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A Significant and Enduring Influence

Diane Rodriguez is a Latino theatre professional

By Kat Avila | Web Published 3.16.2003

When I speak of Diane Rodriguez, I tell people about the first time I noticed her. It was during a performance by the comedy troupe Latins Anonymous at the 1990 Orange County Latino Performing Arts Festival. I remember thinking Rodriguez would have had her own TV show in another place and time. As Suzuki Method trainer Marcos Martinez has noted, "She has a strong stage presence that really communicates across the footlights."

Diane Rodriguez is one of the most significant and enduring influences in Chicano theatre as an actor, writer, director, and administrator. She received her basic training as a core company member of the internationally known El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworker's Theatre) and as a founding member of El Teatro de la Esperanza (The Theatre of Hope). She attained widespread personal recognition as a founding member of Latins Anonymous. Since 1995, she has been co-director of the Latino Theatre Initiative (LTI), with acclaimed gay Chicano poet and playwright Luis Alfaro, at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

Currently, Rodriguez is in rehearsals for Alfaro's two-sister play "Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner" (<http://www.taperahmanson.com>). She plays lead character Minerva. The play opens this April 1 at Ivy Substation in Culver City, California.

Also, Rodriguez was recently nominated for the Alan Schneider Director Award by David Emmes, co-founder and producing artistic director at South Coast Repertory. The award is presented to "directors who have exhibited exceptional talent and established local or regional reputations." The winner will be



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announced at the Theatre Communications Group's (TCG) 14th Biennial National Conference in June this year.

In the past, her awards have included a Certificate of Special Recognition (2000) by the U.S. House of Representatives, the NEA/TCG Director's Career Development Award (1998), Professional Guest Director/Choreographer Award (1997) by the Stage Directors/Choreographers Foundation, and Rainbow Award (1996) by the Los Angeles Women's Festival honoring those who have contributed to diversity in American theatre.

Two years ago I made inquiries about Rodriguez's work. This is what some of her colleagues had to offer. Wrote foremost Chicano theatre scholar Jorge Huerta, "She was one of my students. When I met her, Diane was a dedicated theatre major, fighting the insidious and invisible racism that permeates so many theatre departments in this country. Her work with the Latino Theatre Initiative has been very important for the development of Latina/o playwrights' voices for she has a very keen eye and ear for what is Good Theatre."

Bicultural Mexican-American playwright Oliver Mayer saw Rodriguez in Luis Valdez's "Zoot Suit" when he was 13. However, he was not closely acquainted until she joined LTI. In a phone conversation, he said, "I know Diane in a couple of ways, as a friend and as a director. She is loyal and bighearted, and those qualities go into her work. We have butted heads a few times. What's really great about her is that you can be honest. We're both hardheaded. And I like it. That artistic edge to get it right."

In another telephone conversation, Cuban-American playwright Nilo Cruz described a working relationship with Rodriguez, "She really concentrated on the rhythms of the writing. That's very important to my work. She's willing to take chances.... Diane is a lover and promoter of theatre, creating relationships in the theatre and making connections."

Rodriguez joined El Teatro Campesino as a full-time member in 1973. She remained with the collective until 1985. While there, she

met her husband-to-be Jose Delgado, presently an artist's manager. In an autobiographical essay, "Searching for Sanctuaries," she penned, "Joining the Teatro Campesino was like running away to a spellbinding and forbidden tent show."

Nineteen years old and a student at University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), she became a founding member of El Teatro de la Esperanza. The theatre was Teatro MEChA before it broke away from the UCSB club in 1971.

In 1987, she co-founded Latinos Anonymous with Rick Najera, Luisa Leschin, and Armando Molina. Cris Franco joined the group after Molina left. Rodriguez stayed with the group until 1994. She performed in their plays "Latinos Anonymous" and "The LA LA Awards."

After a 1990 stereotype-breaking performance, I reported, "Who in the audience did not understand why the punkers howled 'I Want to be Aryan Like You!' or the unrelenting succession of psychosocial conflicts within one bicultural Chicano that ended up with him choking himself to death?" The continued relevance of the skit-formatted "Latinos Anonymous" is the reason it is still performed today by other groups.

Then in 1995, Rodriguez joined LTI. This well-respected professional continues her adventures in the world of the theatre with no signs of slowing down.

*Kat Avila's web site at
<http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/>
lists links to Chicano and Asian American
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