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Wrighting Theater History

Carla Della Gatta

last name is "Della Gatta"

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Shakespearean second acts?¹ Being a Shakespearean *is* my second act. Although my long-form publications are centered mostly on Shakespeare, I teach LGBTQ theater and Latinx theater most often, followed by theory, modern drama, and theater historiography all more than I do Shakespeare. I became an academic in order to advocate for art. My filiation is with theater, not with any one time period or author. I am the both/and of the scholar/artist, deeply invested in public history and the work of the theater.

In my last year of my undergraduate studies at University of California, Berkeley, I felt the lingering culture shock of returning from a year abroad in Spain, the changes to my life since my father's death the prior summer, and an overall sense of dread of the real world. As a result, in my last semester of college, I enrolled in the process typically reserved for business majors: executive recruiting. My only prior business experience was a summer internship through the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities in 1995; for ten weeks, I worked for the Patent and Trademark Office in Crystal City, Virginia, learning data crunching and how to use Excel spreadsheets. My boss hired me because the project demanded that I talk to and observe engineers. My assignment was to interact with people, ask them questions, find out why and how they do what they do, and, at the end of the summer, present my findings at a large meeting. As one of the few nonbusiness or economics majors to be selected for an internship that summer, I asked why he sought an English major, and he said, "I can teach anyone the numbers, but I can't teach them how to write or present." I had received a National Merit award in high school for my strong scores in math, and that summer, I finally found a use for those skills as the premise to analyze the processes and ways of thinking that people (here engineers, later artists) employ in their work.

That internship was my introduction to the business world, and after completing my BA in English, I spent nine and a half years in corporate finance, strategic planning, and various other roles on the numbers side of a consumer products business. I learned marketing analysis, how to calculate profit and losses, when to use a D-sum calculation in Excel and how to build one, how to deal with the fast demands of the business world and to manage projects and people, and, perhaps most important, how to field more than 350 e-mails per day. Most of my training consisted of figuring things out for myself; my value to the corporation was in part due to my ability to learn the math and technology quickly and in part due to my immediate grasp of supply-chain processes and how to communicate with people who worked in all parts of product development and distribution. I won awards for financial forecasting and served on process change committees, continually acting as the representative from whatever group I was in to a large committee composed of people from every aspect of the business. Two of the four corporations I worked at promoted me into jobs that hadn't existed before; I had to simultaneously perform a job while creating and making the argument for it. All four corporations placed me in the smallest companies within their organizations, those that had a "start-up" feel to them. I was consistently the youngest person in my position at each company, and I had to maneuver the pitfalls of what was, to me, the entirely foreign world of business, as no one in my family had ever held a business job.² After a decade of paying my dues and succeeding in one career, I gave it all up to go back to school.

I began my MA in English at San Francisco State University, and the first class I enrolled in was on early modern lyric poetry. I dropped the class after the first meeting and took classes on drama, novels, and theory. My second semester consisted of independent study classes while I was living in London with my fiancé. I mentioned to a professor that I was excited to see some Shakespeare plays, to visit the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre and others for the first time. He then suggested I send him some performance reviews, and I had no idea what that meant. I think he wanted two or three; I e-mailed him almost twenty. And they were awful. I had no idea how to write like that, but it changed everything for me. I finished my thesis on postmodern fiction, published my first academic article (on Emily Dickinson's poetry no less), and did a 180-degree turn into a PhD program in theater and drama.

In my application to Northwestern's PhD program, I pitched a dissertation on U.S. Shakespeare festivals and how they constructed and represented minority cultures. I met Ayanna Thompson and Alexa Joubin at the outset of this research, and I read their work on Shakespeare and Black and Asian bodies, respectively. I thought I would find the book on Shakespeare and Latinos and start from there. I was astonished to find nothing on the topic, so I wrote

my dissertation on that instead. My project became more personal than I had intended it to be, a common occurrence in academia. In the corporate world, talking about and asking others about their heritage could get you fired, and I had to learn a new relationship to sharing about myself in my new career. The path has been bumpy at best, and I still hesitate to talk about myself explicitly, though my identity and experience are all over my work. To lead an academic presentation by stating that I am Colombian, Jewish, from an immigrant family, the illegitimate child, bilingual, bicultural; that I have had scarlet fever three times; and that my first few years of life and my first memories were filled with my knowing that I would never be able to walk and internalizing how others responded to me in that heavy brace I wore on my legs, well, it's just too strange most days and almost makes me want to return to my career in finance.

