



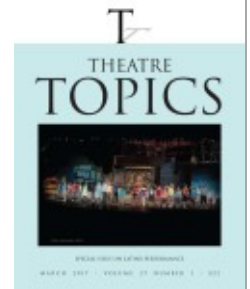
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"But Do We Have the Actors for That?": Some Principles of Practice for Staging Latinx Plays in a University Theatre Context

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# “But Do We Have the Actors for That?” Some Principles of Practice for Staging Latinx Plays in a University Theatre Context

*Brian Eugenio Herrera*

“Why don’t college theatre departments stage more contemporary Latina/o plays?”

This pointed query stood out among the many provocative questions posed by participants at the 2013 National Convening of the Latina/o Theatre Commons. The question underscored the distinctive significance of the university theatre department within the contemporary theatrical ecosystem. As an important producer of contemporary plays (and one not especially known for staging contemporary Latinx drama), college theatre programs seem to hold the power to ratify the writers, works, and traditions of Latinx theatre within the pedagogical project of training emerging theatre-makers and theatregoers. So why, the convening attendees asked, have Latina/o works of the last twenty or thirty years *not* become legibly central to the production curricula staged by university theatre departments? Is it that university faculties simply do not possess a working fluency with contemporary Latinx drama? Have the canonical *teatros* of the 1960s and ’70s cast too lengthy a shadow over more recent turns in Latinx theatre-making? Has publisher reluctance to issue accessible new play anthologies stunted awareness? Are departments outsourcing the responsibility for “covering” Latinx theatre to itinerant guest artists or adjunct teachers?<sup>1</sup>

As such questions buzzed throughout the conversations staged at the 2013 Convening, university-affiliated attendees (like myself) also wondered aloud whether the university theatre production programs in which we worked would ever seriously consider staging a contemporary Latinx play. Or would such a proposal would be stopped short with a different, but no less familiar question: “But do we have the actors for that?”

Within the context of university theatre production programs, this question resounds as an all-too-familiar rhetorical rejoinder. It can be at once a preemptive strike and a self-fulfilling prophecy, surreptitious self-censorship clad in the language of prudent practicality. As I departed the convening, I wondered about a different response. Might the embodied practice of producing Latinx work within a university context prompt ways of thinking beyond this paralyzing, block-stop demurral? What ways beyond the obstacle of “we don’t have the actors” might be discovered if a host of university production programs just took the bold plunge and staged a contemporary Latinx piece? What might that look like?

For more than a half-century, artists, critics, and scholars invested in expanding the opportunities for minority actors on American stages have scrutinized the mechanisms of exclusion embedded in conventions of American theatrical production, especially the habits of practice that guide how roles are cast. Along the way, a variety of emergent methods and models for inclusive and equitable casting of minoritized performers have been theorized and rehearsed. Conceptualized under terminological headings like *nontraditional* or *color-blind* or *multicultural* casting, these interventions have been documented and discussed, with recurrent regularity, in the pages of both scholarly journals and trade publications, by such authors as Richard Schechner, Ana Deboo, and William Sun,

among others. In this decade a handful of book-length academic treatments (by scholars Angela Pao, Brandi Catanese, and Faedra Carpenter) have distilled the limits, possibilities, and orthodoxies of this emerging repertoire of practice. At the same time, artist-scholars (like Daniel Banks, Christine Mok, and Donatella Galella) and critical practitioners (like Erin Quill, Branden Jacob-Jenkins, and Lynne Marie Rosenberg) continue to evince new modes, methods, and vocabularies of critique in essays, performances, and social-media interventions.

