



SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

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What's with the Spanish, Dude? Identity Development,
Language Acquisition and Shame while Coaching
La Comedia of Errors

Micha Espinosa

I was eighteen and had just returned from theatre school to my native Arizona. It was Christmas Eve in the Espinosa household, and the tamales and posole smelled so good. After church, the custom was for the family to gather, the mariachis to play and the cousins to reunite. During these gatherings, the majority of the family spoke Spanish. My Spanish was rusty, but feeling confident from my studies and travels, I tried to engage with confidence. Doing my best to be humble from a minor mistake, I proclaimed, ‘Estoy embarazada?’ From the puzzled looks from my family, I knew I had done something wrong. No one corrected me, but they laughed and laughed and laughed. I ran from the room and locked myself in the bathroom. Did I have food in my teeth? Had I spilled food on myself? Embarazada – embarrassed – what was so funny? I later found out that I had told everyone that I was pregnant. The word for ‘embarrassed’ is vergüenza, not embarazada. How did I get it mixed up? Spanish became my false friend. The next time I was asked to speak in Spanish was for a performance in a play. I hesitated. My body froze and my mind fogged; memories of being put in the corner at school for speaking Spanish, my embarrassing moment, and the pressure of getting Spanish ‘right’ for the play all hit my nervous system at once. Even though I grew up speaking Spanish, I had trouble learning my lines. In my mind, I felt there was something wrong with me.

Fast forward thirty-two years, and it is spring 2019. I have spent years studying my body’s reaction to this freeze sensation (with research interests in identity development, language acquisition and shame), I have reclaimed my Spanglish identity, and I am the visiting voice and text coach at Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF). One of my assignments for the season is *La Comedia of Errors*, a bilingual adaptation by Lydia G. Garcia and Bill Rauch of a *Play on!* translation by Christina Anderson. The *Play on!* project was created in alignment with the equity and inclusion initiatives at OSF to engage and

inspire audiences. A total of thirty-six playwrights were commissioned to translate thirty-nine plays using modern English to increase understanding and connection to the work.

I was deeply honoured to work on the world premiere of *La Comedia of Errors*, which was artistic director Rauch's last production at OSF. It had long been a dream of his to offer a bilingual production. This ninety-minute production, in which Spanish and English were spoken equally, was staged in the round and was actor driven. The play follows Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* in a new cultural context. All classic characters are represented, and the story follows the same plot. There is the classic mistaken identity, puns, rhyme, verse, twins, stock characters and, of course, the amazement and wonder of physical comedy. But the play is now set in a fictitious town in the United States. Two actors play the two sets of twins, and these two sets are geographically split, with one set having been raised in the United States and the other in Mexico. Egeon, the father of the twins, searching for his family, now faces deportation instead of execution, and the play has an important new character called La Vecina. La Vecina, which translates as 'the neighbour', is the bilingual, chatty, opinionated, telenovela-loving, noisy witness who sits in the audience and helps narrate and interpret events, awakening us through her testimony. This new character, La Vecina, uses her wicked sense of humour to interpret for the audience. The passage that follows takes place soon after the Mexican twins' arrival in the United States. The confused jeweller, having already given the twin, Antipholus of Mexico, the necklace for Antipholus of USA's wife, has just approached Antipholus of the USA about payment for the necklace. This interaction takes place entirely in English. La Vecina observes the action and then steps in to remind Antipholus of the USA of the theatre audience and to narrate the action for Spanish-speaking spectators:

LA VECINA

Whoa, that's a lot of English. ¿No que esta obra es bilingüe? What about mis vecinos? Who's taking care of them?

ANTIPHOLUS OF USA

Whatchu mean? We speak American in America.

LA VECINA

Oh, is that how it is? You know what, I got this.

(to audience)

Este señor es el joyero encargado del collar que la esposa celosa deseaba. Y parece que este patrón por fin encontró al hombre que le pertenece. Pero están hechos vueltas sobre quien le pegó a quien.