I knew that becoming an academic would cause me to lose my privacy, but the work is more important than my desire to live an anonymous life. My project became one that filled an absence in the archive of Shakespearean performance history and criticism. I introduced the field of Shakespeare and Latinidad and did so publicly during the first NextGenPlen at the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in 2015, when I presented what was then a greatest hits of my forthcoming dissertation.³ I finished my PhD in five years and handed my dissertation in on my fortieth birthday. This first academic project has now spanned an edited collection, a monograph, an online living archive, several essays, and numerous public talks and has inspired other projects within the field.⁴

ARTISTIC PRACTICE AS CRITICISM

Both my parents loved theater, music, and dancing, and my father loved the opera. My sister and I were taken to performances without any warning of what we might see that night, from theater in Spanish to ballet folklórico, to Broadway musicals, and concerts with such artists as Frank Sinatra and Tom Jones. I recall when my father announced he was taking us to see Marcel Marceau; the tickets were so expensive that he took my sister and me and didn't pay for a ticket for my mother. Art was a luxury, one that my parents' poor upbringings did not include. The reward for their hard work was access to the arts, and they never subsumed their interest in elite art forms with wanting to be part of elite society.

I was raised in the prototypical second-generation household in some respects. All four of my grandparents were immigrants—though official records tell a slightly different story—and my parents were the only ones of their cumulatively twelve siblings to go to college. My grandmothers

finished junior high (and never were taught to drive), and my grandfathers finished high school. One set of grandparents never spoke any English. For my parents, education was the way forward. They earned master's degrees, as did my sister; they both became teachers, and later my sister did as well. I am the first person in my family, including my twenty-two first cousins, to earn a doctorate in anything. While this made my mother extremely proud, some relatives could not understand my choice to give up a career that was more financially sensible to return to school for a long period of time in hopes of going into a lower-paying career. A few relatives stopped speaking to me when I made that decision.

For my family, the arts were for pleasure, not a career. I internalized that attitude and never questioned that my involvement with drama and dance was supposed to be only a hobby. I came from a position of paucity—socio-economic, educational, cultural—and my choice to go back to school was the biggest right turn of my life. I applied my longtime work ethic to my academic research. To be concise: doing the work is essential to theorizing it. It's why we value books on pedagogy written by those who teach and books on casting practices written by those who take part in the casting process. Praxis and theory go hand in hand.

It never occurred to me to theorize theater without making theater. As I transitioned into academia, I began to work with theaters and local cultural institutions. My PhD program did not permit extensive outside work; I dramaturged, participated in panel conversations, and gave talks in theaters, but the focus was on scholarship during those years. I am grateful for that time, as it took pressure off us to do everything at once, and our professors modeled how to be active in publishing and theater simultaneously. Today, my theater work consists mostly of dramaturgy and consulting; I have worked for theaters, entertainment companies, directors, and playwrights. I have signed multiple nondisclosure agreements for assorted reasons—the script is in workshop or early stages, the production involves celebrities, the director does not want to have good ideas stolen. I asked one theater if I could include a line item on my CV for tenure, a mere reference to having worked for them, and they said no. Strangely, what others consider the most public of disciplines (theater) is the most private aspect of my employment history.