Questions of casting—especially the familiar “but do we have the actors for that?”—routinely signal unaddressed tensions about theatrical diversity, equity, and inclusion. Yet, most critical discussions of diversity in casting remain oriented toward the principles and practices modeled by professional theatre-making in the commercial and nonprofit sectors. Most of these discussions operate under the tacit presumption that the industry’s best practices should “trickle down” to the amateurs, whether educational or avocational. While theatre for youth programs, especially within a K-12 context, are not infrequently exempted from such imperatives, college-level theatre programs are not. This stems in large part from the enduring rationale—admittedly more rhetoric than reality—that theatre training in higher education should serve as a pipeline to the profession, and that university theatre productions should meet professional (or peri-professional) standards. Writing both within and against this framework, some artist-scholars, such as Meghan Brodie (2014) and Melinda Wilson (2009), have written compelling explications of their own efforts to place principles of diverse casting into practice; other university-based artist-scholars, such as Brandi Catanese (2009) and Will MacAdams (2016), have offered searching analyses of the ways in which their students have interrogated the limits of diversity, especially with regard to casting. Still, most scholars writing about the ways in which the principles of diversity play out in the practices of casting in a university setting tend to focus somewhat singularly on the campus they know best—their own.

My approach here, while deeply informed by the clarifying work of these authors, takes a different tack.

In the first months of 2014 I somewhat spontaneously undertook an unofficial college tour, organized around stagings of *In the Heights* in a range of university settings. My *In the Heights* viewing tour became a thought experiment through which my recurring encounter with different college productions of the same show prompted me to think through the distinct opportunities and obligations that emerge when staging Latinx plays within a university context. My *In the Heights* college tour fortified my confidence that such questions of casting, especially within the university context, should be embraced as invitations to rigorously explore particular principles of practice—around linguistic fluency, cultural competence, and creative coalition—that might productively guide those invested in bringing more Latinx plays to more university stages.

### **My *In the Heights* College Tour**

With music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda and book by Quiara Alegría Hudes, *In the Heights* stands as an exemplar of both the contemporary musical and Latinx drama, deftly deploying the conventions of both traditions to tell the story of a specific (and emphatically Latinx) neighborhood in New York City’s Washington Heights. The musical is also arguably the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful theatrical work by and about Latinx people to arrive on the twenty-first-century US stage. *In the Heights* opened on Broadway in 2008, where it profitably played for about three years (and more than 1,200 performances). A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, *In the Heights* won the Tony Award for Best Musical before launching a successful national tour (2009–11).

In some ways *In the Heights* might seem especially apt for production in an educational setting. Its buoyantly accessible score melds the musical styles of contemporary pop music (rap and salsa, merengue and R&B, reggaeton and hip-hop) with the established conventions of the American

musical theatre. It features a large cast of mostly Latinx characters, representing a range of disparate Latinx ethnicities. Most of these characters are scripted to be in their late teens and early twenties. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when the amateur production rights to *In the Heights* became available in early 2013, more than a hundred school productions were licensed in the first eighteen months of its availability.

Yet, of the scores of licensed amateur productions of the musical that took place on educational stages throughout the United States during the 2013–14 academic year, only twelve were university affiliated. (Most of these 130 productions were staged by high schools of varying sizes throughout the country.) Although the 2013–14 academic year was the first in which a university theatre department might have presented *In the Heights* as part of a mainstage production season, only seven of the twelve university-affiliated productions were staged by theatre departments or programs within four-year colleges or universities. The remaining five college-sponsored productions were staged by four community colleges and one independent student group.

I saw five of the seven university productions of *In the Heights* licensed during the first year of the musical's amateur availability. My tour emphasized those productions staged by degree-granting theatre departments at four-year colleges and universities and included stops at the University of California, Riverside; Kean University in Union, New Jersey (fig. 1); University of Pittsburgh; University of Texas at Austin; and City University of New York's Lehman College in the Bronx. (Timing prevented my attendance at productions staged by St. Olaf College in Minnesota and Santa Clara University in California.) Although I did not see any of the productions staged by campus student groups, I did attend one staged by a community college (LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York) and another by a high school (Nottingham High School in Hamilton, New Jersey) during this same period. Perhaps notably, during the four months I undertook this spectatorial experiment, more than fifteen licensed high school productions were staged within an hour's driving distance of my home in central New Jersey.

