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Reimagining Access and Representation in the Performing Arts During Quarantine

By Adriana Domínguez, Kim McKean, and Georgina Escobar

Abstract

At the University of Texas at El Paso, where the authors are based, programming intended to promote community engagement had to be reconceived due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

ReUnión rEvolución: a Latinx New Works Festival, an event developed in partnership with the Chamizal National Memorial, slated for late March 2020, was initially programmed with the intention of celebrating both local and national Latinx voices and stories by featuring a multitude of free events for the community. Planned events included staged readings of new plays, writing workshops, panel discussions with playwrights, and an opening and closing night reception for festival artists to connect more intentionally with the community. Necessity created opportunity and *ReUnión rEvolución Radio* was born; a space to investigate language, identity, and connections to the community.

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UT-El Paso's *ReUnión¹ rEvolución²: a Latinx New Works Festival* was a new play festival initially programmed with the intention of celebrating both local and national Latinx voices and stories by featuring a multitude of free, in person, events for the community in March of 2020. Due to the global pandemic, the festival was reconceived and *ReUnión rEvolución Radio (RrR)* was born. *RrR* provided space for four plays written by Latinx playwrights that utilized language and validation of identity to connect the community during a time of fear, uncertainty, and isolation. Through radio programming, which included interviews with each playwright, *RrR* provided the *frontera³* of El Paso, TX/Las Cruces, NM/Juarez, Mexico, an opportunity to uniquely investigate identity through diverse works and gain additional perspective by hearing the playwrights' specific ideas about identity in their in-depth interviews. Furthermore, the creative team had the fortune of reevaluating their own formulations of identity as artists when the medium shifted. In a time of isolation, it was essential that the artistic team reevaluate their contributions to the art form and solidify how their identity as an artist would continue to create opportunities for new work to have a place during the pandemic.

As UT-El Paso "is one of the largest [...] Hispanic-serving institutions in the country, with a student body that is 83% Hispanic" (At a Glance), an important tenet of the original in-person festival was to increase our students' access and exposure to Latinx artists. In a 2019 essay for

¹ Reunion

² Revolution

³ Border

Howlround Theatre Commons, playwright Andres Osorio articulates the necessity of such representation and validation of identity:

Theatre and education and theatre education are all spaces where it's so easy for Latinx people to feel unwelcome. And for an ethnic group that actively erases itself as a survival tactic in this nation that increasingly vilifies us, it means a lot for burgeoning Latinx playwrights to be exposed to plays by Latinx writers and to feel like we have a place in the American theatre, one of the greatest storytelling avenues in the world. Because we have for a long time now.

Osorio's statement aligns with the intended goals of the festival; through performance and public discourse, the festival aimed to demonstrate to our students that they "have a place in the American theatre" (Osorio) and to shine a light on the different aesthetics, genre, style, and forms that comprise the Latinx canon in a new-works festival.

RE-IMAGINING THE FESTIVAL

When it became clear that the planned version would be cancelled due to the pandemic, the artists involved concurred that the festival must proceed in one shape or another. Putting the event on hold indefinitely in anticipation of post-pandemic life could exacerbate the issues of access and representation the department was trying to address. Although the *frontera* is a vibrant and growing community, there are limited professional theatrical opportunities; the nearest LORT is over 300 miles away in another state and over 500 miles away in the state of Texas. Further, as the authors address in their article *Developing Frontera Aesthetic through New Work Creation* for Theatre Topics, the University of Texas at El Paso serves a student population that is over 80% Hispanic (an

imposed term) and less than 20% of works presented on stage through the Department have been written by BIPOC or Latinx artists within the last 20 years. Moreover, the unique positioning of El Paso, Texas on the border of Juárez, México, has often been at the center of identity politics due in part to presidential misinformation, state immigration rhetoric, and a growing racist and xenophobic national climate. Given the calls for accountability in the new American Theatre, the team felt emboldened and even responsible to uplift our borderlands festival further and more deliberately. It was essential that the team continue to problem solve and think creatively about how to ensure that the voices of Latinx writers were honored and that our largely Latinx community population have access to work that confirmed and validated their identity.

We were admittedly torn about the best medium for the reimagined festival; a socially distanced outdoor event, an innovative online digital platform, and a weekly Zoom series were all floated as ideas in initial discussions. However, given the fact that we were looking to revolutionize the way new play festivals serve not only the playwrights, but community, we were not confident that any of those options would truly suit our mission. Then, we had a ‘lightbulb’ moment when we remembered that a core tenet of the festival was to *hear* new plays aloud and to let the radiant blend of Spanish and English, realized by the voices of actors from the *frontera*, bring the stories to life. Once we focused our attention on *listening* to the plays rather than *watching* them, the ideal medium for our newly imagined festival became clear; *ReUnión rEvolución* evolved into *ReUnión rEvolución Radio*.