Working with theaters has become a consistent and essential part of my life's work, not a side hustle or born from a desire to "be public." All my writing is feedback to better develop art, whether I publish in academic journals and university presses or with trade journals or as part of the theater ephemera for a specific production. I am indebted to Liz Lehrman's Critical Response Process and the conceptualization of Critical Generosity as theorized by Jill Dolan and David Román. I permit artists to read my writing about their work before I publish it. When I first mentioned this practice to

a mentor, he said, "You aren't required to do that." I replied, "I wouldn't do it any other way." This practice serves as a check-in for myself. Have I written in a tone and style that is productive for the artist? Would I offer this critique to the person directly? If not, I rewrite. I have read hundreds of scripts, offering dramaturgical and textual feedback. I understand theater as a conversation, and my work and writing are part of that conversation, never proscriptive, and always in service of the art. I firmly believe that there are no failures in American regional theater—unless your actors are drunk onstage or you don't pay your interns—and my presence in the rehearsal room, my writing, and my participation are all part of a conversation to advance art.

This is not an apolitical stance. "Being public" is as vague as "being political," and my public speaking and theater work are predicated on a core belief that making room for art is key to making room for humanity. Making art is always political. Understanding art as a form of criticism places artistic practice on an equal plane with scholarly writing. When Trevor Boffone and I edited *Shakespeare and Latinidad*, we interwove essays and dialogues by artists and scholars and worked with the artists to theorize their practice and the scholars newer to writing on performance to move away from a binarism that has become fashionable as a means to take a political stance. Although more than two-thirds of the twenty-five contributors have university affiliations, we did not include who held a PhD or MFA in author biographies, and we did not include a foreword or afterword. We wanted to present a new field, to do so democratically, and to leave the conversation open for more work to develop. I have been an active member of the Steering Committee for the Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC) for most of my time as a professor. The four pillars of the LTC are convening, art making, advocacy, and scholarship. Trevor and I met at an LTC convening; we are both scholar/artists, and our academic writing reflects these values.

THE ETHICS OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

During my last year of doctoral studies at Northwestern, I was funded through the Gender and Sexuality Studies program and given the opportunity to be an instructor of record for an upper-division course of my own design. I had previously taught a lower-division writing course centered on Jewish American playwrights in the theater department. In Gender and Sexuality Studies, I pitched a seminar on "Latina Theatre and Feminisms" that I asked to cross list as a theater course and as a Latino studies course. It was approved, but I was told that it likely would not fill due to the limited scope of the topic. I was thrilled that I had to approve increasing the enrollment cap (twice) and

that one-third of the students who took the course did not identify as female. I learned quickly to trust my instincts.

When preparing to teach “Latina Theatre and Feminisms,” I was unsure what the students would know about Latino or Latina theater, if anything. I queried the playwrights and plays from my syllabus on Wikipedia, and I found wholly incomplete and absent entries for even the most lauded Latinx artists. So I decided to write their entries myself. This started my hobby as a Wikipedia editor, which quickly evolved into teaching Wikipedia editing in my upper-division classes (can’t I just have a hobby that doesn’t turn into work?). In every upper-division course I teach, students always have the option to create or enhance a page for their final project. I am part of a group of theater scholars who teach this practice, and the first time I was cited in *American Theatre* was for this reason.

At this stage of my career, I have trained hundreds of young people to edit as a form of activism, to make public knowledge, and to work within a commons. These are skills they take with them beyond their college education, and Wikipedia editing is a useful mechanism for applied knowledge. Students choose their topics based on the course content, and I am proud that my students and I have made some critical changes to public information. For example, there was nothing on either Dr. Anthony Fauci’s page or George H. W. Bush’s page about their roles in the AIDS epidemic until my students and I added those sections. For some pages, such as both of theirs, only editors with advanced standing can edit; I created the section on Fauci’s page, and it has remained and been expanded by other contributors. On Bush’s page, I placed the paragraph about AIDS under “Civil Rights”; when I looked at the page a month later, another editor had deleted “Civil Rights” and in its place created a heading called “Discrimination” and moved it there. The section has expanded since then. My students and I have created and improved pages mostly for theaters, artists, and plays from LGBTQ and Latinx artists, but topics range from adding feminist and rhetorical criticism on the page for Emma Watson’s HeForShe speech (from my “Literature for Human Rights” class) to creating the page for queer spaces, such as Highways Performance Space; enhancing the page for the Bijou Theater (from my LGBTQ theater classes); creating a page for Nilo Cruz’s play *Beauty of the Father* and overhauling the page for the Theater of Colombia (from my Latinx theater classes); and improving the page for The Old Globe in San Diego (from my Shakespeare class).

