



LATINX ACTOR TRAINING

Edited by Cynthia Santos DeCure
and Micha Espinosa

“Those of us now engaged as teaching artists and co-learners have the joyful responsibility to begin reimagining the future of actor training in this country, which includes centering the lived experiences and stories of our students who identify as members of historically marginalized communities. *Latinx Actor Training* is an invaluable resource for all theatre practitioners who seek to bring their full, authentic selves to their creative work. This book inspires a genuine sense of hope that, in art as in politics, intentionally making space for diverse voices to lead the conversation will result in greater liberation for *all of us*.”

Walton Wilson, *Professor in the Practice,*
Acting Program David Geffen School of Drama at Yale

“I wish I’d had a resource like this to ground me and guide me. If we want a robust field full of voces artísticas in all their multifangled complexity, essays like these will help pave the way.”

Quiara Alegría Hudes, *Pulitzer Prize-winning*
playwright and writer of In the Heights



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LATINX ACTOR TRAINING

Latinx Actor Training presents essays and pioneering research from leading Latinx practitioners and scholars in the United States to examine the history and future of Latino/a/x/e actor training practices and approaches.

Born out of the urgent need to address the inequities in academia and the industry as Latinx representation on stage and screen remains disproportionately low despite population growth; this book seeks to reimagine and restructure the practice of actor training by inviting deep investigation into heritage and identity practices. *Latinx Actor Training* features contributions covering current and historical acting methodologies, principles, and training, explorations of linguistic identity, casting considerations, and culturally inclusive practices that aim to empower a new generation of Latinx actors and to assist the educators who are entrusted with their training.

This book is dedicated to creating career success and championing positive narratives to combat pervasive and damaging stereotypes. *Latinx Actor Training* offers culturally inclusive pedagogies that will be invaluable for students, practitioners, and scholars interested in the intersections of Latinx *herencia* (heritage), identity, and actor training.

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*Edited by Cynthia Santos DeCure
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(Nefesh Cordero Pino in a scene from *BODAS DE SANGRE/BLOOD WEDDING* adapted by Tatiana Pandiani and Cynthia Santos DeCure at David Geffen School of Drama at Yale, with costume design by Travis Chimick.)

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We thank our ancestors.

During the course of writing this book we experienced the loss of our parents and family members.

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Lastly, thank you to our students who are paving the way.

FOREWORD

This book could not have been written during the 1960s, when Chicano and Latino theatre movements were developing across the country. However, as Professor Chantal Rodriguez points out in Chapter 1, those movements did not emerge in a vacuum; theatrical performances have been a part of Spanish-speaking and Indigenous cultures of *las Americas* for centuries. However, after the arrival of the Spanish colonizers, those theatricals were performed in Spanish and did not attract the attention of English language theatre producers or scholars until the late 1960s. As the first Chicano to earn a doctorate in Dramatic Art in 1974, my path was clear: to teach at a research university, develop courses in Chicano theatre, and direct plays, while most importantly documenting the evolution of Chicano theatre *as it was happening*. Initially, my focus was on Chicano theatre but as this volume reveals, the movement became multicultural and Pan-American. Today, the popular term is Latinx, the new iteration of these multiple identifiers.

One of the joys of reading the chapters in this book is the way in which the authors all speak of *Familia*, a family of scholars and artists who have made a life in the theatre, sometimes against all odds. Few of the contributors to this collection were already performing, directing, or producing Latinx theatre when I started my academic career in 1970. Indeed, some of the contributors were not yet born. Other contributors have trajectories that began in the 1970s and their narratives are distinct, as pioneers who paved the way for the current generation. Although I do not know some of the more recent contributors, their essays make me want to learn more about each and every one of them. So prepare yourself for honesty, sincerity and passion above all, passion with a purpose.

This volume represents the incredible intellectual and artistic growth in the field of Latinx theatre performance and training. Most of us have heard the following exclamation from a non-Latinx: “You Latins are *SO* passionate!” Although

this sounds very stereotypical, it usually comes from a well-meaning person, sometimes as a microaggression. So what did the contributors in this volume do? Through a variety of actions, they turned and continue to turn their passions into a purpose with every character they interpret or create on the stage or the page. Another through line is the process of collaboration that infuses so many of these essays. Many of these contributors know one another; some met when they began their journeys and the idea of training became more than a dream, as possibilities opened up from coast to coast and on the island of Puerto Rico.

