Who Am I, and Why Does it Matter? Reflections of Identity and the Need for Culturally Sustaining Theatre

Bianca Alamo
University of Central Florida

Part of the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons
Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020- by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation
https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020/6
WHO AM I, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?
REFLECTIONS OF IDENTITY AND THE NEED
FOR CULTURALLY SUSTAINING THEATRE

by

BIANCA LYNN ALAMO
B.S. St. John’s University, 2015

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Theatre
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2020
ABSTRACT

The question of “who am I” created an involuntary domino effect which led me to my most valued work I have done as a graduate student, serving predominantly Latino/a students in educational theatre settings. This thesis explores three productions I worked on and the questions that have evolved in my understanding of identity and cultural sustainability as a Latina theatre artist and educator working in educational theatre. As an Orlando Repertory teaching artist, I began a residency with HOPE CommUnity Center along with some colleagues. We worked with high school students from their youth group to devise a show titled *Walk a Day in My Shoes (Camina un día en mi zapatos)*, which speaks to the experience of these students as either DREAMERS or first-generation Americans. During Theatre UCF’s Pegasus PlayLab festival, I worked as the assistant director and dramaturg for *El Wiz*, an original Latino musical adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, written by local Latina/o artists in the Orlando community, as a response to the impact Hurricane Maria had in the Island of Puerto Rico. For Theatre UCF’s mainstage season, I worked as the assistant director and as an understudy for *Water by the Spoonful* written by Quiara Alegría Hudes, which follows a diverse group of individuals trying to navigate addiction, identity and redemption. In this thesis project, I reflect on my own growth and experiences as part of the process and seek to define the necessity of identity and cultural sustainability as a part of the theatre education space, acknowledge the complexities that creates challenges for diversity and access within theatre programming, and articulate areas of growth that theatre institutions may need in order to support the diverse communities they inhabit and the students they serve and educate in a new millennium.
Para mi familia. Gracias por todo.
Thank you for raising me with values in faith, heritage, and servanthood.

For the dreamers.
Thank you for teaching me and allowing me to embrace the part of myself I had long forgotten.

For my sister and the generations to come.
Be seen, be heard, and most importantly, fly.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to firstly thank God for opening the doors for me to continue pursuing a career in theatre. I thank my parents, Herminio and Stacy for all of their sacrifices to ensure I had the best life and opportunities. Thank you to my sister, Ariana for being patient with me and bringing joy in my life during this process. Thank you John, for loving me through it all and for capturing some of my favorite moments of the work I have done.

Thank you to my large family for paving the way and showing me what hard work and empathy looks like to young people who are underserved in our communities. Thank you to the close friends who have been encouragers along the way.

Thank you to my colleagues and supervisors at Valencia College who readied me for this process. Thank you to the incredible community of artists I have been fortunate enough to work with in the past three years. Thank you to my amazing cohort, whom without I would have never found my voice.

Special thanks to:
ORLANDO REPERTORY THEATRE
THEATRE UCF
HOPE COMMUNITY CENTER
BETHEL CHRISTIAN CHURCH
 Dr. Julia Listengarten
 Vandy Wood
 Dr. Martha García
 Elizabeth Brendel Horn
 Emily Freeman
 Maria Katsadouros
 Jennifer Adams
 Stacie Perez
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .............................................................................................................. viii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................... 1
   A Separation of Self ........................................................................................................ 1
   Hiding Me ..................................................................................................................... 3
   Liberation to Explore Me Again ................................................................................... 6
   Defining Cultural Sustainability ................................................................................. 9

CHAPTER TWO: HOPE COMMUNITY CENTER ................................................................. 12
   Who Are We? .............................................................................................................. 13
   Authentic Voices ........................................................................................................ 17

CHAPTER THREE: EL WIZ PEGASUS PLAYLAB ............................................................. 29
   Who Do We Emerge .................................................................................................... 32
   Design and Production Meetings .............................................................................. 34
   Loud and Proud .......................................................................................................... 35
   Rehearsals ................................................................................................................... 39

CHAPTER FOUR: WATER BY THE SPOONFUL ................................................................. 43
   Who Do We Represent? ............................................................................................. 45
   Connection and Identity ............................................................................................. 48

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION .......................................................................................... 56
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Three major potential pipeline of factors contributing to the lack of diversity in theatre education programs .................................................................62

Figure 2: Cycle of factors contributing to diversity and representation in theatre education programs ........................................................................................................66
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The idea of belonging, or fitting into a certain mold, a system, and a group of people has been convoluted since the origins of human life. However, in today’s world, the “identity crisis” for most marginalized youth and young adults seem to be subordinated to mainstream culture. This reality makes me consider about how we as a community of diverse individuals in our nation no longer have a space to explore our cultures in a way that brings us together. Rather, resulting in one national identity in our melting pot, only strengthens assimilation and acculturation, which does not necessarily sustain diverse cultures. Belonging brings a sense of identity, and being born and raised to a certain demographic population, in a specific geographical space and to a specific upbringing has shaped the question of “who am I?” Why does this question matter? Why does it matter for us to implement this cultural awareness and quest in our practice as theatre educators and artists?

A Separation of Self

In my experience, this question was yet to be not fully covered. I remember for instance being asked “where are you from?” and I would answer, “Oh I am from Connecticut and then I moved to Florida with my family” and engage in explaining my own roots. However, I would get asked again, “no really, where are you from?” This second question made me realize that perhaps the question was not directed towards where I am physically from, but where my family was from, my heritage and ethnic background, to which I would answer, “Puerto Rico.” The disbelief along with their responses of: “Funny, you don’t look Puerto Rican.” “You don’t really look
Spanish.” “I literally would’ve guessed anything else but that” validates the need to explore these questions at a deeper level.

At first, I always thought this was a fair assessment, coming from their preconceived ideas of what a Puerto Rican or Spanish person looks, talks, and would act. I had these same conventions about my nation as well because it wasn’t always non-Spanish people who would like to know about my heritage. I would be questioned also where I come from by individuals of the Hispanic and Latina/o community. These ideas are birthed from stereotypes, and as insensitive as they can be, stereotypes derive from some form of truth. Since I did not fit this mold of what is a typical “Puerto Rican,” I always saw myself as othered within my group of non-Hispanic/Latino friends and my group of Hispanic/Latino friends. I made the choice to separate myself from my culture, which left an empty space in my own reality for many years that as an artist I was not aware of until I pursued theatre.

This quest of identity however goes through many phases, as identity has become more fluid and self-pronounced in recent years. In an essay for the Journal of Material Culture, Christopher Tilley, Professor of Anthropology at the University College London writes, “Identity is transient, a reflection on where you are now, a fleeting moment in a biography of the self or the group, only partially connected to where you might have come from, and where you might be going” (9). Growing up I was taught to be proud of where my family has come from (Puerto Rico) and that I should celebrate the traditions and culture the people in my community. I was also taught that this does not excuse me from embracing American culture, and more importantly to my parents, education. I learned Spanish and English simultaneously, being comfortable with both, until I had to go to school in kindergarten. My parents spoke mostly English at home
because my mother feared I would develop an accent and struggle with learning English, which it would lead me to attend English Learner classes. They did not want me to struggle and they did not want my culture to get in the way of my success. While my parents intentions were good, they were not aware of the kind of struggle I would face in the future when it came to my cultural identity, how I saw myself, and how others would see me.

_Hiding Me_

From then on, I adapted to whatever I needed to be in order to fit in. In elementary school, I went to a predominantly Black and Hispanic school. There, I was who I was, having familiar faces of kids from the neighborhood and some family in the hallways and it felt like home. When my family and I moved to a new state, I went to a middle school that introduced me to a new set of cultural experiences. In this new school, for the first time in my life I felt like I was different. I was seen as something less than, someone who did not belong, and all based upon the color of my skin and where I grew up. In those years I dealt with bullying, depression, suicidal thoughts, and hating myself. I tried to be everything but me and I began to hate my parents, my upbringing, and my culture. This planted an unpleasant seed within me, one that for a while challenged the growth of all I could be reflecting a survivalist modality. My faith and beliefs in God is a large part of who I am and my identity. I was always surrounded by love and support from my family and close friends, but I could never see what they saw in me. It was not until I began breaking out of my shell, and explored the arts that I began the journey of trying to answer that unsettling question of “who am I?”
While the arts allowed me to express myself, I found many times I was still being restricted because of how different I looked. While I enjoyed theatre in high school within a diverse demographic of students, I had a rude reality waiting for me as I pursued theatre in New York for college. I was one of three Hispanics at my conservatory. I was one of six minorities that attended in the same year, and from living with seventeen different roommates in the span of four years, I had only ever lived with two other women of color. I remember one of the places I lived in the girls actually made a sign (jokingly) that said “The Ethnic Corner” and placed it above a spot on the couch which was a designated seating area for me. Another memory that comes to mind are some nicknames, and while I didn’t think anything of it at the time, I was called “Beans” quite a lot. While I have nothing against the people I attended school with or my former roommates, I am merely stating the facts. I was yet again in a position of being different and it makes me think a lot about why that happened to me and why no one thought it was wrong.

Besides my living situation, while in school I cannot recall ever having had conversations of culture and identity while studying acting at the conservatory. The only scene work and plays we worked on were written by Caucasian playwrights and a handful of Black playwrights and to the point where I never really bothered to research or look up plays created by the Latina/o community. Instead, I just thought this was it. This is how being an actor works and I just have to accept what was being given to me. I never considered to do research about Latino artists and playwrights, because I was never encouraged to pursue that part of myself and so the desire was not cultivated. However, one rehearsal for a commedia dell’arte play that I was cast in during my studies opened my eyes to see how incredibly alone I felt as a minority artist. I remember doing a
table read and analyzing the script for the show and there were a couple of lines written in *Latin* and the director smiled and looked around the table and finally asked me to respond based on who I am. I humbly replied, “Well, it’s *Latin*, not *Spanish*. There’s a difference, but I can try.” It could exemplify today ignorance in relation to diversity, which produces a level of intense segregation. While there is a lot to unpack there, it could just be called what it is - racist. I remember being so hurt and no one else saw how it affected me. No one else saw what was wrong and laughed it off with the director. During that entire rehearsal process, “Mexican” became my nickname, and I chose to just take it. I chose to laugh and act like nothing was wrong. However, something was wrong. Again, growing inside of me was a bitterness and resentment towards myself. Looking back now, I see the discrimination and prejudices I experienced as a young artist in New York had affected me to the point where I chose to play along as the stereotypical Latina, thinking I would easily make friends and become interesting for others to notice me. I was never truly comfortable with being myself because I did not know who that was and I was allowing *others* to define how I should be because of my own heritage.

After graduating, going to auditions was an unpleasant experience, because it seemed like I could not find a role I could fit. I could not go for the lead role of the Caucasian 18-24 year old “girl next door”. I could not go for the role of the Latina school girl because the only roles that represented Latinas meant they had to perform a stereotyped characterization. One audition I went to was for a tough Latina girl, 18-24 years, from the Bronx, beginner boxer and loner. I thought this was perfect for me! I remember getting so excited to walk into that casting room because there was something about this character that I could relate to, something about her grit and her upbringing that I grew up in as well. However, going into the audition, I saw a hundred
girls waiting there. To my surprise, most looked like the typical Latina. Dark hair, dark eyes, tanned skin, and all of us were wearing black tank tops, combat boots, and cargo pants. I was the only one there with red hair (dyed hair), green eyes, and lighter skin. I was nervous. I felt othered again and in a role I felt confident I could do if given the chance. Going into the audition, I performed my monologue, read a side, and did some boxing sequences. I never received a call or an email about that role. While it is very likely the reasoning is because someone else was a better fit for the role, all I could think was did I just not look the part?

A deep insecurity about my cultural identity rooted further in my own identity, and I decided it was not worth my time to continue to explore that part of myself. In my family, I am the one that does not speak Spanish. I am the one that cannot dance and that does not cook. Again, all those stereotypes of what a Latina woman should be, drove a deeper wedge that made me feel too different. I became numb to a part of myself I felt like I could never embrace. I felt defeated as an actor and did not know about the rise of Latina/o artists who are enthusiastically creating work for and by them. This kind of work was happening in film and theatre, all over in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Tempe, and even in the city of Orlando.