(to ANTIHOLUS, dabbing)

American.¹

La Vecina is not afraid to challenge Antipholus of the USA and his monolingualism. The text dives headfirst into the politics of language. The play's contemporary reimagining and border crossing (both US–Mexican and US–Canadian) also highlight the treatment of immigrants, the reunification of families, and the urgency of empathy in our political times.

In the programme notes for the 2019 season production, Rauch asked, 'How do we reveal the comedy of errors, the misunderstandings, the whole extra lens – the profoundly political and aesthetically thrilling lens of language? Who speaks Spanish? Who speaks English? Who speaks both? How are characters connecting and conflicting because of language and through language?' As a fourth-generation Sonoran Chicana artist, I fell deeply in love with this script and the concepts Rauch offered his audience. At the beginning of the play, *Antifolio de México* reflects on his journey after arriving in the United States:

En el mundo soy como una gota de aqua,
Buscando otra gota en medio del mar –
I to the world am like a drop of water
That in the ocean seeks another drop –²

When I read *La Comedia of Errors*, I immediately felt like my thirst had been quenched. I've always spoken Spanglish, and I think in both languages. However, I had never worked on a production of Shakespeare that so fully embraced the spectrum of Latinx identity and language.

The success of the play's language blending is primarily due to Garcia and Rauch's writing. The adaptation benefited from the brilliant Spanish translations of Garcia, which reflect her understanding of language politics and her years of equity and diversity work. The show was created in 'workshop' over many months in tandem with a group of diverse actors/players in the company. The intersectionality of the players and their relationship to language made this production unique. In addition, OSF is fiercely committed to the local Latinx community. Community organisers Antonio David Lyon and Alejandra Cisneros spearheaded outreach efforts and engaged in radical welcoming, inviting community members to serve as cultural experts during pre-production, and bringing the show to local community centres (often with tamales), school gyms and OSF's rehearsal hall. Through their presence in the room, the community knowledge holders offered a situated perspective to the writers during the rehearsal and adaptation process, as well as an opportunity to gauge how the material would resonate with audiences who might be new to OSF's work.

As the US Dromio so eloquently puts it in the play's first scene, 'What's with the Spanish, Dude?'³ This play features a variety of Spanish speakers –

Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, Costa Rican, Mexicano, Gringo, Spanglish – as well as English speakers, with and without accents. The printed text of the play is multicoloured: red indicates text spoken in Spanish; blue indicates text in which a native Spanish speaker is speaking English; green indicates text in which a native English speaker is speaking Spanish; and black indicates when the text is spoken in English. It was exciting, refreshing and terrifying to approach a text that allowed for this level of cultural bumping. This type of experimentation can be seen throughout *La Comedia*. The following early exchange between sisters Luciana and Adriana, narrated by La Vecina, reveals how the levels of mixing, code-switching and Spanglish move the story forward:

LA VECINA

Por la gran púchika, cree que su esposo tiene una novia.

LUCIANA

¡Los celos matan! Tsk, smack jealousy away.

ADRIANA

Unfeeling fools can with such wrongs go play!

Hermana, you know he promised me a chain;

Would that alone be a token he's detain,

So he would keep right faithful to his bed!

El quiere otra mujer, yo estoy entre espada y pared:

Since that my beauty cannot please his eye,

I'll weep what's left away, and weeping die.

(singing as she exits)

'Y Volver, Volver, Volver

A tus brazos otra vez . . . '

Adriana's song here is a classic ranchera about returning to a lover: 'To return, return, return to your arms once again'. Still, I heard this familiar refrain as a reclaiming of language and cultura. To hear the nuance of the accented English of the native Spanish-speaking character Luciana was deeply meaningful to me. The sounds were of someone who lives in two worlds, ni de aquí, ni de allá, sounds that represented my family and my community. I could think of no other time in my career where I had been part of a professional production where crossing sonic borders was welcomed and embraced. My relationship with language and identity has always been complicated. Linguistic strategising has been a means of survival. Spanglish has been an assertion of my political identity and my relationship to borders has been the fulcrum of my research and performance.