My writing of history for Wikipedia is unpaid and uncredited—I have not created an editor page with my subject matter expertise, as is common—and crucial to shaping public discourse. I created the Wikipedia pages for several well-known Shakespearean directors, and each has a section titled “Service to the Arts.” Doing the research to learn about this aspect of their careers,

labeling it as such, and placing it on a plane equal to their creative achievements makes clear that service is a necessary component to acceding to a high-caliber theater position. It was only in my first few years as assistant professor that I realized that one of the through lines between my Wikipedia editing and my academic project of Shakespeare and Latinidad was a concern for the ethics of public information.⁵ Through working with theaters and movements such as the LTC and with nearly a decade of research, I had amassed a spreadsheet of hundreds of Latinx-themed and/or -authored Shakespearean productions and adaptations, and I knew I could make space for only a few in my monograph. When I connected this aspect of my research to my Wikipedia editing, I realized that, along with an edited collection and a monograph, what would best serve the public is an online archive.

WRITING/RIGHTING AN ARCHIVE

I created LatinxShakespeares.org, an online archive of hundreds of plays and productions, out of a desire to make known the work of Latinx artists.⁶ As a graduate student, I had both the luxury and the challenge of not having to write a literature review in my dissertation. There was no scholarship on any intersections of Shakespeare and Latinx cultures, and I was concerned mostly with how I would make people care about the work of Latinx artists doing Shakespeare. While it is true that we have not been made central in Shakespearean performance or previously in Shakespearean scholarship, Latinx peoples have been part of Shakespearean performance history for decades and Latin American peoples for longer. My creation of the archive became twofold: to write and right a performance history and to explore an aesthetics and ethics of what it means to create a Latinx public history project.

As I began to formulate how I would collect the ephemera, structure the website, and fit the time-consuming project of creating an archive into my schedule, I was also working to submit my book manuscript. One of the most profound experiences I have had as an academic was receiving a racist reader’s report in response to the submission of my first book proposal. I had heard such stories from various mentors, and I sensed how it affected them for years afterward despite subsequent accolades and successes. I anticipated that Shakespeare studies might not initially embrace learning about Latinx people making theater and subsequently would not care about my scholarship on it. Naively, I could never have been ready for the personal attack, to experience what it was like for someone to put into writing that I wasn’t “prepared” to address my own ethnic background; the report was a gross character assassination. I was fortunate to work with an amazing editor, and I still got to publish with my first-choice press, albeit a few months delayed, which

caused me to take the “extra COVID year” on my tenure clock, increasing my precarity by another year. Others are not as fortunate, and such unethical readers’ reports can change the trajectory of their careers. Reading the slurs in that report changed my relationship to the field in a heartbreaking way. It also meant that someone else had access to my proposal and introduction and could use that information for their own derivative project. Since then, I have spoken with several editors to advocate for such reports not to be shared with BIPOC and other marginalized scholars because of the personal damage it causes that doesn’t ever really go away.

I felt a profound sense of urgency to model an ethical engagement with art. I reached out to more than 250 artists and theaters to ask their permission to include their ephemera in the archive. As a result, I signed elaborate permissions forms, received boxes of diaries and ledgers from a now-defunct theater company, had Zoom calls with directors who wanted to regale me with their stories, tracked people down via all means of internet searches, and spent hours learning a software system. I consulted with archivists, lawyers, and a number of Shakespeare scholars who have created and run digital humanities projects. I am indebted to them all. In January 2023, *Latinx Shakespeares: Staging US Intracultural Theater* was published, and due to the generosity of the University of Michigan Press, it was made open access. In early February, I had a soft launch of the archive, and immediately I began to receive questions, suggestions, and submissions. As of this writing, less than ten months later, several thousand unique visitors have viewed the site, and more ephemera and productions are added each month.

