

Research Statement

Michelle Rios

As a Puerto Rican theatre practitioner, musician, educator, and mentor, I am proud of my Indigenous, African, and Spanish heritage, which I continue to embrace through activism, theatre practice, music, and writing. I believe that marginalized communities can recover, reconcile, reunite, and renew when their oppression is explored through theatre. Given today's political climate, there is a need for safe spaces where these communities may redeem and reclaim past histories of oppression to triumph in ways that may transform the present. When investigating political, social, historical, and cultural contexts during a creative process, I often deliberate: How can we create cultural master narratives that offer reconciliation, solidarity, and social change in an ever increasing global and polarized world? Thus, my research focuses on the political, social, and aesthetic realities of race, gender, sexuality, feminism, and post-colonialism through community-based theatre practice and embodied performance.

My objective is to investigate performance as an interdisciplinary, intercultural, and connective practice, focusing on social change, multiculturalism, and identity through physical embodiment and the theatrical space. My practical research incorporates a combination of devising techniques and disciplines, especially music, which I often apply as a foundational stimulus to explore and create theatrical narrative. I also research cross-cultural approaches to further enhance my practice, and am significantly influenced by Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* methodologies which I often reference throughout my teaching and facilitation to educate, create ensemble, generate dialogue, and foster collaboration.

Over the past five years, I have been facilitating workshops through my initiative *The Youth 'Artist' Theatre Project* at various venues in both Canada and the U.S. During my research and practice, I reference the works of practitioners and theorists who infuse theatre with themes of social and political relevance. I also explore cultural contexts and community connections through music. For example, during intergenerational community-based theatre explorations, songs and lyrics are often effective story prompts, examining music cognition and reminiscence. While collaborating with Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and immigrant youth, I incorporate music because it inspires youth to engage in both physicality and dialogue, most particularly through hip hop and spoken word which stylistically resonate for most of today's youth. Songs are usually chosen by the participants to explore common themes relating to the challenges that they often encounter.

When commissioned to write a play for *Concrete Theatre's 2016 Sprouts New Play Festival for Kids*, I chose to create a piece that celebrates my Puerto Rican heritage. *Abuela's Coqui* is a bilingual play with music that honours my Indigenous ancestry through Taino myth and oral tradition. My objective was to share an educational and interactive piece as a cross-cultural exploration incorporating both historical and cultural contexts. *Abuela's Coqui* explores the universal themes of identity, family, and home through song, narrative, and audience participation. Thus, through breaking the fourth wall and inviting young audience members to engage and join in on this cross-cultural journey, a sense of community and a feeling of solidarity was also achieved.

Last year, I had the experience of facilitating a *Youth 'Artist' Theatre Project* workshop session while performing in the U.S. Spanish premiere of *In the Heights* at Gala Hispanic Theatre in Washington, DC. Commissioned by *The Paso Nuevo Youth Program at Gala Hispanic Theatre*, this bilingual workshop focused on the narratives of Latinx-Indigenous and multicultural youth from the Washington, DC area. During the session, we focused on storytelling and explored through song, movement, and narrative, themes relating to identity and living as an immigrant in the U.S. Through the devised process, the youth were able to explore yet another cross-cultural experience which culminated in an open discussion about migration, immigration, and diaspora. Drawing from the theme of “home” from the musical *In the Heights*, the youth were able to explore a cultural master narrative that instilled resilience.

During this bilingual exploration, I was also able to examine the different gestures and nuances that exist on both a visceral and cultural level when investigating embodied performance, thereby examining two cultural perspectives that parallel the immigrant experience of living between two different worlds. Music also became a major component during the process, and once again, theme songs were chosen by the participants and applied as stimuli to address common themes.

In early 2019, I will be collaborating with local Latinx and Indigenous artists as a performer and theatre facilitator in the multidisciplinary collaboration piece *Remixing the Ritual for Sinergia* as part of the *Canoe2019 Chinook Series at Workshop West* in Edmonton. This collaboration will infuse elements of hip hop, music, and spoken word narrative to highlight intersections and nuanced truths that exist in both our Latinx and Indigenous communities. The overall objective of *Sinergia* is to establish programming that will introduce more Latinx and Indigenous narratives into Edmonton’s theatre community. I will also be collaborating with Chilean-Canadian playwright Carmen Aguirre and Latinx director Juliette Carillo on the World Premiere of *Anywhere But Here* at the Electric Company Theatre. *Anywhere But Here* addresses the relevant themes of migration and border politics, thereby exploring social and political themes that also align with my current research and practice.

Other upcoming workshops and projects that will inform my research practice include: A *Youth 'Artist' Theatre Project “Spectrum”* workshop at the Egale Canada OUTShine Conference in New Brunswick, which will focus on identity, resilience, and advocacy with and for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit youth. I have also been commissioned by the LGBTQ+ organization *Ring of Keys* in New York City to devise and direct a musical theatre collective creation piece addressing identity, sexuality, and intersectional feminism.

In conclusion, marginalized communities are often required to address relevant issues of identity and belonging. My goal is to underscore these complex issues, and through a creative and collaborative process that combines theory with practice, generate possible responses. My goal is to explore universal themes as well as commonalities and intersections that exist between us, while also acknowledging and working through the differences that often divide us. Therefore, my long-term objective is to lead arts-based

programming with and for marginalized communities, together with students and professional actors, to continue investigating interdisciplinary approaches that may further enhance the theatrical process through cultural, political, and social perspectives that are grounded in diversity as well as authenticity.