

“My work is more necessary than ever”: An Interview With Rick Najera

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Actor, playwright, screenplay writer, director, television diversity advocate, stand-up comedian, and author of his own memoir, Rick Najera has been performing and creating for over thirty years. A classically trained actor, he was told in his youth that he was not “white” enough to take the Shakespeare roles he longed for. Later, in Hollywood, when he turned to film, he found the opposite to be true: he wasn’t “Mexican” enough for the gang member or drug lord roles casting directors envisioned when they saw his name. Najera learned early that the hyphen in his Mexican-American identity was a barrier to success in film and on stage. After hearing enough times that he was neither Mexican nor white enough to take on the projects he aspired to, he took matters into his own hands and turned to writing, creating his own performance space to question, undermine, and recreate the stereotypical images of Latinos that had kept him off stage in his early days.

Most recently, Najera has enjoyed several staged versions of his 2013 memoir, *Almost White*, including a production at Josefina López’ esteemed Boyle Heights theater, Casa 0101. The memoir was inspired by Najera’s near-death experience in spring of 2012 when he almost bled out from a head injury. Each chapter of the book starts with a part of his injury and recovery then looks back at pivotal moments in his life. The performance of his memoir features Najera as himself, stand-up comedy style, recounting stories from the book.

He currently organizes a series of talks on Latino issues at Oxnard College called “Latino Thought Makers,” featuring well-known Latinos such as Esai Morales, Dolores Huerta, Cheech Marin, and Edward James Olmos. He also wrote and acted in the third season of Hulu’s surprise success series on teenage pregnancy, *East Los High*, and in September 2016, Najera gave the first-ever cross-border TED talk (San Diego-Tijuana).

This interview was completed in March 2017. Here, Najera speaks about his work past and present, his thoughts on Latino representation in Hollywood, and his reaction to the questionable treatment of Latinos under Donald Trump's presidency.

Would you speak to us about the importance of Latino voice in mainstream media in the United States? And as you are doing so, could you address the importance of who is telling the stories?

The first question—how is it important for Latinos to be portrayed in the media?—I think it's paramount. People do not understand the propaganda nature of television and the media. Most great politicians or people for good or evil try to tell their story, get it out to the masses, and change history. The people who conquer write the history of the conquered. So the way Latinos are portrayed or seen affects every part of the national debate about Latinos. Latinos are seen as the problem and not the solution, and we are seen as outsiders, as foreigners. We are denied a seat at the table to create solutions, not problems. We get marginalized, sent to the side, seen as not American, seen as unable to speak English, seen as, basically, the problem. And that is because the images you see of Latinos have been so slanted against us, it's hard to break them. I think it's important we tell our *own* stories, so we get out of the role of the conquered, and out of the role of the “studied” and become the ones who do the studying—the ones who are scholars, the ones who are discussing who we are as a people, and the ones who determine our future in this country. Undeniably, Latinos will be the future of this country because of the birthrates and how most of our population is extremely young. We will inherit the United States, and we will decide a lot about its future.

The way Latinos have been portrayed affects how we are educated, what we get from the system, how we vote, all those things are how we are included. Either we're included or excluded; if we're excluded, we become a secondary culture within the U.S. If we are not telling our stories, then we will be on the short end of history.

Latinos writing their own scripts . . .

I think the reason that we need to tell our own stories is so that we are not victims. When you think about it, someone's describing what happened to you. If I wrote the definitive book on the female experience in America without the perspective of being a woman, I'd be denying my audience something. I should only say what I've truly observed and seen. I'm not telling

a story from the inside out, but rather, from the outside looking in. Most of the times in television and movies it's Latinos being told from the outside in. We need only look at the movie about Cesar Chavez that came out summer 2014. The two writers were white. Family members have told me stories of Cesar that would have been far more interesting than that movie. Accordingly, not many people saw it, and the box office was horrible. And then the public turns around and blames the Latinos—"Oh, they're not supporting each other—they don't want to see their own show"—, not realizing that we weren't involved in the making. Our stories should be told by us, because audiences sense falseness. They sense a story is artistically and truly profound when it's truthful. Really the best way to find the truth is to experience the story, know the story, and tell it from the inside out.