My *In the Heights* college tour prompted me to consider one of the defining paradoxes of university theatre production. In most university theatre productions, paid theatre professionals work with students (who themselves pay, in ways both oblique and direct, for access to the opportunity of being onstage) to create theatrical works that seek to balance appropriate standards of artistry, pedagogy, and professionalism. The nearly all-Latinx *In the Heights* cast of characters opened important, yet unsettled questions about what principles of practice a university theatre program should adopt with regard to the casting of Latinx works. Should such a program, as a pre- or peri-professional producer, adopt the “best practices” of the industry and seek an all-Latinx cast, borrowing or hiring outside talent as necessary? Or is a university theatre program justified in drawing only from the available talents within its community-bound educational context and cast the show with both Latinx and non-Latinx actors? When should a university departments “act as if” it is offering the equivalent of a professional production? And when might it appropriately leverage its status as a school play?

Both Miranda and Hudes have emphasized hard distinctions between *educational* and *professional* theatre. As Miranda has explained: “a school production [of *In the Heights*] with not a lot of Latinos in it” affords an important opportunity for students “to lear[n] things about Latino culture that go beyond what they're fed in the media every day. They HAVE to learn those things to play their parts correctly” (qtd. in Sherman, 2015a). Hudes concurred: “I'm happy for schools and communities who do not have [Latino] actors on hand to use *In the Heights* as an educational experience for participants of all stripes” (qtd. in Tran). At the same time, both Hudes and Miranda are emphatic that, for professional productions, “casting the roles appropriately is of fundamental importance” (ibid.), and that “authorial intent wins” (qtd. in Sherman, 2016).

*In the Heights* thereby amplifies the university theatre program's paradoxical status as both a professional producer and an amateur educational producer. How can such a program—run by



FIG. 1. *In the Heights* as staged by Kean University, Department of Theatre, Union, New Jersey, 21 February through 1 March 2014, directed by Suzanne Agins. (Photo: Rich Kowalski, courtesy of the Kean University, Department of Theatre.)

professionals though drawing on an amateur student talent pool that renews every four years or so—maneuver this paradox? Should the theatre professionals who run theatre departments hold themselves to professional standards, which suggests that, in the words of scholar of contemporary Latinx theatre Trevor Boffone, “[i]f you can’t field a majority Latin@ cast and hire a predominantly Latin@ creative team, then perhaps do a different show”? Should you include a Latinx play in your university production season if you cannot guarantee, a few months or few years in advance, that you definitely do have the actors for it? What are the implications for your program’s pedagogy (and its casting pool) if your students do not regularly encounter the opportunity of performing Latinx roles and plays in production?

As I undertook my *In the Heights* spectatorial experiment, I did so as a historian of the contemporary moment. I therefore limited myself to the research materials available in the public archive (for example, publicity materials; journalistic and social-media reportage; public programming organized around the production). Although I did not utilize the methods of oral history or ethnography, I did draw on some insights gleaned from participant observation. I simply attended the performance at Lehman, although I did participate in talkbacks at both UC Riverside (where I helped lead the discussion) and Kean (where I only listened in). At both Texas and Pitt I was an invited contributor to an academic symposium presented in tandem with the productions, and so my impressions were informed by ongoing conversations about the production throughout an extended event. I offer this reflective account of my *In the Heights* college tour not as a review or critique of any of the productions, but as an experiment in (and as an example of) how the methods of historical analysis might be productively applied toward the documentation of contemporary performance practice as one way to fortify our understanding of how university theatre practice has historically been an important part of (and contributor to) the broader ecosystem of contemporary theatre-making.

## The Gentle Provocation of *In the Heights*

At the curtain's rise, *In the Heights* ripples with the sound of morning as an urban community awakens. The edifices of three businesses mark the stagescape: the Rosario Car Service faces Daniela's Unisex Salon, and somewhere in between stands De La Vega Bodega. These three businesses anchor the community that comes to life in the musical. Each provides a home to a family (the Rosario's nuclear family, Daniela's work family, and the blended De La Vega family, respectively); each houses a young person with big dreams (college dropout Nina Rosario, salon employee Vanessa, and bodega proprietor Usnavi); and each stands as a community landmark. Over the course of the musical drama that follows, each business will face the prospect of shutting down, as each of the housed families confront fractures within. By the musical's end the community seen in *In the Heights* survives, but is forever changed by the loves found, lives lost, and choices made over the course of a Fourth of July holiday.

