

Fifty Key Figures in Latinx and Latin American Theatre

ROUTLEDGE



KEY GUIDES

Edited by Paola S. Hernández
and Analola Santana

FIFTY KEY FIGURES IN LATINX AND LATIN AMERICAN THEATRE

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Paola S. Hernández and Analola Santana

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Major works

- Quíntuples* [Quintuplets] (1985)
La pasión según Antígona Pérez [The Passion According to Antígona Pérez] (1968)
Casi el alma: Auto de fe en tres actos [A Miracle for Maggie] (1964)
La hiel nuestra de cada día [Our Daily Bitterness] (1961)
Los ángeles se han fatigado [The Angeles Are Tired] (1960)
Farsa del amor comprado [Farce of Love That's Just a Little Bit Paid For] (1960)
Cuento de la Cucarachita Viudita [Story of the Little Cockroach Widow] (1959)

Published works

- Quíntuples*. Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1985.
Casi el alma: Auto de fe en tres actos [A Miracle for Maggie]. Río Piedras, PR: Editorial Cultural, 1974.
La pasión según Antígona Pérez: Crónica americana en dos actos. Hato Rey, PR: Ediciones Lugar, 1964.
Sol 13, Interior: Suite de obras en un acto y dos actos respectivamente: La hiel nuestra de cada día; Los ángeles se han fatigado in *Teatro puertorriqueño: Cuarto festival*. San Juan, PR: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1962.
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OCTAVIO SOLIS (EL PASO, TEXAS, 1958–)

Born and raised in the bordertown of El Paso, Octavio Solis writes lyrical plays that engage his characters' inner conflicts through imagistic dialogue. Solis has written over twenty-five plays and directed several of his own works. Along with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Solis has worked extensively with Dallas Theater Center, the Magic Theatre, Intersection for the Arts, Thick Description in San Francisco, South Coast Repertory Theatre, and San Diego Repertory Theatre in southern California. Solis's plays confront intractable emotions and

place the confrontations center stage; both characters and audiences are provocatively exposed to the darker side of the American Dream and of Latinx family life. They rarely require extensive sets; he prefers to convey theatricality through the actor and language. Many of his characters are good storytellers, suggesting the importance of a narrative capacity in everyone. He uses poetry and song to invoke the visuals and specificity of his settings.

The land of his birthplace and the places which he has made his home are enmeshed in his stories as characters. Born to Mexican parents and raised in El Paso and wary of labels, Solis shifts his embrace of categories, stating, “the Latino stuff is just labels, but the border is real ... It is the repository of so many stories.”¹ After El Paso, Solis lived in San Francisco for years and eventually settled in Medford, Oregon, where he currently lives. In each location, Solis connects with the community and collaborates with local theatres, and it is life on the border, or the experience of in-betweenness, that appears in a number of his plays. In 2010, Caridad Svich’s NoPassport Press printed a collection entitled *The River Plays*, consisting of *Dreamlandia*, *El Otro*, and *Bethlehem*, all about US–Mexico borderlands.

Solis began as an actor in Dallas in the 1980s, and he later wrote and directed his own work. His writing contains echoes of the lyricism of Shakespeare and the imagistic writing of Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes. Theatrically, he studied with Paul Baker, a Texas theatre-maker known for his character-driven stagings, and later with Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino, on developing his early play *Prospect* (1989) for their 1993 production. The play was produced by the Latino Chicago Theatre Company later that year and it toured to the Edinburgh Theatre Festival in 1994. Solis’s range of influences manifest in his breadth of work across a variety of sources and spaces. *The Ballad of Pancho and Lucy* (2005) is a Latinx version of the *Bonnie and Clyde* story, and *Hole in the Sky* (2018) was commissioned as a site-specific piece about water and drought, staged outdoors on a horse ranch in southern California.

Two early plays, both set in El Paso, create mythic stories through the specificity of Latinx images. *Santos & Santos* (1993) is based on a real story of a Lebanese family that came to El Paso through Mexico. Solis evokes a story from one snapshot and “only discovers by the end of the play where the central image will be located.”² The play centers the images of *lotería* cards, drawing on such symbols as *el corazón* (the heart) and the figure of La Malinche (the Aztec woman famed for her role in the Mexican conquest) to signify character traits and plot

foreshadowing. Along with these visual images, Solis brackets poetic subtext in his script, creating a theatrical writing style that is the equivalent of film montage. Similarly, *El Paso Blue* (1994) is a modern-day version of the Oedipus myth, and Latinx culture is imbued through music entirely in Spanish, combining country and blues styles. Playing on a familiar tale, Solis invokes culture through the Spanish language and musicality.

