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## **Toward Culturally Responsive Artistry: Implications for Institutions, Artists, Educators and Audiences**

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### **Abstract**

In 2012, the Austin Independent School District reported that over 60 percent of its students identified as Hispanic. However, the number of theatrical offerings for children including Latino stories or Latino/a characters on Austin stages is staggeringly disproportionate to the number of Latino children living in the community. *Mariachi Girl* is a new bilingual Spanish/English musical for child audiences. This paper articulates and analyzes research findings from surveys collected from children, teachers, and care givers who saw the production. The paper introduces the term culturally responsive artistry and offers new perspectives and suggestions on how arts institutions and theater educators can form lasting relationships with minority communities.

### **Pre-Show Experience: A Case for ‘Culturally Responsive Artistry’**

While leading a talk-back following a performance of José Rivera’s *Boleros for the Disenchanted* at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston in 2008, I was bombarded with questions from the mostly white<sup>1</sup> audience. The company had invited me to share my perspective as a scholar engaged in Latino theatre and like the rest of the audience, I was seeing the piece for the first time. After I shared some of my reflections on the play as they related to the national state of Latino theatre, I opened the discussion to comments and questions from the audience. Many of the inquiries were about the bilingual nature of the piece, revealing the perceived non-accessibility of the play from the mostly monolingual audience. One woman asked, “Why is there a need for Latino plays and Latino theatres? Why are they segregating themselves?” I explained that there is a need for such companies as mainstream theatres often do not include Latino/a stories on their stages. Another audience member, who seemed frustrated with my comments about institutionalized racism and white privilege, apparently thought I was incriminating him and the rest of the audience in this historical inequity saying: “But, look, the Huntington just did this play, and look at who is—and who is not—here.” This man’s comments revealed one of the many challenges with historically white theatres producing plays by and about people of color. His comments suggested an expectation of immediate support from the racial or ethnic group that is being featured, even if the theatre has historically rarely or never featured that group. My scholarship and artistry respond to comments and questions like this man’s that are present throughout the United States.

The stories shared on stages across the United States do not fully represent the racial and cultural demographics of their communities. The 2010 census confirmed what previous censuses had predicted—with over 50 million people living in the United States, Latinos/as are the fastest growing minority group. Latino playwright and scholar Jorge Huerta (2003), states “we [Latinos/as] are not going away. This poses a challenge and an opportunity to theatres and theatre departments across the country: continue to ignore these people, or include them in our seasons and our curricula” (p. 761). Here, Huerta refers to a great need for Latino representation in theatre for all ages. However, U.S. youth are steeped in the process of developing a sense of self and therefore possess an even greater need for inclusion on our stages. Hence, those in the field of theatre education have a responsibility to consider and respond to the negative impact of Eurocentric practices with theatre by and for youth in a country that is becoming increasingly more diverse.

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<sup>1</sup> I intentionally do not capitalize the word white when referring to race throughout this document so as to interrupt the privilege that the word carries with it.

As a playwright, scholar, and teacher of pre-service theatre educators, I take responsibility in assuring that my work reflects the demographics of our state and country. Though Latinos/as currently comprise the majority of Texas public school students, school theatre programs throughout the state fail to reflect Latino stories and bodies in theatre classes and productions. This lack of Latino representation on stage is also prevalent in university theatre programs and regional theatres. These institutions serve as the models for university students seeking to become theatre artists and educators, and so the cycle continues. The following case study explores the skills required by culturally responsive theatre artists and educators.

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. In the fall of 2012, such a project was undertaken in Austin, Texas when ZACH Theatre (ZACH), Teatro Vivo, and the University of Texas at Austin Department of Theatre & Dance (U.T. Austin) partnered to produce *Mariachi Girl*. In this paper, I examine the production through the lens of culturally responsive artistry. Ultimately, I seek to open a conversation about the opportunities and challenges presented by producing plays of color at historically white institutions.

*Mariachi Girl* is a new bilingual Spanish/English theatre for young audiences (TYA) musical written by the author of this paper, with music by Héctor Martínez Morales. In this paper, I draw from my experiences working with ZACH, Teatro Vivo and U.T. Austin to produce this play. Additionally, I led a team of researchers in conducting a study at school and public performances of the play, in which adult and child audience members were surveyed, including teachers and caregivers. The main research questions of the study were: How does experiencing Latino/a themed plays impact audience members and performers? How do Austin community members relate to the play *Mariachi Girl* and perceive its value in the community?

As playwright and researcher, I was engaged throughout much of the process, including rehearsals, production meetings, and performances. My role as a participant-observer in this artistic process ultimately shaped the process of developing this study, collecting the data, and crafting a descriptive narrative of my findings. I draw from my experiences and observations to narrate this case study, and I weave the findings of our research team throughout my analysis of the process and product of this production of *Mariachi Girl*. Borrowing from culturally responsive education theory, I argue for a paradigm of culturally responsive artistry, specifically theatre that reflects the cultures and identities of the communities in which it is performed. Through this study exploring the value of Latino theatre to the Austin community, I intend to raise critical questions as well as forge a discussion about how public schools,

universities, and arts and cultural institutions face great opportunities and responsibilities when situated in diverse communities. This paper introduces the concept of culturally responsive artistry as a lens to further investigate the role of the historically white theatre (ZACH), noting the opportunities ZACH took advantage of and missed throughout the process. The paper finally offers some considerations for next steps for historically white institutions seeking to engage with people of color in their communities.

### **Exposition: Curtain Up On Culturally Responsive Artistry and *Mariachi Girl***

*Mariachi Girl* follows eight-year-old Carmencita (also called Cita for short), who dreams of playing mariachi music like her father, though her father insists that traditional mariachis only include men. The characters in the play speak both Spanish and English. Young Carmencita struggles with her identity and works out her problems with her two Barbies: U.S. Barbie and Mexican Barbie. Eventually, her teacher gives her a book about a famous female mariachi, and her understanding of what is possible expands. The play includes original mariachi music by Héctor Martínez Morales, written to be performed by live mariachi musicians. Ultimately, the play explores how one girl can challenge her identity in a modern society while embracing her rich heritage.

It is important to examine the context of this co-production. The racial landscape of Austin and its school systems plays an important role in this case study. Over 30 percent of the population of Austin is Latino. The percentage of children who are Latino/a in Austin schools is significantly higher than that; in 2012 the Austin Independent School District (AISD) reported that over 60 percent of students identified as Hispanic. However, the number of TYA offerings including Latino stories or Latino/a characters on Austin stages is staggeringly disproportionate to the number of Latino/a children living in the Austin community.