*Liberation to Explore Me Again*

I stopped auditioning, and continued my education, furthering my studies at St. John’s University in Queens, where I received my bachelor’s in Dramatic Arts, Film, and Television. There, I met a greater population of Latinas/os pursuing their art in many forms such as Radio, Communications, Public Relations, and Film. During this time, I had the opportunity to study abroad in France, Italy, and Spain for five months, which has forever marked me in the best way.
It was there I grew in relationship with many of my classmates on the trip, most Latinas/os who were also some of the first in their families to ever step out of the Americas. During my time abroad, I understood why cultural heritage is so important. Meeting the people of Firenze, everything about Tuscany was imbedded into their foods, customs, hospitality, and language. There was something so unique about being in their presence and seeing the strong connection of family and gathering. While we are cultures apart geographically, the values and customs were very similar to that of my own family. I felt at home, and it felt good to indulge in that heritage that resonated with my precious own. This same feeling carried out everywhere I went in Europe. I was asked by many locals where my family was from, because to them, I fit in so well just based upon my physical attributes. When I mentioned Puerto Rico, for the first time no one questioned if I was or not telling the truth.

It was not until three years later from that trip abroad that I embarked on another cultural journey, one that has shaped my graduate career thus far. During my first year of graduate school I took a Dramatic Literature class where I was introduced to the first Latina/o play I’ve ever read, *The Highest Heaven* by José Cruz González. I remember being shocked that there was a Latina/o play, especially one for Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). I was also introduced to playwrights such as Federico García Lorca, Álvaro Saar Ríos, and Quiara Alegria Hudes. This was my first exposure of Latino theatre, and I was more surprised by the fact that others apart from this culture read, saw or participated in these works. I felt naive about my lack of knowledge that these plays and these theatres existed. It excited me, and terrified me. Again, my interest peaked, however this time it was not due by a piece of art, but rather by the impact of Hurricane Maria.
In September of 2017, tropical systems were sweeping the Atlantic waters, a mixture of the winds from the Sahara and the warm ocean, hurricanes began to form, heading west towards the Caribbean. While many of the islands and countries in this area are used to witnessing hurricanes, every storm comes with its own unpredictable nature. Hurricane Maria devastated the smaller islands east of Puerto Rico, slightly weakening the force. However, as the storm made its way back into the warm waters, it strengthened once again. Puerto Rico experienced a Category 5 hurricane as high wind gusts, hail, surge, and flooding plundered the Island. I remember how scared my family and close friends felt at this time. Most of us had family still on the Island and lost contact with them for weeks after the storm. There was severe loss throughout the Island and it was felt by Puerto Ricans near and far. What no one did anticipate was the phenomenon that occurred in regards to the assistance and support for Puerto Rico. The issue became political, with many controversies with the Puerto Rican government and the United States. As politicians in Washington fought about what aid to send to the Island, Puerto Ricans from around the world took to response and raised funds through the manifestation of art. Jennifer López, Marc Anthony, Ricky Martin (Enrique Martín Morales), and Lin-Manuel Miranda for example raised the concerns that the Island faced and recollected funds through music, dance, and theatre.

The deep insecurities that planted in me years before began to uproot. I felt a duty to do something in response to what was happening although at that time seemed inauthentic. However, seeing these artists respond through their art inspired me to pursue a modest project that spoke upon my feelings towards the devastation that the Island of Puerto Rico endured. For a combined project in my Research Methods and Puppetry class I chose to adapt the play *When Coquis Sing*, written by former MFA Theatre for Young Audiences graduate student from the
University of Central Florida, Michelle LoRicco. The original play is centered on a mother and daughter, in which the mother navigates a way to talk to her daughter about death, since she—the mother—is expected to pass away soon due to illness. The stories the mother shares with her daughter about Puerto Rico and the adventures she will have with her grandmother there transport the two of them to the Island of Puerto Rico, where they run into native critters and animals helping them along their journey. I adapted the play in which the mother and daughter are not only transported to the Island, but they are transformed into the coquis (unique small frogs native to the Island of Puerto Rico), themselves. They discover that their image of Puerto Rico is different from the stories the mother shared, since it was just recently devastated by a hurricane. The mother and daughter coquis navigate the forest, discussing change and the importance to grieve what was lost, but to be strong and brave to continue to move forward. The daughter coqui learns she must go on without her mother, like the Island must go on even from its losses. I created marionette coquis and performed the piece at the end of my first semester. This project began to free me of my own self-consciousness about my cultural identity and it propelled me into all the work discussed in this thesis project. I did not think this would be my perusal while in graduate school. However, when a force, such as a hurricane shakes your core, and causes a visceral response, you begin to question who you are, and why that matters.

Defining Cultural Sustainability

As I reflect about the three productions I have worked on, many questions have risen as I viewed the processes from my own perspective of discovering my identity as an artistic student and practitioner. One of the most striking moments was seeing that there has been a lack of
diversity within the local student demographic of theatre majors and student patrons and participants. There has also been a lack of diversity within the seasons chosen for both education based theatres. In a 2017 data collection of local residents, the dominant racial and ethnic group is “white (95.9k people)... and 86.3k Hispanic or Latino people” shortly behind. This shows just how rapidly the Hispanic and Latina/o populations are growing in the region. While in more recent years, both educational theatres have had more diversity in their productions than in previous years, their work on embracing diversity needs more attention and consideration. How can we, as some of the leading theatre institutions in Orlando, continue to share stories that brings forth theatre that is culturally sustaining for our local community and our student artists?

In this thesis project, I refer to terminology that is associated with race, culture, and ethnic groupings. These terms and methodologies have framed my questions and the lens I use to reflect and analyze the three projects that I will study in depth. The term *culturally sustaining theatre* (CST) is one I use repeatedly in this research as a means to convey the practice of creating an environment in which student artists can have a theatre education experience that allows for a space of their own self-discovery embedded in cultural awareness. I also use CST to define theatres producing shows that reflect the diverse culture and communities which it inhabits through its season shows and partnerships that work together in hopes of increasing the diversity of stories shared on stage and patrons. This term I have taken from the newly rising practice of *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (CSP) in K-12 educational institutions. Cultural sustainability is defined as preserving cultural beliefs, practices, languages and heritage, with the intention that by not doing so, this culture could cease to exist in the future. Culturally sustainable pedagogy enables us as educators and practitioners to forgo the student relationship
to their classroom, teachers and school. This infers culturally sustainable teaching practices, learning styles, implementation, and classroom environments are conducive and willing to diversify learning and stories. What this manifests is a decolonization of educational practices that have hinder the learning experience for many students. Taking this idea and implementing it in our theatres, I will be talking about how the projects I have worked on would have benefited from culturally sustainable theatre practices that engages the local community (audiences, students, family patrons, faculty and staff) and the students participating in these productions.
CHAPTER TWO: 
HOPE COMMUNITY CENTER

Immigration is one of the heaviest and most popular topics of political debate. Furthermore, the identities of youth from migrant and immigrant families have been more prevalent in conversation within the last few years. In this current political climate, the media has broadcast many headlines and stories regarding the threats DACA and Dreamers are facing due to the current administration. Fears of deportation, exploitation, and separation are stronger than before. As a theatre artist, practitioner and educator I know firsthand the power theatre can give to someone and to a community that feels powerless. Theatre can be a tool for youth facing these challenges to find ownership of their stories and act against the challenges they face.

At HOPE CommUnity Center in Apopka, Florida, high school students within this demographic are working towards a brighter future. HOPE serves the predominantly Latina/o and Haitian community of migrant and immigrant farmers. The youth in these communities—some born in the United States, and others immigrating from a young age—face challenges that are not typically experienced by known to the average teenagers. Their youth group, Sin Fronteras or Without Borders, is described as a place that “gives teenagers a variety of opportunities to learn about self and others, make meaningful connections, and become leaders in the community” (HOPE CommUnity Center). One of these avenues is through theatre, and the youth group desired to have a space where they could share their stories in creative ways, founding the theatre troupe—the Monarchs—in partnership with the Orlando Repertory Theatre. Since the community already had a partnership with Orlando REP, the process was seamless for teaching artists to go there and meet with the students. The collaboration resulted in a devised
original piece inspired by the prompt “Walk a Day in My Shoes…” to speak upon the challenges they face individually as well as within their communities, and the optimism for a better future that HOPE CommUnity Center provides to their cause.

Who Are We?

Although coming from Puerto Rican descent, I found myself insecure when beginning with the group in Fall of 2018. Firstly, I don’t speak Spanish. I know some small phrases, a song or two and that is all. Secondly, my skin color is on the lighter end of the spectrum, and even within my own culture, I have felt othered due to this reality. Thirdly, my background as a second-generation Puerto Rican American has made me aware of my own privilege within the Latina/o community. I was terrified that I would not relate or connect with the students. Once again, I felt inauthentic. I made assumptions that I could not connect to them and, therefore, I needed to be on guard for how I would teach them—which is a fear that accumulates for educators.

There is an assumption that as an educator, I can only teach what I am an expert in; that way students can learn and grow from me and all the knowledge I possess on the subject. However—to me—this assumption creates an obstacle between myself and the students, one that divides us based upon the differences in knowledge and experiences we have with our own baggage, thus presenting an untruthful persona that entitles me as the sole expert in the classroom. In truth, this is an approach based on a teacher-directed practice of learning, in which I as a teacher take charge of the class and decide on what will be taught and learned in that space. This misconception also goes along with the old empty vessel theory in which I, again as
teacher, am the instrument used to transmit knowledge into the empty vessel—namely the student (Rodriguez 177). While both concepts sound extreme, it is true that these styles of teaching and learning still exists, and it contrasts to the opportunities that the culturally sustainable approach may also offer in the way we teach and learn.

Culturally sustainable teaching has been on the rise—more so in K-12 schools in the United States—within the last few years. This practice of teaching opens the classroom space for students who may come from marginalized and underrepresented minority communities to learn and understand in a way that resonates with their experiences. One example of this approach comes from a research study on Latina/o youth’s education in California called “Project Fuerte” where researcher Jason G. Irizarry from the University of Connecticut writes:

As researchers, policymakers, and educators search for remedies to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for Latinx youth, they often ignore the perspectives of those most directly impacted by the problem - namely, the students themselves. (84)

The researchers, policymakers and educators he speaks about can be summed up in what Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) call the *gatekeepers*. The gatekeepers are presumably the adult figures who are the deciding factor of what information and experiences are exposed to children. Acknowledging that I am a gatekeeper myself, I seek to improve experiences for these segregated youth, which comes from my own personal story as a Latina student. Within my role as a teaching artist and director at HOPE, I had to put aside my insecurities and put forward the students’ needs. As a practitioner within the educational theatre setting, I have learned that when writing and creating art in support of representing authentic youth voices, those insecurities...
of not being an expert to their experiences need to be secondary. I was there and continue to be there to serve these youth as an expert in this field of theatre, not an expert in their situations, and that is how the collaboration came to be for myself. By stepping out of the model of a teacher-directed learning environment and focusing on a student-centered or learner-centered model, it allowed me to not be the sole person in the room that would dictate the material and activities done with the Monarchs. Instead, I wanted to facilitate the space in a way that gave them ownership of their experiences and allowed them to teach me and help me understand what was most important for them to put into their piece. Thus, it became imperative for this thesis project to do research about how their identities were threatened due to assimilation and acculturation, which ended up creating a strong connection between myself, the students, and the HOPE organization.