Tell me about your TEDx Talk you gave in September 2015, the first to be held across the San Diego/Tijuana border: (Interviewer's commentary: This TEDx talk took place Sept. 4, 2015, adjacent to Monumento 258, which marks the border separating California and Mexico. The talk was given in open air just beside the border. In fact, the spectators faced Najera and, behind him, they could see through the border wall to Mexico, where there were also spectators and speakers throughout the day. The U.S. audience was limited to only 100 spectators because of the Border Patrol's worry regarding crowd control.)

It was good. I spoke from the heart. It was not, however, without a threat of censorship—the Border Patrol tried to censor my talk. I was about to go on stage and they said they were going to shut this down; it was too dangerous. They were paranoid I was going to incite a riot. The Border Patrol threatened to stop the talk if I didn't curtail my comments. They told me there was no freedom of speech there. So I had a choice: be arrested or speak carefully. So, first of all, I spoke from the perspective of how I see the border after growing up on it. How it was different back then. The border has become a lot more militarized. Now people are talking about this isolationism in America and building up the border against Canada! You've got one group of people saying build a bigger border against Canada and another group of people saying build a bigger wall against Mexico. Eventually what are you going to do, get a special dome that covers the United States? I tried to explain how the war on the border really began, going back to the Mexican-American War. It was not a popular war. Even the president, Ulysses S. Grant, said it was an unjust war—and he even fought in it. It really was a land grab. As one person said, and I believe it was Polk, swallowing Mexico will be like

a poisonous pill to America. So today, we've taken all this land, signed the Treaty of Guadalupe, and this is where the border stands. This is the border that I stood on as I gave the TEDx Talk.

On a personal note, I remember so clearly being young and seeing two dolphins swim and jump over the border. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I thought to myself, how ironic, these mammals living free in the ocean for thousands of years are defying the border. I discussed that even if we make the border stronger and stronger, in the end, it will never work. The terms that we are using to speak about immigrants, such as "undocumented" or "illegals," are ugly terms we are using to speak about our neighbors. They say stronger fences make better neighbors. Actually, I think stronger fences only create a sense of enemies. Looking at people from Mexico as our enemy, when the truth is, they are our third-largest trading partner. They're bigger than France, England, and Germany combined. The stronger the border becomes, the better it works at actually *keeping people from going back to Mexico*. Once you cross over, you don't want to have to return again and not be able to get back. We have a broken immigration system that's making it impossible to move between countries. And now, we're using Mexico and this whole border issue as pawns in a political debate that leads to more animosity, more anger, and really, more hatred of people who are actually very family oriented, who have the same values that we have. So when we use terms like "anchor baby"... a lot of people don't know that many of families with so-called "anchor babies" are getting deported. Mexico had to actually start offering special courses to some of these deported kids to teach them just how to survive in Mexico—some of them do not even speak or write Spanish.

So in the end, this border is making our fears come true. The fantasy of the border, like in *Game of Thrones* with the White Walkers and all that stuff, is going to keep the "Brown Walkers" out. The brown, indigenous peoples who have been in America from the beginning. We are creating enemies instead of doing what the US does best, which is make Americans out of immigrants. It is what we should be doing. This is what I discussed.

Gender: You write a lot about gender stereotypes, and you often break them down. Can you explain why that is important?