ZACH, Teatro Vivo, and U.T. Austin, the stakeholder in this production, each came onboard with their own individual mission, history, and access to resources. While the three entities worked together to bring this play to the Austin community, the three did not have equal investment nor final say in the production. The play was listed as a co-production with ZACH Theatre and Teatro Vivo, in partnership with the University of Texas Department of Theatre and Dance. However, because the production was housed at ZACH and since ZACH was essentially engaging with Teatro Vivo in an effort to boost their Latino audience, I focus more on ZACH's efforts around cultural diversity in this paper. In its 79<sup>th</sup> season and with an operating budget over six million dollars, in 2012, *Mariachi Girl* was one of ZACH's first productions of a Latino themed play, and its first ever Latino TYA offering, though they have been producing TYA for over 20 years. On its website, ZACH refers to itself as "one of Austin's most vibrant and innovative performing arts organizations, creating intimate theatre that ignites the imagination, lifts the spirit and engages our community" ("About ZACH

Theatre” 2012). ZACH does not articulate a specific racial, ethnic, or cultural community. Founded in 2000, with an operating budget that is a small fraction in comparison to ZACH’s, Teatro Vivo’s mission reads, “Inspired by the power of theater to both educate and entertain, Teatro Vivo produces and promotes Latino based theatre, providing a window into the Latino community to make theatre accessible to all audiences, especially those underserved in the arts” (“Teatro Vivo” 2012). This mission makes Teatro Vivo’s focus on Latino theatre clear, while aiming to bring Latino stories to Latinos and non-Latinos alike, and also reflects the goals of culturally responsive education and artistry, terms that I will discuss in depth in the next section. *Mariachi Girl* is one of Teatro Vivo’s first productions of a TYA play. The mission statement of the U.T. Austin Department of Theatre & Dance states that it “exists as a diverse educational community of artists and scholars who are committed to excellence in teaching, research, creative practice and service . . . we are actively committed to diversity as essential to the educational experience of our students” (“The University of Texas at Austin” 2012). Department has, like ZACH, historically underrepresented stories of color in its mainstage season. For U.T. Austin and ZACH, supporting and engaging in this production helped them fulfill their articulated missions. For Teatro Vivo, engaging with such large, visible entities meant risking losing their visibility and identity in the process, but also gained the company exposure to people who might not otherwise see their work.

The stakeholders came to *Mariachi Girl* at different times, from different angles, and brought distinct intentions and resources to the collaboration. Teatro Vivo first encountered *Mariachi Girl* when the company selected it to be featured in their new play development program. The next year, in 2011, Teatro Vivo shared a revised draft of the play with the Austin community through a staged reading at the Mexican American Cultural Center. U.T. Austin Department of Theatre & Dance Chair Brant Pope expressed an interest in engaging with the Latino community since his move to Austin a few years earlier. Pope saw the reading and recognized the play as a potential bridge between the university department and Teatro Vivo. Artistic Director Rupert Reyes and Executive Director JoAnn Carreon-Reyes of Teatro Vivo serve on the Arts Council for the Department of Theatre & Dance at U.T. Austin and Pope and Reyes engaged in a discussion of how to coproduce the play. Pope signed on as director after multiple conversations with the playwright and Teatro Vivo producers. Pope explained that U.T. Austin would be able to offer in kind support and faculty time and talents, though the department could not consider *Mariachi Girl* part of its season nor assume production costs. ZACH Theatre Education Director Nat Miller first came into contact with the play when he heard JoAnn Reyes, Pope, and Roxanne Schroeder-Arce speak about collaborating to develop and produce the play during a panel titled “Navigating partnerships: enhancing artistic work through institutional collaborations” at an International Performing Arts for Young People showcase in Austin in 2011. The three entities began to discuss how they might work

together, and it was decided that the project would be billed as a coproduction of ZACH and Teatro Vivo in collaboration with U.T. Austin.

Carreon-Reyes says Teatro Vivo wanted to produce *Mariachi Girl* because “the play is an important story for our community, for Latino/a children and other children to see that we all have dreams” (J. Carreon-Reyes, personal communication, October 7, 2012). ZACH’s interest in the play was similar. Miller says he wanted to produce *Mariachi Girl* because, “over 70 percent of the students who come to see our plays are from a Latino/a background. I wanted to make sure they were seeing their stories onstage and were represented” (personal communication, November 5, 2012). Pope was eager to connect U.T. Austin with the broader Austin theatre community and wanted to support the play as, “it is an American story. We all can relate to it, and yet it is told through a Latino lens which is important” (B. Pope, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

While ZACH and U.T. Austin had partnered before, this was the first time for Teatro Vivo to collaborate with the other institutions. They were excited to engage in this project, but also concerned about Teatro Vivo being overshadowed by ZACH in ZACH’s grand space. Teatro Vivo does not have its own performance space and typically rents theatre spaces for productions. Surveys demonstrate that some audience members were not aware that this was a collaborative production, despite efforts to inform through publicity, announcements at the show, and in the program, perhaps showing that the venue often indicates more to the public than what is written. In response to the question, “What is the value of *Mariachi Girl* to you personally?” a 54-year-old female who identifies as white, responded, “I’m delighted ZACH has taken this long overdue step to reach out to the Latino/a community in Austin.” In some ways, the efforts Teatro Vivo made to both produce the play and also to engage with ZACH were overshadowed by the production physically taking place at ZACH.

ZACH has a reputation of producing excellent theatre in the Austin community. The company is also well known in the schools and has been bringing school audiences to plays for 20 years, providing “field trip opportunities for students to experience live theatre with educational content,” according to the ZACH web site. ZACH provides teacher resource guides and consciously aligns its TYA plays with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills state standards. Miller felt confident that he could book the school performances, but was not certain of how the public performances would sell at ZACH. In partnering with Teatro Vivo, he was primarily looking to the Latino theatre company to engage their resources to help reach out to the Latino community and encourage them to attend the weekend family performances.

All three institutions had worthy intentions for wanting to collaborate to share the story of *Mariachi Girl* with the city of Austin. Each brought their own past and current orientations and resources. Negotiating such offerings would prove challenging and rewarding to all of the stakeholders, though the mission of ZACH to diversify its audience as the housing institution would come to the forefront.

