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Author

Queponds, Melanie Claire

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LATINA THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES: MARIACHI GIRL

By

Melanie Claire Queponds

A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

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University Honors
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APPROVED

Dr. Tiffany Ana Lopez
Department of Theatre, Film, and Digital Production

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Chair and Faculty Director, University Honors
Associate Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education

Abstract

While Riverside is a central hub of art and culture in Southern California with a predominantly Latina/o population, there is a lack of theatre produced by Latina theatre artists for Latina/o audiences, especially youth. On February 18th, 2016 at the Culver Center of the Arts in Downtown Riverside, the UCR Latina/o Play Project (LPP), student theatre ensemble, address this need for culturally responsive theatre for families in the community by producing *Mariachi Girl*, a bilingual musical by playwright Roxanne Schroeder-Arce. With funds and support from the Chancellor's Research Fellowship and the Gluck Fellows Program of the Arts, LPP was able to bring this beautiful story to life as a fully-staged production, with live mariachi band, folklorico dancer, talented actors and singers – all free and open to the public. Through narrative of my experience, plus rehearsal and performance photos, I will describe my artistic process and experience as director and producer. I will also explain how my directorial process evolved over the seven weeks of rehearsals with help from my cast, my faculty mentor, and my directorial mentor. I will discuss the audience reaction and response from anonymous surveys after the show. Finally, there is a discussion of the importance of culturally responsive theatre for people of all ages, creeds, races, and cultures.

Acknowledgements

Muchismas gracias to Dr. Tiffany Ana López, my faculty mentor, for being such an amazing inspiration to me and my family, and for all her work and help in getting me to this place in my life, that I could have never imagined. The amazing Latina/o Play Project ensemble for their corazón, pasión, blood, sweat, and tears in this production, y amor por el teatro! To the Chancellor's Research Fellowship, for the funding to bring this show, the musicians, the playwright, and my directing mentor to Riverside, and giving me the opportunity to grow in my process and push me to the path I was meant for. To the Gluck Fellows Program at UCR for their financial support of our entire ensemble and their amazing support in our work throughout this entire year. To the University Honors Program at UCR for their financial and moral support of my Capstone Project.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Page 1

Methodology and Theoretical Paradigms: Page 4

Artistic Process: Page 7

Questions and Answers: Audience Response: Page 12

Culturally Responsive Theatre and Its Future: Page 15

List of Figures

Figure 1: Cita from the original *Mariachi Girl* production at Dallas Children's Theater (Page 2)

Figure 2: Cita and Luis from original *Mariachi Girl* production at Dallas Children's Theater (Page 3)

Figure 3: The Playwright Roxanne Schroeder-Arce (Page 4)

Figure 4: Directing Mentor Sylvia Blush (Page 5)

Figure 5: Scholar Dr. Cecilia Aragon (Page 6)

Figure 6: Original cast of *Mariachi Girl* staged reading, May 2015 (Page 7)

Figure 7: One of the first rehearsals (Page 8)

Figure 8: Prof. Flores and her ensemble rehearsing with the cast (Page 9)

Figure 9: Our folklorico dancers in their beautiful trajes. Taken by the Culver Center of the Arts. (Page 9)

Figure 10: Our poster for the production, designed by Gabriela Bobadilla (Page 10)

Figure 11: Luis, played by Alfredo Medina, singing his heart out for the audience. Taken by the Culver Center of the Arts. (Page 11)

Figure 12: Dr. Lopez and I announcing the talk-back right after the show. Taken by the Gluck Fellows of the Arts Program. (Page 12)

Figure 13: Cita (Daisy Velasco) and Luis (Medina) perform together for their duet as father-daughter duo. Taken by the Gluck Fellows of the Arts Program. (Page 13)

Figure 14: The curtain call! From left to right in front row: Danny (Numa Juarez), Lucha Reyes (Nathali Samano), Mrs. Parker (Sarah Garcia), and Carmen (Irais Cardenas).

