



# SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

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Carla Della Gatta

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*Caliban's Island: Gender, Queerness and Latinidad in  
Theatre for Young Audiences*

*Diana Burbano*

I am an immigrant. I was born in Colombia, and my family emigrated to Cleveland, Ohio, in the mid-1970s. My family was the only Spanish-speaking family in the area. I was forced to learn English as quickly as possible. My mother struggled, but because I was younger, I had an easier time of it. I sat in front of the TV and absorbed English from Alaina Reed on *Sesame Street* and Morgan Freeman and Rita Moreno on *The Electric Company*. I loved language, the odd, hard, tongue-twisting English consonants. The crunch of them, the howl of the diphthongs. Unfortunately, I also had a severe lisp, and I could barely make myself understood in either language. I got plopped into theatre classes to help with my English, my shyness and my speech.

I was introduced to Shakespeare as a freshman in high school. We worked on *Romeo and Juliet*, which felt like a slog. To my dyslexic eyes, the play was as impossible to read as it was to understand. It didn't click until our teacher, Mrs Mack, wheeled in the old AV unit and popped in a videotape. Some man came onstage, and I rolled my eyes in anticipated boredom. Then he started a riff, playing *Romeo and Juliet*, making those words sing in a way I didn't know was possible. It was Ian McKellen's *Acting Shakespeare*.<sup>1</sup> I was riveted.

McKellen flew through characters with nothing more than a change of posture and his resonant voice. Unfortunately, we only got to watch forty-five minutes of the tape, and then the bell rang. This same thing happened four years in a row. I only saw the end of the show when, several years later, McKellen performed in San Francisco and I was lucky enough to be one of his onstage corpses. Listening to that gorgeous baritone sing 'Once more unto the breach' cemented my love both for McKellen and for the Bard.

Much to my immigrant parents' disappointment, I decided to study acting. The truth was, due to my learning disabilities, I was considered a terrible student. I had fantastic language skills, however, and I loved to be on stage.

I had an affinity for ‘speaking the speech’. Shakespeare became my passion. I was lucky enough to have instructors who believed in me, and who gave me wonderful, challenging roles. I played La Pucelle, Lady Anne and Macbeth’s First Witch. I adored the language. The power of the word. The power of his words in my mouth. I became a professional actor, and I studied Shakespeare at the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre of Great Britain.

However, opportunities to work in classical theatre were few and far between for a young Latinx woman. Despite my classical training, I got my Equity card doing Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). I worked in TYA for most in my career as a stage actor as it offered some of the only opportunities to work professionally as a performer of colour. In contrast to the work being done on the main stages, TYA was the place where stories for and about people of colour flourished. When BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) kids found a strong connection to the story being told, it was clear from their enthusiastic reaction how important and magical it was. In this essay, and through a focus on my 2017 play *Caliban’s Island*, I detail my trajectory as a performer and playwright to attend to the ways in which classical training and Latinx identity can intersect in children’s storytelling.

## **Creating Theatre for Young People**

I started in TYA at the Bilingual Foundation for the Arts, a Latinx theatre company in Los Angeles that was founded by Carmen Zapata, Margarita Galban and Estela Scarlata in 1973. This company produces Latinx plays and often does the same play in English and Spanish, alternating the language weekly. At the Bilingual Foundation I performed for young children (up through the fourth grade), mostly English-language learners and children of colour, and often from impoverished backgrounds. Theatre was not a part of their lives. I lived for the change in the children’s eyes as they started to buy into a story. The way the atmosphere in the room shifted and grew with a good performance was magical. The tired teachers would thank us, and tell us over and over again, ‘They’ve never seen a play before; sorry if they were noisy.’ They *were* noisy – they were engaged, worried about the characters, yelling at the bad guy, rolling their eyes at the sappy stuff.

I found this work exhausting, frustrating and educational. The kids told us right away if they thought something was stupid or dishonest. The late 1990s was a time when every TYA had a badly written ‘rap’ shoehorned into the show. The writers didn’t seem to respect or understand rap as a form. A well-done rap is as thrilling as a well-spoken Shakespeare monologue and often even scans into iambic pentameter. The raps in these plays were not well done. They were a half-hearted effort to reach the primarily Latinx and African



American audience theatrically and they often failed spectacularly. I learned that you cannot pander to children; they won't let you get away with it.

Kids appreciate a good story. They don't behave like jaded subscribers, and the kids in our audience needed us. I loved being able to entertain them. Yet I learned early in my career that TYA tends to abandon kids after age ten or eleven. The plays I performed were always geared towards younger children. Perhaps that is what the grants that paid for the performances specified. I always felt that we did a major disservice to both the kids and the theatre by not trying to connect with the (admittedly more cynical, more difficult) middle school-aged kid.

