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**Palabras del Cielo:**  
**An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre**  
**for Young Audiences**

Compiled by  
**JOSÉ CASAS**

Edited with  
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I would like to dedicate this project  
to Leslie Lincoln,  
whose faith in me and my work  
has been a wonderful blessing  
which I will always be grateful for.  
—José Casas

I would like to dedicate this project  
to Ricardo,  
who supports me in everything I do.  
—Christina Marín

# Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences

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# Foreword

This collection of plays and scholarly articles is a long-awaited and vital contribution to the history and evolution of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences in the United States. The reader will discover plays making important statements about what it means to be a Latina or Latino in this country: the joys and frustrations of childhood coupled with the added challenge *and opportunity* of being a member of the largest (misnamed) minority in the United States. Always, the plays center on *familia*, with one or more children at the center of the story, negotiating their place in a history that has been elided or denied altogether. Further, like the majority of Latina/o plays written for adult audiences, identity is a central issue: who are we? How and where do we belong? These questions are asked by all children, of course, but to a member of a Latina/o family and community these questions seem even more urgent.

The inclusion of scholarly essays further situates the plays and playwrights represented here as vital contributors to the growing movement of TYA Latina/o plays. I know of very few anthologies of plays that include scholarly discussions of the works in the same volume; thus the reader is treated to in-depth analyses of the plays and their creators—an added bonus. It is also important to note that these plays have all been produced in a variety of venues ranging from professional companies to community-based teatros as well as schools and universities across the country.

The scholarly essays and the plays themselves reveal that Latina/os are not one monolithic group. We come in all shapes and sizes; representing the full spectrum of the “color wheel.” The countries of origin differ, extending from within the U.S. to the tip of South America and all points in between. Further, the languages spoken in the plays may differ according to the character’s (and the playwright’s) national origin; for example, the Spanish spoken in El Salvador has linguistic patterns that you do not hear in Mexico City and so forth. English is the predominant language in these plays; an understandable nod to non-Latina/o producers since English-language theatre companies cannot afford to produce plays entirely in Spanish for their non-Spanish-speaking audiences. Several of the plays in this collection have been commissioned by non-Latino companies, to the producers’ credit, as they wisely attempt to build their future audience-bases.

I write as a theatre historian whose research and creative activity has focused on the theatre and performance of Chicana/os as well as other Latina/o theatre artists in this country. Therefore, I think it is important to position these plays in their historical context. Neither the plays nor playwrights represented in this volume were born in a vacuum; Spanish-language theatre and its audiences have been



a part of the social fabric of this country wherever there were Spanish-speaking audiences, eager to see themselves, their myths, frustrations and dreams on a public platform. Those performance venues have varied from sacred spaces like churches to the farmworker fields and urban streets as well as *carpas* (tents) and professional theatres; from the temple to the arena, as it were.

As the title indicates, Prof. Nicolás Kanellos' landmark study, *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940* (University of Texas, 1990) chronicles Spanish-language theatre in this country. He scoured archives across the country and Spain to reveal Spanish-language theatre activity in the major centers of Latina/o population from California to Florida; New York to Texas. What is of interest to the reader of this volume, I believe, is the fact that many of the companies producing Spanish-language plays and pageants were family affairs such as the Compañía Hernández-Villalongín. This was a very successful Mexican troupe that settled in San Antonio, Texas, to escape the horrors of the Mexican Revolution in the early part of the 20th century. As a family "business," of course there were children in the companies and sometimes the little ones also participated in the productions. More importantly, many of the more modest venues, such as the *carpas*, were popular with working-class families and human nature tells us that there were always children in the audience. Likewise, plays and pageants that were produced in the barrio churches always included children onstage—a sure way to get the parents into the pews. These early 20th century players and performances were the precursors to contemporary Latina/o theatre companies that began to emerge in the 1960s and which were, in effect, also family affairs.

A prominent contemporary example of what I am saying is the Teatro Campesino (Farmworker's Theatre), which was founded in 1965 by Luis Valdez and a group of striking farmworkers fighting beside Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta for a union that would provide them with better working and living conditions. As the years passed, members of the Teatro married and had children, who were also de-facto members of the Teatro, performing in the annual Christmas plays and pageants, alongside other children from the rural community of San Juan Bautista, Calif. In other words, children were and are prominent members of the Teatro Campesino. Today, Kinán Valdez, son of Luis and Lupe Valdez, is the artistic director of the Teatro Campesino. He and his two other brothers began participating in the Teatro's performances at an early age, following in the footsteps of the early Spanish-language theatre companies of previous generations. But this is only one example of the several Latino theatre companies across the country that are now headed by the second generation. And, as in the past century, there has been a crossover between companies, with the son or daughter from one troupe basically marrying-into another Teatro or forming their own company.

The reader of the plays and the commentaries in this volume should not forget that today's theatre workers know and value the importance of the next generation and have always encouraged the youngsters to create their artistic, musical and theatrical expressions. Accordingly, as the plays in this collection fittingly demonstrate, *familia* has always come first, and the natural struggles, hopes and dreams that these working-class families experience bring them closer to the lived experiences of all Americans. It is the dream of all of the artists and scholars in this collection that others will be inspired to pick up the mantel and continue to produce plays that speak to the universality of the Latina/o experience in this country and throughout the Americas.

—Jorge Huerta

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## Introduction

### Latina/o TYA in the 21st Century, Making the Invisible Visible

“Being Latino means being from everywhere, and that is exactly what America is supposed to be about.”

