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Connections Between the Academy and the Profession

Ann M. Shanahan

Loyola University Chicago, ashanah@luc.edu

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MFA dramaturgy programs had no financial aid, so I didn't do it.

CURT | I did the same thing. I made it through undergraduate and I couldn't figure out how to swing the debt of MFA programs. I was fortunate to have time in the academy, and to be in Chicago, which was an incredible place to be a young artist. So I got lucky.

For me, it's just like with Patti. It's always the students. I want to create structures so that students don't have to get lucky. If they're good, they can just get it. Over the decade or so before we went tuition-free, I can't tell you the number of talented people we turned down because we couldn't support them. I remain hopeful, in spite of everything that goes on in the world right now, that humankind gets better with every passing generation. I'm working for that next generation.

PATRICIA | Yes, and I think debt is immoral. I have to be honest. I mean, I say that and I see people blanch a little bit. My more moderate self can say excessive debt is immoral. But I actually think educational debt is immoral. Sure, at the end of the day, what that practically means is you want a small debt, or you hustle a little bit around the edges, but it shouldn't have to be *that* much of a hustle. So that's why I do it.

CURT | But also, Patti and I have fun together. Which is another answer to your question. You get to collaborate with people who enjoy being challenged. I can't imagine running a regional theatre that didn't have bunches of young people walking in and wanting to tear down the walls and shake the whole place up. I'm challenged by my students every day. Our collaborators at Brown make us better artists. It's a great productive collaboration. And

as with *Macbeth*, that Brown collaboration extends into my work as a director all the time.

WHITNEY | Curt, speaking of your directing work, I know you're not always running class and doing administrative work. You're also an artist that's very active, and you direct a lot. Can you talk about how you maintain that? How do you maintain the artistic juice with the practical demands of running a building?

“THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO WENT TO THE BROWN/TRINITY ACTING AND DIRECTING PROGRAM WHO HAVE BECOME PLAYWRIGHTS. MORE AND MORE, WE'RE SEEING PEOPLE MOVE BETWEEN THOSE ROLES RATHER FLUIDLY.”

- Patricia Ybarra

CURT | Well, we have to take time away to recharge. That's the real key. When you're in the middle of it, there's literally no rest, and the days are 12 to 16 hours. Patti and I are on email at 5:30 in the morning. And we go until we collapse at 10 or 11 or 12 at night. And then, when I take time off, I really take time. I always tell young artists that they have to think about where they grow their garden. And I know that sounds like a Hallmark card—

WHITNEY | No, it's real, I have no garden!

CURT | It's real.

WHITNEY | I need a garden.

CURT | We can't, as artists, forget to have a life. Because if we forget to have a life, then we're missing 80 percent of the reason we make art in the first place. So where is your comfort? Where is your peace? Where is your joy? The older I get, the more I retreat into those spaces when I need to reenergize. That's really something that I'm trying to practice for myself and continue to talk to folks about, young folks like you.

PATRICIA | Curt's right. I had to retreat for a good 10 days and not engage. And, weirdly, I wrote something for the first time in a while.

CURT | See, there you go.

PATRICIA | I'd been asked to do something, and I was like, "Oh, I'm never gonna get that done." And I asked the person, "Can it be 500 words?" And she said, "Yeah. Anything. Anything you want." And then I wrote something that had a real length, about 4,500 words in a few days. Just because I wasn't on email.

WHITNEY | I so appreciate your taking the time to talk with me. I hope you have beautiful days.

CURT | I'm going to go rehearse *Macbeth*.

PATRICIA | I'm going to hang out with my little Jedi for a little bit.

WHITNEY | I need to grow a garden. I literally just wrote that on a big sticky, and I put it on my wall. *sz*



FIG. 1 Michelle Aravena and Las Chicas at the ¡Papa Caliente! (i.e. Hot Box Nightclub) in Theatre Under the Stars' Latinx-inspired musical *Guys and Dolls* PHOTO Melissa Taylor

In our fields today, lively debate continues about whether productions should edit or even produce certain older, Golden Age musicals that contain material that is offensive within our current cultural context. Certainly, many revivals and new productions engage this material from a contemporary lens in hopes of making them more resonant and timely for new audiences. Casting is an arena that can allow a production staff to re-conceive such material. In his essay below, **Julio Agustin** explores the intentions, value, and reception of helping to create a new production of *Guys and Dolls* at Theatre Under the Stars in Houston that featured an all Latinx cast and re-conceived setting for this well-known classic.

INTRODUCED + EDITED BY DAVID CALLAGHAN + ANN M. SHANAHAN

BRAVING THE CHALLENGES OF RE-ENVISIONING THE CLASSIC MUSICAL FOR A NEW AUDIENCE

BY JULIO AGUSTIN, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

"We in leadership positions need to do everything we can to reflect the world we live in."
— **Bill Rauch**, Artistic Director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, to the *New York Times*