As a work to stage within a university context, *In the Heights* is both notably difficult and surprisingly forgiving. The musical is rigorous in its demands on both its cast and production apparatus. At the same time, the show enthusiastically welcomes its audience members, inviting them to discern "universal" themes in the musical's emphatically Latinx stories of youthful aspiration, im/migrant struggle, and intergenerational conflict and community survival. As a work of musical theatre *In the Heights* carefully integrates spoken word, music, and dance within an intricately plotted narrative structure that charts the struggles of two romantic pairs and their surrounding community by using familiar musical conventions (including "I want" songs, love duets, and rousing ensemble numbers). As a work of Latinx drama *In the Heights* presents a constellation of complex Latinx characters and scenarios embedded within a specific Latinx community and uses the signal flourishes of Latinx drama (including bilingual code-switching, syncretized Spanglish idioms, and counter-stereotyping strategies). Efficiently melding these distinct theatrical traditions, *In the Heights* offers a gentle provocation to both its enactors and audiences, encouraging them to trust that the theatrical languages they already know will help them to discover fluency in those theatrical languages that the musical invites them to learn.

The gentle provocation of *In the Heights* extends to the challenge (and the opportunity) of its casting. Featuring a diverse and mostly Latinx cast of characters, it rehearses a culturally and racially capacious vision of Latinidad. The Latinx community depicted in the musical is composed of characters who trace their heritage to the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, as well as other places in Latin America. In its original productions both on and off Broadway, the musical's staging of Latinidad applied the pan-Latino casting conventions that, since the 1960s, have evolved to the point of being presumptive in most major theatre productions.

Within the conventions of pan-Latino casting, a particular actor's actual or perceived Latinx heritage authenticates their portrayal of a Latinx character. This authorizing function can apply whether or not the Latinx actor's particular ethnicity aligns with that scripted for the character. In the original productions of *In the Heights* Olga Merediz's Puerto Rican heritage did not disrupt her portrayal of the Cuba-born Abuela Claudia; likewise, Mandy Gonzalez's Mexican heritage did not preclude her from portraying Puerto Rican Nina (nor for that matter did Miranda's Puerto Rican ancestry disrupt his portrayal of Dominican American Usnavi). In the same original productions, the musical also rehearsed an emphatically multiracial vision of Latinidad wherein Latinx-ness could be defined by the legible admixture of different cultural, racial, and national backgrounds. Breakout star Karen Olivo (who originated the role of Vanessa) claimed a mixed heritage that included Puerto Rican, Native American, Dominican, and Chinese ancestries. Andréa Burns and Christopher Jackson (the original Daniela and Benny, respectively) also claimed mixed or biracial ancestry, as did some of the original Broadway production's most prominent "replacements." (Both Jordin Sparks, who took on the role of Nina, and Corbin Bleu, one of Broadway's several Usnavis, are biracial non-Latino actors of African descent.)

The tradition of pan-Latino casting within the professional theatre has proven an expedient means to the laudable end of prioritizing Latinx actors for Latinx roles. Embedded within the conventions of pan-Latino casting, however, lay the presumption that professional Latinx actors are always already equipped with the necessary technical skill and cultural expertise to portray characters of a Latinx ethnicity different than their own. The culture-crossings animated by pan-Latino casting have also cultivated a coalitional ethic among professional Latinx actors to be attentive to the nuances of cultural specificity, especially when portraying a character outside one's own ethnicity.

Within a university context, however, the authenticating aspects of pan-Latino casting can place an unfairly presumptive burden on Latinx student actors to possess (or develop) expertise on cross-cultural Latinidad, and to tacitly perform as an authorizing presence in the production's portrayal of Latinx characters and narratives. Moreover, the conventions of pan-Latino casting can make it too easy for college productions to rely upon the involvement of Latinx students to perform as an authorizing, even authenticating, presence. Of course, the lived experience and cultural expertise of Latinx students involved in the production might offer additional resources, but such contributions of specialized knowledge, whether vocal, choreographic, or cultural, should be integrated into the production staff and acknowledged fully and appropriately in the program. In addition to risking exploitation of often uncredited Latinx-student cultural labor, this practice also threatens to diminish the educational experience for all students by failing to expose both Latinx and non-Latinx student performers to the skilled expertise of trained dramaturgs, voice teachers, and movement coaches. Whether and how a university producer anticipates, integrates, and compensates such contributions is one way by which the production's values are revealed, especially with regard to the staging of the Latinx play.