—Raquel Cepeda, *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina*

As an artist and educator of color, I have constantly struggled with the issues of race, identity and my positionality within the field of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). Over the past decade, I have come to embrace this field, and I am invested in seeing it evolve. I not only believe that TYA is legitimate theatre, I feel it is, by far, the most important theatre, the type of theatre that bears with it a responsibility of the utmost importance. TYA is imagination painted with the colors of the crayon box. It embraces our youth with a comforting hug and reminds adults of the way it used to be. Its honesty breaks our collective hearts, and its sincerity gives us hope. It places our dreams on a pedestal all the while preaching the message of love, and, as I look over the landscape of TYA, I often feel as if I am an uninvited guest. It is a feeling shared by many of my colleagues in the field. Where do we, as artists, theatre administrators and educators of color “fit in,” and how do we function in an environment that has, historically, catered to the white dominant culture in America? Do we, as a marginalized group in TYA, enact the radical change necessary in order have our intentions realized or do we participate in a way that reinforces the status quo?

As a member of this community, of which I strive to be a part, I am a study in contradictions, yearning to have his voice heard while holding his tongue for fear of being ostracized or, even worse, not acknowledged. The answers to those questions are complex as much as they are troubling. How do others see me when I struggle to see myself?

The inspiration for this anthology is to help facilitate dialogue. It is about gathering people in the same room. It is about addressing a flawed system and inspiring change towards a more vibrant collective in the field of TYA. It is meant to serve not only as a collection of plays and book chapters but as a resource. In particular, a resource that explores Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences (LYTA) in a way that is very much needed. This book is a reaction to what I see in front of me. This research is intended for anyone interested in wanting to gain a better understanding of LYTA. This research is, most importantly, aimed at those individuals who hold leadership roles in theatre departments in the United States, including those with formal TYA and/or theatre education programs; the idea being to promote the study of LYTA, but also integrate it into their programs of study.

The collected plays in this anthology are categorized by gender of the playwright, geographic regions, ethnicities, themes and targeted age groups. The purpose is to counteract the notion that Latina/os in the United States exist as one single monolithic group and that there are similarities, but there are also differences that give each community (and play) its own uniqueness. This collection was also assembled to reflect the growth of the Latina/o communities in the United States and the acknowledgment that the stories of these communities need to be addressed.

This project is meant to celebrate the playwrights who bring stories of the Latina/o to the stage. It is meant to give these talented scribes a forum for their work to be shared with a larger audience. The hope is that people from all facets of the field, especially professional TYA theatres, promote these plays, produce these plays and actively begin weaving these and future stories into the fabric that is TYA.

Ultimately, this anthology is a call to action that is meant to remind people that we do exist and are no longer comfortable with being relegated to the background that, essentially, has made people of color invisible. It is about building relationships, establishing partnerships, respecting differences, building community, creating art and committing to scholarship that reflects the world in which we live.

—José Casas

# **Scholarship**

## **Overview**

**By Christina Marín**

## Overview

In the opening chapter, “The Historical Developments and Emergence of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences: Towards a Mestizaje Theatre,” Dr. Cecilia J. Aragón shares her personal journey and relationship to some of the origins of Latino Theatre for Young Audiences (LYA). Tied to the Indo-Hispanic rituals and indigenous ceremonies, she constructs a bicultural/hybrid notion of “performing mestizaje childhood” and examines the representation of children as both spectators and performers from the Mesoamerican and pre-Columbian periods, through the Spanish Colonial period, and through the Chicano Movement to the present. Steeped in research, this chapter offers readers a little known historical context to ground the rest of the anthology.

In chapter 2, “The Interplay of Memory and History in Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences,” Dr. Lorenzo García explores official history and personal memory in the portrayal of the lives of the young Latina/o protagonists “maneuvering within and against cultural norms, pejorative characterizations, dominant ideologies and social hierarchies.” Working against the many challenges facing Latina/o youth in contemporary society, these characters struggle against domination in an effort to balance the “dividing forces of memory and history which tug and push from opposite directions.”

In “Latina/o Youth and Journeys of Transformation: Exile, Migration, and Home,” chapter 3, Dr. Jimmy Noriega illustrates how several of the plays in this anthology “demonstrate the different strategies youth use to confront the challenges, frictions and disappointments of living as a marginalized “other” within the U.S. borders.” Exploring the important roles played by culture, family, history, and home, he reveals how these plays impact identity formation in Latina/o youth and contribute to the formation of their hopes and dreams.

In chapter 4, “Reclamando Nuestros Derechos: Examining the Intersection Between Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences and Human Rights,” I offer pedagogical connections for artists and educators to explore when reading these and other plays against the backdrop of three documents developed by the United Nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training offer a framework for teachers and students to unpack historical and contemporary human rights conflicts and violations in a global context.

Through chapter 5, “The ‘Diversity’ Question: Conversations on the Topic of Inclusivity in Theatre for Young Audiences,” Professor José Casas seeks to create a space for discussing the notions of diversity and inclusivity in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA), both in higher education and professional

theatre. It is a collection of interviews/discussions where participants from both areas talk about this issue on a national level as well as share their personal experiences in the field. Although, much of the scholarship speaks to and explores the plays within this anthology, this chapter is meant to help contextualize the world in which these plays exist, questioning their place in the landscape that is TYA in the United States today.

The closing chapter, “They Don’t Look Like Me Up There: A Look at Representation of Marginalized Populations in TYA in the United States,” is a multiperspective cultural analysis of how identity construction is impacted by representation in culture. Kelly Fey, associate director of education at the Boch Center in Boston, reveals how the lack of primary representation of certain societal groups in TYA companies in the United States perpetuates marginalization and negative identity construction in young people. She offers the TYA Inclusivity Manifesto, based in part on the practices outlined in The Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s Audience Development Manifesto, as a call to action for TYA companies to increase the positive representation of marginalized groups, and incorporate values of inclusivity and diversity in their artistic and operational practices.