### **Rising Action: Culturally Responsive Education Meets Theatre**

Until the famous 1946 Mendez vs. Westminster federal court case ruled that it was unlawful to support “Mexican schools” in California, racial and ethnic discrimination in education was common practice. The Brown vs. the Board of Education case finally ended legal public school segregation seven years later. Certainly, integrated schools did not end the challenges of educational access for students of color. Culturally responsive education, also known as culturally relevant education, has offered new pedagogical theory since the early 1990s in response to some of the continued challenges children of color face in schools filled with white teachers, white administrators, and books and curricula that do not reflect their lived experience.

Many studies and resources are available that examine the importance of diverse cultural representation in education. Chin (2013) notes that in the 1980s, discipline-based art education was highly scrutinized for its promotion of discriminatory art curricula. While Chin’s work looks specifically at visual art, similar criticism can be applied to discipline-based theatre education. However, within the field of theatre education—including creative drama, theatre teacher education, applied theatre, and TYA among other subsets—few research studies have approached questions of cultural diversity. Books like Sharon Grady’s *Drama and Diversity* (2000) and Johnny Saldaña’s *Drama of Color* (1995) explore drama activities with and about diverse groups, but little is available that investigates race and ethnicity in relation to audience impact and reception in TYA. Therefore, in this study I look to the field of education and adapt the term “culturally responsive education” to “culturally responsive artistry,” and finally apply the theory as I reflect on the recent production of *Mariachi Girl*.

For over the past 20 years, many pedagogues and scholars have written of culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching. Geneva Gay (2010) offers some of the most compelling arguments for such practice, outlining the five principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching as follows:

- Acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.

- Building bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.
- Using a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.
- Teaching students to know and praise their own and each other’s cultural heritages.
- Incorporating multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.

While each of these principles is distinct, they all emphasize the importance of acknowledging the students in the room. Teachers must adapt both curricula and methods of teaching to include the cultural backgrounds of the students and make connections to different cultures and aspects of society.

Gay’s (2010) theoretical contributions are applicable for theatres offering productions for young audiences. In the chart below, I adapted Gay’s culturally responsive education theory, first to culturally responsive artistry and then to culturally responsive theatre education. The first column reiterates Gay’s five principles as they relate to a public school classroom; the second column offers ideas of what these characteristics might look like in the context of a professional theatre; the third column relates the characteristics to a theatre classroom. I include this third column, culturally responsive theatre education, as I hope to extend this work to theatre teachers for consideration consider when creating curriculum and producing theatre with young people.

Big Idea	Culturally Responsive Education	Culturally Responsive Artistry	Culturally Responsive Theatre Education
Acknowledging cultural heritages	Acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.	Acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect audience members’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to theatre and as worthy content to be explored onstage.	Acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, in both the curriculum and methods of teaching theatre classes and in production.
Connecting self to world	Building bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as	Building bridges of meaningfulness between home and arts institution experiences as well as	Building bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as

	between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.	between the art form and lived sociocultural realities, thus making the work relevant.	between the art form and lived sociocultural realities, thus making theatre experiences relevant to the students' lives.
Different entry points for different learners	Using a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.	Using a wide variety of strategies to engage different people who enter the space.	Using a wide variety of instructional and production strategies to engage students and others who enter the space.
Modeling, valuing, and acknowledging cultural heritage	Teaching students to know and praise their own and each other's' cultural heritages.	Modeling and encouraging community members to know and praise their own and each other's' cultural heritages.	Teaching students to know and praise their own and each other's' cultural heritages.
Inclusion of many cultures on a regular basis	Incorporating multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.	Including multicultural information, resources, and materials in arts programs, written materials, institutions, and performances.	Incorporating multicultural information, resources, and materials in all class activities and productions in the theatre program.

Theatre teachers often look to regional theatre companies as a model for the plays they choose to produce, how they produce them and ways of representing and engaging communities. Like many regional companies, school theatre programs often fail to consider the full community in which a theatre program is located. In the classes I teach with pre-service theatre educators, I spoke with my students about some of the challenges and successes I perceived with this production of *Mariachi Girl*, in relation to culturally responsive education, culturally responsive artistry, and finally culturally responsive theatre education. Seeing a prestigious regional theatre company like ZACH produce the play offered opportunities for my pre-service theatre education students to reflect on how they might engage with such a work. Their responses suggested that seeing ZACH produce Latino theatre led them to consider their own authority, ability and responsibility to produce such work in their own future school theatre programs.

Public school (K-12) theatre programs, post-secondary theatre programs, and regional theatres hoping to diversify their patronage and storytelling have significant opportunities to learn from applying culturally responsive education to their efforts. All of these institutions are part of the same theatre ecosystem. The recent collaborative production of *Mariachi Girl*, which sought to serve all of those groups, lends itself well to such an exploration of culturally responsive artistry.

### **Climax: Can Culturally Responsive Artistry and *Mariachi Girl* Unite?**

The final product of *Mariachi Girl* was well received in the Austin community. The school shows sold out quickly, and teachers expressed great appreciation for the production and its value to the school children of Austin. While the weekend shows did not sell as well as ZACH had hoped, the audience sizes were decent, and the press and surveys of audience members indicated that most appreciated the efforts of all parties and the show itself. However, like any artistic endeavor, there were challenges along the way. As more organizations seek culturally responsive artistry, we may learn from historically white institutions who are taking chances by responsibly producing theatre that represents the diversity of stories and cultures in their communities. For this reason, I will now reflect on the production in relation to culturally responsive artistry.

To examine how culturally responsive education can translate to culturally responsive artistry, I will examine each characteristic outlined by Gay (2010) above and explored through the chart provided earlier in the paper. First, Gay challenges educators to value different cultures in the curriculum. In TYA, this translates to the design of the season, or the dramatic literature selected for production. By choosing to produce *Mariachi Girl*, ZACH, Teatro Vivo, and U.T. Austin all made a statement about the importance of sharing this Mexican-American story with the Austin community. Seeing representations of Latino/a characters on the stage validates the culture for both Latino/a and non-Latino/a children and adults. ZACH reached out to schools and their usual audience base, Teatro Vivo advertised widely through local Spanish and English-language newspapers and social media for the weekend shows, and U.T. Austin encouraged students and faculty to attend. One teacher reflected on the experience, "My bilingual students loved the play! Two of my girls walked out crying and relating to Carmencita. My fourth graders are being taught to embrace their identities and this was a perfect play to encourage this transformation." Based on this comment and many others, it appears that the three institutions succeeded in the goal of valuing different cultures by presenting a Latino story in a space where such stories have historically been underrepresented.