In the mid-1970s, when I first joined the American Educational Theatre Association, the predecessor to what became the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), I was the only Chicano at the annual conferences. As the name indicates, ATHE is an international organization for theatre artists, educators, and scholars to share their work through papers, workshops, publications, etc. I also started attending the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conferences in the same period. Again, I was the only Chicano, speaking for theatre that came from Chicanas and Chicanos. As the lone Chicano at these conferences, I was often asked to speak for “my people,” as if we were a monolithic group. Each essay relates, quite vividly, some of the distinctions between Latinxs. But be aware that much has changed since the early period.

As the field of Latinx theatre continued to grow and evolve, the idea of professionalism was taking hold. The mainstream (read: white, male) artistic directors’ indifference to plays by or about the Latinxs began to change when Joseph Papp of the New York Shakespeare Festival produced Miguel Piñero’s *Short Eyes* on Broadway in 1974 and the Center Theatre Group and Teatro Campesino co-produced Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* in Los Angeles and New York City in 1978–1979.¹ Motivated by the critical and financial success of these plays and *Zoot Suit*’s record-breaking run in Los Angeles, some non-profit mainstream theatre companies began to show an interest in what Latinos were writing and began to solicit their plays. Some of us decided to “play in the Big House.” This practice can be termed either “mainstreaming” or “infiltrating,” depending upon one’s point of view as well as the results of such alliances. The cultural map was expanding to include plays about the Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban communities of the country, slowly exposing non-Latino audiences to these little-known populations, some of whom could trace their “American” ancestry back centuries.

I call the 1980s the beginning of the professional stage of Latinx theatre. Instrumental to that development, the Ford Foundation began to bolster what was then being called Hispanic-American theatre in the United States and Puerto Rico. One of the most important initiatives of this effort was a fully funded “National Hispanic Theater Conference” in San Antonio, Texas, in 1986. That meeting brought together theatre artists, directors, producers, and funders to discuss the state of “Hispanic-American” theatre. One hundred thirty representatives of the leading and emerging theatre groups from across the country and Puerto Rico attended the San Antonio meeting. There were keynote speakers, panels,

workshops, performances, and other activities that ushered in the next phase of Latinx theatre in this country. Actor training was among the major topics.

Prior to the 1986 conference in San Antonio, the Chicano *teatros* were performing mainly to their respective communities from California to the mid-west, while the Puerto Rican and Cuban groups in the Northeast and South Florida also played to their particular audiences. I observed that there was no love lost between the conservative Cubans and the more progressive Chicanos and “Nuyoricans” (Puerto Ricans living in the boroughs of New York), who shared leftist politics. But this two-day gathering demonstrated how much the participants had in common. Alliances were formed, connections were made, and everybody returned to their respective communities and companies with renewed enthusiasm. This was a major step in bringing the Four Corners (including the “southeast corner” of Puerto Rico) together, reviving an important Indigenous relationship with “*La Tierra, Nuestra Madre*” (Mother Earth).

When the Ford Foundation published a report on the state of Hispanic theatre in the mainland and Puerto Rico in 1988, it was clear that there were a number of Latinx theatre companies that were artistically sound but financially in trouble.² In response, the Theatre Program of the Ford Foundation began to offer grants to *teatros* to enhance their fiscal management. The Director of the Theatre Program asked if I would moderate two meetings of the 12 leading companies and I gladly agreed. The first meeting was held in San Juan Bautista, California, December 5–7, 1986, and the second meeting was held in San Juan Puerto Rico, June 12–17, 1987. The main topic of discussion would center on “Artistic Direction in Hispanic–American Theatre.” These historic meetings were attended by “The Founders,” leaders in the field, individuals who had begun their trajectories in the 1960s.³ They will all be mentioned in this book.

Alongside the noble efforts aimed at Hispanic theaters, the Ford Foundation also began to pump funds into mainstream theaters for their “Hispanic Projects.” Theaters across the country vied for these dollars as well as for major funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Fund, among others. As you read these chapters, you will note that several people in this book participated in many of the projects across the country. These projects became important development tools for Latino playwrights and theatre artists across the country. As a participant in many of these initiatives, as a director or an observer, I noted that as the years passed, the quality of acting was improving. Two of the most important projects were INTAR’s Hispanic Playwright-in-Residence Laboratory, run by the late Maria Irene Fornés, and the South Coast Repertory’s “Hispanic Playwright’s Project.”⁴

Language was a major concern for *teatros* across the country. Companies like *Repertorio Español* and *Thalia* in Manhattan, and Miami’s *Teatro Avante* were producing their works in Spanish only, while INTAR (International Artists Relations) was producing Latin American plays in English only. The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre began by taking plays to the people, performing outdoors; the

other groups were performing indoors, to a more educated and affluent audience base, eager to see their plays in the language of the homeland.⁵