Thus, I felt uniquely qualified to serve the play and the players. In 2005, I published a study, 'Insights into the Challenges Latino Students Face while

Training in Theatre', in *Shakespeare around the Globe*.⁴ The chapter was the first of its kind and has since led to numerous articles and publications. In preparation for *La Comedia*, I revisited the work. In the study, I used phenomenological inquiry to examine linguistic identity. I specifically look to George Kitahara Kich's scholarship on developmental stages for bicultural identity formation to better understand language acquisition.⁵ I offer the steps now through my lens of actor training. They are as follows:

Stage one: this stage can be emotionally painful, when the subject/actor realises they have an accent, or when their cultural voice is markedly different from the way others perceived them or their phenotype. Different-ness, the feeling of not belonging, can lead to feelings of self-negation, rejection and shame.

Stage two: the subject/actor might find themselves emotionally unstable. The subject's feelings might fluctuate between an understanding of their beliefs in the context of their social and political world and the possibility that a situation could be triggering, and thus the unhealthy feelings return.

Stage three: this last stage of development brings stability. The subject can be expressive rather than be defensive. The subject/actor actively seeks and takes joy in their cultural or linguistic identity.

As a vocal coach, I found myself going through these same stages of acceptance. I feared that my skills would not be enough; I had grown up under the English-only movement and had not had a formal bilingual education. Would my Latinidad serve the play and players; would my intermediate Spanish level II skills and 'border crossed over me politics' be enough? How was it, after years of study and significant life experience, that I still had to go through the process of reclaiming my right to cultural competency and linguistic dexterity?

In my years of teaching bilingual/bicultural workshops and researching the experiences of Latinx actors, I have witnessed that second-language learners of both English and Spanish share in the same process of acceptance of self. I have experienced and seen the debilitating effects of shame and shame memory. To take Spanish as an example: some people speak better Spanish than others. Some people can speak Spanish but cannot read or write it. Some studied in school but have never performed while speaking Spanish. Some can speak Spanish and English, but only within the context of where they were raised, with only local rhythms and pronunciations. Others do not speak Spanish at all but need to do so for work or social acceptance because of their phenotype and cultural background. Lastly, there is the fear of judgement from the experts in the room, those who speak Spanish with greater fluidity, proper

grammar and pronunciation: this fear dramatically increases the possibility of the freeze response in the body. Language ability is deeply tied to one's identity, as exemplified in the first scene of *La Comedia*:

THE ACTOR WHO PLAYS DEPUTY

The first scene of our play picks up somewhere in the United States. . . .

And we begin with:

EGEÓN

El padre, hecho un cautivo, que solo habla español.

DEPUTY

(interpreting)

The father, now a captive, who only speaks Spanish.

SHERIFF SOLINUS

A sheriff, who only speaks English.

DEPUTY

Un sheriff, que solo habla inglés. And a deputy, who will do his darnedest to interpret.⁶

This moment nicely sets up the rules of the world and reveals how central language ability is to the characters' identities. The actor playing the deputy, the talented Mark Murphy, took the last line above and brilliantly encapsulated the struggle of speaking a second language. The joke was not played for laughs; rather, the actor gestured his arm with earnest enthusiasm and shared his truth with the audience by allowing them to see in his eyes the feeling of relief that came from returning to his mother tongue after successfully translating in effortful Spanish.