My viewing tour confirmed that meaningful commitment to three aspects of a production appears essential to the successful staging of *In the Heights* within a university context: linguistic fluency, cultural competence, and creative coalition. Although discussed within the specific context of a few productions of a single show, I submit that these principles of practice might be productively generalizable to the staging of nearly any Latinx play within a university context.

### **Three Principles of Practice for Staging a Latinx Play within a University Context**

#### *Linguistic Fluency*

*In the Heights* is a demanding show to perform. And no single role underscores the musical's technical difficulty more emphatically than that of Daniela—the fierce, funny, and formidable proprietor of the beauty shop. The actor taking on this role must possess a big singing voice, deft comic timing, and the capacity to convey a subtly charted dramatic arc, all while speaking in the thickest accent scripted by the show and looking fabulous the whole time. Moreover, as the show's strategic revision of the clichéd “Latin spitfire” character, the role of Daniela risks lapsing into stereotype if performed without meticulous control and attention to scripted detail.

Few college actors of any heritage would arrive fully equipped to take on the role of Daniela. Seeing five different university Danielas (two of whom were Latina, one was African American, and two were Anglo), I did find it striking that one of the most effective portrayals of the character came from an Anglo actor in the UC Riverside production. Perhaps notably, this particular actor brought experience with language-intensive drama (having recently portrayed a leading role in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*), and, as she affirmed during the talkback, took the counter-stereotyping imperative of the role seriously. Using the cast recording as a referent and drawing on her own independent research in tandem with that of the production's dramaturgical team, this actor astutely leveraged the role's technical challenges as scaffolding for what proved to be a memorably effective portrayal of this difficult part (fig. 2).



FIG. 2. *In the Heights* as staged by the University of California, Riverside, Department of Theatre, Film, and Digital Production, 20 February through 1 March 2014, directed by David Gram. (Photo: Alan A. Call, courtesy of the University of California, Riverside, Department of Theatre, Film, and Digital Production.)

The success of the UC Riverside Daniela proved a powerful reminder not only that technique emerges from training, but that integrating vocal coaching—for dialect and dialogue—into the production process is essential, perhaps especially for Latinx actors taking on Latinx roles. Just as there is no singular “British” accent and just as the regional distinction among “Southern” accents are many, so too is there no uniform US Latinx accent. Rather, the sounds of US Latinx speech are inflected both by the different variations of Spanish spoken throughout the western hemisphere, and also by the many regional variations in spoken English throughout the United States. An increasing number of voice teachers throughout the country specialize in coaching and teaching the myriad US Latinx dialects; access to their relevant skills should be considered necessary preconditions for the staging of any Latinx play within a university context.

### *Cultural Competence*

The conventions of pan-Latino or culturally analogous casting (wherein the actor’s own ethnic heritage is considered an attribute in their assignment to the role) are often premised on an often unarticulated assumption that the decision to assign, say, a Puerto Rican actor to a Puerto Rican role automatically invests that portrayal with a measure of authenticity, in part because the actor is presumed to possess culturally specific knowledge. This presumption places an often unfair expectation on the Latinx student actor to automatically know and fully understand cultural details that are perhaps remote to her lived experience or possibly distinct from her actual heritage. In talkbacks and other conversations throughout my viewing tour, I routinely heard cast members express anxiety about whether they were getting *In the Heights* “right.” This anxiety was especially pronounced among Latinx student actors, many of whom voiced concerns not unlike those of original Broadway cast member Krysta Rodriguez, who worried whether she was adequately Latina for the ensemble:



“When I got the show, I thought they were going to call me Fraud-riguez! . . . Was I Hispanic enough?” (qtd. in Gonzales).

