



# SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

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Carla Della Gatta

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*¡O Romeo!*

## Shakespeare on the Altar of Día de los Muertos

*Olga Sanchez Saltveit*

TITANIA: *Amigos, bienvenidos a nuestro cuento*  
 A trifle of a work about reunion  
 One household, *ubicada en Inglaterra*  
 Set within this humble wooden M<sup>1</sup>  
*Un escritor famoso*, William Shakespeare  
 Himself lives here but near the gates of death  
 He is not well, *él tiene un catarro*  
 We'll catch his spirit at his dying breath.

*¡O Romeo!* is a bilingual musical play based on the life, work and death of William Shakespeare. The cross-cultural show, which I conceived and directed for Milagro Theatre's annual Día de Muertos celebration in 2014, used Shakespeare's penchant for writing from extant sources to illustrate the history of colonisation that cultivated modern-day Día de Muertos traditions. Spain's cultural intrusion in the Americas syncretised Catholic and Indigenous ceremonies honouring the dead. These traditions were made popular in the late nineteenth century through the engravings of José Guadalupe Posada. Día de Muertos recognises that death is a great equaliser; no matter how wealthy or powerful a person may be in life, everyone is reduced to bones in death. Accordingly, the revered Bard is levelled in *¡O Romeo!* by mortality, remorse and cultural ineptitude.

Milagro is the Pacific Northwest's premiere Latinx culture and arts organisation. It is located in Portland, Oregon, and was founded in 1989. Every year since 1995, when the company established its home at El Centro Milagro, it has created an original Día de Muertos production. *¡O Romeo!* premiered on 16 October 2014 and ran to 9 November 2014; it received the 2015 Drammy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Devised Work.<sup>2</sup> This chapter describes the production, its dramaturgical questions, and its humorous

critique, in traditional Día de Muertos fashion, of Shakespeare's practice of creative appropriation.

### **Shakespeare and Día de Muertos: the Motivation**

*¡O Romeo!* was created in alliance with the Complete Works Project (2014–16),<sup>3</sup> a two-year Portland-wide celebration of the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth and the 400th anniversary of his death. Milagro, of which I was then artistic director, was invited to join in, but the project was outside of our mission as a company dedicated to producing Latinx playwrights. Nevertheless, we decided to participate by engaging Milagro's most meaningful staging: the altar of Día de Muertos.

*¡O Romeo!* is an *ofrenda* to Shakespeare's big-hearted legacy and his human frailty. Día de Muertos *ofrendas* are altars and ritual displays constructed in honour of departed loved ones, embracing the joyful and complicated nature of life. In the spirit of the holiday, we crafted a play that imagined Shakespeare's appropriation of Mexica (Aztec) culture, as well as his deathbed regrets. This imagining of the final days of his life and his journey to *el otro lado* wove Shakespearean tropes into a traditional Day of the Dead story of longing and reunion, with love, laughter and song.

Many of Milagro's Día de Muertos productions are devised; that is, rehearsals begin without a script. Devised work can take many approaches, but in this case, as the director, I arrived at the rehearsal process with an outline, some development strategies, and thoughts about which actor might play which role. The show featured an intentionally diverse cast, both in acknowledgement of the global resonance of Shakespeare's works and in keeping with Milagro's other productions. Portland has a relatively small Latinx population. This situation has always complicated casting for Milagro's shows, but it also multiplies non-Latinx actors' encounters with Latinx theatre-making, deepening their understanding of our history and cultures. The process of creating *¡O Romeo!* encouraged the actors to bring their expertise with Shakespeare's work into conversation with pre-Columbian beliefs. This respectful encounter, unlike the colonial project of supremacy that sought to quash Indigenous traditions, proved challenging and fruitful.

Reviewing his canon, I determined that our play would feature Shakespearean archetypes such as villains, a clown, a pair of young lovers, a wise counsellor and a supernatural being. These personalities, together with Shakespeare, his son Hamnet and a fictional housekeeper named Rifke, would people the new play. In rehearsal, I asked the actors to explore the nuances of performing different characters within the same archetype. For example, one actor explored the differences between the archetypal ingenues Ophelia and Juliet, while another explored the archetypal villains Richard III



and Claudius, to determine which role they would take on. Once selected, the characters' unique backgrounds and motivations informed the actors' improvisations, fleshing out the scenarios that structured the script.

With the traditions of Día de Muertos in mind, we questioned what it meant for a fictional character to die – that is, to be erased. If a work of art and all its records were destroyed, would that mean it never existed? Could a deleted character be restored, in the way that spirits return to the land of the living to enjoy the sweetness of life again? We decided that fictional characters did have life, could die and – by the traditions of Día de Muertos – could return to commune with the living, provided that an altar were built for them. The logic of the premise was grounded in Latin American spirituality.