I found that in the process, the students’ and I had similar experiences in school, which led to them opening about their own insecurities and fears about what they could accomplish in the future. In the journal *Nationalism and Youth in Theatre and Performance* scholars explain how students coming from other countries, by means of immigration or being refugees, experience an identity crisis by being shepherded through the education system in the United States. Sarah Coleman explores this crisis in her essay titled “Theatre and Citizenship: Playbuilding with English Language Learner Youth”:

I explore how students negotiate their own fluid identities of citizenship while simultaneously creating new definitions of national identity through their cultural adjustment. (150)
This idea that the students are creating new identities through cultural adjustment is concerning and I consider that it deserves more attention. The article further suggests that once a student (immigrant or other) is placed in a school (most likely public), they are automatically enrolled in classes to help them learn English, through learning American traditions such as the national anthem, popular culture, and American social classes. This has created a situation in which students are not encouraged to practice and pursue their own cultural traditions and customs, thus moving towards acculturation, which scholars define as “the shifting of values, belief systems, and behaviors that occurs from continuous contact between two cultures” (Baldwin-White et al. 43). While the United States is considered the melting pot of the world, there is a great dissonance in its relationship to diversity, which takes root within American education. The insecurities students face specifically coming from immigrant Latina/o communities—derives from their treatment and the content they are required to quickly learn and adapt to in school. In the book Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World, editors H. Samy Alim and Django Paris write:

The purpose of state-sanctioned schooling has been to forward the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools. In the United States and beyond, this saga of cultural and linguistic assault has had and continues to have devastating effects on the access, achievement, and well-being of students of color in public schools. (1)

Where does theatre fit in all of this? Why choose theatre specifically as a medium in which these students can express their voices? Theatre fits because of its storytelling nature of the art
form and its intention to bring people together. In this digital age of modern technology, there is a severe lack of human physical contact and communication, therefore theatre provides something unique that a film, a recording, or a book cannot. Through basic techniques the students learned how to tell their stories using their bodies and voices, creating something that is intimate, personal and encourages connection. In this devised theatre process, the space was created for the teaching artists and the students to collaborate and create an original piece that would give the audience an invitation to have a conversation about what they saw from the students’ experiences and how they were motivated to contribute to a better outcome.

**Authentic Voices**

Since I did not join the Monarchs until the Fall of 2018, I spoke with one of the teaching artists who started with this theatre troupe to give preface to the project. Maria Katsadouros is two years out of graduate school, receiving her Master of Fine Arts in Theatre for Young Audiences at the University of Central Florida. She is the current Curriculum Development Coordinator at Orlando Repertory Theatre and began this work with HOPE CommUnity Center two springs ago. In an informal interview with Maria, I asked her how the process and partnership with HOPE began: “Emily Freeman, our Community Engagement Director had approached me and said, ‘We are going to start a residency with students at HOPE CommUnity Center’, and there wasn’t anything set in place in terms of the content we would use or the work we would do…or if it would become what it has become, which is this theatre troupe that devises their own pieces.” Devising is widely defined as to plan or invent by careful thought. In a theatrical lens, devising usually consists of an ensemble of
artists (actors, dancers, designers) creating collaboratively—mostly through improvisation—to produce a new and original work. Devised theatre is not something I had a strong background in at the time I joined this project. I wondered why we were choosing to devise a show with students who did not have a lot of theatre experience instead of selecting an already published work by a Latina/o playwright to cast them in. I thought we would be missing an opportunity to expose the students to plays and playwrights that come from similar backgrounds and experiences. For myself, it was not until I started graduate school that I began reading plays by Latina/o playwrights. I felt strongly that we needed to get these plays into communities that could relate to the characters and stories, such as *Esperanza Rising* by Lynn Álvarez or *Highest Heaven* by José Cruz González, both of which tackle themes and experiences of Mexican American youth, their families and communities.

However, I understood that there was a greater need to make the experience for the students’ one that was centered on them as the learners and artists, thus, giving them the responsibility to be experts of the story they wanted to tell. This decision moves away from the teacher-directed approach once again into something that is more culturally responsive and engaging. Why did we choose to devise an original show instead of direct a published one? Norma Bowles, the founder and Artistic Director of Fringe Benefits Theatre, gives an excellent justification that rings true to this experience: “just as cavemen developed different stone blades for killing, skinning, cutting, etc. . . . Often the perfect play/ piece does not already exist to accomplish the specific task at hand” (Bowles 15). Simply put, the play does not yet exist. No play can fully encapsulate the lives of every individual, and therefore devising allows for a space where an original piece can be created, and not only of one individual, but of a
community. Our specific task was not to tell the story someone else wrote, but to help
the students tell their stories written by them and for their community.

Devising is made with careful thought and while we wanted the students to drive the story
of the play, we needed to provide foundational theatre tools, such as terminology and technique
to help them feel confident throughout the devising process. While we remained opened to the
students’ ideas, we sought to challenge them to only think about using body and voice to tell
their story, rather than rely on spectacle. We did so because in the beginning of the process, we
noticed most of the questions the students had for us was about what set pieces, props, or
costumes they would use for the performance. We did not want their story to be lost in the
spectacle elements of theatre, and instead have the storytelling live within the narrative dialogue
and movements they created. It was important, as their collaborative partners in this process, that
we were honoring the stories they were willing and ready to share, but as their directors and
teachers, we wanted them to understand why the choice of having costumes and props is not
wrong, but why the choice to only rely on themselves and each other was much stronger.

However, the process to get there was not immediate. It took a few weeks to establish
trust in the group, and we had to get creative to figure out exactly what the students wanted
out this experience and what their piece would ultimately be about. Maria continued by saying
they began with “one-off sessions” and “it was very much an uphill battle...trying to figure out
who was excited about this work, who genuinely wanted to do it. And, really working to tap into
why they wanted to do it. Which to be honest, I think we’re still figuring out.”

Devising functioned as a tool that allowed the students to have control of where they
wanted their story to go. Building a relationship and a sense of community was our
priority. Through improvised theatre games such as *What Are You Doing* and *The Truth About Me*, we saw the students stepping out of their comfort zones and take risks which led to a freedom in play, which then led to the devising process. The games allowed for the students to get into their bodies, creating shapes, movement and playing with tempo and rhythm. The narrative story and what turned into the dialogue came from writing prompts given to the students: “We were really looking for a concrete way for them to talk about their communities. We thought about breaking it down, to say, if you walk a day in my community you will see this: and we would unpack the positives and negatives”, Maria explained. This then grew into the idea of incorporating more senses and looking at what the community looks like for each student. Walk into my home and you will see/hear… Walk into my school and you will see/hear… This became the foundation of their piece, a walk through their lives from their point of view. In continuing my conversation with Maria, I asked how this developed. She stated, “we were working to scaffold it and trying to make it a safe space for them to share as much as they wanted, but knowing we wanted to create a piece that was rooted in their reality and not just talking around those things.” The creation of “Walk a Day in my Shoes” became a personal story that was rooted in wanting to make a social impact, and for these students, most of whom are active social justice warriors at HOPE, this became something in which they have been “excited to be a part of something bigger than themselves” (Maria). The students saw their stories being told, and not by someone else, but from their own words. It was decided that the piece would need to be adaptable, so that any new Monarchs added to the group would be able to easily incorporate their pieces of their own story into the performance, making it unique each time. Without articulating it, we created a model that could be sustained for a long time which allows
for new students to share their experiences and add it to this story. HOPE became a project that I was asked to step in and started leading as my residency. I had only been there once before when I helped trained high school students in theatre games so they could lead them in their summer camps and felt right at home. There, I saw a community that reminded me of my family, and I saw in them people I grew up with. It was a tangible feeling that lived with the interactions, the languages heard in the classrooms and buildings, and the scriptures painted on the walls. Stepping into this space as a new director and teaching artist allowed me to also be a new voice and guide in accordance with what the students had already built. As the students opened to me and shared their stories and this personal piece of theatre, I related to them in some of their struggles and the strong duty to familia. That is what stood out to me the most about these students and what motivated me to want to support them in their endeavors. Everything they do is because of their families: the younger and older siblings, their grandparents whether near or far, and mostly for their parents who either made it into the country with them or had to go back due to issues with immigration.

The purpose of this piece was to get the audience to understand their stories and perhaps see these students for the first time in a different light. We incorporated theatrical devices that helped propel their stories and to implore change they want to see in their communities. Using four main devices: repetition, tableaux, movement, and monologue, students devised a piece that showed the struggles, victories, and hope in body and voice, finishing with a call to action. Repetition was used throughout the piece, highlighting main issues that affected their lives. While we did not encourage other theatrical elements, the students had a connection to the song “This is Me” from the Greatest Showman, which underscored their opening sequence.
The students lined up on either side of the room, facing each other and then one by one, they enter the middle space saying “Walk a day in my shoes” or “Camina un día en mis zapatos” until all students were saying the same phrase, at different paces, with various dynamics and in two languages. Language became a major tool when developing this piece, since most of the students—if not all—spoke Spanish fluently. Having their language incorporated in the piece continued to reassure their position in the creation process and looking back, I would say language is a foundational element we as practitioners have to take into consideration in the steps towards culturally sustainable theatre: “Language has an integral effect on learning, culture, and socialization (Baldwin-White, et al. 44). We had to use Spanish in this piece because it would not have been as effective or as meaningful to these students if we did not use their language as a method of communicating their story to the audience. Students who are learning English as their second language already experience eight hours a day of language immersion and are usually not able to use their language as a part of their learning process. Scholar Jason G. Irizzary’s research speaks upon the importance of using diverse languages as a part of the learning process:

Because of the restrictive language policies subordinating the use of languages other than Dominant American English in the school, the students often felt alienated from teachers and the content they needed to learn in order to meet their personal and educational goals. (87)

Irizzary continues to state how the benefits of using “diverse languages” (87) results in “students seem[ing] to move effortlessly within and across languages, often drawing from multiple languages to maximize meaning-making” (87). Translating this experience to that of the Monarchs, the students were free to intertwine their languages, which helped in finding the
meaning behind the words and connecting to the emotion and given circumstances honing in on principles of character development that surpassed just speaking the lines. Using their languages helped in achieving this level of understanding of acting. It was also thoughtfully inclusive for the audience—whether they knew Spanish or English—all were included into the story and represented in the language.

The movement of the piece was also created by the students and guided by the teaching artists. In the process, we had them split into three groups of three where they would answer the same prompts of what do they see/hear in their community, however finding a physical representation of what they wanted to describe. For example, students answered the prompt “walk into my community and you will see…” and one example of a response was obstacles and the students would then create a tableau of what obstacle meant to them. Another example was “walk into my community and you will hear loud noises” and then they would move into a tableau, featuring the three students in the group of what hearing loud noises means to them. Emily, Maria and I rotated between groups to help them if they got stuck with trying to come up with a frozen picture. The notes I would give the students would be to create a picture that is clear and one that connects from head to toe. One group I helped with was stuck trying to make a tableau of the word “traditions.” I asked them, how did you come up with traditions? They answered that if you walked into their community you would see people celebrating in their own way a special holiday, eating traditional foods or having family over. I then asked them what a clear picture would be, if they could pick one, of what traditions means to them that the audience could also receive a concrete message. After thinking about it, they decided food would make the most sense, and one student sat down happily leaning over the imaginary
table, smelling the food that the other student was placing in front of her. Then the last of this group of students sat across, extending one hand out towards the audience and having the upstage hand pantomiming holding a utensil for whatever was in front of her. I was moved to see the open invitation for the audience to come and join them in their traditional meal, and saw how the piece was turning into something that creates a space for conversation and including others outside of these experiences to sit at the table. This highlights another important aspect of cultural sustainability, in which no one is above anyone else and we are all here to learn and grow through a dialogue of different experiences.

