

Bridging the Américas through Theatre: The Latinx Theatre Commons International Convening at Encuentro de las Américas

Trevor Boffone

The Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC)¹ convened at the Los Angeles Theatre Center's Encuentro de las Américas November 9-12, 2017. Established in 2012, the LTC “joins theatre artists, scholars, and students both virtually and in-person through an effective, volunteer-basis model that creates opportunities for theatre practitioners of all ages, races, and gender identities, while advancing the state of Latinx theatre in the United States” (Marrero). In partnership with HowlRound, the goals are “to transform the narrative of the American theatre, to amplify the visibility of Latina/o/x performance making, and to champion equity through advocacy, art making, convening, and scholarship” (“Latinx Theatre Commons”). In addition to the Los Angeles International Convening, the LTC's initiatives include the online journal *Café Onda*, El Fuego, Anti-Racist Training, in addition to having hosted in-person regional gatherings in Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, Seattle, and New York City. According to theatre scholars Maria Enriquez and Christopher Goodson, these initiatives “create a mobile, collaborative network that illuminates, challenges, and redefines American theatre through the presence of an active Latinx theatre collective.” Given these premises and that many scholars, such as Teresa Marrero, understand the LTC as “the most important movement of the new millennium.” It provides a national presence to the Latinx theatre movement, which largely had been without a cohesive organized structure since TENAZ (Teatro Nacional de Aztlán) shuttered in the early 1990s. In what follows, I propose to shed light on the Latinx Theatre Commons International Convening at Encuentro 2017 by asking: How does the LTC build community? How can building community lead to widespread

change in the American Theatre? And, is it possible to create and sustain a community-focused theatre movement across national borders?

“Encuentro” is the Spanish word for an encounter, a meeting, or a conference. Notably, the festival staged an encounter between Latinx theatre artists in the United States and artists from across the Américas. The values of the 2017 Encuentro were to promote the following: cross-cultural collaboration, exchange of methodologies, openness to risk, and inclusive dialogue. These values not only informed how the selection committee chose the participating productions, but also guided the various conversations that occurred throughout the convening weekend. In addition to productions by seven US-based Latinx theatre companies, artists from Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru were in residence at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC) for three weeks.² Productions in the 2017 Encuentro de las Américas included:

- *10 Millones*, Argos Teatro—Havana, Cuba
- *Broken Tailbone*, Nightswimming & Carmen Aguirre—Toronto, Canada
- *Conjunto Blues*, Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center—San Antonio, TX
- *Deferred Action*, Cara Mía Theatre Co.—Dallas, TX
- *Dementia*, Latino Theater Company—Los Angeles, CA
- *El Apagón/The Blackout*, Pregones—The Bronx, NY
- *Las Mariposas Saltan al Vacío*, Compañía Nacional de las Artes—Bogotá, Colombia
- *La Razón Blindada*, 24th Street Theatre—Los Angeles, CA
- *Latin Standards*, Marga Gomez—San Francisco, CA
- *Miss Julia*, Vueltas Bravas—Bogotá, Colombia
- *Quemar las Naves: El Viaje de Emma*, Organización Secreta Teatro—Mexico City, Mexico
- *Ropa Íntima*, Ébano Teatro—Lima, Peru
- *This is Culture Clash*, Culture Clash—Los Angeles, CA
- *Wet*, Alex Alphaarah—Los Angeles, CA

These productions ran in repertory in five spaces at the LATC for three weeks, with the middle weekend seeing the 2017 LTC International Convening bring over 150 artists and scholars to Los Angeles not only to see the work, but more importantly to discuss aesthetics and the possibilities of cross-cultural collaboration. During the Convening weekend, the LTC engaged participants in guided conversations about aesthetics both in the United States and abroad, themed panels and roundtables, opportunities for relationship building and networking, group meals, and post-show parties.

Encuentro 2017 marked the first meaningful effort by the LTC to build bridges between US-based Latinx and Latin American theatre artists. After national and regional convenings in Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, Seattle, and New York City, the moment was ripe to facilitate a dialogue between artists in the United States, Canada, and Latin America. While each convening has had a specific aim, whether to engage with the local community or to foster new play development, Encuentro 2017 aimed to find commonality between artists from disparate places in the Americas. During the days of TENAZ (El Teatro Nacional de Aztlán), there was a constant ebb and flow of cultural exchange between artists from across the Americas. Since 1985, the International Hispanic Theatre Festival in Miami has been an important site to stage Latin American work in the US, but such festivals have not fully foregrounded the intersections and points of exchange across national borders.