Towards the latter half of the play, Emilia, the abbess and long-lost wife of Egeon and the mother to the separated twins, reunites with her family and community. Emilia is an expert code-switcher, and she reveals her true identity by speaking completely in Spanglish, a reflection of her two lives united:

Nuestros queridos vecinos,
 And all that are assembled in this place,
 That by this sympathetic one day's error
 Have suffered wrong,
 Please come with us into the chapel here
 And we shall make full satisfacción.
 Thirty-three years have I but been in labor
 With you and you, my sons; and till this present hour
 My heavy burden never delivered.
 Mi comunidad, mi esposo and mis hijos both,
 And you the calendars of their nativity,

Go to a baptism feast – un nuevo bautismo – and come with me;
After such long grief, such festivity!⁷

These last words – ‘after such long grief, such festivity’ – struck me to the core every time I heard them. I believe *La Comedia of Errors* will bring relief and festivity. I imagine the many Latinx students and communities that will benefit from producing and seeing the show. I imagine the audiences that will be introduced to verse and Shakespeare and poetry with Spanish, English and Spanglish. OSF is a unique environment where equity and inclusion are at the forefront of the process. Elsewhere, I have seen talented actors not given opportunities because they speak with an accent. Stories of blatant ignorance and racism frequently appear on the Latinx Theatre Commons and Latinx Scholar blogs. Some actors tell stories of directors asking them to be ‘more Mexican’; others ask the very real question of *do I belong?* The following post on the Latinx Theatre Commons Facebook page received numerous responses:

Hello all. First time poster, recently joined. Latinx, obviously. I’m Latinx American tho, brought up without the culture or language. Does that hurt my opportunities being in Latinx Theater, and how can I provide a voice for others in my position? Do I learn and devote myself to a culture I never knew, or can I create something new that is still valid to the Latinx experience?⁸

This question strikes at the heart of the complexity of the Latinx experience with identity and work in the theatre. Latinx Shakespearean projects like *La Comedia* offer audiences and players a more complex representation and thus understanding of who we are as a cultural community. I have seen in the classroom and onstage actors liberated by working in their mother tongue. I have also seen actors who resist and shut down when they are asked to speak in their home language.

In the last act of the play, La Vecina declares, ‘You know what, ya basta. I’m done waiting for others to step in and step up.’⁹ I concur with her sentiment. As a vocal coach, I am committed to cultural competency and to a recognition of the cultural context and linguistic complexity of the cast/students with whom I am working. An understanding of the stages of identity development and its relationship to shame and to shame memory has helped me develop best practices. I find inspiration in many places, from Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development and Brené Brown’s resiliency theories, to the growing research on identity and language education, language teaching psychology and numerous studies in second language acquisition.¹⁰ But I am most deeply influenced by the work of Catherine Fitzmaurice, with whom I have studied for over twenty-five years.

The Fitzmaurice method of embodied voice holds at its core the philosophy that the teacher will recognise their own nervous system and the nervous system of the other.¹¹ I have developed over the years what I am currently referring to as identity-conscious, character-driven voice and accent design. The process begins by creating an environment of trust by using radical listening. I rarely work in groups. I believe that each actor needs time to work individually. I then tailor instructional materials to align with the learning style of the actor to increase autonomy. I try to be conscious of the ways a player could be triggered with shame or shame memory; moments of community involvement put a higher level of stress on the players in terms of their abilities and authenticity. It is at these times that in my role as voice and text coach I serve as an ally, advocating for the time needed for acquisition, serving as a confidant and actively mitigating levels of stress primarily using principles and techniques from the Fitzmaurice ‘destructuring’ process.

In the fourth act of *La Comedia*, the character Antifolo de Mexico says, ‘Este sueño Americano es una pesadilla’: ‘This American dream is heavy’.¹² As of 2005, just fifteen years ago, bilingual education was banned in three states – California, Arizona and Massachusetts – that, together, as Corey Mitchell details, ‘educated 40 percent of the nation’s English-language learners’.¹³ Generations of actors like myself who grew up under these laws are now reclaiming their language and healing from the demoralising and counterproductive attitudes around language learning. The tide is changing, and many of these laws have recently been repealed, although Arizona’s laws remain intact. The play ends on a hopeful tone, with the US Dromio offering to his Mexican counterpart:

We came into the world hermano y hermano;
Let’s go, not one before another, but mano en mano.¹⁴

I am hopeful that more productions like *La Comedia of Errors* will reach audiences, that more opportunities for revisioning and reimagining our narratives will make a difference, that we will continue to fight for a country that embraces its neighbours and that celebrates biculturalism and bilingualism. I love that *La Comedia* uses the artistry of humour yet does not forget the reality of the distribution of sadness in Latinx communities: those migrant/immigrant stories, family separation, Dreamers waiting, waiting, waiting for the day when they will return, return, return, or the day they must leave, or the day when someone will honour and pronounce their names with dignity.

