

**Festival Review. *Encuentro de las Américas: Embrace Our Voice.*
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Encuentro is a Spanish word that means an encounter, a coming together which offers an opportunity of looking at each other in person. This is the second Encuentro theater festival hosted by the Latino Theatre Company at the Los Angeles Latino Theatre Center, in the city of angels, California. José Luis Valenzuela, artistic director of both, master minded and procured funding for two of the collectively most important events in recent Latinx theater history: The 2014 and the 2017 Encuentro festivals. The first, in 2014, meant to gather Latinx theatremakers for the first time since 1992 the last TENAZ festival--Teatros Nacional de Aztlán, the ideological cohesive glue of the Chicano-Latino theater festivals since the 1970s. The X in Latinx honors those of our artists who do not identify with binary male-female gender identities. Ideologically we, as a community, have outgrown the a/o suffix, as in Latina/o.

The 2014 Encuentro featured 14 plays was held for one month at the LATC during October-November. The 2017 Encuentro expands the conversation to include 14 pieces from the Americas: 1 from Canada and 5 from Spanish-speaking Latin America, and 8 US-based Latin companies in an event that lasted 3 weeks and in a larger way embraced a Spanish-speaking component. Plays in both languages enjoyed super titles in the other language.

Both Encuentros counted with the collaboration of the Latinx Theater Commons, a nation-wide network of self-organized scholars and theater artists whose goal is the dissemination of works by Latinx playwrights, designers and directors in order to be woven into the overall fabric of contemporary American theatre. In each

event the Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC) organized a Convening, which is a gathering of theater practitioners, historians and scholars into a jam-packed 4 day weekend event. This offers the opportunity to see nearly all of the plays, as well as the possibility of engaging in meaningful conversations with the artists. As in the previous event, the LTC 2017 Convening held the opening and closing ceremonies, 3 small group break-out sessions, and two large panel sessions. One panel featured experts in the field and focused on emerging trends, moderated by yours truly, and the other, moderated by Chantal Rodríguez, centered on artists and their aesthetics. There were also 3 small group breakout sessions composed of 20 participants that mixed scholars, Latin American and Latinx artists in a more intimate conversational setting. See Olga Sanchez Salveit's "Estamos juntos/ We Are Together: Report Outs from the Latinx Theatre Commons International Convening" (<http://howlround.com/estamos-juntos-we-are-together-report-outs-from-the-latinx-theatre-commons-international-convening>).

According to Valenzuela's 2017 program welcome statement:

Through this Encuentro we will not only be able to better understand each other's narratives but also find the opportunities to build a joint narrative... we share our creativity and shine a light on both our differences and commonalities... moreover, we continue crafting a global, creative community.

Indeed, this festival offered a plethora of differences in aesthetic as well as thematic choices. On the one hand it appears that several of the Latinx pieces and the Cuban piece took to heart the Encuentro subtitle, Embrace Our Voice, presenting autobiographical material. A narratological approach is evident also, as characters intermingled the dramatic format with storytelling that breaks the 4th wall. Musical forms also took center stage not as background but as integral characters. Several of the Latin American works centered on aesthetic experimentation and adaptations, sometimes taking a huge risk by devising an interdisciplinary work with absolutely no spoken language.

I was able to see 10 of plays during the Convening weekend of November 8th to the 12th, 2017, thus will review those in depth while honoring the presence of the others. I saw: *10 Millones* (Cuba), *Quemar las naves, el viaje de Emma* (México), *Las mariposas saltan al vacío* (Colombia), *Dementia* (US), *La razón blindada* (US), *Miss Julia* (Colombia), *Ropa Íntima* (Peru), *Culture Clash, an American Odyssey* (US), *Deferred Action* (US) and *El apagón* (US). Shows I was unable to see were: *Conjunto Blues* (US), *Latin Standards* (US), *WET: A DACamentented Journey* (US) and *Broken Tailbone* (Canada).

