

Race, sexual identity, and sexual orientation have always been central concerns of your work. But *Learn To Be Latina* is your first full-length comedy. Why shift to a comic form for these seemingly serious societal issues?

Race and sexuality are central to my work because I experience racism and homophobia on a daily basis. It's funny that I have this reputation now as a comedic playwright, because my natural impulse as a writer is to go to dark, fucked up places. There are two answers to this and both are true. First, I was on deadline from the National Queer Arts Festival to write my first full-length *The Danger of Bleeding Brown*. I knew that it was going to be a very emotionally devastating play to write and that it was going to be my first full-length, I wanted to tackle something small and funny first. I was asked by Golden Thread Productions to submit something for their festival of one-act plays on Middle Eastern themes and the AD had expressed a particular interest in comedies, because most of the plays they usually receive tend to be very serious and intensely dramatic. So feeling the need to write something to buffer the trauma of *The Danger of Bleeding Brown* and wanting to submit a play for Golden Thread, the initial version of *Learn To Be Latina* came to be, which is the first scene of the play. After the reading of *The Danger of Bleeding Brown* and the overwhelmingly positive response from the reading, the NQAF immediately asked me to present something the following year and awarded me a Creating Queer Communities grant for the completion of a new full-length. After writing *The Danger of Bleeding Brown*, though, I thought if I could write its complete opposite that I'd dig myself out of the emotional darkness I had gotten myself into. And because I had so much fun writing it as a one-act, I figured it would be even more fun to turn it into a full-length. But then there was the fact I got a grant called Creating Queer Communities to write a new play, so I figured that if I wanted to write a full-length *Learn To Be Latina*, I'd have to queer it up somehow. So that's the long situational answer. The shorter is that I think people are just largely more responsive to comedies than serious dramas or something politically didactic. It's like when you give a dog medicine you have to hide it in the food—wrap it in a piece of ham so they'll swallow it. Comedy for me is the ham around the pill. It makes the harsh realities much easier to swallow.

Every time I read one of your plays, I'm reminded of the strong provocateur's edge that pervades them. Are you actively trying to determine what you can get away with on stage? How does the comic style of *Latina* change the goal?

I'm hella Southern, as you know, and of course as a Southern writer I have a deep love of Flannery O'Connor's work. I'm reminded of something she wrote about fiction writing: "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures." I'm not trying to provoke for the sake of shock. Writing for me is my way of fighting for visibility, not just for myself, but for entire groups of people that are kept at the margins and out of the theatre. That goal didn't change with *Latina*—in fact, it was heightened. One of my goals for the play was to make white people uncomfortable and have them hear and see onstage many of the things that some of them may think and want to do, but filter out because of the need for political correctness. I grew up in the South, so I'm used to hate being all loud and obvious. After living in the Bay Area and New England, I can honestly say that my experience of racism can't be expressed in terms of an area being greater than or equal to, but rather in different acceptable modalities of communication. Personally, I think PC-ness gives a safety net to racism, and I wanted to expose that by writing out the subtext for my experience of white "liberal" PC-ness. Now that I read this, I'm afraid I make myself sound hella racist. Audience members, take note: I'm not racist. Some of my best friends are white.

In an interview with Adam Szymkowicz, you described the challenges of growing up Latina in a world "where race was defined in terms of black and white." Do the shifting racial definitions in *Latina* reference your own childhood? How much of Blanca's frustration is autobiographical? Nothing that I've written is overtly autobiographical, but I don't know how to get invested in characters to write them without putting a little bit of myself into every character I write. So yeah, I relate to Blanca's frustration—not from my family or from where I grew up, but from college where I was told by students in the latino student group that I wasn't latino enough because

I didn't speak Spanish. I didn't let it get to me, though, so I didn't internalize that, which is where Blanca and I differ.

How do you write about feminist and queer theory without being didactic? I think it's because theory seeks to give explanations to the dynamics of relationships and I just try to focus on the relationships. I know those relationships and the dynamics that those theories try to explain, so I try to focus on the action because I'm writing a play, not an essay. After all, you can stage an action, but you can't stage an explanation.

How much of *Latina's* genesis came from the classical canon of comedy and your training as a playwright, and how much came from a need to break the mold? I don't think it was either really. Mainly, I wanted to write something that would make me laugh. And with every play I write I try to write something that I've never seen on stage before. If I can make myself laugh and surprise myself while writing, I trust that the same holds true for audiences.

You also told Adam Symkowicz that "aesthetics is politics." What does your aesthetic aim to relate, both politically and personally? I think what gets privileged in theatre is stodgy, rigid, uptight realistic narratives about upper middle class white people and their problems. There are certain stories that can be told and in certain ways, and I think that's bullshit. To me that's an extension of the dominant paradigms of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism in society. I'm an activist in my daily life, and I bring that to my writing. Resisting the "proper" way to write a play is my own way of saying "eat my clit up til you spit up!" So to speak.