The first play that I wrote, *Caliban's Island*, was for a TYA audience. I wanted to work on a piece for older kids that touched on themes of gender identity, 'Othering' and self-acceptance. I chose to adapt characters from Shakespeare mostly because I love the plays and never had a chance to perform them myself. I also figured that I could pitch the play to non-Latinx artistic teams. A female Latinx writer has a lot of strikes against her as far as the majority theatre is concerned, and, frankly, I wanted them to know I could speak their language.

*Caliban's Island* is a mash-up of *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*, with assorted Shakespearean characters and tropes. There are twins, a terrible storm, an island with magical beings. It begins with a storm that shipwrecks a young girl named Vi on a deserted island. A peculiar creature of indeterminate species named Cal is watching her as she awakens from her ordeal. He claims to have rescued Vi from certain death at sea. Vi is grateful to him, but her twin brother, Bast, is still missing, and she cannot rest until he is found.<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare wrote wonderful roles for women, and that certainly appealed to me as a young person. Viola is brilliant and able, and also vulnerable and funny. Vi is the hero of the story; she is fighting against sexism and gender norms. She is on a difficult quest, and there is no romance at the end of it. She has to save her beloved brother, who is in distress and who needs her to rescue him. Shakespeare's Viola does find love at the end of *Twelfth Night*, but my Vi doesn't. I wanted my heroine's journey be an adventure and my play to show that women can be friends with men and not have it become sexualised. I wanted to explore a journey between people who have more on their minds than their hearts. These characters are all fighting to be allowed to live authentic lives and not be shoehorned into the roles society expects them to play. Vi and Cal become good friends, but there is no hint of a romance to mar the honest bond that happens between them.

I wanted to work on relationships between girls. In popular media, young girls are encouraged to be catty to one another, in a way that reinforces patriarchal dominance. Young women can't be allies because they can't be friends with one another. I created Mira, a character based on *The*

*Tempest's* Miranda, to represent the opposite of Vi. Mira is feminine and impulsive. She is a lonely girl who holds terrible power and doesn't know how to control it. I felt that it was important to show a young woman wrestling with her natural gifts and wishing to hide them. When we meet Mira, she is a lonely, vain, arrogant and bossy young girl who herself was shipwrecked on the island as a baby. The fairy Fluffy has been her primary companion ever since. Mira thinks Vi would make an amusing playmate, so she casts a spell and takes her prisoner. Vi and Mira seem to have nothing in common, but they learn to work together and to respect each other. Both have unique talents; Vi uses hers with ease, but Mira's gifts are too powerful, frightening, for a young girl. She feels embarrassed at her abilities because she cannot control them. With Vi's encouragement, Mira starts to own her power.

I teach students in the fifth and sixth grade. The change that happens to girls as they turn into tweens and teens is marked. They often go from being strong, bossy and outspoken to being shy, afraid to speak out, afraid to seem smarter than the boys. They start to get looks and comments about their bodies and faces, and they lose the freedom they had in childhood. Their bodies mature much faster than their minds, and confusion, anger and anxiety begin to play a bigger role in their lives. Mira embodies their confusion and their quicksilver personality changes. Vi is the fearless girl, who hasn't hidden her true personality. Vi and Mira, working together, learn that what makes them different also makes them an unbeatable team. The incorporation of magic adds an element of fun and style true to the original Shakespeare.

I chose to mash up *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest* because I have always loved Viola's wit and felt great sympathy for Caliban; I wanted to see how they would behave with each other. With Caliban, my purpose was to reverse the tropes associated with him. Caliban, a person who does not fit into societal norms, is described as a monster. He is othered, outside, different and thus dangerous. I certainly related to that. I came to the United States as a child, unable to speak English. I worked hard, but I always felt different, uncomfortable. I failed miserably at school because of my learning disabilities, which made concentration difficult. I brought home one bad report card after another. I also got into trouble because, having been a victim of molestation at a young age, I was acting out my sexuality in 'inappropriate' ways. I became an outcast, both at school and in my family. The way Caliban is treated in *The Tempest*, as if he were stupid, as if he had no right to education or sexuality, seemed to me unfair and short-sighted. And it made me, perhaps unfairly, dislike Prospero, the adult who interferes, controlling and thus taking the joy out of magic.

As our society slowly opens up to non-binary sex roles, I wanted to give

children a character that reflects that fluidity. Fluffy is a kid's version of Ariel, and they are a gender-fluid fairy. The other characters don't quite know what to make of Fluffy: what they are, whether they are servile, feral or sentient. Mira has trapped Fluffy. She commands them to do her bidding. Fluffy is misnamed, misgendered and enslaved. They also need to be seen as whole so they can live freely as their true self.

