we have an artistic team, which is ourselves and Desmar [Guevara] as musical director, with different responsibilities in decision making. A lot of decisions we make are connected to administrators' decisions, because that is going to affect how our dreams are going to become a reality. We have to pay attention to the needs of the space as another magnet that has to be kept in good shape. We have nine people full time, and four part time; this is just on the administrative side. As for the actors, we have a pool of actors; some of them get a

contract for a year. If we have several projects, some get a season contract, and if not they get a per-project based contract. We also have the educational program and sometimes the actors that are not performing do that work, too. The Education Program is going to change because we are considering it for both theaters and that is challenging.

I'm glad you touched the subject that we were waiting for. Please fill in the historical details on the merge with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater.

RR: We began to take very specific steps. Actually, it's interesting, because I think that is a good way to begin, by collaborating in productions. In 1996-97 we began to flirt with the idea that we could do this more formally. That initial artistic collaboration set the tone because for both Miriam and ourselves that connection had to be above everything else, that we have convergence in our artistic ambitions and values even if we did it differently. If our initiation issue was different, we shared similar goals. So, we never had the expectation of merging at that point; it came later. We started sharing our staff members, too, at the beginning, and it was evident that a permanent connection would guarantee some urgent succession for us and for the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater. The merge would bring incredible assets to our company via Miriam's presence, what she means, and her history. That's when our conversations began, and about five years ago we said we should shake hands on this. We started to co-manage certain programs and eventually we were sharing an attorney and he suggested that it didn't make any sense that we were doing our work separately, and then we began talking about merging. We submitted all the paper work in January 27, 2013. Everything has been approved and we are waiting for the process at the State level, because it is a State consideration. We are thinking that by the end of this year it will be sealed. After that we have to prove that we are actually married and living together. It's a whole big process because in reality it becomes a whole new corporation. And a new corporation has to undergo public scrutiny.

Let's talk about I Like It Like That, the musical based on life in the Barrio during the 1960s, featuring music by the legendary members of Fania Records, which will open next year. Was that a collaboration between the two theaters, or a Pregones production?

RR: It's more a theatrical, organizational collaboration. There is some level of creative collaboration in it, but we are just starting the process. Here is the thing: there is a history of collaborations from this group of people, headed

by David Maldonado, the producer of the musicals *La Lupe* and *Hector Lavoe*, and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater from before. We are respecting something that was there before; just because it was not with us doesn't mean that it was not valuable. Miriam had an extraordinary experience with them, and she has proven to be right. Working with them has been a real pleasure. So, we saw here an opportunity for the first time to have that experience that Miriam had and we don't have, until now, with the commercial outfit. We want to tap into that experience in this format. We want to be here and figure it out, and getting to know each other has been good. The beautiful part is that we have provided the structure for it to flourish and for us to be present and contributing to the shaping of the piece. It's something that is their baby and we are helping to raise it to see where it lands.³

Music has always been an integral part of Pregones productions. Do you believe that you do theatre with music (à la Brecht) or musical theatre?

ACL: Yes, most of the work that the ensemble generates is heavily anchored in music.

RR: Musical plays, that's what we call it. Occasionally, we have gotten into the music theatre conversation, because musical theatre has an implication. We fluctuate between calling it musical theatre or theatre with music, depending on the type of theatre we are doing. For the most part it is music created for a specific production. Occasionally, we also rely on canon music, for instance; if we have boleros in the production we use Myrta Silva, and so on.

JM: I see it as theatre with music. Music is a language that we support and bring to the stage alive, and it's essential to what we do. As a language, it can also be digitalized music that is being played live on the stage. For instance, the show that I am directing now, *The Marchers*, has two musicians. I'm going to treat this particular theatrical journey via digital music or digital samplings of sound. There is a sound of a paper falling, and then I've asked them to find the rhythm in there and to create a composition based on that. It's not like music played with a traditional instrument, but there is a composer there who is creating something for us. So, music is a language that we use most of the time generated by a musician that is using his expertise and who contributes to the staging of that production.⁴

RR: There is also something important, which is the amount of musicians that have come and played in our theatre. It is a different approach than when they play in a club, or a concert. Also, the amount of actors that we have trained to work with musicians, because it is not something that comes naturally to

actors. When you have to enter into that dynamic on the stage it is a really nice professional development and a skill for an artist to have. So that is the one thing that we appreciate.