The Cuban play *10 Millones* (10 Million) by Argos Teatro, Havana, Cuba, stands out for several reasons. It is an autobiographical testament by playwright, director and scenic designer Carlos Celdrán, of the deep divides evoked by the Cuban Revolution of 1959. A young man comes of age during the fervor of the first years of the Revolution, only to find at what cost to his family. Displaying a minimal set that served as a chalkboard, the story simultaneously unfolds narratologically and dramaturgically. The main characters, the young man, the father, the mother and another man, sometimes address each other, but most often direct themselves to the audience narrating what often seems to be an apology (in the classical sense of the word as a self-defense). The passing of time and changes in space are marked by the writing of simple phrases upon the chalkboard background. While this piece lacked an elaborate set, it often painted detailed mindscapes through the use of narrative descriptions thus allowing the viewer, much like a reader, to imagine the world these characters inhabit. Daniel Romero shows off his superb acting skill as the young man (Boy) was accentuated during an accidental detonation of the theater's fire alarm. He remained still and in character, alone on stage during the 10 minute ordeal, which, rightfully so, earned him an ovation from the audience. This is an emotional piece that resonated in my heart and that of others as the story of any and all who have had to separate from loved ones and the country of origin for political reasons. With strong performances by Maridelmis Marín, Caleb Casas and Waldo Franco, this piece works well for anyone

with an ounce of empathy for the plight of those who face difficult family choices, enjoys great a moving story embodied by heart-felt acting, and a minimal set design.



By contrast, the aesthetic choices made by the Mexico City's Organización Secreta Teatro, headed by writer-director Rocío Carrillo, could not be more distant. Their interdisciplinary, collectively created piece, *Quemar las naves, el viaje de Emma* (Burning the ships or in English we say burning the bridges, Emma's voyage) offered a lush visual feast orchestrated to the ambient sounds generated by the actors (voice coach Margie Bermejo), a live percussionist, and a magical musical score (by Betsy Pecanins) matched by an epic, larger than life scenic, visual and costume design (by Érika Gómez), with video design by Mayeli Torres and Chantal Vidal, with live vocals by Óscar Acevedo. Without a doubt the musical and sound score was cast on an equal footing as the actors. Georgina Rábago played the title role of Emma, displaying a tremendous vocal and emotional range. The legendary director of Teatro Campesino, Luis Valdéz, also recognized Rábago's talents by casting her as Alice in the Mexico City production of *Zoot Suit*. Did I mention that there was no dialogue in this piece? None except for a couple of sentences in the closing scene. Loosely based on the archetypal, mythical structure of the Greek classic, the *Odyssey*, this piece took a year of collective creation to portray a rite of passage that, according to Carrillo, is little mythologized: that of an adult woman once liberated (be they by widowhood or

divorce) from the societal restrictions of marriage. It is a story of loss, of beyond the imagination adventure, of sexual awakenings, and ultimately of the freedom to choose one's own path and steer one's own ship. While the play's master mind, Carrillo, asserts that this is theater and not dance, personally it took me back to the memorable performance by Pina Bausch in *Bluebeard's Castle* by Bella Bartok. It resonated with a similar iconoclastic daring on the part of the actors that is willing to deliver a bare all performance, authentic and true right down to the marrow. This is a memorable visual and sound feast that indelibly finds its way etched in our collective consciousness, to resurface now and again as if to say: look again, think again, there are more layers to unfold here. It is impossible to walk away from this piece without mentioning the stellar cast, who morphed into various roles: Georgina Rábago (Emma), Tabris Berges (Hermes, Cyclops, Calipso and voyager) Ernesto Lecuona (Capitan y Poseidon), Alejandro Joan Camarena (Cyclops, Orpheus and voyager), Beatriz Cabrera (portraying and amazingly powerful Circe, mermaid, Baubo, Nausica and voyager), Jonathan Ramos (Circe, Medusa, Penelope and voyager), Margarita Higuera (Mermaid, Baubo, Calipso, Penelope and voyager). This piece works well for audiences with a high tolerance for ambiguity and experimentation while lovers of dramatic realism will find this piece challenging.



Bogotá, Colombia's Compañía Nacional de las Artes presented another visual spectacle that captured the intimate story of a transsexual person, a heterosexual male and female, a stripper, a bisexual, and 2 angels of death—all institutionalized for various reasons, most prevalent of which is the 1990s AIDS epidemic. *Las mariposas saltan al vacío* (Butterflies Jump to the Abyss) written by award-winning José Milán and directed by Jorge Cao, who also did the scenic and lighting designs, offers a plethora of perspectives on love, betrayal, promiscuity, ignorance, joy and ultimately, the power of forgiveness. The cast in order of appearance is: André Torres, Nicolás Ibáñez, César Morales (who also designed the costumes), Nelson Celis, Alejandro Gómez, Martha Lazcano and Cristián Caína. While some found the material dated (as was the case in another 1990s AIDS-themed play), this play speaks of an international epidemic that placed the gay scene in front and center stage.