Another element that we utilized was a focus on voice and gesture, which we took newspaper headlines about immigration and DACA as the inspiration for this part of the performance. We introduced the theatre game called “the machine” in one of our earlier sessions with the students to explore ensemble building. The game consists of one person stating in the middle of the space doing a repeated sound and movement and continues as other individuals join in one at a time, with their own sound and movement, but being connected to each other, thus creating a human machine. For the play, we broke up the machine and decided that the students would stand in a line, and one by one say their headline out loud and do a gesture representing the headline. They continued this as each person added and added, creating a chaotic atmosphere of noise and movement until one student would step forward and shout “stop!” This was a striking part of the performance, as this was the only case in which the students were not saying their own words, however, we encouraged the students to react to these words and what it meant to them in their bodies and voices in a safe way. One student became teary-eyed and had a brokenness in the quality of his voice while placing his hands on his head, shaking it around
saying over and over: “How DACA affected the mental health of undocumented young adults.” Another student put her hand over her heart and raised her first in the air saying “DACA isn’t just about social justice. Legalizing Dreamers makes economic sense too.” It became apparent in this moment of the process that the students understood the weight of the work they were doing. The energy coming into rehearsals change. They were not only excited to see each other, but also excited to continue working on the piece and making it stronger each time. This mirrors agency in their work, which pertains to the model of a culturally sustaining approach, in which the students’ are empowered to continue doing the work, because the work now has a personal and social impact to themselves and their communities. The challenge I found from this new burst of investment and energy was the lack of focus that swept into the space. While we were working on the piece itself, everyone had ideas and wanted to be heard which resulted inside conversations, students directing students and ultimately there was a need for classroom management. As an artist, I became more intense about the work and less empathetic about the process, which I realized that as a teaching artist I needed to be aware that sometimes it meant the students needed a day to just play games and breath out the heavy content they were tackling within the play. Both focus and play, needed to be a part of the process. What this did was also provide an out for anyone that might need a space to step out in case the work got intense or personal, and they needed room to just breathe and recollect themselves. There were only two instances where this happened, and I needed to be flexible and understanding to the student's needs. It became a balancing act in which we as the teaching artists had to gage where the students were on the days we would rehearse. Depending on what happened at school, at home or even at HOPE that day, their energy changed, and we had to be able to adapt. This again
required a cultural self-awareness for us as the outsider teaching artists stepping into their space. We are coming from different backgrounds, agendas, and expertise than the students, and all parties had to come together and remember the work we all committed to and the community we wanted to engage.

The last component of the play was inspired by a monologue written by one of the students. This student was very much a leader in the group and was vocal about her ideas and passion for advocacy. The monologue starts with “I've come to the realization that the world, my community, and my life are changing.” In continuation, we wanted to highlight points in her monologue in which the students would do a simultaneous movement, tableau, and have specific words and phrases they would say all together. This was intentional to create emphasis on what the monologue spoke upon, a changing world and view for these students that led to a call to action for the audience “to wake yourself up and do something.” The monologue turned out to be one of the more challenging pieces to breakdown, because we did not want it to come across as a lecture to the audience. Instead, we broke it down with intentional movement and got the students thinking about the power play in this last monologue. On descriptive phrases, the students would individually and one by one created their tableau of that word, such as “running” or “laughing.” We wanted the movement to show isolation, but also diversity. On longer phrases such as “if we stopped and looked around just once, we would notice so much”, all the students in a “v” shaped formation, made an “x” with their arms in front of their faces and then followed the movement by putting one hand to their foreheads and swooping down on “looked around just once.” The contrasts of these two movements is meant to highlight the idea that we can be so into ourselves (connecting back to cultural self-awareness) that we do not and sometimes choose not
to take the time to look at what’s going on around us. Certain levels of shapes and movement would create a dynamic to propel the story forward, much like how the adding on of voices and movement in the headliners section highlighted a chaotic moment. The audience was invited to walk a day in the shoes of these youth, to see and hear what they face daily, and are called to do something about the changing world. It’s important to note that the changing world the student referenced was also about a changing generation, and how she and her peers were no longer wanting to stand by and watch injustice happen in their community. The play ends with the students standing in a line and saying three statements with complimentary gestures:

ALL: (students fold their hands over their hearts)

My dream...

(students face each other, pairing off and have arms extended towards each other) Our dream...

(students turn to face the audience, arms extended out to them) What’s your dream?

At the end of their performance, the students received a standing ovation for their work. Their audience was a diverse group of individuals, representing corporations, non-profits, and foundations that give to HOPE to help fund their programming. Thinking about the talkback the students held after the performance, the questions the audience had for them inquired their individual stories and how they went about crafting the piece. The students graciously recognized us from Orlando Repertory as their guides in the process, however they proudly and confidently talked about their experience creating the play from their own words. They talked about the games and exercises, including the writing prompts they were given to learn about movement
and vocal dynamics and how differing levels helps in creating emphasis to what they wanted to say. One student, who had never really opened personally about what this whole process and theatre group did for him chose to answer, and his response was incredibly moving. He spoke about why he wanted to join the group, and about how he and his sister were dealing with one of their parents not being approved to come to the United States, so their family had been separated for a few months at the time. He said he was so angry and confused, that he just started to shut down and isolate himself from others, including friends and family. Being a part of the theatre group helped him get his sense of community back and working on a piece that was representing his story helped him cope from the distress he and his family were going through. What impacted him the most was how he was able to move from a place of feeling powerless to feeling influential. He found his voice in theatre and wanted to continue the momentum in creating speeches and volunteering to go with groups to places such as Washington D.C. to be a part of conversations at large happening regarding immigration. I was deeply touched by his story, as it was my first time hearing it with everyone else in that space, and reflecting on it now once again highlights the importance of giving the students a place where they can take the lead and responsibility to create something meaningful and impactful for themselves and those who may feel they do not have a voice. In their own way they were agents of change for themselves and we were able to help them in having a conversation about the issues they were facing and then bridging the sides of this dialogue and inviting those on the outside to see and hear their story.
CHAPTER THREE: EL WIZ
PEGASUS PLAYLAB

In the summer of 2019, I was involved with Pegasus PlayLab, a new play development festival hosted by the University of Central Florida’s (UCF) Theatre department (Theatre UCF). Pegasus PlayLab receives hundreds of play submissions from emerging playwrights throughout the country. Three plays were chosen to be workshopped at UCF and performed as summer staged readings while one was chosen to be fully produced as the university’s mainstage summer show. The workshop has been designed to have the playwrights present during the rehearsal timeframe with the director, actors, and designers.

While only one play is fully produced, the others have two weeks to prepare for a weekend run as a staged reading, including a talkback after each performance with the actors, director, and playwright. The audience is invited and encouraged to be active participants during the talkback in hopes of cultivating an environment for critical and constructive feedback beneficial to the playwright and the production as a whole. Pegasus PlayLab is meant to give the playwright a space to hear and see how their play is interpreted by a creative team and audience. The goal is not for the play to be ‘finished’ at the end of the process, but rather for it to be further developed. This unique play development program requires many factors to be taken into consideration such as the university’s mission, the Orlando community, patrons of the university’s theatre department, and the students in the theatre programs. The plays chosen for this development process go through an adjudication committee of theatre graduate students to finalize the festival. The committee follows a rubric that helps filter plays based upon castability, quality of writing, quality of story, potential for growth, and audience response.
With this unique and collaborative opportunity, Theatre UCF students are exposed to more contemporary stories and gain experience working closely with a playwright. With this, the opportunity to bring in playwrights of color to offer their work to the community of students and patrons allows for a more culturally sustaining theatre experience within the educational institution. In my observations during my participation with this festival, I felt some plays are intentionally chosen to not only diversify the theatre season but to give opportunity to theatre students who may not always have the chance to play characters that are representative of their ethnic backgrounds. I served as the assistant director and dramaturg for *El Wiz*, a new Latino musical written by Paul Castañeda and Juan Cantu, along with Latino artists of the Orlando community. The play had gone through several renditions before making its way to Pegasus PlayLab. It was first produced as a one-act at the Orlando Fringe Festival, performed in a staged concert at UCF Celebrates the Arts, and in its almost full-length form was selected as the first staged reading for Pegasus PlayLab in summer of 2019.

Set in the midst of Puerto Rico’s devastation from Hurricane Maria, *El Wiz* takes a new Latinx twist on the classic American fairy tale of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and a Latino approach to the more modern film *The Wiz*. With familiar characters such as Dorothy, Espantapájaros (Scarecrow), Hombre de Lata (Tin Man), and León Cobarde (Cowardly Lion), the story of journeying back home remains intact, however, according to Paul, the idea of “home being a place” is shattered. This is due partly because of the displacement many Puerto Ricans faced from the devastation of Hurricane Maria in September of 2017. The play was first premiered at the Orlando Fringe Festival in the spring of 2018, and has many references specifically to the Puerto Rican community. There are many tributes and cheeky jokes to pop-
culture stories featuring Puerto Rican communities such as *West Side Story*, and the works of Lin Manuel Miranda, such as the musicals—*In the Heights* and *Hamilton*. In a conversation with Paul Castañeda, I remember asking him why there were so many references to Lin Manuel. His response was intentional, “we had to pay tribute to the Latino who changed the game for *us* to tell *our* stories.” It occurred to me then that this process would be immersed in the politics and opinions that surrounded the issues of diversity in educational theatres. My experience in this production was difficult to navigate, as I found myself engulfed in the opposing views that neither moved forward nor backward the agenda of diversity in the theatre department. Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, Associate Professor of Theatre at the University of Texas at Austin writes about this topic related to culturally responsive artistry:

> While many historically white institutions are beginning to diversify their season offerings by producing plays by, for, and/or about people of color, in doing so they tread complicated terrain. Such work requires attention to thoughtful representation and intentional audience development that fosters reciprocity. (3)

In order to produce *El Wiz* successfully within the confines of UCF, we needed to approach the play with a thoughtful consideration that also included our UCF theatre patrons, those in the Theatre UCF department (including students, faculty and staff), Paul and his creative team, and the Orlando and UCF communities. While this presents itself a massive undertaking for a show that would only run for two nights, I believe it would have been an opportunity to allow for growth in all areas and for all the people involved. However, the experience felt more like I was riding a pendulum, swinging backwards and forwards.
Who Do We Emerge

Pegasus PlayLab seemed to be a perfect venue for a show such as *El Wiz* because of the play’s innate collaborative nature and invitation to the Latina/o community to share their story. However, casting for *El Wiz* would prove to be a challenge, as there is only a small demographic of theatre UCF students who represent the Puerto Rican or greater Latina/o community.

It is important to note that the university application process stems from the K-12 experience ultimately affecting what students apply to universities and their programs. The lack of students of color applying to these programs is considerable and their reasons range from socioeconomic challenges to family upbringings. I know firsthand how much of a privilege it is to have the opportunity to study the arts and to pursue it as a career. Most students coming from marginalized communities are not encouraged and do not entertain the idea of applying to these arts-based programs for fear of financial instability for themselves and their family. Other contributing factors include lack of resources to pay for university tuition and fees, transportation and demographics of applicants of color in selective universities and degree programs (Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education 20).

Paul Castañeda was not only invited as the playwright to partake in rehearsals, but also as the director for the show, and on learning there would be potential trouble in casting, a conversation occurred about inviting Latina/o artists from the community to be involved in the production. I find that the challenge for artistic educators is to create a learning and professional environment without sacrificing sensitivity towards students’ identities. While the casting worked out to display a diverse demographic, there was still a part of me that felt like we were only checking off a box during auditions. The ability to tell a story came second to the obvious
first, do they look the part? This was my personal battle as a student. I knew that if I were to walk in an audition no one would consider me to be Hispanic, not by my appearance or my name. In my head, I felt that only by knowing me (meaning, knowing where my family comes from) would I ever be considered for the role. As an assistant director and theatre educator taking part in casting for El Wiz, I felt awkward and insincere, knowing I was only considering casting students who “looked” Latina/o or had a name in Spanish. However, even that mindset of casting was flawed because of the Puerto Rican demographic the play represents, and as a Puerto Rican, I can say we are a spectrum of diverse people within our own culture. We are made up of all skin colors, hair types, and our cultural and ethnic roots travel back to native Taínos, African slaves, and Western European countries such as Spain, Portugal and the Gaelic nations. With the color of our skin under the scope of scrutiny, the difficult question that came up for me during the audition process was, what kind of Puerto Ricans are we wanting to represent in this play? When I asked Paul this question, he laughed at first and then saw my genuine concern. Being on the lighter side of the spectrum, I understand my privilege is greater than most Puerto Ricans just based on the color of my skin. Paul answered politely, “we want to represent all Latina/os. It’s their story too.”

