



SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

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Carla Della Gatta

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Diálogo: On Performing Shakespearean Characters as Latinx

Alejandra Escalante and Daniel José Molina
Facilitated by Carla Della Gatta

In this conversation, Alejandra Escalante and Daniel José Molina tackle the nuances of portraying Shakespearean characters as Latinx actors. Although currently living in New York, they have both worked extensively for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), and they met when starring in the lead roles of OSF's *Romeo and Juliet* in 2012. They shared the stage again at OSF in *The Tempest* (2014) and in *Henry IV, Part I* (2016). Their onstage relationships soon took on an offstage life, with the two marrying each other in 2018. They have both performed Shakespeare in Spanish in various roles. In this dialogue, they discuss their background with Shakespeare, the process of translating his work into Spanish, and their history with performing in plays written by Latinx playwrights.

Carla Della Gatta: How did you get involved with Shakespeare?

Daniel José Molina: My favourite college professor very frankly said to me, 'Molina, you can't sing, and you can't dance. You might want to pick up Shakespeare.'

Even though I completely agreed with him on my limitations, it wasn't until many years later I understood how wise and practical his advice was. Before that moment, Shakespeare only brought up memories of that interminable and dull semester in junior high. Maybe [that professor] just wanted to keep me busy. Maybe he was savvy enough to know that regional classical theatres are a great first step for a young non-equity actor.

Even if I didn't go on to steadily work in productions of Shakespeare's plays (going on eleven years now, which blows my mind), [this professor] had offered me an invitation into an entire dimension of history, performance and art I otherwise might not have discovered. He might have just thought it would keep me busy. In those early days it was just lexicons and plot synopses and monologues, but very quickly that evolved into

spear-carrying in actual summer stock productions and, before I knew it, an acting career.

But if I ask myself why I've stuck with it? It would be a very glib combination: people keep offering me jobs and, very luckily, I can't get enough of it.

Alejandra Escalante: My first role was Lady Macbeth in high school, when I was seventeen. I had done scenes from Shakespeare before, but that was my first full production, and weirdly enough, that was the show that got me to love Shakespeare, whatever that says about who I am as a person. I remember being seventeen and not necessarily understanding word for word what I was saying, but I understood something, those murderous intentions. That was my first experience of loving it. Now I love to dissect and discover the words, rhythm, and verse.

Carla: Does your process for engaging with Shakespeare differ from your process with other playwrights?

Alejandra: In a sense. Working on a script by Shakespeare I tend to work on the language in a very specific way. I need to understand the language backwards and forwards to feel confident that I have a hold on the character as well as know that the audience understands me. On more contemporary pieces I don't tend to rip apart the language and put it back together in the same way.

I definitely approach a script of Shakespeare's very differently than I do a contemporary script. Sometimes I like to say it's the same thing, but it isn't. I found out quite early on, being one of the younger people in a cast, à la *Romeo and Juliet*, and being around these people who had been doing this work for years, I realised I needed to actually know what I was saying. And to not embarrass myself when we go through first reads and I am pronouncing everything wrong. So I am really meticulous now about [approaching] the script and writing down every single word. I will translate it into modern English; if there's a phrase I can understand word by word but I can't really intellectualise it, I will translate it into a way I can understand it or a phrase I can understand. I have to do that for every single word in a Shakespeare script. Whereas I think there's a lot more interpretation and ease with something that is more contemporary. If I understand what I'm saying, hopefully the audience will too.

Daniel: It does, but only in the technical sense. Those first few read-through or table work days might be my favourite when working on a Shakespeare play. Picking apart the giant knot of rhetorical parenthetical subjects, proper nouns, historical references, and terribly unfunny and archaic Elizabethan jokes with a group of intelligent artists/dramaturgs/directors is some version of my ideal Sunday. All this is to say, Shakespeare earns himself maybe a couple extra table work days to make sure everyone comprehends every word in that script.

And (hot take), the difference between working on Shakespeare and [working on] a new play honestly ends there. I am most moved by Shakespeare when it is performed by actors hungry for truth, not style. Flawed, three-dimensional, breathing, all-too-mortal characters is the way for me, baby. I remember working at a theatre in my earlier days and getting chewed out by a director for not respecting the elevated language by not behaving onstage in a . . . well . . . elevated manner. Presentational. Stylised for stylisation's sake. Unplaceable transatlantic accent. That was the wave at this particular venue.

I didn't have a comeback then, but now I would just throw Hamlet's speech to the players at him. All this is to say: do I want every audience member to hear and follow every single one of my character's specific, poetic, timeless thoughts? Absolutely, diction IS important! But am I going to perform my [role] any differently than a real human being onstage simply because the play is historic? No thanks.

Carla: Both of you are bilingual, but were you trained to act in Spanish? What are the biggest challenges to being in a bilingual or semi-bilingual production?

