



SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

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Shakespeare Through the Latinx Voice

Michelle Lopez-Rios

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Love, murder, ghosts, politics and scorching poetic language: do these words bring to mind the world of Shakespeare or that of Latinx theatre? Both Shakespeare and Latinx plays utilise rhythm, sounds, high stakes and multilingual text to create profound storytelling. The performance of Shakespearean text through the Latinx voice offers a unique experience that resonates with modern audiences, foregrounding a Latinx cultural and historical perspective that offers one more way to personally connect to plays written over four hundred years ago.

I use the term 'Latinx voice' to describe the influence of the Latinx artist as actor, director, playwright, designer or producer. Directors orchestrate a collaboration among the artistic team and company to reveal a specific time, place and perspective. The contributions of artists are inextricably linked to the complex composition of who they are and how they approach the material and task at hand. And so, there are many ways that the Latinx voice may influence the production of Latinx Shakespeares. Here, I call on two such productions – *Measure for Measure* at Chicago's Goodman Theatre and *Julius Caesar* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) – to illuminate this potential range of influence. I also bring into conversation Luis Alfaro's *Mojada*, a non-Shakespearean Latinx production that ran in rep with *Julius Caesar* at OSF, to further expand on the possibilities of the Latinx voice.

I speak from the perspective of the voice and text director (sometimes called a voice or dialect coach), a role that may not immediately come to mind when one names the collaborators on a production. The person in this role

contributes a wide range of vocal expertise, such as healthy vocal use, dialects, clarity of language, knowledge of archaic language, regional pronunciation of text, and so on. Scott Kaiser of OSF concisely describes the mission of this work as, ‘to encourage the full expression of the language of the plays through the actor’s voice’.¹ The voice and text director helps shape the sounds in the text to create the vocal landscape of the production.

This vocal landscape includes regional sounds, cultural expression, pronunciations, translations and anything else specific to the meaning or expression of the language. Navigation of the vocal landscape in Shakespeare is central in the rehearsal process and includes an incredible amount of work on the text. The performer must clearly tell the story with full emotional availability using both poetry and prose. World-renowned Shakespeare director John Barton describes this process as a barrier that actors must address: ‘First, that the heightened language in a text has to be found by the actor and not just taken for granted. And secondly, that a right balance has to be found between the naturalistic and heightened elements in that text.’² In describing his work with Barton on Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, fellow director Trevor Nunn notes that success was achieved when ‘the poetry was not an end in itself. The words became necessary’.³

The vocal landscape is just as central to the success of storytelling in many Latinx plays. In response to a question about what makes a play Hispanic, José Rivera highlights the importance of language:

Latin culture is very specific – a belief in family, a willingness to think magically, a passion for love and sex, a code of honor and respect [. . .] these things, more than food and music, are what define Latin culture for me. So a lot of Latin theatre in the US is very passionate, very invested in the musical possibilities of language, very willing to use nonrealistic methods of storytelling. What makes a play Hispanic? The emotional and cultural and aesthetic sensibility of the creative artists involved.⁴

Much like Shakespeare’s text, the Latinx lens requires actors and directors to unleash poetry, prose and multiple languages with ease as they explore the politics of the day.

In 2012, I met with artistic director Robert Falls of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago to discuss coaching his upcoming production of *Measure for Measure*. He was interested in my experience with both Latinx theatre and Shakespeare. Though I began my theatrical career as an actor, I eventually turned to directing and coaching a wide range of projects including several plays at the Houston Shakespeare Festival. I am also the co-founder of the Royal Mexican Players (originally from Houston), which has brought many new Latinx works to life. In my conversation with Falls, I quickly confessed

that I was not a Shakespeare scholar, but I am a coach who likes to dig into the language and make sure the story is clear and accessible to the audience.