Along with creating two female protagonists and a gender-fluid fairy, I wanted to address the challenges of a patriarchal version of masculinity. Bast is Vi's twin brother, a Shakespearean trope that I use to emphasise both characters' discomfort with their gender norms. Where Vi is fierce, feisty and adventurous (read: masculine), Bast is gentle, shy and scholarly, a boy who is happier reading in his study than practising swordplay with his sister. I imagine the fights with his father, and the guilt that Bast must feel for not living up to his role in a patriarchal society.

The 'monster' in my play for children is a society that cannot accept differences. The journey is how they come to accept each other. There isn't a 'happy' ending. Vi and Bast, with Cal's help, devise a way to escape the island, to return to the world of 'normal' human society. Mira wants to come with them, but Cal knows how dangerous that world would be for her: human beings would not treat kindly her astonishing magical powers. Only when she has learned to suppress and control them could she hope to survive in that world. Mira sees the truth in Cal's words and awakens to the fact that he loves her and wants only to protect her. She is nevertheless disappointed, so, to mitigate her sadness and loneliness, she takes a forgetting potion. Vi and Bast sail away towards home.

I felt that tying things up in a neat bow would be a disservice to middle school-aged children. They have a deeper understanding of the vicissitudes of life. *Caliban's Island* was written as a way for middle schoolers to engage with Shakespearean language and tropes, while centring the issues that most affect them. The play was chosen for Creede Repertory's Headwaters Festival and is published by YouthPLAYS. It was described as 'part *Peter and the Starcatcher*, part Shakespeare, [the work of an author who] writes with a unique voice all her own'.<sup>3</sup> I believe the work is successful as well as accessible, and I am proud of it.

## **Making a Latinx Play**

*Caliban's Island* isn't explicitly Latinx in its conception or characterisation. TYA may be the only theatrical form in America where 'diverse' casting is the norm. I had a development reading of the piece with Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble in Santa Ana, California. The cast comprised, entirely, Latinx performers with classical training. I emphasise in the notes that the

actors should be people of colour, but will they be? As someone who was often frozen out of opportunities because of my ethnicity, I fear that casting may default to the majority.

I am a Latinx playwright, so anything I write would and should be considered a Latinx play. My love of language and Shakespeare brought forth this play. I am bilingual, proficient and fluid in both languages. I like large, complicated words. Tom Stoppard is an immigrant playwright for whom English is a gleefully acquired language, and the way he examines and manipulates English delights me. I sometimes use words ‘wrong’ because I like the placement, the feel of them. Like Stoppard, I am an autodidact, and hence I never learned ‘the rules’. I paint in words with abandon.

I ask my actors to really use their mouths and their lips. I want a heightened sense of language. I feel that Latinx actors have not been encouraged to use their voices in big, theatrical ways. They have been asked to flatten their accents, in order to be understood. Ian McKellen, in contrast, uses his own natural dialect, a beautiful Mancunian lilt that he employs to great effect. I love to hear the musical Latinx dialects really bite into the English language and reclaim it with their own music intact – no flattening to be understood, but a glorious dive into the different vowel sounds, the lisps and trills. The natural dialect enhances elevated language, conveying truthfulness, and it is my hope that actors who perform in my work feel able to use their natural voices in big, compelling ways.

Despite the fact that *Caliban’s Island* is not explicitly marked as a ‘Latinx play’, it is permeated by Latinidad because I am Latinx. I would be honoured to hear, in ten to fifteen years, that a production of this piece has set another young immigrant on a path to becoming a writer. TYA is where I learned and honed my craft as a storyteller. For a long time, it was the only place I saw actors of colour performing diverse and virtuosic roles, and it was one of the only places where stories for Latinx people were actively solicited and presented. As things begin to shift in the American theatre – and as Latinx practitioners nudge their way into theatre spaces where previously they were not welcome – it is important to value TYA as an important piece of the narrative, and to not neglect the very important young audiences that deserve to see themselves reflected on stage. I will always return to TYA with joy for the gifts that it has given to me in my life and career.

## Notes

1. First performed in 1980, the one-man show was broadcast in 1982. McKellen plays multiple Shakespearean roles.
2. The play text can be found online: Diana Burbano, *Caliban’s Island* (Los Angeles: YouthPLAYS, 2017). Available at <https://www.youthplays.com/>

play/calibans-island-by-diana-burbano-418 (last accessed 12 November 2020).

3. 'Headwaters New Play Festival', Creede Repertory Theatre, updated August 2017. Available at <http://www.creederep.org/headwaters-festival-2017/> (last accessed 12 November 2020).