Finally, we worked with Shakespeare's text directly. While Milagro has produced several Spanish Golden Age plays by Lope de Vega and Calderón, its Día de Muertos productions have been set in more contemporary times. When work began on *¡O Romeo!*, the closest the company had come to crafting a Día de Muertos production based on a classical text was with *¡Viva Don Juan!*, which I devised and directed in 2011. *¡Viva Don Juan!* wove portions of Tirso de Molina's classic script into a plot that imagined the notorious Don Juan making a deal with the devil in order to perform in the play that bears his name. *¡O Romeo!* was the first time that a Milagro Día de Muertos production would work with a non-Spanish- or non-Latinx-heritage source for inspiration. Shakespeare's text found its way into lines of dialogue and lyrics for songs such as 'Now Is the Winter of Our Discontent', a duet sung by Richard III and Lady M. Thanks to the multilingual cast, Shakespearean lines were occasionally delivered in Spanish, Korean, German and Russian. This practice was unusual for Milagro, where multilingualism generally involves English, Spanish and Indigenous languages such as Nahuatl or Quechua.

In the spirit of Día de Muertos, *¡O Romeo!* was a comedy about reunion, upholding the belief that death cannot separate us, only change our relationships with the once-living. Love transcends death. The most meaningful reunion of the play was between Shakespeare and his long-lost son, Hamnet. Even as *¡O Romeo!* honoured Shakespeare's artistic contributions and poked fun at his colonising appropriation, it ultimately humanised him as a father still grieving over the death of his young son. The widespread notion of a universality in Shakespeare's work found a mirror in the universality of mortal concerns raised by Día de Muertos.

### ***¡O Romeo!* in Performance: Plot and Critique**

The show revolves around the creation and performance of Shakespeare's 'final work', an imagined trilingual (English, Spanish and Nahuatl) play informed by received Mexica culture and the history of Mexico's colonisation

by the Spanish. Shakespeare (performed by Tony Green) is writing the first literary dramatisation of Día de Muertos, in a play titled *The Mystical Story of Love and Reunion of Xochiquetzal, the Aztec Maiden, and the Spanish Conquistador Don Armando*.

Rifke (Sofia May Cuxím) is Shakespeare's housekeeper, a Jewish woman from Spain who has fled the Inquisition to find work in Stratford caring for Shakespeare and his family. Her brother, who also fled for his life, has made his way to Mexico City, in New Spain.<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare is rapt as he listens to Rifke read her brother's letters aloud; they are filled with details about the wonders of the New World. Together, Rifke and Shakespeare learn of the customs of the Aztecs, such as a marvellously potent beverage called *xocolatl* that cures all ills, and a month-long celebration in honour of the dead during the time of year when the veil between the living and the dead is thinnest. Inspired by these accounts, Shakespeare has begun writing the play he believes will be his final and greatest work. In a nod to the theories questioning Shakespeare's authorship, we see that Rifke is his co-writer.

Rifke is especially taken by the idea of creating an *ofrenda*, wondering whether such a ceremony might enable them to be reunited with Hamnet, whom she misses dearly. Rifke produces a jacket that belonged to the boy, but Shakespeare immediately rejects her idea, so she leaves the jacket by the windowsill and exits. On his way to bed, Shakespeare stops by the window, puts down his candle, picks up the jacket and holds it close. Clearly, he too misses his son. Returning the jacket to the windowsill near the candle, he unwittingly creates a simple *ofrenda*. By tradition, the *ofrenda* bears a candle for the honoured departed and a belonging of significance to that person, such as clothing, tools or mementos, meant to make the spirit feel welcome. The jacket and candle are enough to draw Hamnet to Shakespeare's room.

Sensing that his father is near death, Hamnet (Otniel Henig) summons Titania (Tara Hershberger), who in turn beckons Hamlet (Heath Hyun), Ophelia (Rebecca Ridenour), Polonius (Arlena Barnes), Lady M (Danielle Chaves), Richard III (Enrique Andrade) and Yorick in the flesh (Jacob Wiest). Shakespeare identifies each by name until he reaches Hamnet. Perhaps he can't believe his eyes, perhaps his heart won't let him, but for whatever reason Shakespeare mistakenly greets his son by saying, 'O, Romeo!' and Hamnet won't permit the others to correct his father. The gathering is happy, except for Lady M and Richard III, who are bitter about their portrayals as villains. They despise these bad reputations and, after singing their duet, conspire to convince the Bard to destroy all his works before he dies.

Playing on Shakespeare's lingering grief, Lady M and Richard III persuade Shakespeare that his work, which kept him in London while Hamnet fell ill, caused him to neglect his son, leading to Hamnet's death. Despondent over the thought, Shakespeare orders Rifke to burn all his manuscripts. The other

spirits are dismayed and, stalling for time, tell him that such a destructive act demands that they prepare a ceremony. Lady M and Richard III suggest they perform Shakespeare's newest work, arguing insincerely that it will convince him of the worthiness of his endeavours, when they intend the opposite. His new play is filled with Shakespearean tropes such as forbidden young love, villains in disguise, a sword fight, a dumb show, speeches by a goddess and bewitchment. However, the two villains secretly plot to sabotage the performance of this unfinished play so that he goes ahead with the destruction of all his works. Richard III becomes a petulant actor, uncooperatively complaining about everything, and Lady M recites her lines in the most stilted iambic pentameter imaginable.