Measure for Measure is a dark comedy about Claudio, who sends Isabella, his sister and a novice, to plead for his life before the moralistic Angelo. Angelo becomes infatuated with Isabella and astonishingly proposes that, if she sleeps with him, he will spare her brother's life. Falls believed that the themes of religion, power and justice resonated strongly with a modern audience, and that the play was a 'world not unlike our own: flawed, excessive but always compelling – and inhabited by people who are aching, vibrantly and recognizably human'.⁵ Shakespeare set his play in Vienna, but Falls was setting his production in New York City during the 1970s, 'an era in which economic challenges, urban flight and the sexual revolution transformed what had been arguably the greatest city in the world to one of the most troubled'.⁶ He cast the play to reflect not only 1970s New York but also present-day Chicago. He believed that my diverse background would help create a vocal landscape that was true to the text, the concept of the production and the diverse voices performing the characters.

He cast the siblings Isabella and Claudio as a Latinx family. Actress Alejandra Escalante was charged with bringing to life the complex character of the virtuous nun who must decide whether to accept Angelo's horrific offer to trade her virginity for her brother's life. After research and discussion, the actors and I decided that the family would be specifically Dominican New Yorkers. The actors took on the rhythms and sounds of the Dominican New York dialect and spoke a few of the lines in Spanish. I was struck seeing the character of Isabella through this lens. I have experienced Shakespeare productions set in various locales that incorporated dialects and particular cultures. However, the fierce loyalty to God, religion and family made sense to me more than it ever had in this play. Rivera's words about Latinx culture echoed in this discovery: 'a belief in family, a willingness to think magically, a passion for love and sex, a code of honor and respect'. Claudio's passion for Juliet, Isabella's love for God and, most importantly, the crucial sibling relationship were amplified. The chilling, familiar feeling of fighting an oppressive institution hit closer to home. As a Latina, I found this Shakespeare text resonating within me in a whole new way.

I wasn't alone in the connection to the piece. Theatre critic Scott Morgan noted that the 2013 production 'largely succeeds at making Shakespeare's play from the early 1600s feel much closer for adventurous audiences of today'.⁷ Critic Brian Hieggelke echoed this sentiment in his review, concluding, 'the clarity of the ideas that Falls teases out of the work creates a contemporary relevance'.⁸ Falls used the individual voices of the actors to find specificity in the characters that allowed audience members to connect to the story and relate it to the present day.

In 2017, I served as the voice and text director at OSF for Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, as well as, concurrently, *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles* by Luis Alfaro. OSF has been a leader in putting equity and inclusion at the centre of its practice. According to artistic director Bill Rauch, as of 2017 the acting company was close to 70 per cent actors of colour.⁹ However, the commitment to inclusion did not stop with the artists onstage. The staff, directors and designers that came together to collaborate were also diverse.

The cast of *Julius Caesar* reflected this commitment to inclusion, with African American, Asian and Latinx actors in lead roles. I prepared for rehearsal like I prepare for any Shakespeare piece. I began discussions with director Shana Cooper on her vision for the piece and the way that she wanted to tell the story. She was incredibly passionate about making the language, relationships and story as clear and real as possible in each and every moment. She was interested in each actor's individual and authentic voice. I researched meanings, pronunciations and interpretations, and I collected as much information as I could in preparation. Then, once we started rehearsing, I worked with each actor to fully express the language through their own unique voice.

Three Latinx actors were cast in the production. Unlike *Measure for Measure*, however, the production did not focus on the race or ethnicity of the actors or characters. The role of Caesar was played by Latino actor Armando Duran. We explored the language for clarity of thought as Caesar gains so much honour and respect that he is offered a crown. We explored love as Caesar negotiates his wife's wish to stay home after she has a horrific dream. Finally, we explored family as Caesar is betrayed by his family of military brothers. Unlike *Measure for Measure*, our time was not focused on dialect. We were working to unleash the actor's voice, which means, in part, having the freedom to express this voice fully, including (for Latinx actors) their Latinidad.