The second principle of culturally responsive education-- building bridges between home and school and school and society--easily translates to TYA artistry; TYA companies must bridge

experiences between home and the theatre and theatre and society. This characteristic relates to both the school day performances and the weekend public performances. The production succeeded in this area due to the bilingual writing of the play. For some Latino parents in Austin who do not speak English, much of the theatre available is not accessible due to language barriers. For the weekend shows, such parents could accompany their children and understand the play. Some bilingual schools attended the production and articulated that their students found it especially meaningful to hear two languages on stage. One teacher responded, “This was the best show I have seen with [ZACH Theatre] in years! Love that it was bilingual so that it was accessible for all of our students.”

The companies relied heavily on the play to make these connections, though in some instances considered other elements, such as activities and materials made available before and after the production to build such bridges. For the weekend public performances, ZACH created a bilingual recorded pre-show announcement, including all of the typical information about funders and turning off cellular phones. This was a wise choice as the announcement served as a statement that the company was consciously reaching out and adapting its practice to assure that not only the performance, but the entire experience reflected the bilingual audiences it hoped to attract. Interestingly, ZACH offered a live pre-show speech at the school performances that was all in English. Perhaps this was because ZACH’s education department staff members who gave the speech do not speak Spanish. Reyes, a cast member of the show in addition to being artistic director of Teatro Vivo, facilitated a talk-back at all public and school performances. During the talk-back, audience members responded with strong feelings about how they related to the show. At several of the talk-backs, mostly at the public performances, some audience members chose to speak in Spanish. The surveys were provided in Spanish and English and there was always a bilingual member of the research team available while audience members completed their surveys. With the increasing numbers of Spanish speakers and bilingual members of the Austin community, these efforts are examples of how the producers of this play sought to build such bridges for all audience members.

Gay’s (2010) third principle speaks to employing a variety of instructional strategies reaching different learning styles. To the TYA artist, this relates to all aspects of the production and also the materials that surround it. This production of *Mariachi Girl* contained multiple production components to reach the audience, including live music, bright costumes, and a colorful set with bright purple music notes and multicolored flowers. Pope staged an opening where Cita and her brother chased each other around the set to music, pulling the audience into the world of the play. Throughout the show, colorful blocks were moved around the space by the actors to create different rooms as the scenes changed locale. These culturally responsive choices engaged all audience members and were especially compelling to younger audience members. The continued movement helped monolingual audience members to

understand the Spanish or English that they might not understand without clear character motivation or inflection. The design choices were also culturally authentic, as was the music.

The play calls for live mariachi musicians. Despite the challenges that this presented, the three institutions were determined to find live mariachi musicians to perform the play. The actual labor of securing musicians fell mostly to Teatro Vivo, perhaps due to an assumption that as a Latino organization, the company would know many mariachis, which they did not. However, Reyes scoured the musical community of Austin and finally secured four mariachi musicians to play in all of the weekend performances. Pre-recorded music was used for the school shows, due to the musicians' schedules and cost. It was really unfortunate that the school audiences did not experience the live mariachis, as they brought to the production a fullness and variety of instructional strategies aimed at reaching different learning styles.

Another way that the production succeeded in engaging multiple learning styles was that the teacher packet, or study guide, which also served as a program for this production, included pictures and interactive activities, like a bilingual crossword puzzle and a prompt to encourage youth to find out about their family heritages. Great care was taken to assure that the teacher packet was both culturally accurate and engaging. Miller called upon the play's composer to refine the mariachi terminology and welcomed Martinez Morales' unsolicited comments about Spanish grammar errors. The packet included questions like, "What is a tradition in your family? Has the tradition ever changed? Why?" Such questions draw connections between home, theatre, and society in that children and parents are encouraged to take the packet with them and continue to explore the themes of the play together at home after the experience. Therefore, the packet was of use to not only teachers but to families as well. Some families. Sadly, besides the bilingual activities, the packet was only available in English. As a next step for these companies, providing an entirely bilingual packet would further ensure that the Spanish speaking audience members could access the activities provided.

Teachers at many schools reported back that they found the packet very helpful. Below is a display at an Austin public elementary school showing how bilingual teachers employed and translated some of the materials provided in the teacher packet. Most of the student responses are in Spanish. One student's picture depicts Cita and her father each saying, "Yo me recuerdo de mi pueblo," or "I remember my land." The characters in the play do not speak those lines, but it appears this child inferred from the story that it was critical that both Cita and her father remember where they are from, thus honoring their cultural heritage. The teachers combined the materials provided by the packet with their own resources to reach children with different learning styles. They encouraged students to write and draw in response to the play as well as read further about women in mariachis and customs of different cultures. They encouraged students to write in English and/or Spanish.



Figure 1.

Gay's (2010) fourth principle involves teaching children to understand and value one another's cultures. This returns to the importance of a theatre organization's season selection. By selecting *Mariachi Girl*, the three organizations not only represented Latino stories and Latino/a peoples, but also selected a play with positive, central Latino/a characters brought to life in realistic ways. This led audiences to empathize with the characters despite the audience member's race or ethnicity ultimately leading to understanding and valuing the culture represented. The United States continues to encounter stereotypes of Latinos/as in media and beyond. More representations of fully developed, central Latino/a characters are needed to counteract the caricatures and negative portrayals historically presented. Also, as Mexican American Latino/a children who rarely see positive representations of self in their educational and lived experiences saw their culture on stage being appreciated and valued by other children, they potentially experienced a sense of pride. One audience member who identified as a seven-year-old Hispanic female wrote in response to how she felt while watching the play, "I feelled very happy (sic)." While we can't be sure as to why this audience member was very happy, she also wrote, "I learned Mariachis." I see a connection between feeling happiness and learning about mariachis for this child, and also a connection to Gay's characteristic of valuing one another's culture. While this child identifies as Hispanic, she has likely not seen characters of her ethnicity on stage nor has she been around other children and

adults watching a Latino play. This is an important experience that may elicit a sense of pride and happiness in young audience members and adults alike.