Paul’s words reminded me of Jorge Huerte’s foreword in the anthology Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences: “We come in all shapes and sizes; representing the full spectrum of the ‘color wheel’” (7). The perspective of this viewpoint allowed me as an artist to see myself in this work. The cast was ultimately diverse, joined by two members of the Latina/o theatre community and myself towards the end being a citizen of “NY’OZ” (the version of citizens of Oz in this play). The purpose of El Wiz being written,
according to Paul, was to create a play “for Latino artists”, therefore, every time it is performed, it would be fully served from production to performance by Latina/o artists. However, since this was a UCF setting, the main cast of characters needed to be students. While, I understand the season chosen by the department is dependent on the students we have in the program, I can see there is much ground work to be done to not only encourage students of color to study theatre in higher education for diversity’s sake, but for their own self-interest in doing work that preserves and represents their culture, history, and story.

Design and Production Meetings

Going into production meetings for El Wiz, the conversations on design, story and process centered on infusing authentic Puerto Rican culture. It was refreshing to hear I was not the only one in this process who felt insecure about not having the opportunity to express their culture in their art. The student designers were not creating full products of their designs, but rather were tasked with creating the fleshed-out idea in visuals aids. Our costume designer for the production was from Latino descent and he eagerly worked on his designs after hearing Paul speak so passionately about why this play was written at the first production meeting. The costume designer replied “thank you for telling a story that feels like home.” This is where the idea of home, not necessarily being a place, but rather a group of people who make up a community is a special part of El Wiz’s story, and this image resonates deeply with the Latino community. A lyric that comes to mind from the “Finale” of the show speaks to this, “the feeling of familia, that’s home.” Familia (family) doesn’t stop at those who are blood, but rather encompasses those who are there for you. This became key for my dramaturgical note for the
production. I wanted the audience to receive the message that yes, the story’s bones may be similar to the classic American fairytale, but it was entirely founded upon the theme of home and family. This theme of family and home is found in most Latina/o plays, whether for adult audiences or young audiences, the story is meant for everyone in the family. Jorge Huerta again speaks to these themes beautifully saying:

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 adult 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. (7)

Huerta points out the urgent questions about identity that is embedded within the Latina/o communities. This urgency is also found in El Wiz as Dorothy is desperate to leave her Island, even before the storm hits because she longs to find out her true identity. Her journey is a constant search for the answers to these questions Huerta highlights in his quote. Ultimately, Dorothy does see there is no place like home, even if her home is destroyed, she is a part of a community that will rise up and rebuild, because the process represents the essence of who they are.

Loud and Proud

When I first joined the El Wiz team, I was in the midst of taking a Contemporary Theatre class, and a study of the works of Federico García Lorca, a Spanish playwright, poet, and prolific
writer resonated with me deeply. His writings infused the rich Andalusian culture of southern Spain, creating a space for an audience to visualize the landscape of Granada and hear the flamenco inspired musicality of the dialogue between characters. This excited me as a Latina artist, wondering how to creatively express the movement of a culture and of a place within a written work. This was the first time I experienced a class where my culture was infused in the curriculum. When it was revealed that our final project would be a collaboration with an undergraduate level literature class in Spanish theatre, I remember being over the moon, while other classmates were concerned about their connection to the project. In speaking with a classmate, I expressed that I felt unease since no one in the class seemed to have a strong investment with the Spanish component to this project except myself. Her response beautifully stated what I have always been afraid to say out loud. Paraphrasing her words, she said “well I for one I am so glad we got to explore a different culture and different language from theatre that was not written by a white American man.” Looking back to this project, I can see where cultural sustainability is a model that is not only needed for someone like me, but for all students.

Having had the opportunity to collaborate with a department that comes from a different culture allowed us to expand our horizons as actors and theatre makers. Jason G. Irizzary, from the University of Connecticut speaks clearly to this idea of creating dialogue in his article about Project Fuerte: “the students embraced the collective identity that emerged through their shared marginalization while simultaneously trying to build bridges…” (Paris, 95). In collaboration with our Contemporary Theatre class and the Spanish Theatre Literature class, the demographics of students were split fairly evenly, and it was an opportunity to share a story about a culture that
was not meant to isolate non-Spanish students, but rather to build a bridge and conversation surrounding culture.

In a similar connection to Lorca’s works, I felt this too of the story *El Wiz* tells. My connection is strong to the Island and knowing *El Wiz* sprung up as a passion project for a community of Latina/o artists in response to Hurricane Maria reminded me of the small contribution of theatre I made in my first year as a graduate student. I created *coqui* (small frogs native only to Puerto Rico) puppets that represent a part of me and my family’s history in response to the devastation and injustice Puerto Ricans went through, and it was something that I wanted to keep pursuing. *El Wiz* created that opportunity. However, even with this passion I look back on my roles and can see there were missed opportunities to create an experience for audience engagement and interaction about culture and identity in an attempt to build relationships and community as a part of the message of the show.

Apart from that, I struggled with balancing my expectations in my roles as dramaturg, assistant director, and ensemble cast. For Theatre UCF, I had clear guidelines to follow as a dramaturg. I was expected to be an expert of the text, researching the history, environment, and playwright, everything that makes the play what it is, and hopefully fill in gaps for what might be unclear in the text to then be revisited by the playwright. What I found challenging was researching for a modern play still in its developmental stage, and although it resembles the characters and plot of the original *Wizard of Oz*, a more immediate goal is present: to raise awareness and set up a call to action for Anglo Americans about the inequalities that Puerto Ricans faced in the time of crisis.
As far as being an assistant director, the role depended on Paul’s expectations mostly to see where I was needed and in what capacity. It was not until the first few days of rehearsals where Paul expressed I could direct any scene of my choosing, and if he was not present in the space then he was comfortable with me leading the rehearsal. This came about from the many conversations we had about the meaning of the play and the impact he desired the play to have on the audience. I was initially very intimidated by Paul and this process, because I felt like I had a lesser role that would not have the opportunity to contribute to the creative development.

*Imposter Syndrome* dug into my ability to be confident in the work, however, in the words of Brené Brown, “we must reclaim the truth about our lovability, divinity, and creativity” (Brown 82). The stories I concocted in my head stemmed from the need to complete an incomplete story. Essentially what I mean is this - from not having grown up accepting and embracing a huge part of who I am, my story was incomplete and, therefore, my mind felt the need to complete it; however the completion came from a place of insecurity, and the story became one of unworthiness. Since I was just becoming confident in my new identity as a Latina artist, I felt like those who have always identified that way could see how new I was to the community. It took me time to warm up in the space, and then I realized that I was there for a purpose. I was not only a dramaturg and assistant director, but I was also an artist and educator within a university theatre department representing a demographic that is underrepresented within theatre academia. This shift in thinking came slowly, but I was able to find my voice within the rehearsals as I was entrusted with more responsibilities. It became apparent that I had a good sense of where the story was going and how to help the students explore identity as a part of their process in developing these characters.
Rehearsals

Going into rehearsals for this show, Paul introduced himself to the cast and gave a testimony of how this work began: “It started off as a joke,” he said casually. While watching the movie *The Wiz* with a few friends, they talked about what it would look like if there was a Puerto Rican version of the show. Once the Island was devastated by Hurricane Maria, the joke quickly became a call to action for the artists in the Latin community.

As art is a response to some reality, the spearheads of *El Wiz* felt their response would be in the capacity of this musical that not only brings representation and attention to what was happening on the Island, but also a call to action for those outside of the community to rise up and act. There’s an assumption that Puerto Ricans are rarely seen as Americans unless they live in the mainland. Lin Manuel Miranda, composer, playwright, and actor, wrote in a *Washington Post* column regarding the island’s devastation:

> There’s no shortage of compassion and goodwill for Puerto Rico among the American people. But it must be matched by the recognition of our government that the American citizens of Puerto Rico need, demand and require equal treatment. *(Washington Post)*

With this in mind, the community of artists that gathered to create *El Wiz* did so in necessity and urgency. It was inspiring to hear the cast share their own stories of what this show was bringing up for them, in regards to family and culture. There were challenges in the early stages of rehearsal as the play is bilingual, and contains many phrases in Spanish that do translate in either context or with the next line for audiences who do not speak the language. What was surprising to me was that during the first read-through of the script, the students were incredibly self-conscious about saying the Spanish text, including those who read and speak Spanish.
fluently. Even with myself, reading the bilingual stage directions was nerve-wracking because I was so afraid to say something wrong. There was a self-consciousness that made me think about training for actors in an educational theatre setting. What texts are we using so that language can feel freer when coming into the rehearsal space? How are we training our students to bring themselves into roles without questioning where they come from and what makes them who they are? While I believe there is no black and white answer for these questions, I think they ought to be explored. Remembering from my theatre undergraduate experience, the techniques and materials used to train the actors in the classroom or studio space were traditional and did not expand past the classical approach. However, in this new generation of artists, if we truly seek to have an inclusive and diverse theatre program, we should look towards a reevaluation of the curriculum and approaches so that it meets the needs of the students and reflects theatre today. While classical training is a great foundation, we should understand as theatre practitioners that as the art form changes, so do our students.

This is where cultural sustainability should be prominent when teaching acting and cultivating an inclusive environment in theatre education. While it is important for the student to understand the mechanics of voice body and imagination to enact their character, it is equally important for them to understand voice, body, and imagination of their own persona. The beginnings of theatre taught us this, as theatre was used as a primary source of retelling a culture’s history, encouraging youth to continue sharing the stories of their traditions and culture. Theatre as ritual is what I believe to be a loss of training actors and theatre makers to create art that is representative of the people, and instead postmodern trends represent fragments of the human psyche. While both should exist, it is my suggestion that educational theatres should
implement within their training space for exploration of self and one’s background as a part of the students’ work. Latina/o theatre has historically not strayed away from the traditional form of theatre, however the infusion of culture and diversity found in their work allows for a celebration of a segregated group of people.

With that in mind, I saw where I could help the actors in finding those moments of connection to the text. We first began with music rehearsals with Josh Ceballos, a Staff Accompanist and Music Specialist at UCF, fleshing out harmonies and accents on specific words in the bilingual songs. Along with the musical tones and rhythms, a continuous emphasis Josh put on the cast was the question of where the song was coming from? Was it initiated by a moment of desperation or triumph? A moment of confusion or a buildup of a lifetime of uncertainty? For the opening number of “Ayúdanos, Ayúdanos”, Josh was particular about the desperation needed in the song, and how that needed to come through first before the pretty musical notes. What Josh was emphasizing in this case, was a passion for the given circumstances of the people that are represented in this show. That’s where I found myself in with the cast. Whenever there were breaks, or moments where I would work a scene with the ensemble or a few of the actors, I wanted to break down the story, their story and the story we were telling.

One day, I remember walking into the rehearsal space, about ten minutes before we were starting, and was notified by the Stage Manager that Paul would not be in rehearsal. There was an emergency he had to take care of, and he left me and Josh in charge. Josh and I quickly convened and decided to do rotations. He moved into a smaller rehearsal room to work on specific vocal parts, and I worked through scenes with the rest of the cast. It was my first time
calling the shots, and while I had directing experience before, this felt completely different. I did not want to do or try something ‘wrong’, and immediately felt insecurity sweeping in. However, I reminded myself that I was recommended to be in the space. I had a purpose for being there and for serving in the capacity I was asked. We started with scene one, and the opening monologue is by the character of Tío, who is the narrator of the story and uncle to Dorothy. Tío speaks to the audience directly about the impact Hurricane Maria had on the Island, recounting the memory of the day of her landfall. When the actor finished saying the monologue, I asked him, “how did that feel?” He looked at me and said, “It felt fine.” I then probed with more poignant questions: “No, how did it feel? To tell someone about loss and devastation that you have encountered and those close to you have encountered?” He stared at me blankly for a few moments and then responded with, “I didn’t think about that.” I nodded my head, and said with a smile, “that’s okay - that’s why we’re here.” I remember that conversation specifically because I wanted the cast to understand this production was not a typical show. They had an opportunity to tell a story, while fictionalized in this context, of the emotions of true events that happened to a group of people who felt helpless and were desperate.

