

# ARTS & CULTURE

This past Friday, I was talking with a fellow theatregoer at the Mexican American Cultural Center about how that evening alone, we had a plethora of excellent options for Latinx performance and were struggling to see them all: Teatro Vivo's *Real Women Have Curves*, which we were at the MACC to see; Ground Floor Theatre's premiere of *There and Back* by Austin playwright Raul Garza; *(Un) Documents*, a new work by local performer/poet Jesus I. Valles, which was the anchor for the inaugural FuturX, a festival of Latinx performances that in its four-day run also offered an improvised sci-fi telenovela by the troupe Prima Doñas; a program of burlesque and spoken word featuring the Queen of Texas Burlesque, Chola Magnolia; a program of short works by Florinda Bryant, Heather Maria Acs, and Dillon Yruegas; and readings of new plays by Krysta Gonzales and Brian Oglesby.

And this was just weeks after ProyectoTeatro had mounted its latest Spanish-language stage production, *Persiguiendo al Dragón* (*Chasing the Dragon*); Latino Comedy Project had hosted a free reading of new sketch material; and Alante Flamenco had premiered the dance work *Anochecer* (*Nightfall*), and just weeks before Aztlan Dance Company's revival of its production of *The Enchilada Western*; Roy Lozano's Ballet Folklórico de Texas' presentation of its Noche de Folklor 2018 on the Zilker Hillside; Shrewd Productions' opening of its National New Play Network rolling world premiere of *The Madres*, with an all-Latinx cast; and Glass Half Full Theatre's workshop of its next production, *The Cucuy Project*. Now, this land has been home to storytellers, dancers, and performers of all kinds for as long as humans have lived on it, from the Native peoples thousands of years ago to their descendants of recent centuries, many of whom identify as Native American, Mexican, Mexican-American, Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx. We can't be sure of what they did for most of that history. However, Latinx theatre and dance have documented roots in Austin going back 45 years, and many performing arts companies have shared Latinx narratives throughout the city (well, maybe more on the Eastside) during that time, but in this era having so many brown stories and brown bodies onstage in such a concentrated period of time is unprecedented.

So what's going on?

A closer look at this surge in Latinx performance reveals a convergence of the scene's past, present, and future. The past is represented in companies that were created on the foundation of tradition. In the mid-Seventies, Maria Salinas and Roy Lozano each established dance companies that focused on traditional dances of Mexico. Salinas' Ballet Folklórico Aztlan de Tejas and Lozano's Ballet Folklórico de



Mical Trejo (I) and Karina Dominguez in Raul Garza's *There and Back*

Austin what life is for brown people in this city, this state, and this country now.

But blazing onto Austin's arts scene now is a new generation of writers, performers, and directors who are leading the way into the future, among them Jesus I. Valles, whose *(Un)Documents* speaks to both his experience as a Mexican and as a queer person of color; the Prima Doñas, an all-Latinx improv troupe, whose next show, *Latinational*, views politics through their particular comedic lens (Sept. 29-Nov. 17, Sat., 8:30pm, ColdTowne Theater); the artists of Glass Half Full Theatre, whose original works such as *The Cucuy Project* (Sept. 14-22, Fri. & Sat., 8pm, Dougherty Arts Center) create magical spaces for Latinx narratives by incorporating puppetry; and writers such as Krysta Gonzales, Florinda Bryant, and Dillon Yruegas. In this future, there is more Spanish-language theatre, as with ProyectoTeatro, which produced *Persiguiendo al Dragón* with a cast of Latinx performers all under the age of 18, and Pedemonte Productions, soon to present *Toc Toc* (Sept. 27-Oct. 12, Thu.-Sat., 8pm, Austin Scottish Rite Theater). In this future, also more historically white theatre companies will be telling brown stories as Ground Floor Theatre did with *There and Back* and Shrewd Productions is doing with *The Madres* (Aug. 31-Sept. 15, Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 5pm, Santa Cruz Theater).

In 2000, I recall eagerly awaiting the next Latino (pre-Latinx) performing arts offering because at that time, there were only a few venues and companies offering any brown performance. Companies were known for the genres of performance they offered – classical, traditional, experimental, original – and anything that was other than white, e.g., African-American theatre or dance, or Latino theatre or dance, was a genre. No more. We're moving toward an acknowledgment of many genres within that which is considered theatre of color in Austin.