Figure 2.

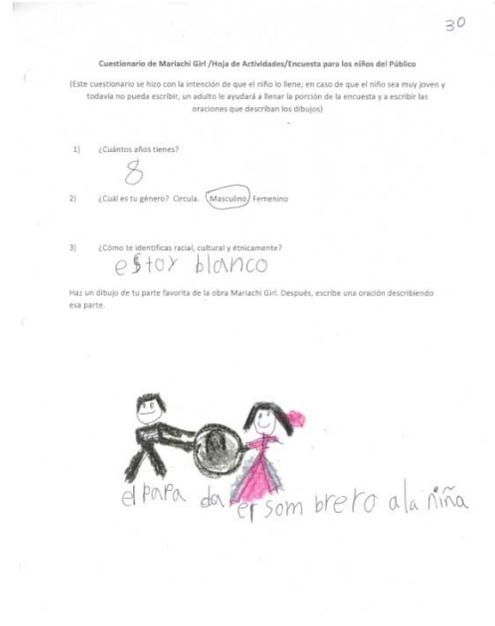


Figure 3.

Another child, who identified as an eight-year-old white male, wrote in Spanish in response to what his favorite part of the play was, “el papa da el sombrero a la niña” (the papa gives the sombrero to the girl). Again, this child’s sentiment shares his interest and appreciation of the Latino culture and heritage being passed down to Cita, relating back to Gay’s fourth characteristic. Though he is already bilingual, based on his writing, and therefore already has some interest in the Spanish language, he has most probably not seen much Latino theatre due to the limited availability of Latino TYA in Austin.

The last principle, of including multicultural materials throughout the curriculum encourages educators to embrace diversity on a regular basis, not only in certain instances. In terms of culturally responsive artistry and this production of *Mariachi Girl*, some opportunities were taken, and others missed. The production itself was culturally authentic. For example, all of the Latino/a characters were played by Latino/a actors. For all of these actors, it was their first time performing at ZACH, though several had performed with Teatro Vivo before. ZACH, as the hosting institution, thought of some possibilities, like the bilingual pre-show announcement and educationally sound teacher packet, though it was primarily in English and therefore inaccessible to some students and families. However, culturally responsive education means looking beyond Black History Month for inclusion of black history.

Therefore, if ZACH is to consciously include Latino theatre in its work, the company needs to think about Latinos/as beyond when it is producing a Latino play. ZACH's website and pamphlets depict almost all white people. While this is true of the company's history, the leaders of the organization must recognize what this practice says to potential audiences. Some Latino/a audience members at *Mariachi Girl* who were new to ZACH likely entered the building with some hesitation. This first visit was an opportunity for ZACH to dispel any biases and concerns that walked in the door. The producers made no effort to offer any cultural resonance in the lobby, like Latino visual art or an educational or dramaturgical display. ZACH can create marketing materials that include more racial and ethnic diversity. However, if the company does not also adjust their mission and season to back up such materials, diversifying marketing efforts is only a surface-level gesture not truly aligned with embracing diversity at every turn. The work entailed in Gay's (2010) final principle is complicated and requires comprehensive, intentional steps, demanding significant adjustments from everyone involved to make real meaningful change.

A central aspect of culturally responsive education, woven through the characteristics above, is fostering a student-centered classroom where educators take time to know and understand their students and value every voice in the room. Curtis (1998) explains that culturally responsive education acknowledges the lived experience of students. Curtis relates culturally responsive pedagogy to critical and feminist pedagogy and offers that "meaning making becomes more inclusive and is not limited to controlled content of knowledge constructed by a predominantly Eurocentric, male viewpoint. Learning includes examining a wide variety of perspectives, including one's own" (Curtis, 1998, p. 137). Artistic institutions could interpret this to mean offering a reciprocal experience for audiences. Theatre is often seen as a one-way communication, but in the past few decades more theatre companies are offering interactive talk-backs that address issues and ideas brought up in their productions. Such talk-backs foster dialogue in their communities, unlike those of the past where the audience hears even more from the theatre company, with artists talking about technical elements on the show or their careers in the theatre.

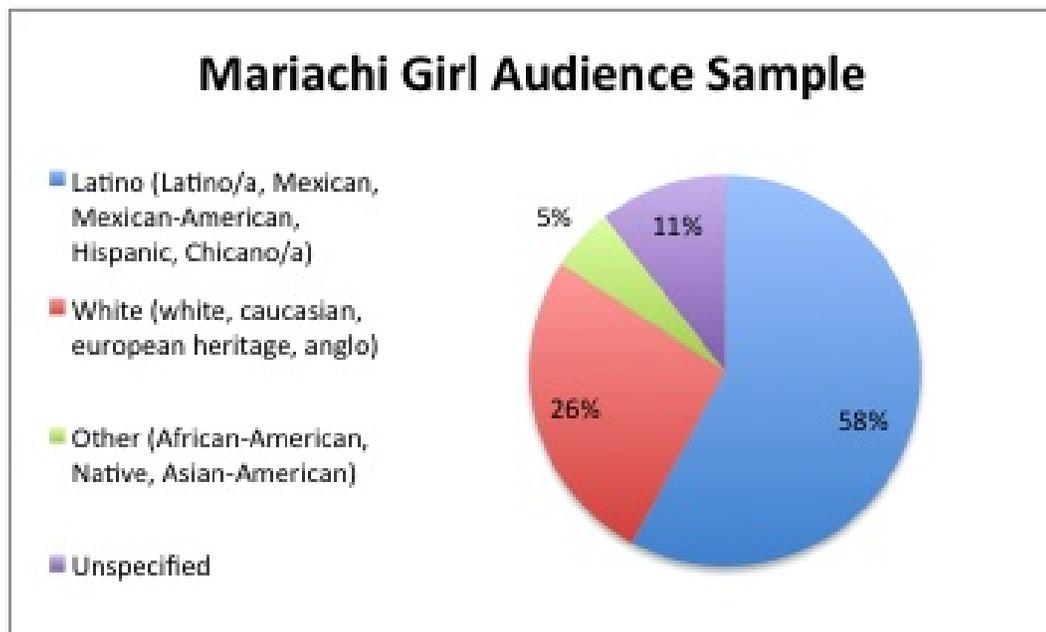
Many Latino/a patrons walked through ZACH's doors for the first time and engaged with Teatro Vivo but not ZACH representatives. On opening night, Miller of ZACH and Carreon-Reyes of Teatro Vivo introduced the show. Pope of U.T. Austin was present and there was a shared sense of ownership of the production as everyone was present and engaged. After opening night, however, several of the production team members seemed to disappear from the public show arena, leaving Teatro Vivo to facilitate the talk-backs and engage with the audiences. ZACH staff members were involved in crafting the talk-back and were invested in the experience being positive for the audience, but it appears that ZACH saw the talk-back solely as an experience for the audience rather than an opportunity for the theatre to learn