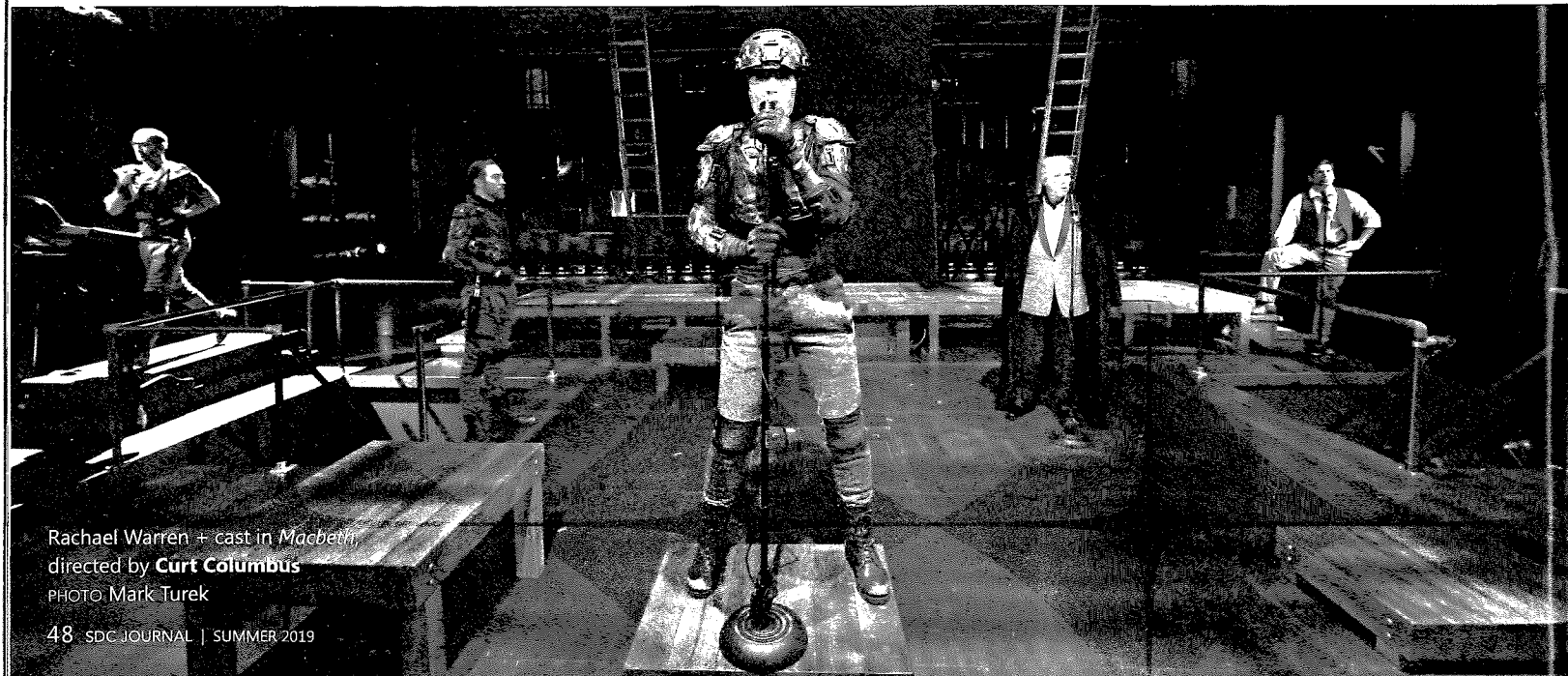
INTRODUCTION

In what has become one of the most divided periods in US American history since the Civil War, fear and suspicion of "the other" pervade the not-so-"United" States of America. Residents voice intolerance of differing viewpoints. These expressions are no longer reserved for closed-door conversations between family and close friends, when relationships might supersede ideologies, nor are they limited to online trolling. Instead, biases are openly expressed, often without regard to civility. Residents of this country are frightened of each other and a quiet sense of panic invades the cultural space.

Given that the arts often reflect real life, it is no surprise that there has been an increase in the writing and production of plays about important and what some consider controversial subjects, such as immigration, women's rights, Muslim heritage, and the concerns of LGBT communities. Starting in the 1970s, Augusto Boal aimed to combat oppression and incite social change with his Theatre of the Oppressed; he argued that theatre is "a platform whereby actors and audience can be 'indirect activists,' addressing their own individual and social issues, resolving them and thus contributing to the achievement of a better world" (Hassan). Boal asserted that all theatre is political and mirrors its community by prompting the "audience to become stakeholders in the play's action and recognize the problems it presents as ones they encounter in society" (Schroeter). However, not all theatre is poised to be politically useful. **Tony Kushner** argued in an essay on political theatre that, aside from the rare theatrical box office hit, the "increasingly creepy spectacle" of commercial theatre is no longer the place where the greatest political impact is made (Kushner). He asserted that, with such long-running spectacles as *The Phantom of the Opera* and the myriad of animated film-to-

stage productions by Disney, it is in the regional houses where a call to action most often materializes. Hence, one method in which theatremakers of the regional circuit combat contemporary forms of inequality is by re-envisioning some of the most produced classic musical works with the needs and sensibilities of a contemporary audience at the forefront.

With this in mind, I decided to examine a recent professional collaboration as a case study in the challenges that come with re-envisioning the classic musical for a new audience. I was invited to choreograph the quintessential Golden Age musical *Guys and Dolls* with a Latinx "twist" at Houston's long-running, not-for-profit institution, Theatre Under the Stars (TUTS), under newly appointed artistic director **Dan Knechtges**. The motivation for this Latinx-inspired production of the classic musical stemmed from the previous season's ultra-successful hit production *In the Heights* directed by **Nicholas DeGruccio**. Not only did the TUTS production cast twenty out of its twenty-three company members with Latinx identifying performers, but the theatre also successfully expanded its audience base as a result of its outreach in Houston, Texas, the country's fourth largest Spanish-speaking city (Mitelman). Upon receiving approval from the estate, Knechtges and DeGruccio were emboldened to continue the momentum of the previous season by introducing the theatre's bilingual audiences to the classic American musical *Guys and Dolls*. DeGruccio chose *Guys and Dolls* because its setting "lined up perfectly with the big influx of people to New York City from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. (Maines). Additionally, aside from providing opportunities to the Latinx theatre community, Knechtges and DeGruccio sought to honor the musical's inherent traditions while simultaneously embracing the theatre's objectives of education and outreach (Fig. 1).



Rachael Warren + cast in *Macbeth*, directed by **Curt Columbus**

PHOTO Mark Turek