This summer's surge of Latinx performance demonstrates more than a trend. For one thing, it doesn't include longtime Latinx companies and artists such as Ballet East, Lotus Contemporary Performing Arts, and Sharon Marroquin. And it doesn't take into account the fact that come January, the Latinx Theatre Commons will produce the 2019 Sin Fronteras Festival and Convening, held at the University of Texas at Austin and the Mexican American Cultural Center (in partnership with Teatro Vivo), showcasing Latinx and Latin American theatre for young audiences. And there are surely other performances, companies, or festivals that I have missed (for which I apologize). The fact is, Latinx theatre and dance is happening in Austin, faster than we can write about it! What a perfect problem. ■

## Past, Present, FuturX

The current surge of Latinx theatre and dance in Austin speaks to both tradition and pioneering new directions

BY ROXANNE SCHROEDER-ARCE

Texas schooled Austinites in Mexican cultural heritage and helped keep it alive in this community, and Lozano's company still does so today through its School of Dance and public performances such as the free Noche de Folklor (Sat., Aug. 25, 7:30pm, Beverly S. Sheffield Zilker Hillside Theater). Two decades later, Ana Maria Tekina-eiru' Maynard added to their ranks with the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance school and company, which will throw a picnic next month celebrating its 21st anniversary (Sun., Sept. 9, 2pm, 701 Tillery).

The present can be seen in companies such as Aztlan Dance, which evolved out of Maria Salinas' folklórico company under the stewardship of her son Roén; Latino Comedy Project, which got its start in 1997;

Teatro Vivo, founded by Rupert and JoAnn Reyes in 2000; and Olivia Chacon's Alante Flamenco. Their productions are contemporary in style and the world they present, even when the forms they use may be traditional. *The Enchilada Western* (Aug. 23-26, Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 4pm, Santa Cruz Theater) is a modern take on mythic characters from Mexican culture, set in the Texas desert of today. *Real Women Have Curves* takes place inside a small sewing factory in Los Angeles where an enterprising but undocumented young woman is trying to launch a business without being spotted by ICE. And it doesn't get much more up-to-the-minute than the LCP's 2017 production, *Gentrifucked*. These are the companies that have spent the last two decades showing

**In 2000, there were so few companies and venues offering Latinx performance locally that it was treated as a genre. Today, we're moving toward an acknowledgment of many genres within that which we call theatre of color in Austin.**

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# ARTS EVENTS

## The Art of Dying

In Austin Scottish Rite Theater's *Wit*, people are there for one another, and no one has to face the end alone

BY ROBERT FAIRES

With apologies to Charles Dudley Warner, "Everybody talks about death, but nobody does anything about it." Case in point: John Donne, the 17th-century English poet whose *Holy Sonnets* teem with talk about the end of life – what it is, what it means, what it should be – and yet for all his insistent "Death be not proud" and "Death, thou shalt die," Donne ultimately surrendered to the Reaper like everyone else. And so will the scholar who's made the study of Donne her life's work, who can parse his punctuation for volumes of meaning, who can expound at length on the difference between small-d and capital-D Death. At the outset of *Wit*, Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, this scholar, Dr. Vivian Bearing, informs us that within 100 minutes, she too will have booked passage to the undiscovered country –

Death will not be denied. Before she departs, however, Dr. Bearing has something more to say on the subject of mortality. This teacher, as feared as she is revered in her field, has become the student once more, and she wants to share what she's learned. *Wit* is Bearing's education in the process of dying.

The lessons that the play imparts are what helps distinguish *Wit* from the innumerable

other terminal illness dramas out there and make it worth repeated viewings. As Bearing undergoes aggressive treatment for metastatic ovarian cancer, she comes to see that a keen intellect is no defense against flesh that is failing, that a life of the mind is cold comfort as death closes in and you crave nothing so much as the warmth of human contact, and that dying is a lonely business

but doesn't have to be. People are all around you; you simply have to open up to them.

It's that last lesson in which this production by Austin Scottish Rite Theater seems the most deeply invested. The story is clearly Vivian's, which makes Kristin Fern Johnson the lead player here, but the other eight actors perform with such unity of purpose, such teamwork, providing support and lifting Johnson

up, that their presence comes to have a meaning independent of their roles, one that says: We are here for you. Director Susan Gayle Todd has shaped an ensemble with a sense of openness and care that's evident to us, if not to Johnson's character.