Along similar thematic line, the English language piece, *Dementia*, written by the Latino Theater Company actor, Evelina Fernández and directed by José Luis Valenzuela, presented an acting tour de force by Sal Lopez in the title role of Moe, a 1990s AIDS epidemic victim about to die. A functional scenic design by Sydnie Ponc

stages the centrality of Moe's deathbed around which old wounds, like oldie but favorite songs, bring both joy and pathos. Here too the musical flashbacks play a pivotal role, along with that of the characters. In this piece, Death comes in the guise of a 'torch singing drag queen' (Program Notes), played by the talented Ralph Cole Jr. (who boasts a long list of TV and film appearances). Other than the perfect timing that characterizes this ensemble of actors –the core of which has been working together for several decades—it is Fernandez's crisp and witty language that allows the audience to both laugh and lament. Her use of irony brilliantly distances the characters from their own personal tragedies, thus rescuing them and us from an otherwise melodramatic telenovela format. Showing off the talent in the family Esperanza América, daughter of Evelina Fernández, plays Moe's caring niece with the innocence of youth and her loyalty to family. Cast members include Lucy Rodríguez, Danny de la Paz, Geoffrey Rivas and Evelina Fernández in the role of Moe's ex-wife.



Presented by the 24th Street Theatre, Los Angeles, California, *La razón blindada* (*Armored Reason*), script, direction and sound design by the legendary Argentinean Arístides Vargas of Teatro Malayerba (Ecuador) brought us a farcical, absurdist

rendition of the classic Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote* (1605). De la Mancha (Jesús Castaños Chima) and Sancho (Tony Durán) do justice to this legendary duo in the midst of harrowing circumstances; they are political prisoners at Rawson Prison, Patagonia, Argentina, during the military dictatorship of the 1970s. On an autobiographical note, this play is based on the experiences of Chicho, Vargas' brother, who was himself imprisoned in said state facility. He and fellow political prisoners survived prison life through storytelling and acting, under the close surveillance of prison police, reminiscent of the French philosopher Michel Foucault's treatise on the psychologically oppressive power of the real or inferred panoptic gaze. De la Mancha and Sancho meet once a week, on Sundays. Theirs is the logic of a world gone mad, a frightening enclosure that wraps around the prisoners and audience alike, only to be liberated by the beauty of Vargas' poetic language and the mobility of three tables and two chairs on casters, always occupied by the two characters. With minimal scenic design and virtually no sound other than the actors' voices, this piece is accompanied by video projections of the plains that surround the prison both at the beginning and the end of the piece. The fact that the characters are in a prison requires reading the program notes as does the location of the action in Argentina. Having to read the supertitles in this language-dense piece might have become burdensome for monolinguals.



Miss Julia (Compañía Vueltas Bravas, Colombia), based on August Strindberg's 1888 realistic classic *Miss Julie*, and adapted by J. Ed. Araiza with direction by Lorenzo Montanini, turns naturalism on its head not only by tropicalizing the set to a rural Colombia's midsummer night's dream, but by deconstructing the very representational naturalism of the hypotext. This adaptation and translation into colloquial Colombian Spanish opens with a party-like ambiance welcoming of the audience into the theatrical space. The live percussive sounds of drums, together with offerings of shots of rum and regional Afro-Colombian rhythms prepares the space for the subsequent ritualistic destruction between Miss Julia (Tina Thurman) and Juan, her man servant, Jhon Alex Toro, much to the dismay of his woman, the household cook (played by Gina Jaimes). Class differences become evident and Miss Julia's caprice of having Juan no matter the cost. The moral decrepitude of the ruling classes is set against the masculine superiority of being male, no matter the class standing. Miss Julia, evidently a gringa, speaks Spanish with an affected American accent, wears a ballet tutu and exaggerates her every motion. The deconstructive gesture comes through a series of repetitive choreographed and dissonant movements that, like a broken record, repeat, scratched and tearing into

the psychological fiber of the characters. A well-executed play, I found this piece emotionally cold in its perfection. Perhaps that was the point.



