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Latino Theater Company: Members in Conversation

Angela Scott · Wednesday, September 7th, 2016

Angela Scott, administrative director of the Latino Theater Company, recently had a conversation with three of the 30-year-old company's founding members: Lucy Rodriguez, Sal Lopez, and Geoffrey Rivas. Here's what they talked about.

Angela: What do you think is the reason for Latino Theater Company's longevity working together as an ensemble?

Lucy: One big reason is José Luis Valenzuela. He is an extraordinary visionary. He thinks big and is intrepid in taking on projects. He can rally people to support his vision and indeed we have been blessed to work with very talented actors, designers, writers, musicians, etc. He commands the respect of our many colleagues. And because he is such a good-hearted person, he attracts good-hearted people. It is difficult to talk about the work without talking about "JLV." Kind of like trying to separate the song from the singer—you need both for the art to come to fruition. But our work is GOOD! And if it weren't we would not have lasted this long. The other reason is love—sounds hokey but it's true. Love of the work, love of each other, love of our community, love of the arts and theater in particular. And finally, the lines between professional and personal are very blurred in our company—intentionally and wonderfully so. We support each other professionally and have also been there for each other through all of life's major milestones—marriages, births, baptisms, graduations, illness, deaths—amazingly no divorces! We don't know how to be any other way.

Sal: The leadership. José Luis is a visionary and always has something exciting that he wants to plan. I think that is an attraction for all of us. We want to be part of something bigger than us. We all share the passion of theater and we want to tell the stories from the perspective of our community. In terms of the ensemble we respect each other and rely on each other. Over time we have shared many artistic and personal history and that has bound us together as a company.

Geoffrey: I think the reason for our longevity is our collaborative effort and commitment to the work at hand, we believe in our mission and our artistic director's vision.

Angela: What is your process like and what makes it unique?

Lucy: I don't know if it is unique. We often don't have a completed script. We may be working from a concept, an idea, a piece of music. Sometimes history or a newspaper article, some current event issue has been the genesis of the work. Then we improv with JLV setting up some parameters. Evelina Fernández is our playwright and sometimes she uses what we have done, sometimes not. But she always listens and is open to suggestions and criticism. I personally feel that is because she is secure as an artist and a woman, and she can therefore be very generous. Our rehearsal room is a safe space—like Vegas. What happens there stays there until we decide otherwise.

Sal: It is very collaborative and we trust the opinion of each other. The willingness to be open in terms of constructive criticism regarding any given project. When Evelina writes something we feel comfortable enough to express our opinion which I don't know how common that is. Each one of us feels we have something to contribute and we accept the suggestion whether it is wrong or right. Our process is starting from scratch. Sometimes we might start with music or improvisation in order to find the tone or mood of the piece and we build from there. We sit and discuss the politics or issues we are dealing with or want to tap into as the play develops.



Sal Lopez as Juan Diego in the annual holiday production of La Virgen. Photo by Carol Petersen.

Geoffrey: Our process is very collaborative. The way we use music and movement in our workshops shapes and creates our pieces, and helps us set our aesthetic values.

Angela: What do you think is most important for young companies to consider when forging their own legacies?

Lucy: Wow. I don't think I started thinking about legacies until a few years ago. Not sure it is on a young company's mind. But it is always good to check in with yourself and know why you are doing or pursuing something. The answer may not always come readily but at least you are asking the question. And if the answer satisfies you, keep going.

Sal: I think they have to have a vision that they share. Passion is very contagious and it must be maintained in order to carry you through the tough times. They must be malleable, be able to forget and forgive, and make it about the work. And you must have goals and think big. Those things will always propel you forward which is what needs to happen.

Geoffrey: What's important for young companies to consider is coming to an understanding of what their mission is and how they will accomplish that mission, and how much time it will take. Things don't happen overnight. You have to be in for the Long Haul and then everyone has to be on the same page — or at least as close to being on the same page as they can be.

Angela: What are your favorite characters you've played?

Lucy: I totally loved playing Lydia in *Premeditation*. How freeing to play someone who calls it like she sees it, shoots from the hip, and is unapologetic and self assured. The accent and the over-the-top blonde wig were fun too! Right now as we work on the *Trilogy*, I am finding that I really love the character of Esperanza, especially as the old lady. She is strong but vulnerable; and says things we all think but may not be free enough to say—yet. Total honesty, that has got to be one of the perks of growing older.

Sal: I've enjoyed playing many different characters but one of the ones that has been the most challenging and fulfilling was the role of Moe in *Dementia*. He is a man dying of aids and he must come to terms with the truth about himself his family and friends before he dies. It was very demanding physically and emotionally. I loved the challenge of carrying the piece and the humor of the character despite the dire circumstances. As a straight man the role demanded that I tap into emotional areas and nuance that stretched my instrument and expanded my acting chops.

Geoffrey: Don't know if I have a favorite character. I've been blessed to play a multitude of different characters and each one is unique into itself and has brought its own joy and challenges.

A Mexican Trilogy: An American Story plays at the Los Angeles Theatre Center September 8-October 9, 2017. Information and tickets [here](#).

Top image: Solitude (2009 production). From Left, Lucy Rodriguez, Robert Beltran, Sal Lopez, Geoffrey Rodriguez, Fidel Gomez, Semyon Kobialka, and Evelina Fernandez. Photo by Ed Krieger.

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