Alejandra: Spanish was my first language. I learned English through school, once preschool started. I did not receive training in acting in Spanish. I'm not sure there are too many challenges. When it comes to Shakespeare, I think it's important to have a great translation. I will go through the verse to find emphases and things I learned in school, for sure, particularly if I get stuck on something that sounds weird, and then I work with Daniel through it. But other than that, it's kind of been a mash-up of what I've put together. The wonders of Shakespeare appear in his language, not necessarily in his plots, so an evocative translation is really necessary. Just putting the words into Google Translate does not work! I promise!

Daniel: My acting training did not include any Spanish. I've had two recurring challenges when I've been in bilingual and semi-bilingual productions. One of them is, sadly, I've never been in a semi-bilingual production with a fully bilingual cast. Every time, the non-Latinx cast members learn beautiful Spanish. But I've wondered what would happen if it were a full cast of Spanish speakers that have grown up and have an emotional connection with those palabras.

My second problem is when a Latinx story in a play in English feels the need to translate words within dialogue. You know what I'm talking about? When a character will say a line that goes something like 'My favorite food is an Aguacate! An avocado!' Who are you translating for? If all these characters speak Spanish, why are you translating? If it's a scenario where the characters are all speaking their native language, but it is just translated for the audience's sake, then what is happening in that moment? That's just a pet peeve of mine.

Carla: Alejandra, you played Julieta in the 2011 OSF *Measure for Measure*

set in a border town, and you were the only monolingual Spanish-speaking character. How did speaking the lines in Spanish affect your character? What did it mean to be linguistically segregated from the other characters?

Alejandra: It was definitely the first time I had worked on a production that was almost entirely set within a Latinx community. I found a lot of happiness and excitement in being able to represent that part of myself. It was very cool to have a commonality with some cast members. To be honest, a small percentage of the cast was actually Latino/a/x. Four of about fifteen speaking parts were played by Latinx actors. I found a great sense of stakes in Julieta only being able to speak in Spanish. I felt her frustration and urgency in trying to communicate. I really had to do very little acting because the desperation came so naturally. I remember not being confident with my English when I first started school (preschool), and the fear I had of speaking up. Here was Julieta, pregnant, with her fiancé in prison facing death, and she can barely plead her case. It was very moving.

I was also in Tanya Saracho's plays *The Tenth Muse* (some Spanish) and *Songs for the Disappeared* (partially in Spanish) at the Goodman, and when I was younger, I did *Blood Wedding*, and that was entirely in Spanish. Most of it was in Spanglish. There was also a lot of Spanish in *2666* at the Goodman.

Carla: Daniel, you played Romeo in (mostly) English in the OSF production in 2012 and then in Spanish with the Neruda text in a staged reading for The Public. Aside from the different scripts, what were the differences you noted in playing the role in two languages?

Daniel: Honestly, it's very difficult to compare the experiences since OSF was a full production while The Public was just a reading. But Romeo's track felt both similar and dissimilar. Much of that I attribute to Neruda's decision to translate Shakespeare's play line by line rather than editorialising. So every single one of Romeo's thoughts was uttered, but since they were in Shakespeare's order, there was no rhythm, and certainly no rhyme. To be frank, I expected so much more from the adaptation. A discovery was made of the stark contrast between adaptation and translation. It was like a bad cover of an incredible song. But I loved the experience both for that discovery and the new friends I made on that project.

Carla: What about translating?

Alejandra: Most of the directors I have worked with, although they are Latinx, don't speak Spanish, or I have played roles where I was speaking Spanish and maybe there were Latinx elements to the play, and some that weren't Latinx at all. In terms of the language, I started doing a lot of that on my own, kind of fairly thrown in the deep end. When I came in to do *Measure for Measure*, nobody told me that I was only speaking in Spanish. At the first read-through (it was a different time, and things have gotten better), it was very clear that it was a Google translation, and it didn't make any sense at all.

That day, I switched some words around. Then I approached Bill and asked if I should translate it, and it was put on the back burner. So I translated it myself. That was the first time, of several, that I have done that. And I don't mind it. I really like the work. It's a weird way to use your brain, to try to translate poetry. It is challenging and really fun, and fun to ask my mom if I read it to her this way, how does she interpret it. In terms of the acting, I never found it to be any different or approached it differently.

I have definitely looked at Spanish translations before. Once I got to *Romeo and Juliet*, Dan and I would spitball back and forth, because there was Spanish thrown in here and there, so we had to go over that. For example, should he call her 'Mi cielo' or 'Mi sol'; we would go back and forth in that way. For the most part, I like to do it on my own, and what feels evocative to me, especially if I am the one saying it, I might as well make it work for me. I do like to run it by my mom, Dan, anybody just to see not only does this make sense, but more so, does it give you the sense of what it means in English, does it inspire you to see and hear that same imagery?

Carla: You starred opposite each other at OSF in *The Tempest* and later shared the stage in *Henry IV, Part I*. What was the difference in your experiences in these non-Latinx/Spanish-themed productions and *Romeo and Juliet*? How was the process and/or product different?