As playwright Georgina Escobar notes in “The Composition of Latinx Aesthetics,” the “compositional movement of the LTC [. . .] is not only taking form, but is encouraging other movements—modeled and inspired by the LTC.” Escobar explains how, while the commons-based approach may appear easy or a given, “It has taken work and plenty of careful listening for us to find moments of harmony [. . .] to form the strong tenants that may support the movement for years to come.” In many ways, Encuentro 2017 was an act of careful listening as artists from across different borders sought to find the “moments of harmony” that Escobar speaks of. To do this, many of the conversations at the convening were guided by the following questions: What has kept us apart for the last fifty years, and how do we come back together? How do we engender a more equitable exchange between Latinx and Latin American artists? What is our common ground across our borders? What are we doing differently? And, perhaps most importantly, what can we learn from each other?

The LTC uses a commons-based approach to build community and foster an ecosystem that supports tangible, widespread social change. While in Los Angeles, Encuentro 2017 shared their work, in addition to their approaches and methodologies, with other theatremakers. The goal was as simple as it was nuanced: to create a shared, multi-dimensional understanding of the field, from Argentina to Canada. In line with the LTC and HowlRound’s philosophical values, the convening weekend was rooted in the commons-based approach, or a philosophical method that “stands in contrast to the enclosure and privatization of knowledge, but more importantly it creates opportunities for new ways of conceptualizing possibilities through collaborations using

existing infrastructures” (Marrero). In this way, the LTC used the commons-based approach to extend its reach across the Americas by assembling participants to collectively experience and discuss the performances, aesthetics, and methodologies outside of the typical Eurocentric artistic lens often privileged in mainstream theatremaking in the United States. The festival, therefore, sought to find commonalities between Latinx and Latin American cultures, forge opportunities for future collaborations, and to devise a space in which artists from across the Americas could build bridges across artistic worlds that are not always given these spaces. To this end, Encuentro 2017 incited necessary conversations between United States-based theatre artists and their *familia* across border(s) —both physical and not— that have separated the various artistic communities. For decades, these boundaries, such as cultural misunderstanding, discriminatory and oppressive immigration laws, nationalistic mindsets, and the everlasting effects of colonialism, have separated the theatre community across the Americas.

Different from previous LTC convenings, the planning committee implemented small groups. This proved effective as the LTC’s commons-based methods fostered community and made a large event feel intimate. Conveners were divided into twelve groups of around twenty members; each group was led by two co-champions comprised of members of the LTC Steering Committee. For many, the small group environment allowed conveners to process and reflect on the shows and convening conversations in a more-welcoming environment. Small groups enabled conveners to build relationships. Groups were pre-assigned and intentionally grouped people together who did not necessarily know each other. Moreover, group members were geographically and linguistically diverse, from designers to scholars to playwrights and producers, and from early career artists to practitioners with over 40 years in the field. After meeting three times throughout the event, each small group gave a three-minute report-out during the final large group session. While the form of each group’s presentation was as diverse as the groups themselves, all responded to several guiding questions: What common ground have you found? What differences have you explored? What has surprised you? What still needs to be said? Where do we go from here?

Reflecting the individuality of the group itself, each presentation was aesthetically distinct, while still mirroring the larger questions posed by the convening itself. One group saw members wondering aimlessly around the stage to reflect the chaos and confusion of being at the event. Another group had members say what they bring to the conversation. Members then linked

arms, creating the visual representation of a bridge; as they leaned forward, they showed us what support looks like. Other groups took a more traditional approach. My group posed dramaturgical questions about the convening. Our questions included: What is a scholar? And, what does scholarship look like? How do we talk about problematic work in a constructive way, keeping in mind that what might be problematic in the United States may not be problematic in other countries? What are we doing to make this festival as accessible as possible? Overall, how do we measure success in the long term? Should there be a better balance between artistic and scholarly engagement? What is our responsibility as artists, if any?³

While it is still too early to know the lasting results of some of the main questions posed by the convening, one thing was apparent: there is power in critical mass. At LTC convenings, people can connect on a deeper level simply by having shared experiences in addition to shared interests. In Los Angeles, Latinx and Latin American theatre had room to live and breathe without having to justify its existence. This is how a movement grows. Creating a space for theatremakers of color to gather in the United States is a radical act. At Encuentro 2017, Latinx and Latin American theatre were *not* marginalized. They were the mainstream. There was a space for critical engagement and reflection. There was a space to discuss aesthetics and community engagement. There was a space to grow a transnational movement.

Notes

¹ For more on the Latinx Theatre Commons, see “The Latinx Theatre Commons: A Commons-based Approach Movement” by Teresa Marrero.

² For more on the selection process, see “How a Commons Becomes a Selection Committee” by Abigail Vega.

³ For more on the small group share-outs, see “Estamos Juntos/We are Together: Report-Outs from the Latinx Theatre Commons International Convening” by Olga Sanchez Saltveit. 2017, <http://howlround.com/How-a-Commons-Becomes-a%20Selection-Committee>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2017.

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