You approach a stereotype from the outside. Stereotypes come from somewhere. I present those; the audience recognizes the stereotype. Then the complexity comes through. No one ever starts off to see a sad monologue. It works better to start with a light monologue and let it turn sad. One of my

characters, the Virgin of the Bronx, is a great example. There are miracles around us every day—why is it so bad that this Puerto Rican woman is young, single, and pregnant? Look at the miracles around you—it’s easier to blame her for not being able to control herself. You’re blaming this woman for doing something that you yourself could or would have done. This is the woman who tells the audience, “Don’t judge me! Look at me like a miracle!” There are various versions of this monologue, in one of which the character actually has her baby taken away from her and is left with a stethoscope trying to find the absent baby’s heartbeat. This is the darkest version of the monologue. I always skirt on that border of darkness and comedy. I believe that comedy and tragedy live in the same world. You want to have a tragic play? Start off with a play that’s supposed to have a happy ending and it doesn’t. Things don’t always happen as we expect. In fact, I didn’t expect Trump to become president, and look what happened. But when breaking down gender stereotypes, I start light and funny, and dig deeper as we go to turn the stereotypes over. (*Interviewer’s commentary: Najera’s 2004 Broadway play, Latinologues, presents some dozen monologues by seemingly stereotypical Latino characters—some examples are the Virgin of the Bronx; Alejandro, the hot Latino bus boy/waiter; and Buford Gomez, Border Patrol. Through each monologue, the audience discovers the characters’ complexities and hardships, and in the end, we see how Najera weaves each of their stories together, creating a tapestry of complex and sometimes heartbreaking life stories.*)

Let’s talk about Trump. How has the recent election affected your work?

Trump’s election has actually made my work more necessary. I thought maybe, after Obama, I wouldn’t need to fight for representation anymore. But it is clear that change has not happened yet. My fight is not just for Latinos. In a way, protecting Latinos eventually protects all of us . . . if we establish norms of how people should be treated, it means *all* of us should be treated fairly. Today it might be Latinos, but when Anglos are in the minority, it would protect them, too. Nothing can happen to one of us that couldn’t happen to any of us. A while back, I was at a rally in Sacramento. There were mariachis and the crowd was nearly all Latinos. I’m yelling, “¡Que viva la raza!” and then I said, “I love my race . . . and do you know who else loved their race? The Nazis!” It was a point that I made because of ethnic cleansing. I said we thought that was done after WWII . . . you may love your culture and your race, but you have to understand that we are all part of the *same* race. There is only a HUMAN RACE. We all are human beings. I’m concerned for me

and my children and for other peoples' children. We need guarantees to keep us civilized. I want things to be good for all of us.

With Trump, it's easy to blame undocumented workers for our problems. This isn't a new thing. It used to be that someone who looked native or Mexican could be arrested and sent back for being vagrant. This is happening now—people who have never lived in Mexico are being sent “back” and they don't even know how to survive there. At the same time, I personally have family who has died for this country in wars. My family has fought for America and still had horrible things done to them. We have gotten so used to the micro-aggressions, like Trump saying we are all so bad, people start to feel immune to it. And when people claim that Trump is just saying what the majority of people think, it shows us that he has successfully legitimized racism.

You talk a lot about the U.S./Mexico border. What do you think will happen now with the wall Donald Trump wants to build?

I think they will try to build it. I wonder if the wall is built to keep us in America? It seems that way, the way the politics are going now. The wall is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. I grew up in the shadow of the wall—I could see the “caution” signs that show Mexican families running across the border. Latinos were seen as almost vermin! Wait a minute—this is a land that was *ours*! How screwed up is it, and how strong is white privilege when you can say I'm going to take away your land, I'm going to kick you off it, and I'm going to want *you* to come back and work the land, then I'm not going to let you stay, and I'm not going to do any meaningful legislation to allow you to stay? What America's become now is the golden cage. You cross over here, and the laws are so harsh you won't cross back again. You're here, you are making a living, sending money back to your family in Mexico . . . then remittance becomes a huge part of Mexican economy allowing Mexicans to buy Ford, Maytag, etc. Yet we build walls and penalize people who do that—we don't treat our neighbors right. The 1%ers, they don't realize the contributions Mexicans make to the US economy.

I've become more necessary under the Trump administration. I happen to be in a good position. Latinos are the solution, not the problem. I need to take what I am doing and amplify it. My message is inclusive and good. I am what America does best—America makes Americans. That's exactly what they do. Three generations later it's my bilingual son. I look at the world now, and I say my comedy is more necessary than it has ever been.

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