

Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences

Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences. Compiled by José Casas with Christina Marín, ed. Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 2018; Pp. 581.

Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences testifies to the fact that “today’s theatre workers know the value and importance of the next generation,” as Jorge Huerta observes in the forward (9). The book brings together contemporary docudrama, solo performance, and plays with and without music written for young, Latina/o audiences by Latino/a playwrights. The anthology also includes six scholarly articles that conduct in-depth analysis of the plays in the collection; document conversations with leaders in the field; offer pedagogical tools; and ultimately model paradigmatic shifts in the ways Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) is produced, presented, and taught.

In the introduction, José Casas writes that as an artist of color, he often feels like an “uninvited guest” in the greater landscape of TYA (9). Diane Rodriguez shares this sentiment. In an interview for the collection, she addresses what she calls “the gap,” a disconnection in the field that has not made TYA a means for “building audiences of color over the past 50 years” (88). This 581-page anthology is an attempt to address that gap, featuring plays by Josefina López, Guillermo Reyes, Lisa Loomer, and more. However, it is not a collection begging for an invitation; it is an affirmation of the work that Latina/o/x communities have already been doing for generations. By pairing these plays with essays that engage the themes of the plays in the collection as well as issues in the field of TYA, *Palabras del Cielo* provides critical tools for degree programs in TYA to center Latina/o plays in their classrooms and on their stages.

University-driven efforts to train scholars and professionals in TYA have expanded; at thirty-one universities across the United States, there are six MFA programs, eight MA programs, seven BFA programs, and eighteen BA programs that offer degrees in educational theatre or TYA. *Palabras del Cielo* makes an intervention for Latina/o-specific studies in these programs. The texts within offer a unique opportunity to deepen conversations about Latina/o experiences in the United States and to interrogate the history of the craft of storytelling through the theatrical adaptation of Latina/o folktales. In turn, three of the included plays reimagine western canonical texts like Voltaire’s *Candide* and Dante’s *Inferno*. These plays allow young actors to perform a variety of acting styles and genres while maintaining a focus on the “young audience” aspect that is central to the form.

Beyond the theatre classroom, this anthology could easily be used to explore how Latina/o identity and culture shifts over time, since the plays reflect issues in the community from the mid-1990s to 2014. In addition, the companion essays offer scholarly context that make the book a resource for those in the social sciences and humanities more broadly. For example, in her essay, “The Historical Developments and Emergence of Latina/o TYA: Towards a Mestizaje Theatre,” Cecilia J. Argón traces the specific trajectory of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences (LYA) through the role of children in performance traditions from Indo-Hispanic rituals and indigenous ceremony to the Chicano Movement. Argón concludes by affirming that “this anthology of plays recognizes the performance of regional specificity, migration, and transnationalism and global impacts on Chicana/o and Latina/o children and youth” (25). In the essay, “They Don’t Look Like Me: A Look at Representation of Marginalized Populations in TYA in the United States,” Kelly Fey uses a cultural studies framework to write about the impact that cultural

representation has on identity formation and interpersonal relations. Fey also puts forth a framework to assess diversity and inclusion work being done at theaters across the United States and provides readers with a TYA Inclusivity Manifesto modeled after the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's work in audience development.

Palabras del Cielo amplifies the voices of Latinos and Latinas equally throughout. However, the experiences of trans, non-binary, and gender nonconforming youth and the works of playwrights who identify as Latinx are palpably absent. Despite this absence, some of the stories in this book do engage with young protagonists who challenge gender norms. *Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans: A Salsa Fairytale* (book and lyrics by Karen Zacharías, music by Deborah Wicks La Puma) is a great example. In this fantastic, fast-paced musical adaptation, the title character is a sixth-grade exchange student from Puerto Rico who comes to a new school to learn English. However, this fairytale is not about a young girl who goes to the ball, loses her shoes, and meets a prince; it is about two young girls who learn empathy and fairness, after tempers flare between them on the basketball court. This version of *Cinderella* makes a significant effort to counter the sexism of the original story. For instance, the girls compete to earn a spot on a national team with a celebrity coach, played by a fairy godfather, while his wife enjoys a day off at the spa. Like the rest of the titles in this collection, *Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans* is a strong play that can easily tour schools or hold an audience as part of any university or professional mainstage season.

Meaning “words from heaven,” *Palabras del Cielo* is ultimately a stellar anthology of Latina/o TYA geared toward the classroom. It lends itself to production-based and historical survey classes at the university level, providing a necessary intervention with the potential to reverberate across stages and classrooms for generations.

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The Journal of American Drama and Theatre
Volume 31, Number 2 (Winter 2019)
ISSN 2376-4236
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