While the process of El Wiz did not go as I had expected, I was grateful for the experience because I not only learned so much about who I am, but also about the tensions surrounding ethnicity and diversity within our theatre community. While tension is not usually described as something positive, in these circumstances I found it to be helpful in my understanding of both sides of the pendulum.
CHAPTER FOUR:
WATER BY THE SPOONFUL

I was first introduced to Quiara Alegría Hudes’ play *Water by the Spoonful* in my American Theatre class in the spring of 2018. We read plays ranging from the early 20th century to present day and it was not until we reached the period of the 1980s in American theatre that we read our first play written by Puerto Rican playwright José Rivera titled *Marisol*. As we progressed closer to contemporary theatre, we encountered more diversity in the plays and playwrights.

As I read *Water by the Spoonful* the first time through, I immediately connected to the themes of a dysfunctional family dynamic due to culture and expectations. The play is the second of Hudes’ *Elliot Trilogy* that consists of *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, *Water by the Spoonful*, and *The Happiest Song Plays Last*. While the trilogy follows the main character Elliot, a U.S. war veteran suffering from PTSD, *Water by the Spoonful* introduces a new group of characters who navigate through their own issues of drug addiction, belonging in the world and within their community, and redemption. Each character is confronted, over and over, with the question, “Who am I?” Only by finding their own answer to this question can they move toward some kind of hope. I am invested and mesmerized with the same question. Coming from a background rooted in faith, my Puerto Rican culture, and family, I reiterate my deep yearning to discover more about myself and the past that impacted the formation of my identity. I have found myself questioning where I belong and if I deserve the life I’m living. I have found myself terrified of losing those I love most because of my own mistakes and misunderstandings. I found myself in the characters of Elliot and Haikumom, in Yaz and
Orangutan, in Chutes&Ladders and Fountainhead. And as I found myself in them, I learned through the rehearsal process I was not alone in these discoveries. This constant movement of finding out who I am and who I am in the world around me is what Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Associate Professor of Rhetoric, Gender, Women’s and Sexuality Studies at the University of Iowa, describes as *moving relations* in her article about relational politics. As she notes “It is the expanse of this movement between reaching and retreating, in this oscillation between here and there, that “I” and “she” and “we” are becoming” (1). Rowe describes her encounter with a young Indian girl, while out at night with a friend in India. She says that while she is an advocate and part of a sisterhood of women of color sharing in community and building bridges, this encounter she saw as a failure, as she allowed her own discomfort in the presence of the stranger girl to create distance between them. This distancing is something that we do individually, especially in the context of discovering more about who we are, and it becomes more apparent when we encounter others who we deem different.

However, with our individual differences, we share collective flaws as a part of our becoming—similarly to the characters in this play, who are guilty of coming closer together and distancing themselves further from each other. This “recoiling” (2) as Rowe would call it, may come from an unfulfilled life, bad habits that become addictions, feelings of isolation and loneliness to the point of not belonging anywhere, or being haunted by the ghosts of the past—each of their stories, each of my own stories, each of your stories—is one that seeks redemption and community; we all seek a reason to live and somewhere to belong.
Who Do We Represent?

When the plays were announced for the 2019/2020 season of Theatre UCF, I was thrilled to see *Water by the Spoonful* on the list. Knowing the play was written by a Puerto Rican playwright and featured Puerto Rican characters, I wanted to be a part of it. I was put in contact with director David Reed, and shared with him my interest in joining the creative team. He asked me what role I wanted, between dramaturg and assistant director. I told him I was interested in more directing experience, and immediately it was done – I became the assistant director for the production.

When I first met with David, he shared his concerns about being a white male directing a play written by a Puerto Rican woman, about a group of people that he could not culturally relate to except for FountainHead—the only white man in the show. I understood his concerns and was happy that he expressed them to me in a positive way that made me feel like I would be a great asset to the production. He expressed that this was not only to be a great opportunity for me to learn as a student, but also to have my perspective a part of the vision for the show as a Latina female and artist. It became clear in rehearsals that he was willing to let me have as much or as little part in the show as I wanted. He was willing and wanting to give me the space I needed to share my thoughts and perspective because my presence mattered greatly in the process of unpacking the story and working with the cast.

During early conversations with David and dramaturg Brittany Caine, we talked about what ideas, themes, and concerns stood out most to us in the play. A crucial concern surrounded the auditions. While the play only asks for one or at most three of a specific demographic in the character descriptions, casting would prove to be challenging yet
again as in my experience with *El Wiz*. First, we needed three Puerto Ricans, or Latina/os to represent the 24-year-old Elliot, 31-year-old Yazmin, and 39-year-old Odessa (Haikumom). We also needed one Black male to represent the 50-year-old Chutes & Ladders and a Japanese, or a representative of Asian descent, to represent the 31-year-old Orangutan. FountainHead, the only white male character in the play, was the less concerning role to cast since there were plenty of actors to choose from in that demographic. David posed a question about the accuracy needed in the casting. Both Brittany and I expressed that the casting had to be as accurate as possible, meaning, we would not appropriate a character or change the intent of the playwright. We knew the challenge in auditions would be finding people who could play these characters and authentically represent someone of their demographic and age. Once again I found myself asking the question, do I cast with appearance or talent as priority? This question lead me to think about the next question: is the inclusion of diverse plays in the season a response to the needs of specific students, or a desire to diversify what we as an educational theatre space produce?

To answer the first question – simply put, yes we had to cast students who looked the part, and then from that group, decide who could carry the character past their appearance and look more deeply into their circumstances and life experiences. I learned that bringing representation to the theatre season is not an overnight endeavor. If we choose not to do a show because we are limited to the small pool of students we can choose from, then we are going to move even slower towards diversifying our theatre season. David and I knew we needed to speak clearly and frankly of these challenges as a part of the process to grow collectively and see how we could all help each other as a creative team with the cast and designers.
Another consideration for these characters was their circumstances of drug addiction, feelings of unworthiness, and wanting to belong, the circumstances that are transient to the human experience, no matter where we are from. At first, the age maturity of the characters in this show’s content did not cross my mind as something we needed to think carefully about because coming from an acting background, I have played characters older than me with experiences that were far different from my own. However, looking at it from a directing and educator perspective, David pointed out that we needed to put emphasis on these characters’ situations as a part of the rehearsal process.

We had to cast appropriately as possible. However, the two roles that would be the hardest to cast, were Orangutan, a Japanese born but American adopted female and the other being the multi character of the Arabic college professor, Professor Aman, who also plays the Iranian citizen Ghost and a Japanese Police Officer. However, I have to counter the thought of casting appropriately here, since Hudes specifically wrote this multi-role, two of the same ethnic origin and one of a completely different ethnic origin—to be played by one actor. Hudes provides a characterization of an individual who can move through time, space and ethnic origin, thus complicating further this idea of representation and identity.

Although we wanted to be as accurate as possible, we ended up casting individuals who would not ethnically be from a community but physically could portray someone of that culture. I first connected with Dra. Martha García, a professor from the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at UCF about referrals to professors who identify and are fluent in Japanese and Arabic. The script had several lines in both languages for which the cast would need help with translation and pronunciation. Dra. García was eager to help and quickly referred
us to Dr. Haidar Khezri who replied that he would be happy to come to our first rehearsals and work with our students. He worked well with the students on the pronunciation of a phrase that roughly translates to “can I please have my passport back” and would email every now and then asking about their progress. The other referral was not able to set up a time with us; however, we did connect with an alumni of Theatre UCF’s stage management program who is from Japan and spoke the language fluently. She was able to help in the translation of a phrase and worked remotely with our students on the pronunciation. By introducing the students to various cultures through these authentic representations, we made a small effort toward building a relationship between the Departments of Theatre and Modern Languages and Literatures. While this was indeed a first step, it makes me think about how we can continue to grow into a partnership with departments and faculty members from diverse backgrounds. This partnership could help support our work with diverse storytelling, which then leads to engaging diverse audiences, perhaps further inspiring and encouraging students of marginalized backgrounds to study performing arts.

Connection and Identity

Being a part of this production of Water by the Spoonful was unique because the conversations from the beginning of the process spanning production meetings and rehearsals, complicated our perceptions of the authentic representation of these characters and their collective stories. We were constantly asking ourselves, are we doing this right? Are we doing these characters and this story justice in our designs, staging, and beyond? And to counter, we wondered about at which point do we stop asking the previous question and let the play be what it is within the context of a mainstage show at UCF. These questions bring up what
scholar and researcher Zaretta Hammond calls levels of culture, in which she identifies three levels of culture educators should consider in the classroom to authenticate a culturally responsive and sustaining space. Hammond describes the three levels surface culture, shallow culture, and deep culture as parts of a fully grown tree. Surface culture is within the leaves and branches, being observable patterns, such as our preferences in food, clothing and music; shallow culture is situated at the trunk of the tree being behavior and social interaction such as attitudes towards authority, views on touching and verbal communication; lastly deep culture lies within the roots of the tree, being beliefs and norms that shape our worldview, such as religion, health, and ethics (Hammond 23). By framing these culture levels within theatre, we can equate costume, lighting, and set design to surface culture, staging, spatial relationship, and interactions between actors to shallow culture, and then the delivery of lines, the composition or mise en scène of a scene and the overall play to deep culture. Hammond suggests this for her classroom educators and I believe it applies for theatre practitioners as well:

Rather than focus on the visible “fruits” of the culture—dress, food, holidays, and heroes—we have to focus on the roots of the culture: worldview, core beliefs, and group values. (Hammond 24)

In thinking about the previous question, are we doing this right? I am inspired by Hammond’s thoughtfulness to this question as she notes that:

The answer to this question comes from understanding universal patterns across cultures. I call these similarities cultural archetypes. While cultures might be different at the surface and shallow levels, at the root of different cultures there are common values, worldviews, and practices that form these archetypes. (Hammond 25)
Hammond breaks down these cultural archetypes into two categories: collectivism and individualism (Hammond 25), positioning a community mindset vis-à-vis an individual mindset. I believe this perspective has to be one of Hudes’ main interest with Water by the Spoonful as seen within the relationship between Orangutan and Chutes&Ladders. Both come from seemingly different locations, backgrounds, and cultures, yet their connection to each other is, in my opinion, the strongest of all the characters. This is clear because despite their surface and shallow cultural differences, they share a sentiment of longing for human connection with someone who accepts them for who they really are.

These concepts of culture were invaluable in the rehearsal process to access these characters by creating a space where the actors could share, along with David and me, parts of ourselves. Rehearsals began with an in-depth conversation about the major themes and ideas that stood out to us all in the play. We had a similar dialogue to that of the initial production team meeting with the cast and wrote on a white board their thoughts. The white board was filled with words such as redemption, PTSD, identity, culture, family, and much more. We then collaboratively solidified which ones we would focus more on for this production, not totally disregarding the rest, but having a few of the ideas help give the show a direction and structure. What was amazing about this process was coming in agreement and togetherness to where we all saw the show from a collective perspective and respecting that it nevertheless meant something different for each of us individually. One of the key parts of this play for me that I loved exploring throughout the process was the idea of being a part of /apart from, which I first heard during a presentation in the spring of 2019 by Dr. Dorita Hannah, an Interdisciplinary Architect for Performance Design. Dr. Hannah presented images of an art installation at the Prague
Quadrennial that stuck with me. The image was of a variety of hundreds of chairs inhabiting a space, which gave me a tangible image of the meaning of the phrase *a part of/ apart from*. While in our production chairs were not used within the design, the presence and differences of the chairs share similar attributes with the characters. I remember in both of the design meetings and in our first rehearsals, this phrase was written on the board, and while we were condensing our list to about four foci such as redemption, addiction, and perception vs. reality, I was vocal in keeping *a part of/ apart from*, because it held so much significance to the vision of this production. All the characters in this play have strong identities that are rooted in addictions, their hometowns, and their cultural backgrounds. This shows in the differences of how they speak, what connections they have to water, and how they all feel *different*. Just as the chairs face different directions, are painted with different colors, and probably were made and lived in different places, these characters share among them these similarities.