One connection across Solis's *oeuvre* is his poetic language, written in a mixture of English and Spanish. In many of his plays, his "characters feel just as alienated in Mexico as they do in the US, and so they find solace and inclusion in a language that moves from English to Spanish to a patois that exists only on the borderlands."³ *Lydia* (2008) is considered Solis's hallmark play, and it is also his most poetic. The story centers on a Chicanx family that hires an undocumented Mexican housekeeper to care for the daughter who has suffered physical and mental harm due to a car accident. Her dialogue consists of sounds and syllables, not words, and it is the other characters who translate their meaning for the audience. The play also includes an incestuous homosexual relationship, atypical in theatre and especially Latinx dramas of the time, and the repercussions of political, sexual, and psychological trauma on a family.

A thematic through-line of his work are his characters whose flawed attempts toward the American Dream led them to travel emotionally and physically toward this goal. With resonances of playwrights such as Sam Shepard and Tennessee Williams, *Prospect* (1993) takes up its characters' desire for acceptance in US American culture that brushes against the possibility of full assimilation, and with novelist John Steinbeck's group of short stories rearranged for the stage, *The Pastures of Heaven* (2010), to address generational changes and desires in families and workers of California's Salinas Valley. Continuing in this vein, his recent play, *Mother Road* (2019), focuses on the Mexican and Chicanx descendants of the fictitious Joad family from *The Grapes of Wrath* as they travel a reverse migration from California to Oklahoma. Solis paints characters with poignant human flaws, from a Christmastime tale about a young girl in *La Posada Magica* [The Magic Inn] (1996) to the in-depth exploration of suicide and grief in *Gibraltar* (2005). Likewise, in *Se Llama Cristina* [Her Name is Cristina] (2013), the two characters remain in one room and move psychologically and emotionally through drugs, time, and locale. Solis acknowledges that none of his characters are model citizens. The honesty from which his characters speak is a reflection of Solis's personal exploration with truth and positionality.

Adaptation has always been part of Solis's work from the start, but with a Latinx theme. His first play, *Man of the Flesh* (1988), is an adaptation of José Zorilla's version of *Don Juan Tenorio* published in Mexico in 1844. He developed the play when studying under María Irene Fornés in her six-month workshop lab at International Arts Relations (INTAR). After *Man of the Flesh*, Solis later adapted other Spanish Golden Age stories, such as Calderón de la Barca's *Life is a Dream* to *Dreamlandia* (2000), set on the border in the present day. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) commissioned Solis to adapt the first book of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (2009), resulting in a large-cast, Elizabethan-style show that included twenty-five puppets. He later re-envisioned the story as *Quixote Nuevo* (2018), moving away from Cervantes's novel to contemporary bordertown theatre, with the fantasy elements transposed to Day of the Dead folklore and contemporary politics of immigration and deportation explicitly addressed.

In recent years, Solis has expanded beyond playwriting and directing to translation, voiceover work, and non-dramatic writing. He translated Shakespeare's little-known *Edward III* into contemporary English for the OSF's *Play on!* initiative (2015–2018) and worked as a consultant for the Disney film, *Coco* (2017), in which he also voiced the character of the Arrival Agent. In 2018, San Francisco's City Lights Books published *Retablos: Stories from a Life Lived Along the Border*, Solis's first foray into non-dramatic literature. Unlike his prior works that contain veiled autobiographical elements, Solis embraced an exposed semi-autobiographical mode by writing a series of fifty short memory-stories based on his childhood in El Paso.

Solis has received numerous writing awards, including the Distinguished Achievement in the American Theater Award from the William Inge Center for the Arts in 2019, a United States Artists Fellowship in 2011, and the National Latino Playwriting Award in 2002. He received an NEA Playwriting Fellowship, a McKnight Fellowship, and, in 2020, became a member of the Texas Institute of Letters. Through constant evolution in his creative form, Octavio Solis depicts Latinx life and language and redefines life on the border.

Carla Della Gatta

Notes

- 1 Teresa Marrero, "Q&A: Octavio Solis," *TheatreJones*, 21 (May 2013). Accessed December 1, 2020, <http://theaterjones.com/ntx/features/20130521082921/2013-05-21/QA-Octavio-Solis>

- 2 Nirmala Nataraj, "Octavio Solis Hits the National Stage," *Theatre Bay Area*, March 2009.
- 3 Octavio Solis, "American Enough," *PowellsBooksBlog*, September 26, 2019. Accessed December 1, 2020, www.powells.com/post/original-essays/american-enough

Major works

Retablos (2018)
Quixote Nuevo (2018)
Se Llama Cristina (2013)
Lydia (2008)
Gibraltar (2005)
Dreamlandia (2000)
El Paso Blue (1994)
Santos & Santos (1993)
Prospect (1993)
Man of the Flesh (1988)

Published works

The River Plays: Dreamlandia, Bethlehem, El Otro. South Gate, CA: NoPassport Press, 2010.
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RAFAEL SPREGELBURD (BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA, 1970–)

Rafael Spregelburd is one of Argentina's most prolific and multifaceted artists. Playwright, theatre and film director, actor, translator, theatre theorist, and essayist, his work has intrigued and inspired Argentine and