Theater is inherently involved with community, and Latinx studies, by definition, serves as a bridge from the academy to the community. My next public history project is funded through a grant from the Wallace Foundation to write a concept paper on archiving Latinx theater. I am the project lead and co-principal investigator with three other Latinx theater makers and scholars, and with a group of fifteen scholar/artists, we will strategize and plan how to write public-facing history. I write history both within and outside of academic circles with the understanding that most people’s first interaction with Shakespeare, theater history, Latinx cultures, and more does not come from peer-reviewed work. Sometimes, public humanities work takes a tone of discovery, without crediting previous work by nonacademics or scholar/artists, especially those of us who are of minority identities. Public-facing history and public-engaged work do the opposite. A life in the arts and the ability to have a career as a scholar/artist motivate and enable my work. Theater gave me a chance to reinvent not myself but my relationship to my life’s work, away from the corporate world’s strict divisions of labor. Academia permits such hybridity, albeit in the fringes of interdisciplinarity, which for me reside in the intersections of the arts and humanities. My office is in a building with

six performance venues—including theaters, concert halls, dance studios, and music rooms—and it is there that I find the space, the creativity, the community, and the language(s) to advocate for art.

NOTES

1. To wright is to build; my use of the term here acknowledges the building of theater history in the vein of the building of plays (the work of the playwright), and it is in honor of my mentor Jon Rossini’s foundational book on Latinx theater, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

2. Somehow, my prior artistic practice snuck into my business career. I was in honors drama and jazz choir and captain of the cheerleading squad in high school, and I taught dance in my first few years of college. One corporation had an annual convention in August, and each year, there was a musical revue by employees for other employees. I had to attend vocal and dance rehearsal, get fitted for costumes, and sing and dance onstage for hundreds of people, and I was sent with the other math-based employees to a salon to get hair and makeup done. No joke, this was a requirement of my corporate job for years.

3. This was the closest experience I have ever had to an (J. L.) Austinian performative; I named Shakespeare and Latinidad a (sub)field, and it became one.

4. See the collection *Shakespeare and Latinidad*, coedited with Trevor Boffone (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); the monograph *Latinx Shakespeares: Staging US Intracultural Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023); the online archive LatinxShakespeares.org (launched in 2023); public-facing essays “Latinx Shakespeares as Performance Methodology” (British Shakespeare Association Blog, 2023), “Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* Turns 25” (*Shakespeare & Beyond*, Folger Shakespeare Library, 2021), and “Staging Bilingual Classical Theatre” (*HowlRound*, 2020); podcasts “How We Hear Shakespeare’s Plays with Carla Della Gatta” (*Shakespeare Unlimited*, Folger Shakespeare Library, 2021) and “Bilingual Classical Theatre” (Classic Stage Company, 2020); essays “The Epistemic Disobedience of Latinx Shakespeares,” in *Latinx Literatures in Transition*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in press), and “Accruing Gravitas, or Why There Isn’t a Latino King Lear (Yet)” (*Shakespeare*, in press); and my NextGenPleN speech, “From *West Side Story* to *Hamlet, Prince of Cuba*: Shakespeare and Latinidad in the United States,” in *Shakespeare Studies* 44 (2016): 151–56.

5. A conversation about ethics and public information is happening at an increasing speed and breadth in today’s world due to concerns about social media, the advancements in artificial intelligence, and issues of censorship.

6. The phrase “writing/righting” has been used in various scholarship for decades. In 2019, Antonia Castañeda and Clara Lomas published their edited collection *Writ-ing/Righting History: Twenty-Five Years of Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2019). I now reference their book on Latinx literature when employing this term.