Working with a text that is not only contemporary but establishing distinct diversity within its characters has been eye opening to see why it is important to talk about identity, and not only within the context of this show, but as part of getting to know each other as a cast and creative team. Through our “story time,” beginning with warms up in rehearsals, one person would stand in front of the group and tell a story any story they were comfortable with sharing. At first the stories were funny and lighthearted; the actors were a bit stiff and closer to the rest of the cast. As we continued to tell stories through the rehearsals, David encouraged everyone to take a stance more center stage, further from the cast, and tell a story that may not be funny, as long as they were comfortable to share it with the group. David and I also shared stories in this process, which established a greater level of trust and openness between the cast and the
directors. Through this time of sharing stories, we got to see a bit more of who we are, which allowed for the conversation of identity to be freer in the rehearsal space. When talking about a childhood memory for example, it was amazing to see how most of the cast connected it with where they were born or where their family is from, and that affected whatever was happening in the situation they were describing. This gave everyone a platform to open up and be themselves, in a way that I never experienced as a student actor in a rehearsal.

The opportunity to have explored this journey in the rehearsal space was essential as we then moved towards finding the physical and virtual lines that connected the characters. For example, in Scene 7, Odessa and John (Haikumom and FountainHead) are at a diner, talking about John’s addiction and how Odessa can help him in finding support. They are then interrupted by Yaz and Elliot. Up until this point in the play, the audience is not aware of their relationships. Yaz and Elliot are cousins and their aunt Ginny had just died. Ginny raised Elliot as her son, because her sister, Odessa, Elliot’s biological mother, could not due to her addiction to crack cocaine. There are striking arguments about money needed for the funeral; John believes he is helping the situation by handing Elliot two hundred dollars to cover what Odessa owes. Elliot, a North Philly born and raised Puerto Rican war veteran, has no interest in taking money from the white rich “user.” Already in this scene, the audience is seeing and hearing this “shallow culture” of who these characters are through their interactions with each other. Elliot, Yaz, and Odessa are a part of the same family, by blood; however, Odessa could not be more apart from her son due to her own addiction that led to their falling out, in which she is constantly reminded that she is at fault. While John is very much apart from the family culturally, he is a part of Odessa’s world virtually, being an online member of her addiction
support group forum, where she is the site administrator. However, as tensions grow in the scene, it is clear that Odessa begins to lose her relationships even more, which drives her to return to her addiction again after having been clean for seven years.

This scene is incredibly intricate, and it required a lot of reflection and conversation between myself, David, and the actors to excavate and play with the relationships in this scene. The cultural implications in this scene are specifically formulated through the text. In previous scenes, Odessa as her virtual counterpart Haikumom, speaks gracefully and provides poetry in the form of *haikus* to the group of online chatters in recovery. She speaks eloquently, evading the use of fowl and oppressive language in the chat room and by censoring anyone who does so. In this scene, however, Odessa cusses out her son Elliot. She talks less like her online counterpart and speaks in her native Puerto Rican Philly slang. This surprises John, as he knows her to be quite different from online. She indirectly apologizes for the outbursts claiming her “family knows how to push every button” (Hudes 34).

Odessa’s concerns in this scene revealed another challenge her character faces within the play, which is a challenge that I and many face: the perception of how others see us and how in reality it makes us feel. Odessa apologizes and hides her background from her online community. The character of Yaz also struggles with this identity crisis and finds herself a part of nothing: she does not identify with her job at Swarthmore College any longer and feels estranged from her husband and family. She gives a clue to this in a conversation with Elliot while buying flowers at a Flower Shop for Ginny’s funeral.

ELLIOIT: You love ideas. All you ever wanted to do was have ideas.
YAZ: It was an elaborate bait and switch. The ideas don’t fill the void, they just help you articulate it. (Scene 5, 23)

Having this conversation in rehearsal was eye opening as there were a lot of similarities to this insider/outsider persona that the characters of Yaz and Odessa, and really all of them, possess.

The student who played Yaz expressed during rehearsal that she loved her story because she got to a point where she could finally embrace and accept her heritage by becoming the “elder” of the family. I found affirmation in areas in my walk as an artist and educator that I did not know I needed during this production. When it comes to my own approach in directing, the story is the most telling aspect of the play. How did my presence as an assistant director enrich the process? What made the experience meaningful was working with a group of ethnically diverse student actors and being a part of that representation as an assistant director. It was thrilling to see themselves discover their own connections to these characters that they were able to tap into at a personal level of understanding and empathy.

What we discovered in rehearsals was more than the blocking or the trendy imagery that would make the story exciting, but rather we discovered pieces of who we are and how vital that discovery was in the process of exploring the characters and the world of this play. While the play itself is not necessarily talking about Puerto Ricans, Japanese Americans, African Americans, and Whites, it cannot go unnoted that these specific identifiers are mentioned because it does shape who they are, and who they are trying to be, which is why cultural identity became an important conversation in the rehearsal process.

This led me to the second question I posed earlier in the chapter: is the inclusion of diverse plays in each given season a response to the needs of specific students, or a genuine
desire to diversify what we as an educational theatre space produce? At first, I thought I could answer this question by comparing the differences of adding diversity and simply being diverse in the shows we select for our audiences and students. From my perspective at that time, I felt that adding diversity to a theatre season was a conscious and intentional choice to show that as a historically white institution we do celebrate diversity: just look at our amazing season featuring Black and Latina artists! However, after many conversations and research regarding what is culture and what is diversity, I discovered I had my own bias within this argument. While, that seems logical for me, I did not realize that it was making me blind to see why the seasons were chosen in this way. It is a good thing that we are adding in more diverse stories to our seasons, and it is a greater thing that it gives opportunity to the students of color we do have in our programs; however, the work cannot end there. In order to move from point A, of adding diversity to foment its representation out there, to point B of not having to think about it because we would be diverse enough, it takes one show at a time. It takes one new student of color, or students representing multi-ethnicity, being accepted into our programs at a time, and it does not happen overnight.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

A few months ago, I was watching Disney’s *Moana* with my sister one evening, and while we have watched it well over ten times since its 2016 release, we never tire from the story. *Moana* follows a young teenage girl of the same name who lives in the magical Polynesian Islands. She is next in line to be the village chief, and her father and mother taught her the way of the island, including the well-known rule that “no one leaves.” They believe the ocean to be dangerous and mischievous, and the Island was a gift to their people, so they must maintain it and live off the land. Moana, however, is very much like her grandmother, curious and enchanted by the ocean. As her grandmother lays dying, she gives Moana a necklace containing a stone that is the supposed heart of Te Fiti, a mystical goddess who could save their Island from being consumed by darkness. She tells Moana she must do what she could not, and return the heart of Te Fiti to its natural place—only, it is across the ocean towards the horizon, a place where no one goes. In tears about her grandmother’s passing, Moana sets off on her own, venturing out to the unknown waters and making friends and enemies along the way while questioning who she is and where she belongs in the world.

Now, I preface with this story, because while thinking about the concepts of cultural sustainability, it always circles back to who we are and where we come from. The connection here is with a song Moana sings before the climax of the movie, in which she is visited by her grandmother’s spirit, while alone on a boat in the dark ocean. Her grandmother sings, “Moana, you’ve come so far, Moana do you know who you are?” Moana thinks for a moment and answers in a song, “I am the daughter of the village chief, we are descendants
from voyagers and they call me.” This line resonated with me differently this time than the other ten times I heard it before. While in the midst of reflecting about my own identity and culture, I finally understood her journey and, in that moment, began to really understand my own. In many ways, Moana and I differ; however, the similarities come from accepting who we are, and understanding that while we may not be the picture-perfect version of our culture, there’s a strong call to preserve and sustain the values and customs our cultures contribute to the world. While Moana is a fictional character, her journey to finding out who she really is and where she belongs is one that all of us experience, but most urgently this is the journey that many marginalized young people face while living in the United States.

Mexican-American artist César Chavez said, “Preservation of one’s own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures” (Hammond 21). I believe this quote helps us rethink the misconception of the term preservation. The word has unfortunately been referenced in genocidal movements such as Nationalism and Fascism and, therefore can cause uneasiness when using it to describe the intent of being culturally sustainable. However, Chavez offers an alternative that differs from the term’s scandalous past and instead challenges us to view preservation as an act of respect and understanding of different cultures. It charges us to be co-existing with each other, equalizing everyone in the same respect. The productions I have spoken about circle around to the need for the collective and individual search for identity, and the importance of making space for diverse representation.

This need reflects the historical climate of the United States’ relationship to the cultural identity of its citizens and immigrants alike. We as a country continue to grapple with a foundation established upon unity and freedom, but also colonization and dehumanization in the
forms of discrimination and slavery. The country was not “written with people like us [Latina/os] in mind” as Alicia Meléndez, journalist and advocate says in her podcast “Latina to Latina” while interviewing Senior Vice-President of Viacom, Daisy Auger-Domínguez. From explaining this part of our country’s history, they transition to the conversation of what culture is like today in the United States—specifically business culture—and how Daisy’s work is all about diversifying the culture. The follow up question is how does the culture change? Auger-Domínguez replies:

One day at a time. I mean, really, I tell my talent acquisition team, we change the DNA of this company one hire at a time. We need to really upscale folks, and by upscaling, I mean that we need to really help folks understand and build their own narrative, not a narrative that’s imposed on them but a narrative that feels right to them. And, everyone has an insider-outsider story. (Auger-Domínguez)

This conversation between the two women and, specifically, the quote above resonated something in me that I did not think about during the process of the three productions presented in this thesis project—I am not alone. So many times, in the process I felt like I was fighting the battle for diversity, representation, and authenticity alone, but that is not the case at all. There have been others before me chipping away at our country’s infrastructure that has seeped into all aspects of American culture, especially universities and more presently, theatre. I now look at these productions as a stepping stone for myself in my career to continue the work that is going on, in terms of moving towards diversity and a culturally accepting theatre education experience. It might not always be acknowledged by others or seen as progressing, but it is—just slowly, and that is okay. If this work is being done, and there are people—like myself, who are passionate
and invested in moving the needle forward to continue to do so, then we will always be in a better place than we were before.

Today, this is being challenged more than ever, but it is also being praised. Musicals such as Hamilton speak about the United States’ origin, and the values our founding fathers set before the citizens. The musical praises the accomplishments of those who were immigrants to this new world and has informed the ideology of the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The play gears patriotism to those who may have never found that sense of patriotism for America. Those that have ancestries of people who were once slaves, who were not considered to have the same rights as white men and women, and who were brutally discriminated against, can now see people who look like them as a part of the country’s history, where they are not in lesser roles but equal ones. That is what Hamilton does, and continues to do, and it moves the needle beyond the agenda of having representation on stage towards creating a show that is accessible for all. It was just announced at the beginning of this year that Hamilton will be filmed live on stage with the original cast and put on Disney+. At first, when musicals were being filmed and then televised, I, like many, were quick to judge, arguing that it demystifies the experience of going to the theatre to see the live performance. However, now being a member of this theatre community, I see so many times how hard it is for those to access the theatre with reasons ranging from location to affordability.

This has made me recognize my own privilege. While I did not grow up seeing theatre representative of my own cultural and ethnic background, I still had access to theatre. In this process I have spent a lot of time reflecting upon how I had a tough time as a Latina woman getting roles, not having representation, and feeling excluded. But when I look back and realize
how much access to theatre I had in comparison to the children and youth from my church community, HOPE CommUnity center, and in my neighborhood, who have had little to no experience with theatre, it has become crucial for me now to have intentionality in the work that I love.

**Apathy to Agency**

This brings the conversation back to the imperative questions of who am I, and why does it matter? José Casas, Chicano TYA Playwright and Professor at the University of Michigan writes in his introduction of the anthology *Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences*, “How do others see me when I struggle to see myself?” (Casas 10). In context, Casas is talking about his initial struggle with finding his place and voice within Theatre for Young Audiences as a Latino playwright and artist. I share this struggle in trying to navigate the narrow path in theatre that I feel was unconsciously created for me to take. What I am talking about here are two forms of racial intentions, one that is intentional, and one that results from a place of normalcy in a society.

As I grew up, I faced rejection and discrimination in educational institutions from peers and teachers. Discrimination manifests itself in an atmosphere of social rejection, as what scholar Baldwin-White describes to be “the rejection-identification model posits that discrimination is a manifestation of social rejection that activates individuals’ desire to belong” (Baldwin-White et al. 45). I believe this is something artists of color face even today because rejection is a large part of the business of entertainment. Although we are seeing artists of color rise up and create a work that is for them and by them, it has been a long road to get to a point
where we can now begin infusing these pieces into the repertoire we teach young artists. So how do we do this? How do we continue into a movement of culturally sustaining theatre, so that it does not feel like we are checking off a diversity box, but rather challenge institutions to create pathways for a more multicultural approach in the theatre educational experience?