ReUnión rEvolución Radio Logo

THE PROCESS

Upon committing to the festival’s new format as an audio-forward event, we partnered with our local NPR station, KTEP 88.5, and the radio show *State of the Arts*, a “weekly 30-minute program focusing on the arts community of El Paso” (State of the Arts, 10 Oct.). As part of this dynamic partnership, *State of the Arts* dedicated the entire month of September to featuring a new audio drama from *RrR* every week. In addition to the plays, each episode included an interview with the playwright of the piece, with host Marina Monsisvais focusing on the work and the playwright’s connection to the region. The established listener base of *State of the Arts* gave us confidence that this format would meet the festival’s mission. Additionally, this listener base would ideally cast a wider net and attract a more diverse audience than we might have expected for an in-person festival by reaching listeners who may not have ordinarily attended live theatre events even prior to the pandemic. Moreover, we discovered that the audio-forward format, which was presented live on the radio and then archived online for future access, resulted in an easily accessible audience engagement process for each of the new plays presented.

Once we secured the partnership with KTEP and *State of the Arts*, we were quick to inform the participating playwrights of the change. The impact of the new format meant the playwrights had two choices: they had the choice of adapting their existing material into a 10-15 minute radio play format, or they could write a new piece specifically suited for the radio play format. The writers responded graciously and enthusiastically, agreeing to collaborate in this reconceived format and to adjust their work as needed. In about fourteen days, the playwrights turned in either their revised audio-forward draft or a new play specifically written for radio. The festival's production team was also nimble in adapting to this new format for a new work festival. The playwrights were given a digital "room" with a professional director, actors (mainly from the UT-El Paso student population), and a stage manager, while a production manager oversaw the logistics of all the rehearsal and recording processes. Each playwright worked closely with their team for two weeks in which they identified their goals and objectives for their script, similar to a typical new work development workshop. Some playwrights produced new pages or churned out rewrites outside of rehearsal, while others made in-the-room changes only. The process was designed to meet each playwright's needs and be as writer-friendly as that of any in-person workshop.

Each director handled their rehearsal room in their own way; the emphasis on the aural nature of the medium was a common factor. Directors had actors turn off their cameras for certain rehearsals to allow the writer and the director to fully *listen* to the piece, as well as to train the actors to take their cues from the text and the direction rather than from visual prompts from one another. In this new play development workshop, directors were encouraged to meet the writer's objectives by guiding the actors and the room towards the service of the story and not towards a production-ready result. Playwrights were invited to the

rehearsals and recordings of their production as well as a “tech” beforehand. Guided by the notion that an important factor of any new play development festival is community building, the team also created an event in which each play’s team (writer, director, actors, stage manager) shared their work in a mini digital festival before the final recordings. Though they were, of course, imperfect replicas of an in-person workshop environment, the digital rehearsal rooms were successful in serving as a platform for the playwrights to develop and investigate their new work. Although this provided significant challenges, it forced all involved to deeply connect with their individual process and fully commit to listening, identifying clear moments, and fully recognizing their role in the world of written and spoken language.

IDENTITY AND THE WORK

When the act of gathering, and the performance and visual language of a play is not possible, how does a writer infuse the work with the same type of cultural resonance available to them in live performance?

The festival’s response to this question was to invite a unique combination of Latinx voices—all from Texas, or its neighbor state, Chihuahua — to this audio-forward challenge. The important factors remained accurate representation, multilingualism, and a diversity of narratives. The sister cities of the *frontera* have for many years shared the radio waves and have become accustomed to switching from English to Spanish radio stations on a daily basis. *RrR* became a theatrical celebration of this unique blend of voices, theatricalized through this well-known, and loved medium.

The diversity of the narratives allowed for community members of all ages and a variety of experiences and identities to connect with new

Latinx work. Upon conclusion of the festival, a local high school teacher shared that the festival provided him a platform to celebrate the “rich bicultural region of El Paso” with his students:

Many of my students are new to theatre and I found that the programming of *ReUnión rEvolución* was excellent to discuss the different types of conflict in drama while also celebrating and acknowledging the rich culture of our Border Region. As I am sure you know it can be very difficult to find theatre specifically celebrating the rich bicultural region of El Paso and the LatinX experience, and I want you to know that my students and I all listened to and discussed the entire programming of the *ReUnión rEvolución* festival. (Anonymous)

The pieces that aired each Saturday for the *frontera* community were unique and approached language and identity in a personal manner. Recent UTEP alum Julia Sosa’s play, *El Toro y La Niña*, was about a little *traviesa*⁴ who has a complicated relationship with the world, including the character, *Abuela*⁵. One night, after yet another disagreement with *Abuela*, she unexpectedly begins a journey with a bull looking for a new life: a life away from bullfighting. The listening audience traveled with these two unlikely friends through the Mexican countryside on a search for their definition of home. When *State of the Arts* host Marina Monsisvais asked Sosa about her inclination to use Spanish in her play, Sosa articulated:

I really love doing Spanish theatre in the United States. Sometimes [Latinx artists] find ourselves isolated artistically [in the United States]. [...]Putting in words that are spoken in the ranchos or spoken in the border [..]. Little things like that make it feel like I

⁴ Mischievous little girl

⁵ Grandmother

made this piece for people from Chihuahua, El Paso [...]. It's where I'm from [...]It's what I am. It's who I am. ("State of the Arts," 9 Sept.)