*In the Heights* challenges the speciousness of the “automatically authentic” presumption of pan-Latino casting in a productive way, not only by mapping a broad diversity of Latinx characters, but also by investing each with a character-based ethnic history. To evince the cultural knowledge both scripted within and prompted by the show, the three productions I saw outside of the greater New York area (UC Riverside; Pitt; Texas) were anchored by especially robust dramaturgical apparatuses. At UC Riverside, the production utilized a resource book compiled by student dramaturgs, complete with a glossary detailing the idiomatic nuances of Puerto Rican and Dominican Spanish as spoken in New York City, in contrast to Mexican and Central American Spanish as spoken in southern California. As an example, because the meaning of *bodega* carries drastically different meanings in various parts of the Americas, the UC Riverside sourcebook explicated the regional inflection of the term in New York City Spanglish, while also detailing the corner store’s significance within communities largely neglected by major retail outlets. Additionally, the UC Riverside sourcebook explained why things like car services and power outages had particular resonance in underserved neighborhoods, such as those featured in *In the Heights*. A comparably effective dramaturgical apparatus provided essential support at the University of Texas, where the campus production activated an ambitious confrontation with enduring departmental tensions surrounding theatrical diversity. The university’s graduate and undergraduate dramaturgs helped to articulate a guiding and unifying sense of purpose for the production, both within the campus community and beyond. At Pitt, in a remarkable exploration of the pedagogic possibilities of a university theatre production, the production stage manager (as part of her honors thesis project) conducted all rehearsals and called all cues in Spanish, thereby creating a rehearsal and performance space rigorously attentive to the complex work of linguistic, cultural, and theatrical translation for all participants (fig. 3).

*In the Heights*’ balance of Latinx diversity and specificity encourages the production to consider gaps in cultural competence among the cast as inevitable, not as evidence of inadequacy. Yet, by demanding cultural competence of its ensemble, the musical prompts the thoughtful use of dramaturgical techniques to address gaps in cultural knowledge, just as might be required in any university production of Chekhov, Ibsen, or Williams. Among the productions I saw, dynamic dramaturgical apparatuses, in very different ways, revealed clearly each ensemble’s cultural competence. This competence thereby equipped these casts to productively engage the distance between themselves and their characters not as an embarrassing gap to be hidden, but as a productive space in which understanding might grow.

### *Creative Coalition*

Unlike most prior depictions of Latinx peoples on the American musical stage, *In the Heights* is not about Latinx ethnoracial difference as it confronts a hostile white social structure. To be sure, discussions of racism, discrimination, and being “powerless” percolate throughout the musical’s narrative, but this community’s gentrifying adversaries remain disembodied, remote, and abstracted. What matters in *In the Heights* is how the characters negotiate the fissures of difference—in dreams, in expectations, in experience—that threaten to tear them apart.

Encounters with difference emerge in *In the Heights* as constitutive features of the musical’s onstage Latinx community. As an example, Kevin, the proprietor of the neighborhood car service and father to college student Nina, draws such distinctions of difference around his daughter. In a pivotal eruptive scene, Kevin conveys his judgment of Nina’s (less educated) best friend Vanessa before more forcefully expressing his hostility to Nina’s burgeoning romance with his non-Latino employee Benny. Kevin bellows, “You’ll never be one of us!” His declamation hovers tensely above the bodies onstage and the way its meaning lands can vary depending on how the role of Benny is cast. The



FIG. 3. *In the Heights* as staged by the University of Pittsburgh, Department of Theatre Arts, 27 March through 6 April 2014, directed by Lisa Jackson-Schebetta. (Photo: Vincent Noe, courtesy of the University of Pittsburgh, Department of Theatre Arts.)

production script suggests that Benny is of African descent, but the commercially published script only specifies that he is not Latino. The productions I observed took notably different approaches to casting the role. At UC Riverside Kevin was portrayed by a Filipino American actor and Benny by an actor of Vietnamese heritage, which amplified not only the intra-ethnic tensions between the characters, but also Kevin's differences from his non-Asian wife and daughter. A similarly intra-ethnic tension was clarified in the Kean production in which both Kevin and Benny were portrayed by actors of African descent. At Pitt, an older professional Latino actor played Kevin, while a younger student actor of European descent played Benny. Both Lehman and Texas followed the original production's precedent, with Kevin portrayed by a Latino actor, and Benny by an actor of African descent. In the Texas production, however, the actor playing Kevin's wife Camila also happened to be of African descent, which provocatively escalated the scene's eruptive tension. Perhaps most notably, every one of these configurations "worked," and each amplified the racial dimensions of the conflict between Kevin and Benny. In this particular instance *In the Heights* not only accommodated, but also benefited from each production's creative capacity to make this narrative conflict legible without either evacuating racial meaning or relying upon racial difference as theatrical shorthand (fig. 4).