To round out the cast, Titania places Rifke under a spell that allows her to see and act with the spirits, whereupon she performs the role of Citlali, the Aztec priestess and mother of Xochiquetzal. Shakespeare, in an effort to be authentic, has written dialogue for Citlali in Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica. Of course, Shakespeare does not speak Nahuatl; he merely cobbles together bits of vocabulary sent by Rifke's brother:

- CITLALI:       (*mistrustful*) Huitzilopochtli, papalotl, elote, tecolote.  
 ARMANDO:    Excellency, on this site must I build,  
                   A grand cathedral honoring our king  
                   Though on the grounds of your sacred retreat  
                   And temple to the Goddess Coatlicue.  
 CITLALI:       (*offended*) Coyote, ocelote, aguacate, tácate, nopal!  
 ARMANDO:    I will simply have to take that chance.  
 CITLALI:       (*demanding*) Guatemala, Yucatan, Jalisco, Mazatlan.  
 ARMANDO:    One more sacrifice? That cannot be!

We can only infer what Citlali means from context, inflection and Don Armando's responses. Milagro's audiences are familiar with this approach to bilingual work; rather than hearing a translation for every line, which is tedious, the audience is trusted to grasp meaning beyond a literal interpretation. Here, however, the use of Nahuatl words that over time have been absorbed into Mexican Spanish and even English, causes the audience to understand that what Shakespeare has written is an absurdly ignorant version of the 'native language'. Shakespeare knows that his Elizabethan audience will find these unfamiliar words to be a raw, exotic experience, as unintelligible as the Indigenous were to the Conquistadores. However, since those words are familiar to many in Milagro's audience, the comedy works on two levels: the Nahuatl words strung together are absurd, and Shakespeare's supremacy as a master poet (and representative of the coloniser class) is humbled in a light-hearted protest against offensive misrepresentation.

At the play's climax – a sword fight between the young lover Don Armando and Gertrudis, the Conquistador's jealous daughter in disguise as the Bishop – the young lover is slain. The play stops, partly because the rest of it has not yet been written, but also because it is shocking. Shakespeare is beside himself: this death is not at all what he intended. 'This is the New World,' he cries, 'a place of better human nature, of infinite potential. A place where we might have learned from our mistakes before it's too late.' At this, Hamnet jumps in and improvises an ending that reinforces the fundamental theme of this Día de Muertos play, that death is but a beginning, and that love continues on:

HAMNET: Think death has won, but you are mistaken.  
 Death will not kill their love. Although they met  
 But briefly while on earth, they now possess  
 Eternity's embrace. They laugh at death.

Shakespeare is astonished by 'Romeo's' ability to craft the right ending for his play, and in this moment, he finally recognises his son. The playwright dies happy and is escorted away by his fellow spirits, who sing 'Full Fathom Five' (from *The Tempest*) in a harmoniously haunting arrangement by musical director and composer Amir Shirazi. Rifke, waking from what she has perceived as a dream, realises that her master has died, and she goes about collecting all the items strewn about by the performance – swords, a crown, flowers – placing them on the *ofrenda* of the play. Her act unintentionally beckons the spirits back, including Shakespeare and her beloved Hamnet, and the play ends in reunion and dance.

The interplay between Shakespeare and Latinx and Indigenous cultures prompted a creativity in devised theatre that Portland audiences lauded and that the cast welcomed as means to integrate canonical Western theatre with the cultural traditions they embody and practise. *¡O Romeo!* honoured Shakespeare's dramaturgical concerns while staying true to Día de Muertos traditions of spirituality, irreverence, transcendent love and reunion between realms of existence. By poking fun at Shakespeare's cultural insensitivity, the play made a broader comment against colonising forces that sought (and seek) to eradicate Indigenous traditions. Those traditions have prevailed, albeit altered, for centuries, and they found a way to speak back to a hero of European culture in the voice of *¡O Romeo!*

## Notes

1. 'M' here refers to the symbol/monogram for Milagro Theatre, where this production was staged.
2. 'Since 1979, the Drammy Committee has striven to promote live theatre in

Portland by recognizing and rewarding the outstanding work of Portland-area actors, directors and designers. An all-volunteer group of critics and theatre artists, we attend over 100 local productions each year, culminating in an awards ceremony in June.' 'About', Drammy Awards, 4 December 2019, <https://drammyawards.org/about/> (last accessed 11 November 2020).

3. Geneva Chin, 'First Time Nationwide: Portland Presents All of Shakespeare's Works in Two Years', Oregon Public Broadcasting, 28 March 2014, [www.opb.org](http://www.opb.org).
4. The Alhambra Decree, which expelled Jews from Spain, took effect just four days before Christopher Columbus first set sail west for the Indies in 1492.