Language has always been a consideration for Latinx writers and artists if they want to reach the working-class communities, who are generally native Spanish speakers and/or recent emigres from south of the border. In the earliest stages of Chicano and Nuyorican theatre, the *actos* (brief, satiric sketches) or plays were generally bilingual. You will read about the use of “code-switching” in this book. The earliest plays reflected how many Latinx families communicated in a combination of English and Spanish. This was prevalent in the Nuyorican communities of Manhattan. The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre performed in both languages with plays by contemporary Nuyorican or Puerto Rican playwrights as well as Spanish plays from a variety of countries. Another New York company, the *Repertorio Español* (Spanish Repertory), performed Spanish Golden Age classics, in the original verse. In terms of the Cuban or Cuban-American theaters, the language was generally Spanish, often in classical text or contemporary plays from Cuba, also, of course, *en español*.

Language is one of the most obvious topics that these contributors share. As you will read, language can be a challenge for an actor who learned to speak English as a second language and wants to perform “mainstream” plays, which call for a standard American accent, or a third-generation Latinx who self-identifies as Latinx but who does not speak Spanish. Being told by a non-Latinx person that “you’re different” is almost a universal for Latinxs. Or the more common question from a non-Latinx person is “Where are you from?”

What these chapters confirm is that Latinx actors of all backgrounds and language proficiencies have to work hard to achieve their goals as artists, as teachers, and as spokespeople for their communities. Sometimes, a Latinx actor who is fluent in both Spanish and English will perform in the same play, changing languages from one performance to another. You will read how this issue is or is not addressed in reference to Latinx actors. Some of the authors are native-born Spanish speakers while others’ first language is English. Further, there are degrees of language abilities as well as differences in *what* Spanish is required in a play, depending upon the actor’s background and training. Having directed plays with the same cast in both languages, the majority of actors have told me they prefer the play *en español*. Of course, both Spanish and English are beautiful languages but there is something about performing in Spanish, especially for the Spanish speakers in the audience whose appreciation for the language is palpable.

In the early period there were very few Latinx plays in print and few critical studies of the field *in English* because the majority of scholars writing about theatre from *Las Americas* were Spanish literature professors, publishing in Spanish or Portuguese. Further, those professors wrote about the *text*, generally, not the *acting*, unless they had witnessed the play in either Latin America or the United States. But eventually, English-speaking theatre scholars began to pay attention to live theatre from Latinx playwrights. We now have so many books, anthologies of

critical essays, and articles about all aspects of Latinx theatre published in a variety of scholarly journals—not to mention plays—that we cannot teach them all in a year, which is another reason why this book is so important to the field. Professors Santos DeCure and Espinosa are leaders in the field of training professional and graduate student actors in acting, voice, speech, and dialects. Their journeys, like so many of the contributors, began as actors on stage, television, and film. And like almost all of the contributors, their early experiences as students were difficult, as marginalized or ignored in the classrooms or auditions. Now they, and the contributors to this unique volume, are the mentors bringing to the world of theatre studies this, the first book of its kind in Latinx actor training.

The chapters in this collection are varied, including contributions by actor practitioners, movement practitioners, producers, scholars, performance theorists, directors, and playwrights. The format includes round-table discussions as well as interviews. All of the essays are written from the heart, eager to share their journeys. The contributors had wonderful teachers and not-so-wonderful teachers and directors but their foci are always on the positive. It is important to recognize where the contributors are coming from, both literally and figuratively. In the early period, the three major Latinx groups in the United States had roots in Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Cuba. By the turn of the 21st century, we began to see plays by Dominicans, Salvadorians, and combinations of Latinx cultures, including Afro-Latinxs, finally coming to the fore as representatives of the African diaspora in *Las Americas*—and many whose backgrounds are bi-cultural or multi-cultural.

For years, producers and directors, as well as university theatre professors, would say “There are no Hispanic plays” or “There are no Hispanic actors.” That was then, this is now. And the list does not include the number of plays that have been published since Luis Valdez’s first play *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* was first produced in 1974. As the field evolved from performance-centered to plot and character-driven plays, Latinx playwrights were writing plays that challenged the actors. Most importantly, the characters in these plays were no longer stereotypes and if they were, it was for a reason.