These productions also suggest that *In the Heights* is an especially apt script to explore what performance historian Patricia Ybarra has termed *coalitional casting*. In Ybarra's evocative configuration, coalitional casting occurs when "an act of becoming a culturally different person" works as a consciously constitutive part of "an act of committing to the cause of telling a marginalized story" (n.p.). Coalitional casting addresses the persistent absence of actors of color on university stages by inviting nonminority allies to leverage the privileged ubiquity of whiteness toward the cause of enacting an as-yet unstaged story. Such casting does not exploit abstract ideals of quality, talent, or ability as justification, but instead provisionally assigns actors—as stand-ins almost—to roles for which they might not be suited. Coalitional casting does not rely upon the sloppy shorthand of racial mimicry, but instead deploys ethnic surrogation as a strategic means of underscoring the structural gaps that exist within the American theatre, especially those parts of the theatrical ecosystem like



FIG. 4. *In the Heights* as staged by the University of Texas at Austin, Department of Theatre and Dance, 9–19 April 2014, directed by Jerry Ruiz. (Photo: Lawrence Peart, courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin, Department of Theatre and Dance.)

the university stage that are limited in how they can hire in ethnically analogous performers. As a strategic tactic of theatrical practice, Ybarra’s model of coalitional casting also promises to be one way to present works on the university stage and thereby possibly cultivate involvement by student-artists from underrepresented backgrounds.

Coalitional casting obliges the creative team to clearly understand why an actor is being invited to portray a character who is culturally different from themselves. Coalitional casting does not assign a role because a particular performer might “read as” an ethnicity other than their own, nor does it do so because, through whatever tricks of makeup, voice, or posture, a particular performer might “pass” as a different ethnicity. A coalitional approach instead insists on a principle of “ally-ship” to guide the work of performance, leveraging privilege to amplify awareness of racial and ethnic inequity rather than efface it. Additional responsibility thereby accrues to the coalitional performer: to be attentive and accountable to considerations of what might or might not be appropriate on the one hand; and to be suspicious of what is expedient or what “feels right” on the other. To become a bearer of a tradition that is not one’s own imposes additional responsibility and accountability on the part of the coalitional tradition-bearer, and the extra labor of such a creative coalition must be embraced from the outset as both opportunity and obligation.

Here, it might be worth noting that each of the five productions of *In the Heights* I encountered utilized some version of coalitional casting, albeit without using the term. Some, like the nearly all-Latinx cast at Lehman, deployed the familiar coalitional practice of pan-Latino casting wherein cross-cultural casting has long been used as a tactic toward greater cultural presence and legibility on the American stage. All five productions also cast non-Latinx actors from underrepresented backgrounds (whether Black, Asian, or Middle Eastern) in Latinx roles, usually without evident concern that norms of authenticity were being violated. In contrast, the actors of European descent I saw take on Latinx roles seemed intent on developing complex, culturally responsible portrayals. In each production, some version of coalitional casting was deployed, expanding the tradition of pan-Latino casting in mindful ways to include non-Latinx actors when circumstances required it.