Andrew Sianez-De La O wrote *Borderline*, a play set in the old cotton fields of Socorro, Texas. Enzo and Rosita have snuck away to write ghost stories, while Tony and Veronica are both building up the courage to tell the other a secret. Threatened by a creature in the darkness, these two generations will have to rely on each other and the voice of the repentant Tío Ofelio to escape the desert alive. In his interview on *State of the Arts*, Sianez-De La O explained that the *chupacabra*⁶ character in his text is a metaphor for the border patrol. He was interested in presenting the border patrol this way so that younger audiences—some of whom might encounter the border patrol— could digest the stakes of that relationship in a “palatable” way. Additionally, after his play aired, Sianez-De La O was able to give young listeners the advice: “Don’t be afraid to take up space. That is a lesson I wish I learned a little earlier. If I had been more comfortable taking up the space that I definitely deserve, then maybe I would have found my way here a little quicker. If you don’t feel like you are being represented, find your way in.”

Georgina Escobar brought in a humorous religious satire that reimagines the Annunciation and questions the role of women and motherhood. *Masterclass from a Broken Angel (or Drowning Fish)* is a story about a young married couple grappling with the reality of their own relationship during uncertain times. For Escobar this was a return to her investigation of sci-femme, futurity, and religious satire as genres that can open up the imagination and challenge the status quo, especially for misunderstood communities. In an interview with Kelundra Smith for *ArtsATL* about the use of genre towards Latinx futurity in a frontera

⁶ Legendary creature that preys on livestock

aesthetic, Escobar states, “I tend to write stories that are a bit askew, where we are walking not on this ground [...] Stories that are boiled in a place of conflict or tension always inform the way artists from those regions write, speak, think, and paint,” *Masterclass from a Broken Angel* breaks down the issues of identity by presenting the varied diaspora that exists in the border regions. It features an Ashke-normative Jewish woman married to an Arab-Mexican-American *fronterizo*⁷ residing in the El Paso/Juárez region.

Award-winning playwright and author Virginia Grise also shared her new work, *a farm for meme* for the radio festival. A mother and her three boys live in a tent in an encampment trying to save the farm from police and bulldozers while a confused and displaced artist, plants tomatoes in potholes hoping they will break open the concrete. *a farm for meme* is a story about *semilleros*⁸ and the South Central Farm, built in a vacant lot after the 1992 LA rebellion. In providing context about her work and positioning as an artist, Grise discussed her offerings as an artist in her interview with Marina Monsisvais:

We are at an opportunity in this country where we’re really being asked to make different decisions and priorities for what our work looks like, I really do feel we are at that impasse. I feel that the global pandemic coupled with a national uprising has given us the opportunity to say what kind of life we want to live, and for me our art has to be connected to that....As an artist I think that what I have to offer then, is the imagining of something better. (“State of the Arts,” 19 Sept.)

Through their work, Sosa, Siañez-De La O, Escobar, and Grise provided the *frontera* an opportunity to connect at a distance, uniquely

⁷ Border resident

⁸ Seedbed

investigate identity through diverse works, and gain additional perspective by hearing each playwright discuss specific ideas about identity in their in-depth interviews.

THE PROGRESS

Within every crisis there is an opportunity to practice what Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls “antifragility”—or the capacity to benefit from stress, shock, deprivation, and failure (Taleb 3). The unexpected change in medium for *ReUnión rEvolución* provided the festival a wider reach, and possibly a larger impact, than it was likely to have in its original conception. Although the final product was much different than intended, approximately 4,200 listeners tuned in each week. In contrast, we had been expecting around 500 patrons in total for the festival had it been held in person.

Community members—from the Mayor of El Paso to local high school teachers—reached out to express their appreciation for the festival. *RrR* provided space for four plays written by Latinx playwrights that utilized language to connect the community during a time of fear, uncertainty, and isolation. Through a variety of methods and genres, listeners were able to access diverse work that served as a reminder that human beings have stories to share.

ReUnión rEvolución Radio succeeded beyond our hopes, fulfilling the original mission articulated for the festival by expanding engagement with the community in the El Paso/Juárez region and increasing Latinx representation in our programming, while providing the ancillary benefit of cultivating new production and performance skills for our students and faculty. Most importantly, creatively adapting to the challenges of the time and the interventions required to keep our festival alive served both to

strengthen our community’s connection with its cultural roots and to drive us forward artistically. In a time of unprecedented stress and uncertainty, the new festival radio format provided a sense of stability and engagement. Even as we emerge from this difficult period, *ReUnión rEvolución Radio* may be here to stay.



Figure 1 - ReUnión rEvolución Radio Full Cast Zoom

NOTES

ReUnión rEvolución Radio participated in the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival and garnered the following National Awards:

The Kennedy Center Citizen Artist Award: recognizes programs in higher education using theatrical production to promote long-term societal impact through an artistic lens, to encourage empathetic exploration of the complex cultural and physical world, and to advocate for justice on campus and throughout the world.

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Sound Design-Ian Gilliam (student designer)

All recordings of the plays are still available at:

www.ktep.org/programs/state-arts?page=2&ajax=1

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