We need to first recognize the cycle in which marginalized students can find themselves in regards to representation, access, and agency within the theatre industry. If the issue is the lack of diversity within our theatres, meaning within our patrons, students, and shows, we need to rethink why this is still occurring. The pattern that I have noticed and what I believe to be is a major contributing factor to this issue is reflected in the following figure.
Figure 1: Three major potential pipeline of factors contributing to the lack of diversity in theatre education programs
This image illustrates my thought process in the pattern I have found from my research and my own experiences, suggesting a potential reason for the level of diversity we have yet to see in theatre education. The image shows three bubbles on the left-hand side of potential reasons why a student may not apply to a theatre program (this is my theory for university and local professional theatres such as UCF and Orlando Repertory).

The first circle is *socio economic challenges*. From my research, I have discovered that this breaks itself down into accessibility challenges such as transportation, ticket costs, program/application fees and classes/camp costs, and location of theatre or university. Looking at Orlando Repertory Theatre, there are many pathways created for students to have access to the theatre who normally do not have the means or opportunity through field trip performances, scholarships, free or reduced tickets, and many community-based programs and residencies. UCF also provides application fee waivers, scholarships, fellowships, reduced ticket prices for UCF students, and multiple buses for transportation to campus.

However, even with these pathways towards helping students financially, the next circle depicts a deeper challenge rooted in *family needs and values*. In my experience, my family invested a lot in me, therefore there were always high hopes that I would make something of myself where I will find financial stability. In other people’s experiences that were similar to mine, it was not only for them to make money, but to make enough so that they could also provide for their family. The needs of the family are a concrete reality placed on children of Hispanic/Spanish/Latina/o culture. The narrative in most of our stories begins from the great sacrifice most of our families have taken to get us (the children) a good education. Therefore, in most cases from the students’ perspective in this community, there is an expectation to pursue a
career that has financial stability. As a result, students from these communities are not encouraged to pursue careers viewed by their families as financial instable, and in many cases, the fine arts is looked down upon for not being a reliable source of income. Actress and advocate Diana Guerrero describes her journey as an artist not pursuing acting until her twenties because when she was younger she saw it as privilege in a time where she needed to pursue something that could provide for herself and her family. Guerrero continues to speak upon her conflicting desires as she realized her longing for a career in acting but feared how she would be viewed by her family. These challenges do not encourage students to pursue theatre, which means they are not applying to the programs; as a result, theatre program directors do not have a diversified group of candidates to choose from when they are selecting students.

A part of the issue regarding families not seeing any success within the arts, except for a chosen few like Jennifer López, leads to lack of representation, which causes disbelief. I believe today we are seeing so much more representation out there in all media forms, newsrooms, television, theatre, and music, which is praiseworthy. However, there is a generational mindset within the Spanish-speaking community at large that believes a successful career within the arts is not something for everyone. Therefore, time and time again as a child I was told no, theatre is not something you can do. Another factor I have faced is my family’s misconception that success in theatre equates to having a career on Broadway. If I was not achieving that level of success, then it was viewed as a pointless pursuit. While this was well intended and my parents have truly wanted the best for me, it became discouraging, and for so many other artists out there, this has been true for them as well. For the many students I have encountered who have incredible skills and talents, it was clear that they would not pursue a career in the arts.
As a practitioner, I must ask myself, how can I help? First, I need to discover and accept who I am and why that matters. I need to also let that be my drive in the work I do to help students see who they are and why they matter, especially within the arts. This medium is not a vanity pursuit, although many people may view it in that way. To me, this is the way in which I can give back to my community and to my family, and it is more about allowing myself to embrace the discomfort. It is uncomfortable for me to speak Spanish because I do not know it well, but I need to keep trying so I can broaden the scope of people I can engage and connect with. It is uncomfortable for me to sit at a table where I felt like I did not belong for the longest time, and establish myself as an important voice in the room. It is uncomfortable for me to ask for more representation, because I am used to having less, but I know I, and many like me, deserve to ask for a more diversified representation because we are still not seen enough.

**Culturally Sustainable Theatre**

How do we get to culturally sustainable theatre? We need to introduce a new pattern; we need to disrupt the infrastructure of access and representation. In the following figure, I illustrate a new cycle that possesses pieces of what we already do and suggests how we can keep moving forward. While this scheme is not a one route formula or the only way in which we can progress, it proposes a breakdown of what my research and experience have uncovered.
Figure 2: Cycle of factors contributing to diversity and representation in theatre education programs
Comparing Figure 1 with Figure 2, the adjustments I made were based upon a realization that in order to bring more awareness to marginalized families who do not see themselves reflected in artistic mediums, I suggest we first look at representation labeled in Figure 2’s top circle. This indicates the need for artists of color (also of varying abilities) to do that work, which brings it back to those artists receiving training/education.

However, once we have a more diverse representation, the next challenge that presents itself (second circle to the right) is accessibility. Now, accessibility here is mostly focused on creating pathways for these communities to experience theatre that has cultural representation through patronage. This can be done through in-school performances, field trip shows, and low to zero costs for tickets. In my second year of graduate school, my TYA cohort and I worked on a touring show through UCF called The Last Paving Stone. We performed the show at UCF and toured it at two different schools. Representation was not initially in our thought process when casting for the show and picking the schools we would go to; however, I wish it were. Our cast was diverse in race and ethnicity and in age. The schools we toured at were vastly different, one private and one charter Title I school. We wanted two vastly different audiences, ranging from those who have more resources and opportunities within the arts and those who do not. In the Title I school, we performed the show in their cafeteria and when I looked across the room, most of the students were Black and Hispanic. The show was well received and the students were so interested in the cast and wanted pictures with them after the performance. While I may be reading too much into it, I believe some of them were mesmerized with seeing people in the show who looked like them and they loved it. When we asked the students, who had ever seen a show before, only a few hands out of the forty were raised. I wish at the time, as the Community
Engagement Coordinator I took more initiative to connect with students and see who felt more encouraged to maybe want to pursue theatre education.

This leads me to the next bubble in Figure 2, seeing themselves. This next step is not so much a concrete action, but rather a feeling of change. It is my hope that if these students and their families see themselves within the work then the mindset of “I don’t belong”, or “I can’t do that”, changes to “I can do that and I do belong!” Once they believe they can do it and want to try, we need to provide resources that allow them the necessary space and resources to succeed.

This aspect comes in the form of training (Figure 2); artist in residence in schools, community programs, and local theatres with low to zero cost in classes are some examples of how these students can explore theatre. Working with the students at HOPE CommUnity Center opened my eyes to the hunger which they have to do something creative. Once we could give them the tools and platform they needed to express themselves, it took off from there. When we continued onto more projects, we created more opportunities for students who had been with the group since the beginning to now explore new roles as assistant directors, stage managers, and designers. The burst of creativity that they continue to explore excites me in this process because then it feels like that needle is moving forward and an impact is being made.

Once they have experienced theatre for themselves, they may choose to love it or not, pursue it or not pursue it, but at least the choice is theirs. One of our students at HOPE recently expressed to Maria and me that she has made the decision to audition for the theatre program at UCF. Almost in tears I look back and think, whether that was us or not, something changed in this student that made her want to pursue this art. The next step is the audition. This student feels encouraged and prepared to go into this step, and many other students with this same opportunity
of experiencing theatre may feel the same way. If their families see them doing this work and seeing their talents shine, they too may feel encouraged to want their child to pursue this dream. While this is all theoretical, this student’s desire to apply and go through the process of an audition motivates me even more to continue this work. If we seek diversity within our theatre seasons, we need artists that can do the work, and by working with these students back in their training years before college, we may bring about a confidence in them to apply to the programs. Thus, this brings more diversity to the application pool of students, growing the diversity in our theatre department, and supporting the diversity we want in our season to reflect today’s multicultural global community.

To be a culturally sustaining theatre program, whether at the university, community or professional theatre level, we need all artistic practitioners from all backgrounds within this field, to work together for the sake of one child from a marginalized community to realize their dream is possible. Our job is to continue pushing the boundaries of what art can do, but it is imperative that we also push the boundaries of who can be a part of what art means and represents at large.

This is not a one and done formula. I have worked with many students in my life, some have shown interest in theatre and others not. Some have pursued theatre all the way through high school but drop it in college. While these suggestions provide more opportunity and accessibility for marginalized students to experience theatre, there is still a cultural stigma that theatre is for the elite, and that the fine arts in general is something nice but not for everyone to pursue.
After my undergraduate education, I thought about giving it all up because I did not see myself in the work. I felt like I did not belong and moved away from New York, the only vision of theatre I fully grasped, thinking all those dreams were gone. My family thought the dream was over, and so did I. Then I was inspired to write a play. It was not about a Latina, it was about a fictional shepherd girl, looking up at the stars wondering if there was a God, and if so she wanted to find him, because everything she was living for felt meaningless. In the time I was writing this script, which ended up being a Christmas musical I directed at my church later that year, I found this master’s program in Theatre for Young Audiences. I applied to this program unknowingly going on a journey that lead me to complicate the questions of who am I and why does it matter. I am a Puerto Rican American, born in a low-income city, raised in white and Hispanic neighborhoods. My father and mother are Puerto Rican, and have worked since they were teenagers. They did not have luxuries of going to the theatre, or attending concerts and visiting museums. They lived in low-income communities, and worked hard for their accomplishments. My mother, while not having a college education, worked for multi-million dollar corporations and in elite real estate, being one of the only workers to know English, Spanish and Portuguese. My father holds two Master’s and uses his recent degree as a Nurse Practitioner to voluntarily take care of patients who have no health insurance or financial means to afford check-ups and medications. While my parents may have not always agreed with my choice to pursue theatre, they have always inspired me to work hard and give back in whatever it is I choose to commit. I do not have a typical Latina story, and it is more privileged one than most, but I have a passion to help students coming from minority backgrounds to realize their potential, and to see themselves differently. I challenge myself and theatre practitioners alike to consider our own views of
culture and diversity, and how we are able to pursue it in the theatre education space. In order to sustain this practice, we must continue to build community partnerships, which will help us develop deeper engagements with different cultures. We might assess the materials and curriculum we are teaching in our classes and look at our approach in the rehearsal space to see how we are being cognizant of the diversity of our students in these programs and/or in the increasing diversity we would like to see. While theatre creates opportunities for us to explore the stories of others, a culturally sustaining theatre creates the opportunity for us to explore how we see ourselves.

If we allow ourselves to sit in the tidal waves that rock us back and forth, neither moving us closer or further apart, we are never going to know that there is a shore, with sand, luscious plants, and fruit and we will also never know there is a vast ocean, full of exotic creatures, mysterious fathoms, and untold history that is a part of our identity.
Memorandum

To: Bianca Alamo
From: UCF Institutional Review Board (IRB)
CC: Vandy wood
    Julia Listengarten
    Barbara Frizsche
    Wendy Cartier

Date: March 26, 2020
Re: Request for IRB Determination

The IRB reviewed the information related to your dissertation WHO AM I, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER? REFLECTIONS OF IDENTITY AND THE NEED FOR CULTURALLY SUSTAINING THEATRE.

Based on the information you provided, this study would have been issued a Not Human Subjects Research determination outcome letter had a request for a formal determination been submitted to the UCF IRB through Huron IRB system.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB irb@ucf.edu.

Sincerely,

Renea Carver
IRB Manager
APPENDIX B
PERSONAL INTERVIEW APPROVAL
Permission Note for use of Personal Interview with Paul Castañeda.

Permission was granted on March 19, 2020.

Permission Note for use of Personal Interview with Maria Katsadouros.

Permission was granted on March 20, 2020.
LIST OF REFERENCES


Katsadouros, Maria. Personal Interview. 29 March 2019.


Rodriguez, Vanessa. “The Teaching Brain and the End of the Empty Vessel.” *Mind, Brain and Education*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2017,