In conclusion, I think the underlying message in this collection is that the Latinx actor often stands apart, in the wings, as it were, hoping to be noticed. Some of the contributors learned by what we used to call, “OJT,” that is, “on the job training.” They learned by doing as well as by observing. They also learned by “infiltrating” theatre departments and regional theaters, as this volume attests. The authors in this book represent some of the people who have built communities of actors, playwrights, directors, designers, and producers who know the distinctions, sometimes subtle, at other times, stark, between the cultures represented in this collection and beyond. This long-awaited anthology centering the Latinx actor will inspire more serious examinations of this kind: actor training that is inclusive of all communities and cultures that represent the many faces of the United States.

Jorge A. Huerta, Ph.D.,

Notes

1. *Zoot Suit* was produced on Broadway in 1979 but closed after a five-week run due to mostly negative reviews. See Broyles-Gonzalez, Chapter 4, for an excellent discussion of the evolution of *Zoot Suit* during this period. What is important to note here is the fact that although the play did not fare well on Broadway, the Los Angeles run lasted 11 months, longer than any other professional play in Los Angeles at the time.
2. The Ford Foundation commissioned an assessment of Hispanic Theatre in 1986–1987. See Joanne Pottlitzer's monograph "Hispanic Theater in the United States and Puerto Rico." A Ford Foundation report, 1988. ISBN 0–916584–33–X.
3. The following founders have since passed: Rene Buch, (*Repertorio Español*, NYC), Miriam Colon (Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, NYC), Max Ferra (INTAR NYC), and Carmen Zapata (Bilingual Foundation of the Arts, Los Angeles, California). Other participants who are no longer with us are Tony Curiel (Teatro Campesino) and Ruben Sierra (The Group Theatre, Seattle, Washington).
4. The South Coast Repertory's Hispanic Playwrights Project was initiated under the direction of José Cruz González and later guided by Juliette Carrillo. Among the more prominent "Projects" were Teatro Meta, Old Globe Theatre, San Diego, California; Latino Theatre Initiative, Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles; Latino Theatre Lab, Los Angeles Theatre Center; New York Shakespeare Festival, "*Festival Latino*;" Hispanic Playwright's Project, South Coast Repertory, Costa Mesa, California. Of these, none exist today. The only project that still exists is the San Diego Rep's, "*Teatro Sin Fronteras*."
5. For an analysis and history of INTAR, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and *Repertorio Español*, see Elisa de la Roche, *¡Teatro Hispano! Three Major New York Companies*, Garland, 1995.



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INTRODUCTION

Cynthia Santos DeCure and Micha Espinosa

In 2010, Ellen Margolis and Lissa Tyler Renaud, in their book *The Politics of Actor Training*, highlighted the need to create scholarship that analyzes policies, practices, theory, and pedagogy of the 21st-century American actor training. The essay “Identity Politics and the Training of the Latino Actors”¹ illuminated the challenges Latinx actors encounter when training, including the systemic erasure of language and identity, which lead to diminishing pathways of success and visibility. Our book, *Latinx Actor Training*, continues the long-needed conversation to ameliorate the ongoing struggles and develop pathways for success.

This book was born out of the urgent need to address the inequities in training that we experienced and witnessed in academia and the industry. We are actresses-scholars, *madres*, and *teatristas* who met over a decade ago and bonded when we saw our students perpetually measured by Eurocentric values. We have developed a lasting collaboration as colleagues in the field and allies in the struggle for social justice for Latinx actors and narratives. To that end, we work from an anti-racist ethos and commit to a hemispheric awareness and the centering of people of the Global Majority/BIPOC² as we seek to realign actor training to have a more diverse and global perspective. This book seeks to re-imagine and restructure the practice of actor training by inviting culturally inclusive forms and deep investigation into heritage and identity practices.

We acknowledge that we are not alone in this struggle, and several scholars and artists have forged pathways for change, such as the published scholarship by *Black Acting Methods*, *Intercultural Acting and Performance Training*, and *A Korean Approach to Actor Training*, among others. Their work along with that of We See You White American Theatre, and many more social justice warriors, continues to shed light on the disadvantages that BIPOC actors face. Acting is action, and we offer this book as a collective call to action.

This book is needed today more than ever. Latinx representation on stage and screen has remained disproportionately low despite the population growth. In the United States, Latinx actors are underrepresented on screen, accounting for an average of 6 percent of roles in television and film,³ and on stage less than 4 percent,⁴ even though we comprise 62.1 million,⁵ or 18.5 percent, of the nation's population and are projected to reach 106 million by 2050.⁶ The vicious cycle of these continuing low numbers is disheartening and unacceptable. They confirm a systemic invisibility of Latinx actors across the industry.