about and from the audiences, likely some of the largest numbers of Latinos/as that have been in their facility. The comments offered by audience members were insightful and inspiring, like one woman who shared through tears that she felt for Cita and felt like she understood her deceased father's intentions a little better after seeing the show. Many shared that the music brought up many memories and that they wished the play was longer. Still others shared that hearing Spanish onstage was significant and rare and a reason to bring their children to the theatre, to see how their language and culture is important. ZACH missed opportunities to listen to and learn from the audience with whom they seek to engage.

### **Dénouement: A Case for Audience-Centered Theatre**

Despite the missed opportunities, the research indicates that there is much to celebrate about this production. *Mariachi Girl* ran for just over four weeks in October and November of 2012 in ZACH's Whisenhunt Theatre, an intimate theatre in the round with 120 seats. Four thousand three hundred and forty students of varying ages saw *Mariachi Girl* with 509 care givers and teachers accompanying them to daytime shows. One thousand and eighty seven people attended the weekend public performances. With over 50 performances, a total of around 6,000 people saw the show. The audience members surveyed were those who voluntarily agreed to take the survey following the public performance, or teachers who agreed to take an online survey following the school performances. The study included both school and public audience members. For the school performances, due to time constraints and school policies, only the teachers were offered the opportunity to participate in an on-line survey. At the public performances, all audience members were invited to complete a post-show survey and 114 people, including 92 adults and 22 children volunteered to participate. The adult survey included both Likert scales and open-ended questions. The child survey included space for the children to draw as part of their response. With the younger audience members, the children orated what they had depicted in their drawings to our research team who then wrote what the child said.

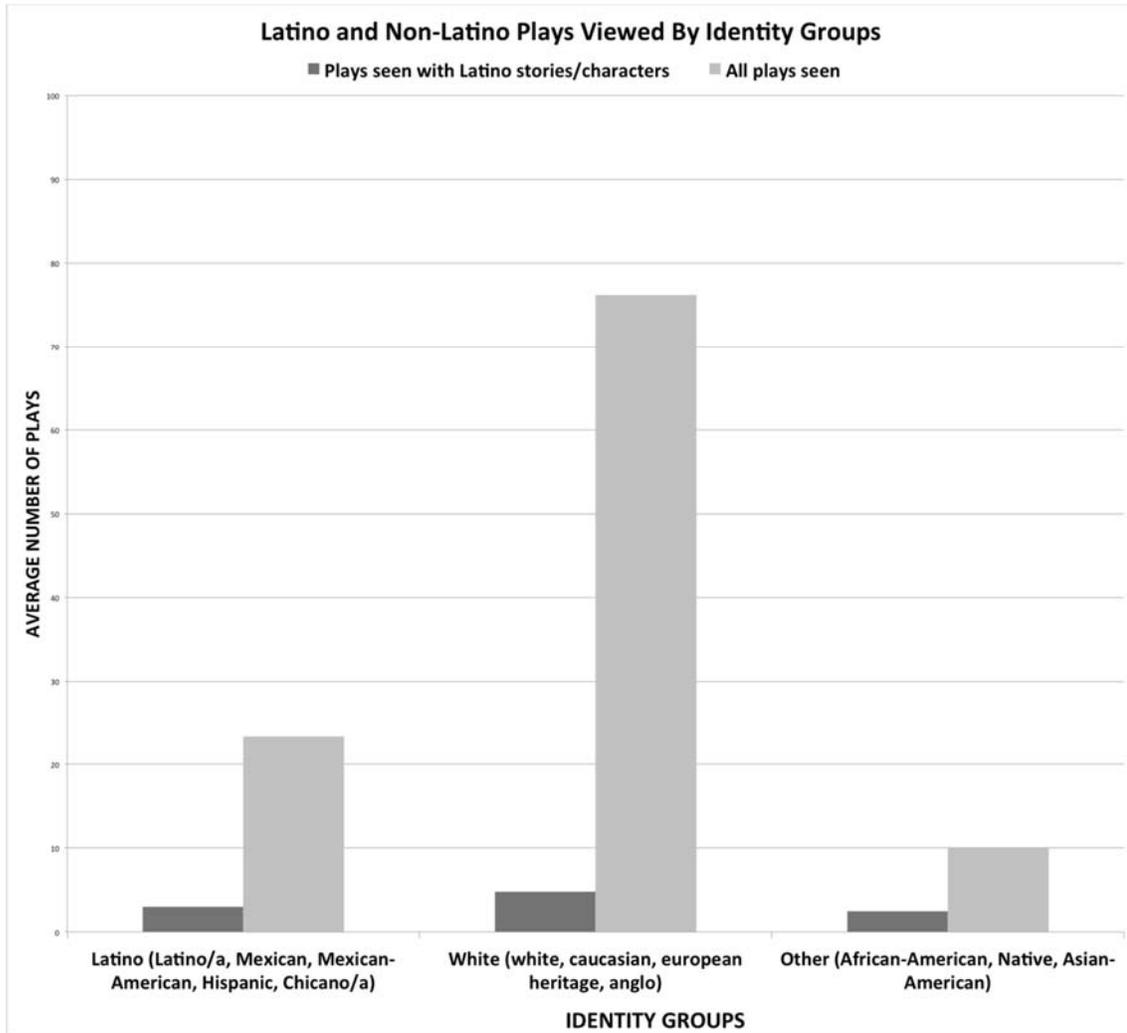
In looking at the two charts below, one can draw some conclusions about the availability of Latino theatre in Austin. The following chart articulates the ways those surveyed self-identified racially, ethnically, and culturally. This survey question was open-ended, not boxes to check, and therefore the researchers received a variety of audience responses. We created identity groups of audience members in order to look at percentages.