Shakespeare knew it. I believe we all know it. You can only fight back with poetry.

Notes

1. Lydia G. Garcia and Bill Rauch, *La Comedia of Errors*, based on Christina Anderson (trans.), *The Comedy of Errors*, by William Shakespeare (rehearsal draft, 21 May 2019, 30). Translation: This man is the jeweller in charge of the necklace that the jealous wife wanted. And it seems that this patron has finally found the man to whom the necklace belongs. But they are going around about who hit who.
2. Garcia and Rauch, *La Comedia of Errors* (rehearsal draft, 21 May 2019, 15).
3. Garcia and Rauch, *La Comedia of Errors* (rehearsal draft, 21 May 2019, 16).
4. Micha Espinosa, 'Insights into the Challenges Latino Students Face while Training in Theatre', in *Shakespeare around the Globe: Essays on Voice and Speech*, ed. Mandy Rees (Cincinnati, OH: Voice and Speech Trainers Association, 2005), 129–43.
5. George Kitahara Kich, 'The Developmental Process of Asserting a Biracial, Bicultural Identity', *Racially Mixed People in America*, 304 (1992): 317.
6. Garcia and Rauch, *La Comedia of Errors* (rehearsal draft, 21 May 2019, 5).
7. Garcia and Rauch, *La Comedia of Errors* (rehearsal draft, 21 May 2019, 80). Translation: Nuestros queridos vecinos / Our dear neighbours; satisfacción / satisfaction; Mi comunidad, mi esposo and mis hijos both / My community, my husband and both my children.
8. Jordan Rodriguez, 'Hello all. First time poster, recently joined. Latinx, obviously', Latinx Theatre Commons, Facebook, 18 October 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/latinxtheatrecommons/permalink/2569996729780686/>.
9. Garcia and Rauch, *La Comedia of Errors* (rehearsal draft, 21 May 2019, revised 7.2), 79.
10. For more on where I draw my inspiration, see Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me (but It Isn't): Telling the Truth about Perfectionism, Inadequacy, and Power* (New York: Gotham Books, 2008); Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2013); Peter Costa and Bonny Norton, 'Introduction: Identity, Transdisciplinarity, and the Good Language Teacher', *Modern Language Journal*, 101.S1 (2017): 3–14; Achilleas Kostoulas and Sarah Mercer, 'Fifteen Years of Research on Self & Identity in System', *System*, 60 (2016): 128–34; Sarah Mercer, 'Psychology for Language Learning: Spare a Thought for the Teacher', *Language Teaching*, 51.4 (2018): 504–25; and Sprouts, '8 Stages of

Development by Erik Erikson', YouTube video, 5:19, uploaded 23 April 2017, <https://youtu.be/aYCBdZLCDBQ>.

11. For further reading of the Fitzmaurice method, see <https://www.fitzmauriceinstitute.org/writings> (last accessed 19 November 2020).
12. Garcia and Rauch, *La Comedia of Errors* (rehearsal draft, 21 May 2019, revised 7.2), 50.
13. Corey Mitchell, ““English-Only” Laws in Education on Verge of Extinction’, *Education Week*, 23 October 2019. Available at <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/10/23/english-only-laws-in-education-on-verge-of.html> (last accessed 19 November 2020).
14. Garcia and Rauch, *La Comedia of Errors* (rehearsal draft, 21 May 2019, 81).