Since the inception of Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC) in 2013, we have joined the LTC's efforts to champion the visibility of Latinx artists. We laud the work and scholarship of the LTC, which has advanced the craft of Latinx creatives through its convenings. With *Latinx Actor Training*, we contribute to their efforts to transform the narrative by intentionally centering the Latinx actor, along with Latinx practitioners and pedagogues who guide them in training.

In assembling this book, we have brought together scholars and practitioners of theatre to offer historical, pedagogical, and theoretical approaches to the practice of acting. We seek to redefine the scope of our community and positively recast the perception of our work. The book includes 25 chapters to examine our intersectional and multidimensional identities and practices, and although it is not all-encompassing, we strive to bring the scholarship forward and invite further investigations. The range of expertise our community possesses is not always represented in traditional academic publishing; thus, in this collection, you will find academic scholars, practitioners, and theatre makers authoring chapters.

This book uses the synonyms Latinx, Latine, and Latino/a to be inclusive. We welcome unidimensional terminology. The variety of economic, social, and political ideologies of Latinidad demands self-identification. Our 2019 collection, *Scenes for Latinx Actors*, describes Latinx identities as “hyphenated, multiple, constructed, reclaimed, colonized, vilified, commercialized, internalized and inevitably evolving with the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, and politics.”⁷ We stand by the usage of Latinx because it offers an inclusive attitude toward gender and sexual identities, celebrates the vast expression and experiences of our community, and embraces intersectionality. We acknowledge that there are arguments for and against its use, but we believe “Latinx” provides the possibility of expansion within the bipartite of cultural heritage and American identity.

Dr. Jorge Huerta, professor emeritus at the University of California, San Diego, draws on his expertise in Chicano and Latinx theatre to offer a foreword to the chapters in this book. We begin with historical and theoretical perspectives in Latinx actor training that may not be widely known. Finally, the most extensive section offers a myriad of lenses into the practice of acting through the Latinx experience. The contributors of this book display a variety of writing styles from pedagogical examinations to narrative formats in order to mirror the diverse expression of our community. Spanish and Spanglish—sounds that are

often omitted in classrooms of training—are interlaced in these chapters to make language visible.

In this collection we offer new perspectives, curricular innovations, and reconfigurations of traditional approaches to empower a new generation of Latinx actors, and to assist educators who are entrusted with their training. We hope Latinx actors and communities find themselves represented in this book, which can foster a sense of belonging that comes from understanding one’s history. We anticipate that Latinx actors will read these pages to find culturally competent mentors, coaches, and champions to help them navigate training toward a clearer pathway of academic and professional success. Finally, we are optimistic that this book will bring visibility to Latinx creatives and champion positive narratives to combat pervasive and damaging stereotypes. Ultimately this book is for all who are dedicated to creating culturally responsive pedagogy. We strongly believe that if we change the training, we change the industry.

Notes

1. Micha Espinosa and Antonio Ocampo-Guzman, “Identity Politics and Training of Latino Actors,” in *The Politics of American Actor Training*, eds. Ellen Margolis and Lissa Tyler Renaud (New York: Routledge, 2010).
2. BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.
3. An average of 6 percent according to the UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report 2022 (2021 television and film 7 roles) and the 2021 USC Annenberg report (5% of film roles between 2007 and 2019). Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2022,” *socialsciences.ucla.edu*, March 24, 2022, <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2022-Film-3-24-2022.pdf>.
4. Ariana Case, Zoily Mercado, and Karla Hernandez, “Hispanic and Latino Representation in Film,” *uscannenberg.org*, September 13, 2021, <https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-hispanic-latino-rep-2021-09-13.pdf>.
5. According to the Actors Equity Diversity and Inclusion report of 2020, and the AAPAC Visibility Report of 2018–19 reported, Latinx actors worked 3.46 and 3.9 percent, respectively, of all the jobs reported. “Total—Actors’ Equity Association,” *Actors Equity Association Diversity and Inclusion Report 2020*, November 18, 2020, <https://actorsequity.org/news/PR/DandIRreport2020/diversity-and-inclusion-report-2020>.
6. Pew Research Center reported a projected change in the US Hispanic (Latinx) population by 2050 from 133 million to 106 million, still reflecting an increase of double the population of the reported 2020 US Census. Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Census Bureau Lowers Forecasts for Hispanic Population Growth,” *Pew Research Center*, September 4, 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/16/with-fewer-new-arrivals-census-lowers-hispanic-population-projections.
7. Micha Espinosa and Cynthia DeCure, *Scenes for Latinx Actors: Voices of the New American Theatre* (Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2018), 23.



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PART 1

History and Theory



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