*Figure 4.*

The percentages of people who attended the play and volunteered to respond are not representative of the demographics in Austin. For example, the percentage of people who identify as Latino/a who completed the survey is greater than the percentage of Latinos/as in the city. Not only are Latino audiences generally less accustomed to going to theatre at ZACH, but as a group, they are less likely to attend theatre in general. The pie chart then helps us to understand the next graph a little more fully.

The graph below represents the number of Latino and non-Latino plays viewed by the surveyed audience members, divided by identity groups. This research study suggests that a major contributor to the lack of attendance of Latinos/as at theatre in Austin is the lack of representation of Latinos/as on stage. In the graph, the average number of plays refers to plays seen by the study's participants over the course of each participant's life. This question was asked only of the adults (any participant over 18 years old). We asked, "Approximately how many plays have you seen in your life?" and then, "How many of those plays shared Latino stories or characters?" We list them by identity groups to show how the study suggests that when Latinos in Texas see theatre, they are more likely to see Latino plays than non-Latinos. Although the white people surveyed saw slightly more Latino plays on average than Latinos did, they saw many more plays that did not include Latino stories and characters. Even the Latino group has seen more plays that do not include Latino stories and characters. This is likely due, in part, to the lack of availability of such plays. Increased availability of Latino plays in Austin would increase attendance of Latino/as at theatre productions in the community.



*Figure 5.*

We must consider the potential implications of such evidence. Landt (2006) states, “Not seeing oneself, or representations of one’s culture, in literature can activate feelings of marginalization and cause students to question their place within society” (p. 894). Contemporary TYA aims to be conscious of the cognitive and social development of young people. The field of TYA throughout the US has a responsibility to fill the gap of Latino representation in both practice and theory and offer young people an opportunity to see Latino/a peoples and cultures as they sit in a theatre together in the midst of developing an individual and communal sense of identity. *Mariachi Girl* audience members offered many thoughts about the value of Latino/a theatre to the community of Austin, including bringing a positive message to all cultures about finding connections between different races. A 47-year-old man who identifies as white shared, “[The play] keeps alive the conversation about the

impact and importance of understanding and appreciating cultural difference in the ever-evolving city of Austin.”

TYA companies have a responsibility to provide stories that encourage young people to appreciate cultural differences and a responsibility to provide stories from different cultures so that all children recognize something on stage that they can relate to. When asked how she relates to the play, a 22-year-old female audience member who identifies as Latina, responded, “I can relate to (Cita) a lot. Growing up I never knew who to be and just like her I played with my dolls and looked at the blonde and the brunette Barbies and asked myself who do I want to be, Latina or American. I thought that the only way I was American was to be a blonde.” While the survey did not ask specific questions about gender, many audience members wrote about how the play brought up feelings and memories related to womanhood and how the play was important for young girls, specifically Latinas, to see. An 11-year-old female youth who chose not to identify herself racially and ethnically wrote in response to what she learned during the play, “Girls can do anything that boys can.” She drew pictures and identified the activities, “football, basketball, race car driving, and of course mariachi.”

Many of the responses confirmed that this production succeeded in audience-centered theatre. Audience-centered practices not only benefit the audience, but also benefit the theatre—letting a theatre know what it’s doing well and how it may improve. Ultimately, audience-centered theatre practice may inspire theatres as they listen to the impact of their work on individuals and communities. The case study suggests that Teatro Vivo, ZACH, and U.T. Austin each made steps toward demonstrating culturally responsive artistry as all involved strived to respond to and change the disproportionate number of Latino plays experienced by the Austin community as demonstrated in this study.



Figure 6.

### Epilogue: Next Steps for Culturally Responsive Artistry

While *Mariachi Girl* was a collaborative production in Austin, one of ZACH’s major goals was to engage with the Austin Latino community and diversify their audience. As theatre companies consider reaching out to communities and cultures not yet patronizing their space, they must consider how their efforts may be perceived as tokenism. Companies must not

simply do one Latino play and then dismiss the Latino community if they do not attend. Audience development takes time. A company must consider how they invite a group, and how they engage with the group members who do come. ZACH, who has had a strong presence in Austin for nearly a century, but has produced few Latino works, must recognize that it is not starting from zero. ZACH is starting in the negative, meaning it is perceived by some as a racist institution because of a perceived lack of interest and investment in the Latino community. New interest can be seen as suspicious. That is a reality. Therefore, those first engagements between historically white theatre companies and communities of color are critical.

ZACH was sporadically present throughout the run of the show, and missed some opportunities to engage with Latino/a audience members coming to the space for the first time. ZACH and Teatro Vivo had agreed that ZACH would focus on filling the seats for the school shows while Teatro Vivo would focus on the public shows. Therefore, ZACH did not maintain a presence at the public shows. And since these were the shows attracting parents/caregivers who were more likely to be new to ZACH (rather than classroom teachers who seem to already be coming), they missed an audience development opportunity. As ZACH looked to Teatro Vivo to bring a Latino audience to its space, it did not then take the opportunity to welcome the Latino/a audience members new to ZACH and to hear about their experiences and perspectives.

As ZACH is recognized as a central place of theatre in Austin, with very few plays in its past depicting the Latino/a experience, Latinos are left out. More recently, ZACH has taken action to include Latinos, but whether ZACH has intended to or not, it has historically sent the message that it does not care about the Latinos/as stories and people of Austin. Curtis (1998) describes her struggles as an African American professor to teach her primarily white students about institutionalized racism. She notes that her students resist acknowledging racial inequities and that,

despite their ‘good intentions’ ... the reality of cultural conflict exists and it is a reality they have to be prepared to face ... The students who are convinced that individual attitudes and stereotypes form the basis of racism and sexism are hard pressed to consider that such attitudes can be institutionalized and are a part of the very fabric of our social, political, and educational structures. (p. 135)

In other words, institutionalized racism is a reality that is very hard to acknowledge, especially by institutions taking action to include communities of color. Most TYA companies throughout the United States, built on such institutionalized attitudes, must first acknowledge their past and present racist practices in order to move forward. Historically white theatre companies must accept the inequities of the past and expect challenges as they seek to include stories and people who have traditionally not been a part of their institution. Though a

company's current staff may be eager to include communities of color, historical lack of inclusion is not easily dismissed, especially by those who have been overlooked and underrepresented in the past. The stakeholders of this production did not spend enough time talking about the realities of cultural conflict that exist in the city of Austin and are greater than any of the individuals and institutions involved, and the challenges these realities might present. In some ways, the well-intentioned artists walked into the project with a little too much optimism, too many blind spots, and not enough willingness to look at and talk about the hard realities.