Another non-original play, *Ropa Íntima* by Ébano Teatro, Lima, Perú, is based on the well-known play, *Intimate Apparel* (2005) penned by the award-winning African American playwright, Lynn Nottage and translated into Spanish by Marianella Pantoja with direction by Miguel Pastor. The time is early 1900 and a young and innocent African American seamstress, Esther, played by the company's executive producer Alicia Olivares, arrives in New York City with a head full of dreams. She sews exquisite garments for wealthy clientele in order to save to buy her own beauty parlor. This story predictably unfolds amidst a love triangle that dichotomizes the saintly Esther against her best friend, the prostitute bar maid, and casts the handsome and cunning Caribbean man, George Armstrong, as the jilting gigolo. The company, Ébano Teatro is just two years old and says it is the only theater company in Perú dedicated to addressing its Afro Peruvian population. Selecting a known play by an Afro American playwright may have been an initial smart move for this Festival, yet some of us were left hungry to see an original work that is more closely aligned with Perú's own Afro-descendent communities.



Culture Clash, an American Odyssey, written by Culture Clash, Los Angeles, California and directed by Robert Beltrán, this group is by now a legendary and iconoclastic Chicano cultural presence that has its origins in the 1980s San Francisco Bay Area. While the original members are José Antonio Burciaga, Marga Gómez, Monica Palacios, Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas, and Herbert Siguenza, the company has done its main body of work with the 3 latter. Marga Gómez and Monica Palacios continue their stand-up comedy work independently. Gómez's *Latin Standards* is part of the Encuentro offerings while Palacios' *Browner, Queerer, Louder and Prouder* was featured in The Vault and included in the Encuentro program under 'unconventional theatre in un conventional spaces.' Culture Clash's show recycled segments from older comedic sketches. As is characteristic of this trio's work, nothing is sacred and even a satirized version of program director José Luis Valenzuela found its way onstage. To many, this show was a long, private, inside joke, one to which a select few had access. The rest of us simply enjoyed the talented comedians' sense of political and social satire and allowed ourselves to a wake-up slap in the face through some of its poignant and current commentaries on the post-Trump election US political climate, particularly related to immigration. Audiences with an appreciation for witty political satire and over the top humor will enjoy works by Culture Clash.



Dallas, Texas' Cara Mía Theatre Company came to the table with its hard-hitting and highly polished political piece, *Deferred Action*, the second part of a trilogy on immigration. Co-written by the company's artistic director, David Lozano (who also directed) and The Dallas Theatre Center's Lee Trull, this play tells the story of Javi, an undocumented deferred action dreamer from El Salvador. This play works like a finely tuned bird's eye view of the political ins and outs between the Democratic and Republican parties in 2016, right before the presidential election that ousted the incumbent political party from office. The cast included of Ivan Jasso as Javi, Maya Malan-Gonzalez as his political activist girlfriend, Frida Espinoza Müller as the grandmother, Rodney Garza as Javi's immigration attorney, Sonny Franks as the larger than life born-again Christian Republican politician Dale Jenkins, Liz Magallanes and David Saldivar as the community activists, Benjamin Lutz in various roles and Lisa Suarez as the Democratic presidential hopeful. With scenic design by renowned Tim Mackabee and lighting by Clifton Taylor, this piece offers a larger than life visual field. Created by consulting North Texas DREAMers and Salvadorians immigrants in the

area, *Deferred Action* stands out as a unique union of ethnographic research and brilliant dramaturgical choices. While some may object to the ending, this play dishes out hard-hitting political realism in a way that urges the audience to think.



From the Bronx, New York, the now legendary Puerto Rican company Pregones presented *El apagón* (The Blackout) rests on the historically accurate city-wide blackout of 1965. Based on a short story by José Luis González and adapted to the stage by Alvan Colón-Lespier, Jorge B. Merced, and Rosalba Rolón, who also directed, it features the company's musical ensemble. This piece exemplifies what Pregones does best: they put the popular rhythms of Puerto Rican music to harmonize with stellar acting and great story-telling, provoking the audience to feel like we are attending a huge 1950s/60s block party even while seated in a theatrical setting. The storyline is simple: a working class Boricua man wants to get home in time for the birth of his child, and the obstacle is the city-wide blackout, which leaves him stuck underground in the subway in Brooklyn, while trying to make his way all the up to El Barrio in East Harlem. In the dark. This might simple enough yet what gives this performance it unique pizzazz is the superb acting by Jorge B. Merced and Flaco Navaja (one average