Theatre production within a university context is rarely perfect; the seams show as a matter of course. I submit that this inevitability of imperfection stands among the great creative and pedagogic privileges of producing theatre within a university context. The show can be a productive experience for emerging artist-scholars even, perhaps especially, when it is not entirely successful. Yet, too often artistic leaders within theatre programs tend to prioritize the professionalism of their productions to their audiences, administrations, and students, implying that the quality of their shows somehow transcends the educational realities and resources that make their productions possible. A commitment to coalitional casting obliges artistic leaders in university theatre programs who are simultaneously professional educators and professional theatre-makers to embrace rather than efface this duality. As recent controversies at Clarion College and elsewhere have reminded us, it is too easy to play the “educator card” or invoke pedagogic license when one runs afoul of professional theatre protocol (Sherman, 2015b). It is likewise too easy to invoke “professional standards” or “that’s the way it’s done in the business” in order to rationalize the persistent inequities of opportunity and access within one’s theatre program. The success of coalitional casting practices in notable recent university productions (like Courtney Mohler’s staging of Larissa FastHorse’s *What Would Crazy Horse Do?* at Santa Clara University) underscores the opportunity that artistic leaders in university theatre programs have to innovate creative practices that bridge *professional* and *pedagogic* priorities within the context of a university production (FastHorse). By mindfully working within and across the inevitable gaps of imperfection and encouraging student actors to allow questions and failures to remain visible (rather than effacing them in an errant impulse toward professionalism), coalitional casting practices also oblige artistic leaders within theatre programs to advocate for production values that reflect their pedagogic principles as fully as their artistic ambitions.

How one casts a play expresses one’s artistic vision, even as it also reveals the standards of conduct that define one’s work as an artist. To cast any play is to engage in a practice that is both artistic and ethical. Within a university context, casting is also pedagogic practice, reflecting the foundational beliefs and techniques that animate one’s work as an educator. A more rigorous advocacy for culturally competent presentations of plays engaging Latinx racial, ethnic, and gender diversity need not solely rely upon demands for *authenticity*; indeed, the hunger for authenticity—often rooted in some combination of fear and fantasy—can risk fetishization as readily as it promises the reward of cultural validation. Moreover, the appearance of authenticity always lay in the eye of the beholder, thus guaranteeing little beyond, to parrot Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous formulation, our confidence that “we will know it when we see it.” In short, the priority of presenting more Latinx plays on more university stages requires a more reliable and more rigorous protocol than authenticity.

Not every Latinx script is as flexible as *In the Heights*, and not every Latinx playwright will be receptive to the prospect of a coalitional approach to casting their play. Still, *In the Heights* might provide an instructive lesson on how to proactively assess whether and how a university theatre program might productively consider the opportunity of staging a contemporary Latinx play. By working from within the script to ask what a specific Latinx play would require—in the way of linguistic fluency, cultural competence, and creative coalition—artistic leaders within a university theatre program can aptly assess the ways in which their particular creative community might serve a specific Latinx play (and vice versa). When determining how to invest the formidable resources involved in a university theatre production, artistic leaders might then avoid demanding answers to all-too-familiar questions like “but do we have the actors for that?” Instead, they might actively seek out those contemporary works by Latinx and other underrepresented writers that could best benefit from collaboration with the particular creative community housed by their particular department or program.

If my *In the Heights* college tour convinced me of anything, it is that university stages can present more Latinx plays if (and only if) the scholar-artists working on those stages are willing to embrace both the opportunity and obligation of producing works by underrepresented writers within a university context. A university theatre production is, at its best, neither a professional presentation nor school play; instead, it is something rather extraordinary that can best emerge in the space between.

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### Note

1. A brief note on terminology seems appropriate here. In this essay, I opt to use the emergent term *Latinx* as my shorthand or umbrella term for contemporary works by and about Latina/o/x people. My choice to do so follows the reasoning recently offered by *American Theatre* editor Rob Weinert-Kendt in which he affirms the term's utility "for both greater inclusion and typographical clarity" (n.p.). Even so, I retain my reservations about the easy adoptions of *Latinx* (which are cited in the Weinert-Kendt piece), and I exert the privilege—as I do in this essay—to also use differently precise terms like *Cubana* or *Chicano* to communicate distinctions of region, gender, and nation. I also reserve the right to occasionally use the possibly outdated term *Latino* to communicate historical specificity when discussing events and conversations that occurred at the turn to the twenty-first century, prior to the emergence of *Latinx* as both a term and stance. My position here, as elsewhere, is then to embrace *Latinx* not as a singular term, but as part of the terminological richness that has long been available to those writing about Latina/o/x people, their lives, and their artistic works.

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