At the same time, I was working with the actors in Luis Alfaro's *Mojada*, a modern retelling of Euripides' *Medea*. The play is set in the Los Angeles neighbourhood of Boyle Heights and follows members of a Mexican family through their terrifying journey from southern Mexico to the United States. Once in the States, they must face the trauma of their journey and their undocumented status. True to the OSF mission, the playwright, cast, director, assistant director, set and costume designer, lighting designer, sound designer, dramaturg and voice and text director were all Latinx.

Mojada is written mostly in English, but it also incorporates Spanish and Nahuatl. Director Juliette Carrillo sought a seamless flow between the three languages that allowed the cultural specificity to be present in each conversation. The vocal landscape had to capture a variety of Mexican characters, from Armida, a Mexican immigrant who had fully assimilated to the United States, to Tita, a curandera or healer who teaches the ways of her Indigenous culture. There were conversations that would most likely have taken place

in Spanish or Nahuatl but that were spoken in English for the sake of the audience. And though the main characters are from southern Mexico, the English text is strongly influenced by the rhythms and cadence of a Boyle Heights dialect. Finally, there are harrowing screams and cries at climactic moments in the piece.

I had prepared for *Julius Caesar* and *Mojada* differently. Initially, *Mojada* felt familiar to me as a Mexican American who had lived in Los Angeles for many years, while *Caesar* was further away, and the preparation was more academic. However, as I went back and forth between these two politically timely pieces I was struck by the similarity in the work. Both pieces required a strong understanding of the past (Ancient Rome for *Caesar* and the Ancient Greek inspiration for *Mojada*). Both pieces resonated powerfully in the United States, where millions of people were marching in protest against the newly elected president, and where immigration was a volatile topic. Language barriers in both plays had to be dismantled so that the story could be told clearly. Themes of love, honour and ghosts reminded the characters of their past. Both pieces required me to be fully present with actors as they allowed for the full expression of the poetry and prose through their unique voice. We made the language necessary.

Artists from both productions shared that having a Latinx voice coach was crucial to their process and also unusual in their experience. For *Mojada*, I believe that there was an advantage to having a shared, shorthand understanding about the culture and the language. The Latinx artistic team was intimately familiar with the culture, language and characters. For *Caesar*, the advantage was less a matter of specifics and more a matter of the authenticity of one's voice. If a person's voice is Latinx, then having a Latinx voice coach may in some way give permission for the authentic voice to fully come out.

The response to both OSF pieces was positive, and audience members related to the timeliness of the stories. Theatre critic Bill Choy said about *Julius Caesar*, 'What is so impressive is how clear and concise the language is, so the audience knows what's going on, and the motivations of these characters, as the words of the Bard come vividly to life.'¹⁰ And critic T. J. Acena wrote, "'Mojada' is a bilingual show; the characters slip effortlessly between English and Spanish. They do so without translations, but this doesn't pose a problem. The actors' delivery ensures the intent is always understood.'¹¹

Master voice teacher Patsy Rodenburg professes that a person must be 'passionate, political and curious'¹² to engage with Shakespeare's text. These same touchstones are vital to many Latinx plays. It is no surprise, then, that exploring Shakespearean text through the Latinx voice offers a unique connection for artists and audience. The passion and curiosity about the words and world of the play allow performers to access the human story and tell it in the most specific way. Latinx artists are bringing their authentic voice to Shakespeare.

There is no longer a need to fit the ‘idea’ of what the character or play should be. Latinx artists are beautifully realising the roles by bringing their authentic voices to the productions both on- and offstage. This authenticity provides audiences a unique opportunity to engage deeply with Shakespeare’s text.

Notes

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2. John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare: An Actor’s Guide*, foreword by Trevor Nunn (London: Methuen, 1984), 25.
3. Trevor Nunn, foreword to Barton, *Playing Shakespeare*, viii.
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5. Robert Falls, ‘Why *Measure for Measure*?’, *OnStage* (Goodman Theatre playbill), 29.3 (March–May 2013): 1.
6. Falls, ‘Why *Measure for Measure*?’, 1.
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12. Patsy Rodenburg, *Speaking Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 13.