As an institution invites new communities to call its space home, these institutions must recognize that it takes more than an invitation. The institution may need to also make some changes and make the space feel more welcoming to the people who are being invited.

Sandoval-Sanchez (1999) shares,

... for a new generation of Latinos/as, US Latino theatre represents a place called home; a place for subject positioning in multiple discursive locations; a place where identity politics of location reproduces at given historical intersections new ethnicities in the borderlands, in margins of previous, partial, residual, present, and emergent conceptualizations of home (p. 197).

In other words, U.S. Latino theatre is becoming a place where Latinos want to go, to see themselves, to be seen, but we are only at the beginning. It will take more effort, more time, more productions, more listening from everyone for Latino audiences to feel at home in ZACH's space. Latino/a community members must come to trust ZACH in order to feel a sense of home in their space. If theatre companies like ZACH really want to reach out, to develop Latino/a audiences, they need to be prepared to first look at themselves honestly, to recognize their historical privilege, and then to listen intently to new voices and make some adjustments as new cultures walk in the door. As the field of education has been struggling to do for some time, TYA companies and artists must also invest in taking small steps toward culturally responsive artistry.

Dallas Children's Theatre will produce *Mariachi Girl* in 2014. Artistic Director, Robyn Flatt, had a similar idea to that of ZACH, of co-producing the play with Cara Mia Theatre, a bilingual Latino theatre company in Dallas. Flatt called me to share that Cara Mia is not available next year when they plan to produce the play. She asked if I thought it was okay for Dallas Children's Theatre to do the work, for her to direct the play, though she is not Latina and though they will not be coproducing with a Latino theatre company. I responded enthusiastically that not only is it okay, but it is critical that she produces the work and finds others with whom to collaborate. She assured me that she intends, like ZACH, to look to Latino/a artists in the community to help assure that the story is told respectfully and responsibly. She shared concern that critics and community members will condemn the

company for producing the play inauthentically or irresponsibly saying, “We get in trouble for not producing Latino plays, but I fear we may get in worse trouble for actually doing it” (R. Flatt, personal communication, January 14, 2013). Critiques in the local newspapers typically analyze what a theatre company is doing, not what they are not doing. Producing plays of color can actually draw attention to past practices of little to no representation of culturally relevant theatre. Also, historically white theatre companies that produce plays about people of color can be criticized for cultural appropriation and/or producing work irresponsibly. Such companies must face such criticism and use it to reflect on their own practices and then move beyond it.

The fears Flatt expressed, and the willingness of Dallas Children’s Theatre and ZACH to produce Latino works in spite of these fears are important to acknowledge. It is also crucial to celebrate their efforts toward culturally responsive artistry. Still, equally important is taking a critical eye to such endeavors. As with any new effort, we can learn from examining what happened in this premiere production of *Mariachi Girl* to seek a more fruitful experience in the future.

### **Post-Show Experience: Conclusions**

The collaboration was indeed a great experience and in many ways a success. When asked, “What is the value of *Mariachi Girl* to the Austin community?” an audience member who identifies as a 23-year-old Hispanic female offered, “Teaching children of different ethnicities and cultures to embrace their heritage and to chase their dreams.” All three institutions had aspirations related to the sentiments of the audience member above and can take pride in providing such experiences to audiences of Austin. But, one play certainly isn’t enough. Next year, ZACH will co-produce another Latino-themed TYA play with U.T. Austin, though Teatro Vivo will not be involved. U.T. Austin will include a Latino-themed play in its mainstage season, and Teatro Vivo will of course continue to produce Latino plays and will also include a TYA play in its offerings.

Most of my (predominantly white) pre-service theatre education students saw this production of *Mariachi Girl*. Most of them had seen other plays at ZACH and most of them had never seen a Latino play before, including the few Latinos/as in the program. These students have read about culturally responsive education in mine and perhaps some of their other courses. Many expressed to me that seeing *Mariachi Girl* and staying for the talk-back was a meaningful experience, fostering in them a deeper understanding of representation and culturally responsive theatre education. In this paper, I have adapted educational theory and applied it to historically white regional theatres aiming to engage with communities of color. The research is also relevant to my theatre education students who struggle to transfer culturally responsive education to theatre. These students look to regional theatres and their

university programs as models of what to produce and how to produce it. I can offer plays and materials, but they are unlikely to direct a play they have not seen, and they are afraid of presenting plays about people who are different from themselves. These students need to see companies like ZACH taking hard steps toward culturally responsive artistry, and they need to practice listening to audience members who see theatre and perhaps themselves and their communities a little differently when they (finally) see characters and bodies on stage that look and sound familiar.

The efforts of this production, the audiences' responses, and my own reflections here bring me back to the Huntington Theatre post-production talk back five years ago. After fielding borderline hostile questions from the mostly white audience, finally a Latino audience member in the back of the theatre I had not noticed stood up, took a breath, and then began,

I was born in the U.S. My mother came here when she was a little girl from Puerto Rico. I have come to many plays here at the Huntington. I love this theatre and the work they do. Until I saw this play today, I didn't even realize what theatre can do, nor that I have been missing the opportunity to relate to theatre the way I did today. And watching it with you people, white people, who were so quiet and listening intently to this story made me happy. It made me feel like you care about me.

The actions taken by the artists involved in *Mariachi Girl* and the responses of its audience members offer hope for more Latinos/as, like this gentleman, to feel that their story is valued. I further hope that other institutions will look to those who are stepping up toward a practice of culturally responsive artistry, a practice that demands time, patience, tenacity, humility, mutual respect, a willingness to listen and learn, and a great deal of honest self-reflection. If it doesn't feel challenging, then the work is probably not receiving the justice it deserves.

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### **About the Author**

Roxanne Schroeder-Arce is a teacher, scholar, playwright and director. She joined the faculty at the University of Texas Department of Theatre and Dance in 2010 where she works with pre-service theatre teachers. Professor Schroeder-Arce has published several plays and articles. She has taught workshops on issues of diversity and culturally responsive teaching artistry throughout the Americas and beyond. Her research interests include culturally responsive theatre education and Latino/a theatre for young audiences in relation to teacher training. Schroeder-Arce was recently awarded the Ann Flagg Multicultural award from the American Alliance for Theatre Education.