Dancers: Kassandra Kin, Edgar Ortuño, and Estefania Garcia. Taken by the Gluck Fellows of the Arts Program. (Page 13)

Figure 15: The star of the show, Cita (Daisy Velasco), in the spotlight (Page 15)

Figure 16: Cast, crew, production team, visiting scholars and Artistic Director of the UCR Latina/o Play Project come together for a post-show photo. Taken by Nathali Samano. (Page 16)

Figure 17: Gabriela Bobadilla, her younger sister, and the playwright pose for a picture after the show. Taken by the Gluck Fellows of the Arts Program. (Page 18)

Introduction

It was a hot day in Downtown Riverside, per usual in the spring – well, any season, really. I walked briskly towards Molino’s in my dark blue pencil skirt, light blue button up, and brown ballet flats. Running late to my meeting with my mentor, I became nervous at the fact that she most likely had another meeting to go to right after ours, because she is the most accomplished woman I know, always working and helping others, casually inspiring everyone with her chic fashion. When I found Dr. Tiffany Ana Lopez, she had a cup of coffee next to her Macbook and was ready to discuss my capstone, which was still in the works. Because I had just transferred in that year as a third year and was just wrapping my head around what a capstone project even is, I had a couple ideas bouncing around in my head. When we began discussing my first idea of a young playwright’s workshop for high schoolers to write their stories in theatrical form, she began to ask me why I wanted to do this. As I realized that this project may not be for me, Dr. Lopez asked me, “What do you do want to do after you graduate?” I said, well, teach high school theatre, help kids find their voice and express themselves. She then asked, “What about directing?”

And that is when the adventure began.

“Ten-year-old Carmencita dreams of being a mariachi singer and one day joining in performance with her father. However, her father clings to a long-held family tradition of male-only mariachis. When Carmencita's teacher offers her a book about a female mariachi, everything changes for ‘Cita’ as she sees a possibility of her dream becoming a reality. Can she celebrate her own heritage and expand her father's view of the world?

Mariachi Girl is an uplifting bilingual family drama about reaching for your dreams and

is filled with vibrant original mariachi music” (dramaticpublishing.com). As I read this description online, it was as if this musical was calling to me – singing to me, in fact. I said to myself, “This play has to be here, has to be performed for the kids in Riverside, for my colleagues, my brother and sister, for my parents. I have to direct this.”



Figure 1: Cita from the original *Mariachi Girl* production at Dallas Children's Theater

When I took my Women in Theatre class my second quarter at UCR, I learned a specific phrase that will stick with me for the rest of my scholarly career, if not for life: “The personal becomes political.” This is essentially my motto for any of the work I have done and continue to

do with the Latina/o Play Project. What it means to me is that what is important to me, like my culture, my ancestry, my family, becomes a political statement and something that means more than simply a connection or tie-in. For example, making theatre that is about Latinos, for Latinos, by Latinos, is more than a personal way of creating art that I relate to. It is political because Latinos can have very negative representation in the media, whether that be in films, news, video games, and plays. Changing the way my people are seen and giving a true voice to Latinos to media matters to me, and also makes a change in the community. The Latina/o Play Project achieves that here in Riverside, and this is what I aimed to achieve by producing and directing *Mariachi Girl*.

The UCR Latina/o Play Project is a theatre ensemble consisted of undergraduates who are dedicated to bringing Latina/o theatre and film to the community of Riverside. The mission of the initiative is to provide students with the opportunity to engage in service learning through the creative arts by studying, producing and presenting Latina/o

theatre in an intense and experiential forum. Our goal is to bring Latina/o Theatre to both the UCR community and the city of Riverside, reflecting the people and history of the Inland Empire and California through the public presentation of great works by prominent Latina/o playwrights. The Tomas Rivera Endowed Chair and Professor of Theatre, Film, and Digital Production, Dr. Tiffany Ana Lopez was our faculty supervisor and founding Artistic Director.

During the 2015-2016 academic year, once every quarter, we performed a staged reading at the Culver Center of the Arts as part of UCR ARTSblock in Downtown Riverside, plus one fully staged production, which was *Mariachi Girl*. We also partnered with our LGBT Resource Center on campus for a quarterly film screening series, presenting works about Latina/o LGB youth and individuals, also at the Culver. This was a very exciting opportunity to bring works by independent filmmakers to our community, spread awareness of various issues, and give underrepresented artists a voice.

This year, I was the Director and the Producing Partner of LPP. My role as a leader of the ensemble was to produce the shows, as in organizing the ensemble, scheduling auditions, rehearsals, meetings and performances, and ensure that everything runs smoothly for the show to go well. I also directed the shows, meaning I analyzed the scripts, shaped the way the actors interpreted the plays, lead the creative team on projects such as the set, costumes, and other artistic and technical aspects of each production. It was a lot of work, and very rewarding in and of itself.