A final question, what do you say to the next generation who one day will inevitably take your place? What's your advice?

RR: My advice would go to the parents, not the young persons. When a child tells you they want to be an artist, take it seriously. Don't discourage them; don't try to turn them into doctors and lawyers. Believe in their dreams, but don't wait until they happen. If they have a creative idea, figure out a way to do it among friends who have the resources to do certain things. There is no other way. I always say there is no plan B. Approach it as if that it is the only plan in your life. The beauty of it is that there are so many things connected to creativity that do not really have to do with being on the stage; there is the production side of it, there is scholarly work, and so on. There are so many things that a person could do combining creative thoughts and yearnings with other things. And make sure also that they can understand the field, the structure of the profession, because there is plenty of room.

JM: I wouldn't say today the same thing I would have said twenty years ago. Today I would say that there is a path that has already been crossed by many people who have contributed to that collective wisdom that informs what it means to do theatre rooted in Latina/o experience and voices. If there is something that you want to do, go back and see what people have done so you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Your art is going to be much better if you have knowledge of the things that have informed our society as a whole and of the contributions of Latinas/os to our society. So, you don't have to make the same mistakes. Secondly, don't do this if all you want to do is to become famous, or want people to know about you, because that is not what art does. That is something that this current society is instilling in us about recognition. No, art is essential for a reason; art makes society move forward. If you believe in that, that is what you have to do. Recognition and knowledge of people about you, that is an economic structure that is fooling you into thinking that art is a commodity. If you have these two things clear, the path of those that came before you and the lessons they learned so you can learn them and benefit from that, and not to do it because society is telling you that that's the way to become famous and rich. Now, we have people who have reached amazing notoriety and recognition via commercial theatre. I'm really happy for them. I think the more the merrier. And I think those voices

are much needed, so a wider spectrum of audiences will understand that there are different voices in the way to create art. These people have been working way before that, with even more comprehensive work, than the ones who are getting notoriety now. I'm happy for those folks who are toiling those battles out there to get recognition. Our communities are much wiser and have a long history of questions, battles, compromises, and the richness that comes out of the work that art provides.

AV: That's a very difficult question, because I don't feel in a position to be giving advice to people unless they ask me for it, but you should only be doing this if you are really convinced this is the way of life that you want for the rest of the time that you have. My younger daughter is one of the very few people that I know, really a handful of people who since they were very small knew what they wanted to be. Since she was very small she was saying that she wanted to work in the theatre and that she wanted to be an actor. For years I tried to dissuade her. I used to tell her, "You can do something else," until one day I asked her if this is what you really want to dedicate your life to. That means a lot. So, for those who are coming, if you are going to dedicate your life to this and you want to be honest with yourself and your community, go ahead and do it. You are going to enjoy it and probably you will be able to make a living out of doing something that is enjoyable, socially responsible, and artistic. That would be my advice.

Notes

¹ For further information on the group, or the historical merger with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, please visit Pregones's website at: <http://pregonesprtt.org/>

² *The Desire of the Astronaut*, written and directed by Alvan Colón-Lespier, with Desmar Guevara as musical director, had its world premiere in May 2016.

³ *I Like It Like That* started previews on September 7, 2016, at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater. Written by David Maldonado and Waddys Jáquez, and directed by the latter, the program lists Rosalba Rolón as dramaturg and Desmar Guevara as musical director.

⁴ *The Marchers*, inspired by previous Pregones' works –*The Wedding March* (1991), ¡Ay Jesús, Oh, Jesús! (2003), and *Peccatoribus* (2004) –, under the direction of Jorge B. Merced and music direction by Desmar Guevara, had its world premiere November 11-12, 2015.