height and the other very tall) who seamlessly switch back and forth playing the married man and his slightly mentally slow side hick. Using a narrative style much like that of *10 millones*, this story unfolds in the spectator's imagination through oral storytelling. This play has been called the quintessential Boricua play, maybe this could be adjusted to say that this piece exemplifies the prototypical Caribbean attitude of 'al mal tiempo, buena cara' (roughly, make the best of a bad situation). While I thoroughly enjoyed this piece, I could not help but hail back to Pregones's Encuentro 2014 fabulous musical adaptation of Magdalena Gómez's *Dancing in my Cockroach Killers* which I found more complex and fulfilling. Most of the house might have disagreed with me, since *El apagón* earned an immediate standing ovation. The play was followed by an emotional appeal to fund-raise for Puerto Rico's people struck by the violent category 4 Hurricane María on September 20, 2017. President Trump's government has been the object of wide criticism for failing to respond to this crisis, which left thousands of Puerto Ricans homeless, without potable water and electricity.



I was unable to see *Conjunto Blues* (US), *Latin Standards* (US), *WET: A DACamentented Journey* (US) and *Broken Tailbone* (Canada), all part of the 2017 Encuentro but would like to include them nevertheless. Furthermore, the Festival

embraced the overall Los Angeles Latinx performance community and included a guide to other showings around town during the 3 week festival extension. The information on these is taken from the festival program notes.

Conjunto Blues by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, Texas (US) follows the story of El Músico who takes the audience not only through a journey of self-reflection, but the expression of a cultural identity. On an autobiographical note by the playwright Nicolás R. Valdéz who also played the title role, it is his story of growing up in the Conjunto music scene. Directed by the talented Rubén C. González, with a supporting role played by Luis Gonzalez, it takes place in a cantina in San Antonio, TX and in a memory.



Latin Standards is a one woman piece by the inimitable stand-up comic and actor Marga Gómez from San Francisco, California. Gómez honors her Cuban father, Willy Chevalier, comedian, producer, songwriter and prominent figure in the golden era of New York's Latino variety shows. It is a meditation on perseverance and addiction to creativity 'passed down from immigrant Father to lesbian daughter'.



WET: A DACamentented Journey is a one-man piece written and performed by Alex Alphaaraoh, directed by Kevin Comartin tells the autobiographical tale of Alphaaraoh, a thirty something year-old DREAMer who has lived his whole life in the United States undocumented. Echoing *Deferred Action*, the piece's emotional desperation is anchored on the aftermath of the 42nd presidential election and his anti-immigrant policies. The story confronts us with the tragic possibilities of his deportation and what may happen to his US born 15 year old daughter.



In another autobiographical move, Chilean-Canadian Carmen Aguirre (Nightswimming Company, Toronto, Canada) does a one-woman performance entitled *Broken Tailbone* leading the audience in a Latin American salsa dance lesson in a Canadian night club to highlight her funny and poignant experiences in the underground world of being Latina in Canada. Yes, the audience is standing up and dancing the entire show. Written and performed by Aguirre, directed by Brian Quirt with music by DJ Don Pedro, word has it that this piece is a blast with a sharp edge.



For those fortunate enough to have spent the entire 3-week extension of the 2017 Encuentro, the program listed the following pieces also showing around town at downtown Los Angeles venues: *Morir en Vida* a dance piece choreographed and performed by Ela Andrete at The Vault, *Blood Match* by Oliver Mayer at the Conference Room, *Las García*, written and performed by Gabriela Ortega at the Green Room, *Ka Ata Killa* by Milagros Lizárraga at The Tunnel, *Quetzal y Colibrí* written and performed by Alex Alpharaoh and Elisa Noemi at The Vault, *Revoluciones* by Foro Shakespeare at the Conference Room, *Browner, Queerer, Louder and Prouder* written and performed by Monica Palacios at The Vault, *Manos Arriba* by Mercedes Floreslas at The Conference Room, *Aprender a Caer* by Mick Garica and Cris-Jan Garcia at The Green Room, *Samudra* a dance piece choreographed by Beatriz Eugenia

Vásquez at The Tunnel, *Queen of Califas* by Israel López and the Southland Company at the Green Room, and lastly *Jardín* by Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme at The Tunnel.

Like the previous one, the 2017 Encuentro could only be pulled off by the vision of José Luis Valenzuela, the Los Angeles Theater Center and the resources available to such a reputable name and institution. Looking towards the future, Valenzuela plans to have the 3rd Encuentro in 2020 with an entirely international, as in global, line-up. The Latinx Theatre Commons serves as a good partner not for producing the festival, but for producing the Convening which enriches the festival by bringing together artists and scholars, thus ensuring that this event is securely inscribed into the historical record of American theater history.

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