Figure 2: Cita and Luis from original *Mariachi Girl* production at Dallas Children's Theater

Methodology and Theoretical Paradigms: Our Visiting Scholars

Culturally responsive theatre, according to Prof. Schroeder-Arce, is “a paradigm of culturally responsive artistry, specifically theatre that reflects the cultures and identities of the communities in which it is performed” (International Journal of Education & the Arts). According to the 2010 Census Demographic Profile of the city of Riverside, the city itself is 49% Latinx, the largest group of any race/ethnicity in the city. Plus, people under the age of eighteen are the majority in Riverside (Statistics of Riverside’s population, 2010 Census). Our city has a diverse community of youth that deserve to have their stories told and cultures represented. In a city that is overwhelming Latinx, there needs to be a change in the lack of Latinx theatre, film, and media in the community. Having a young Latina at the center of a story and on stage was what called me to produce this play for Riverside, and I wanted to see the effects of that on the greater community.

Mariachi Girl was written by Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, a scholar, artist, pedagogue, educator, director, and performer – but mostly known as a playwright. She is an assistant professor and teaches theatre education in the Department of Theatre & Dance at the University of Texas at Austin.

She is also an affiliate in the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, the Department of Mexican American & Latina/o Studies and the Center for Women and Gender Studies. Her research interests include culturally responsive theatre education and Latino/a theatre for and with youth. Prof. Schroeder-Arce has published articles in journals such as Youth Theatre Journal, International Journal for Education and the Arts, Theatre Topics and Gestos. Her bilingual plays *Señora Tortuga*, *Legend of*



Figure 3: The Playwright Roxanne Schroeder-Arce

the Poinsettia, *Sangre de un Ángel* and *Mariachi Girl* are published by Dramatic Publishing and have been produced by several theatres and schools throughout the U.S., including UCR. Schroeder-Arce taught high school in Texas for several years and served as Artistic Director of Teatro Humanidad in Austin (roxanneance.com). Finally, she is a “selfie queen”, as some of students call her on social media.

My directing mentor for this show and beyond became Sylvia Blush, who is a director, actor, and educator. She specializes in movement, and has background as a dancer. Blush was awarded Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship and was an assistant director at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival for their FAIR Program. She is attending UCLA for her Masters in Fine Arts in Directing in the Fall of 2016. Her teachings, her expertise,



Figure 4: Directing Mentor Sylvia Blush

and her wisdom taught me so much of what it really means to be a director. Blush observed one rehearsal in the middle of our process, gave a movement workshop, and gave me specific feedback and a director’s handbook so that I may grow in my process. The paradigm of her directing process is based off of Anne D’Zmura’s work, a professor of hers and Head of Directing at Cal State Long Beach, where Blush earned her BA in Theatre.

Then, we had a surprise guest, Dr. Cecilia Aragon. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance and Latina/o Studies Program at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming. Dr. Aragon is a leading scholar in Latino Theatre for Young Audiences. Director of Latina/o Studies Program and serves as Area Head for TYA in Theatre and Dance. Her scholarly articles and research areas include Latina/o Theatre, Indigenous Performances of the Americas, and Theatre Education. Dr. Lopez as

the Rivera Chair sponsored bringing her to UCR. As I was looking into professionals of possibly speaking to about my capstone project, she popped up. When I emailed her for her advice, she offered more than that: she offered to travel from Wyoming to Riverside, and join us in the talk-back after the show to give her expertise and feedback. She was a wonderful addition to our already amazing list of guest artists who joined us for this show and the journey it all took us on.



Figure 5: Scholar Dr. Cecilia Aragon

Finally, this show, through the methodology of culturally responsive theatre and a true directing process changed the way that I saw myself as a director and ultimately gave me a process to work with for future productions. What I learned from three quarters taking acting courses at UCR has of course served me as a director. But I realized that I could not teach acting to my actors. What I had to do was direct them, and that was the only way to have this production work, as well as shows I will direct in the future. Sylvia helped me see directing as painting a picture, or setting up a photo, where if you could not hear what was going on in the scene, you should be able to see what is being communicated and still understand the story. If you closed your eyes, you should be able to hear what was going on, who is who, and what the main problem is in the scene. Both of these lined up together is when the true magic of theatre happens.