Alejandra: I don't think there was any particular difference in how the process came to be. Of course, every production is so different because of the cast, director, story, etc. At the end of the day I am still a Latinx body performing all of those different roles.

Daniel: If we're completely honest, not too much, if anything, changed in our processes. Our approach to character building is not dependent on what language the dramatis personae carries in their mouth. Pretty please don't misunderstand that to mean we don't care! Perhaps the experience of performing that role is a deeper, personal one. If us being Latin is a diegetic element in the productions that we're in (i.e. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Water by the Spoonful* or *The Tenth Muse*), it's a real privilege. We can contribute in some small way to the story of our respective cultures. Which means that, conversely, if a play never brings up the fact that we are Latinx, both Alejandra and I cherish that opportunity. Sometimes the representation is enough. It is good to know that tokenisation is not the only way to tread the boards as a Latinx performer.

Carla: Have you ever been asked to perform Latinx identity in a way that made you feel uncomfortable? How did you modify the characterisation?

Daniel: Sadly, yes. Of course I won't name the theatre or the production but it was a role that was a part of an ensemble of clowns. The rehearsal period was incredibly brief, and really much of the characterisation work was done in one conversation at the beginning of us getting on our feet. This was earlier in my career, and I was still in college and very green. I saw smarter, more

experienced actors enhance or grow aspects of themselves to an appropriate clown scale almost effortlessly. And regrettably, the only feature I thought I could exaggerate about myself was that I was the only Latino in this motley crew. Ridiculous accent and broad stereotypes and all. The worst part of it is I remember them being the biggest laughs I had ever gotten at that stage of my career. Thankfully, much has changed.

Alejandra: For *Romeo and Juliet*, Dan and I were asked on the first day, for the first read-through, to read with accents, which none of us knew, none of us knew we would be doing this, including our voice and text coach. So that was the first time he was hearing it too. As you can imagine, David Carey, definitely not being Latino, was quite shocked. That whole idea kept getting tossed out, mainly really, because of Dan and me. Me crying, and asking, ‘Please don’t let us do this. It’s going to be really bad. Please don’t make us do this.’ For lots of reasons, but mainly it was that we didn’t want to seem like a weird, stereotypical story, and because there wasn’t the research into what this accent would be, the style that it would sound like. The first day we were told, ‘Something Spanish’, and we thought, Spanish from 1847 from Spain? I have no idea what that sounds like; I have no frame of reference. ‘Flavour’, ‘spice’, ‘fiery’ – any of those words are such trigger words for me now. I never want to hear them again. It was just so much time spent. [. . .] I would definitely hope that those things were going to get more specific as time goes on. And I have worked with a good number of Latinx dramaturgs, which is really great.

Carla: Have you ever tried to change your Spanish accent for a role?

Alejandra: Yes, there has been some direction. In *2666* (at the Goodman), I played a German character too, but mainly a Mexican character and then a Spanish character. I definitely worked on a Spanish accent because she spoke entirely accented English, and then I was supposed to speak in Spanish. That was an easier change to make because the rules were simpler than that versus being Mexican and changing it to more of a Colombian sound, because I am less familiar with those subtle differences. I have definitely been asked to sound more Mexican, which is interesting because I find what people usually think is that more Mexican is more LA, a more Chicano accent; people often say to talk a lot slower. I’ve heard the direction, ‘You’ve been working out in the field all day so you’re tired. [. . .]’ [ironic commentary]. So that’s the direction that you get to get to where they want. [. . .]

Carla: Actors (and directors) often establish themselves by demonstrating mastery with Shakespeare. Conversely, some feel that they might be pigeon-holed if they engage too much with Latinx theatre. Were you ever reticent to take on any roles? Why so?

Daniel: I have hesitated to accept roles before for various reasons. Have I done something too similar to this before? Will I really be challenging myself

in this? And conversely, can I pull that off? More of those kind of doubts. I consider myself lucky in that I have never felt particularly pigeonholed or stereotyped onstage. All the Latin roles I've performed (with the exception of that show with the clowns) I remember as being multilayered and human. Again, I know that is not every Latin actor's experience, and I say again, lucky.

Carla: Have there been any other types of theatre you took to?

Alejandra: The play that I read that I will never forget that showed me what theatre could be is *Topdog/Underdog*. And just from reading it – I had not yet seen it – I was completely transported. I was completely shaking afterwards. In terms of practice, I got really interested in physical theatre and things that maybe didn't use language quite as much, which is funny coming from someone who loves Shakespeare. I had an amazing teacher named Elaine Vaan Hogue, who taught physical acting, the Grotowski method, and that opened up a whole other part of my brain. I had been a dancer before, when I was much younger, so I think that was also something that made me realise how to bridge this gap and get out of my head and fully in tune with what I was actually saying and doing.