Artistic Process

First, before I knew that I was a recipient of the Chancellor's Research Fellowship, a grant of \$5000 for research or a creative activity, I produced and a directed a concert reading of *Mariachi Girl* in May 2015 in the Blackbox Theater at the Culver Center. It was perfect timing, actually, because the afternoon of the concert reading was when I found out that I won! So naturally, the rest of the night was just cause for celebration and a way of preparing for the fully staged production to be done less than a year later. It was a cast of all students, all undergraduate except for one grad student from the School of Education, who played the father, fittingly enough. It had an audience of about 70, which is full capacity for the Blackbox. A concert reading is where the actors have the scripts in front of them on a music stand, are acting without memorization, and there is very little to no blocking and movement. It went very well, and was a great way of preparing for the fully staged production.



Figure 6: Original cast of Mariachi Girl staged reading, May 2015

For the main event, I held auditions during Finals Week of Fall Quarter, as the show was planned for Winter quarter. Casting this show was one of the most difficult tasks of the whole project! We had so many talented actors and singers come out to audition for myself, my stage manager, and our musical director. The show was casted with all student, all Latino cast. We had the following actors cast: Daysy Velasco as

Carmencita, or Cita; Irais Cardenas as Carmen, Cita's mother; Alfredo Medina as Luis, Cita's father; Sarah Garcia as Mrs. Parker, Cita's third grade teacher; Numa Juarez as Danny, Cita's older brother; Adam Siders as Jose, Luis' right hand man in his mariachi; Guillermo Queponds (my father!) as Abuelo, Luis' father; and a character I added an actor for, Nathali Samano as Lucha Reyes, Cita's hero and who she meets in her dreams.

I rounded up crew and production team during Winter Break, and had every position needed for the whole show: costume manager, set designer, marketing and community outreach chair, assistant director, dramaturgs, and the list goes on.

Rehearsals went for six weeks, from January 4th to February 18th. January 4th was our table read, meaning that it was all of the actors and production team sitting down together just to hear the piece be read by the actors playing the characters. It gives



Figure 7: One of the first rehearsals

every a chance to hear how it is going to sound, who is playing each character, and gives the production team an idea of what to expect and what the feel of the show is. It also gives the director to give everyone an overview of my vision and how I want to run the rehearsal process. It was helpful for me to explain to my actors why I chose this play for my Honors capstone project, and why it is meaningful to me. There was a total of 18 rehearsals, which included the table read, blocking all of the movements, rehearsals with the musicians in the room, technical rehearsals in the Culver with the stage, set projections, and lights, and the dress rehearsals right before the night of the performance.



Figure 8: Prof. Flores and her ensemble rehearsing with the cast

Speaking about our musicians, we could not have done this musical without Cynthia Reifler Flores, our Mariachi Ensemble Director. She is the director of the Mariachi student ensemble on campus as well at Cal State Los Angeles. Flores is one of the original members of Reyna de Los Ángeles, the US's first all female Mariachi. Her work in teaching ensemble all the music while simultaneously working on another mariachi musical was truly admirable. She was able to teach all beginners to mariachi as well as a few seasoned players all of the music of the show within four weeks. To top it all off, she allowed us to borrow her original traje from Reyna de Los Ángeles! Daisy Velasco, who played our Cita, fit in the traje perfectly, and it gave a beautiful resonance to the show, not only through its lovely bright blue hue, but the historic significance of it and how it related to Cita's struggle and triumph.

Because we had a full mariachi band, I had to have folklorico dancers as part of the production! I teamed up with the UCR Folklorico student organization on campus to find dancers, and asked a friend, past classmate, and choreographer Liliana Miranda to choreograph for the last song of the show, the Finale where Cita and her father Luis get to sing together for



Figure 9: Our folklorico dancers in their beautiful trajes. Taken by the Culver Center of the Arts.

the first time. It was wonderful to work with all of our dancers on the show, and have them be such an important part of it, as a beautiful visual and artistic reminder of the culture we wanted to represent and bring on stage, many of our ensemble members' culture, all coming together.

For our work in community outreach and social media to market our show, this was spearheaded by our Marketing Chair, Gabriela Bobadilla. As a part of our initiative, we gave out about 200 flyers around Downtown Riverside during ARTSWalk (First Thursday) and First Sunday of February. During this time, we also put up posters in businesses all over Downtown and around Riverside in places like Canyon Crest and on campus. Finally, we had a Facebook event, where the ensemble, cast, and crew invited all of our Facebook friends and contacts, which was shared with community members as well, outside of our social circles.

Finally, we cannot forget about our production team. The production team for *Mariachi Girl* was a group of very talented and passionate young women wanting to make a difference and create something beautiful for the community. They created the poster, scenic design, sound design, assisted with directing, and all other aspects of the production. They kept me sane and focused on my position as director. These women made me realize that what makes a production truly great is the team creating it.



Figure 10: Our poster for the production, designed by Gabriela Bobadilla

The whole reason that this show was possible was because of the funding given by the Chancellor's Research Fellowship and Gluck Fellows Program of the Arts at UCR. Being awarded \$5000 for my work in the community and in theatre was something I could not have imagined before my time at UCR. Being financially supported gave us the way to pay for the rights, the licensing, scripts, our guest artists to stay and provide mentorship, feedback, and attendance for show and audience talk-back, and our musical director. It solidified that artists, theatre and music professionals deserve to make a living and to be supported by higher education, especially when making such political statements through bilingual theatre showcasing traditional Mexican music, culture, and values.

The performance itself was a very cathartic experience. At the Culver Center of the Arts and in the Atrium, this beautiful space was our home for the production. We had our dancers as ushers welcoming in guests, in both English and Spanish. We had expected 120 people in the audience, but what we got was 225 total attendees. The Culver Center was prepared and put out extra chairs for the whole audience. We had printed out 150 programs and surveys, in case we had a larger audience than 120 – and we did! I was not prepared for the 225 audience members, full of not only UCR students, parents of the cast and crew, and friends, but also families from the community and children! The children in the audience gave me the most joy –



Figure 11: Luis, played by Alfredo Medina, singing his heart out for the audience. Taken by the Culver Center of the Arts.

you could just feel their energy. The show started off well, with everyone laughing at unexpected parts of the play that they related to, like Carmen giving Cita a lecture about jumping on the bed. Their energy gave the actors a push and they put on the best show I have ever seen them do, even though I had seen them perform many times before! After the finale, there was a minutes-long standing ovation, which made me cry before going onstage for the talk-back.

For the talk-back, we had Dr. Lopez facilitating it, along with myself, the playwright Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, my directing mentor Sylvia Blush, and scholar Dr. Cecelia Aragon. It was a



Figure 12: Dr. Lopez and I announcing the talk-back right after the show. Taken by the Gluck Fellows of the Arts Program.

wonderful discussion of why I chose the play, why Prof. Schroeder-Arce wrote it and what inspired it, Sylvia’s thoughts on the performance as a director, and Dr. Aragon’s opinions on how higher education supporting this work is a major step for Latino Theatre for Young Audiences. We also had several of our cast members and crew members give their experience of being a part of the production, which was also beautiful.

What resonated with me the most is that all of our scholars felt that “our hearts were all in”, to paraphrase what Sylvia said. Prof. Schroeder-Arce even said during our celebration after the show that she had seen many professional productions of *Mariachi Girl*, but she felt that there was real “heart” in this show. You could see that everyone truly cared not only for their own characters, but for each other, for the story that we were telling, and who we were telling it for, in the audience. That still means a lot to me, to know that the playwright herself felt that our show had a realness about it. I know it is

because we were not doing it for money, nor fame, nor anything else that was really self-gratifying. We worked countless hours together on the show, without anything material in return, but what we got back in audience response was worth more than anything we could have been paid or given.



Figure 13: Cita (Daisy Velasco) and Luis (Medina) perform together for their duet as father-daughter duo. Taken by the Gluck Fellows of the Arts Program.



Figure 14: The curtain call! From left to right in front row: Danny (Numa Juarez), Lucha Reyes (Nathali Samano), Mrs. Parker (Sarah Garcia), and Carmen (Irais Cardenas). Dancers: Cassandra Kin, Edgar Ortuño, and Estefania Garcia. Taken by the Gluck Fellows of the Arts Program.

Questions and Answers: Audience Response

After the show, we gave out surveys, written in both English and Spanish, that were HRRB/IRB-approved for 18 and older audience members, and 77 anonymous surveys returned. The questions asked on the bilingual surveys were:

1. How did you hear about this production?
2. What are three things you liked about the show?
3. How much did you relate to any part of Carmencita's story? From 1 to 5?
4. Which of the characters did you like the most? Why?
5. Carmencita worries that people that do not understand her culture and identity. Is there anything that you worry about people do not understand about your heritage and culture?
6. How much do you think your identity/race/ethnicity affects how you relate to the story? From 1 to 5?
7. What did you expect when you first heard of the show? When you first walked into the building?
8. How do you feel, now that the show is over?
9. How many theatre plays or movies have you seen with Mexican-Americans or Latina/os as the stars? What are some of the names of these plays and movies?
10. How do you think this show was representing Latinas and Latinos? Positive or negative? In what way?
11. Anything you would have liked to see that did not happen in the show? Anything you would have done differently if you were the playwright?
12. Final thoughts?

The reactions written on the surveys in response to *Mariachi Girl* demonstrated the diversity of our audience. There were people of all ages, from 18 to 70 years old. There were people of all racial/cultural identities: Chicana, Latina, Mexican American, Salvadorian, Native American, Indian, Asian American, Mexican/Japanese, African American, White, just to name a few.



Figure 15: The star of the show, Cita (Daisy Velasco), in the spotlight

Several wrote about the lack of Latino theatre they have seen, and others have seen quite a lot. It seemed to be more of an issue of knowing where to look for media that represents Latinos in a positive light, as compared to relying solely on mainstream media and what is most popular. What gave me the most joy were the many variations of “I want more!”, “Need more Latino theatre!”, and “More performances!”

Finally, a final response to *Mariachi Girl* at UCR was our student newspaper, Highlander News. This article made me cry tears of joy because of how positive the

review was, and how lovingly the show was written about: “The play is incredibly well acted, as even though some of the actors weren’t stage veterans, they felt like a family unit going through legitimate issues. Even Cita’s father, who plays the antagonist, is incredibly sympathetic, as he wants a better life for his children, hoping they won’t feel as attached to their culture as he is. Cita also struggles against the stigma of there not being a tradition of female mariachis, but fully commits to achieving her dream when she learns about the true story of Lucha Reyes, a female mariachi from the early 1900s” (Lees). He goes to say that although “the play was advertised for young audiences, there was plenty to appreciate for people of all ages, as many of the parents in attendance laughed at the jokes playing off the family dynamic... While I was initially worried that I wouldn’t be able to understand the Spanish parts of the play, the context of the lines and the actors’ skills portraying emotion made things easy to understand” (Lees). The student reporter finishes his article with this opinion: “It feels almost criminal that this is the only planned performance of the show, as it is honestly one of the best theater productions I have ever seen, at UCR or otherwise. We really do have some amazing talent at UCR, and I encourage any interested students to see what the Latina/o Play Project and the rest of the Department of Theater, Film and Digital Production have in store for the future” (Lees). All of this gave me such hope and inspiration for our next show, and it proved to me that students at UCR outside LPP and the Department can truly appreciate our work.



Figure 16: Cast, crew, production team, visiting scholars and Artistic Director of the UCR Latina/o Play Project come together for a post-show photo. Taken by Nathali Samano.

Culturally Responsive Theatre and Its Future

The results from our anonymous surveys prove that culturally responsive theatre is important not only for those who identify with the culture being represented on stage, on screen, and so on. Men and women, young and old, from every race were reflecting back on their own culture and experience, and what it means to be judged and treated differently based on appearance, culture, language, gender, and so on. This demonstrated that critics who suggest that culturally-specific shows will alienate audience members not of that culture are not correct in their views. Humans have the ability to relate to those outside of their experience – that is what makes us human. Plus, People of Color have related to middle-aged white male issues for decades now – the reverse can be done as well. Culturally responsive media will be something that activists push for, but the

general public as well. There are diverse people in this world, and their stories deserve to be told, just as much as the “universal” media is represented. Frankly, having quantifiable evidence of our impact on our audience members was not as important to me as it was to bring this work to Riverside. Knowing that our show may have made just one kid in the audience feel like they matter, their family matters, their culture and identity matter, was what made it all worth it to me.



Figure 17: Gabriela Bobadilla, her younger sister, and the playwright pose for a picture after the show. Taken by the Gluck Fellows of the Arts Program.

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All scholars' biographies and photos from scholars themselves.

Rehearsal photos by Raisamarie Dedios and Stephanie Ponce.

Performance photos by Culver Center of the Arts, the Gluck Fellows Program, and Nathali Samano.