But beneath the character, Johnson seems to feed off the support of her fellow actors, taking the safe space they create to



WIT

**Austin Scottish Rite Theater,**  
207 W. 18th, 512/472-5436  
[www.scottishritetheater.org](http://www.scottishritetheater.org)  
Through Aug. 25  
Running time: 1 hr., 40 min.

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Kristin Fern Johnson (l) and Megan Ortiz in *Wit*

dig deeply into Vivian's pain and vulnerability. She may not project all of the cerebral arrogance that Bearing is said to possess – Johnson's innate sweetness tends to shine through – but she provides every bit of the suffering. When her character must endure the "countless indignities" of her treatment – being poked and prodded in her most private parts and endlessly subjected to the ever-more-inane query "How are you feeling today?" – Johnson submits totally to Vivian's isolation and fear; her collapse into the racking misery of her character's situation is total and wrenching.

Comfort won't be found in Vivian's resident and former student Jason; he is as fervently focused on cancer as she was on Donne, and when Delante Keys delivers an ode to the disease's machinelike efficiency, his awestruck gaze suggests Jason has glimpsed eternity in cancer's endlessly replicating cells. Blessedly, Vivian's R.N., Susie, makes up for whatever humanity her doctor is lacking. Megan Ortiz's

performance has an ease to it that soothes, with compassion, kindness, and good humor flowing from her as naturally as water. Then there is Vivian's mentor (Chris Humphrey, soft and gentle as a breeze), who pays a visit just as Vivian is in her greatest agony. Hers is the simplest of gifts – climbing into bed with Vivian and reading her a children's book – but it proves the most profound. The icy intricacies of Donne's philosophical musings melt away in the warmth of Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny*, leaving the dying scholar with only unconditional, unyielding love.

Warmth and empathy are the sustaining forces of this *Wit* – in the performances and ensemble work, in Deanna Belardinelli's lighting and Darrel Mayers' live guitar score, which fills the space with liquid emotion, an IV drip of feeling – and they lead us to an ending steeped in peace. In it is a space in which a human being may shed all that is earthly and pass into the celestial, saved from Death by death. ■

## THEATRE

### OPENING

**MARVEL UNIVERSE LIVE: AGE OF HEROES!** Hold on to your infinity stones, True Believer! This is a live, action-packed spectacle direct from the House of Marvel. Much acrobatic derring-do, pyrotechnics, and motorcycle stunts are involved in this show in which "Spider-Man, the Avengers, and the Guardians of the Galaxy join forces with Doctor Strange ... to recover the Wand of Watoomb before it falls into Loki's hands." Aug. 23-26. Thu.-Fri., 7pm; Sat., 11am, 3 & 7pm; Sun., 1 & 5pm. Frank Erwin Center, 1701 Red River, 512/477-6060. \$25-90. [www.uterwincenter.com](http://www.uterwincenter.com).

☛ **THE GOAT, OR WHO IS SYLVIA?** This is Edward Albee's "most provocative love story ever told," in which a 50-year-old architect leads an ostensibly ideal life with his loving wife and teenage son, but sets in motion events that will destroy his family and leave his life in tatters ... when he confides to his best friend that he is also in love with a goat. No, for reals, *in love with a goat*. Robert Pierson, Rebecca Robinson, Tim Blackwood, and Preston Ruess star in this Capital T production directed by Mark Pickell. Thu.-Sat., Aug. 23-Sept. 15, 8pm. Hyde Park Theatre, 511 W. 43rd, 512/479-7529. \$20-30. [www.capitalt.org](http://www.capitalt.org).

**THE JIGGLEWATTS BURLESQUE: VIOLET CROWN FOLLIES** August's show features World Famous \*BOB\* and her drag family, the House of Famous – Louisiana Purchase, Bobby Barnaby, and Kitty Von Quim. But of course's there's some sweet ecstacy from the Jigglewatts'

own Coco Letric and Miss Ruby Lamb, too. Thu., Aug. 23, 7pm. Spider House Ballroom, 2906 Fruth, 512/480-9562. \$15-120. [www.thejigglewattsburlesque.com](http://www.thejigglewattsburlesque.com).

**CASTA Salvage Vanguard Theatre** presents this workshop production of the new **Adrienne Dawes** play inspired by a series of casta paintings depicting different racial mixtures and arranged according to a hierarchy defined by Spanish elites. Directed by **Jenny Larson**, starring **KhattieQ**, and featuring puppets by **Julia Smith** and music by **Graham Reynolds**. Aug. 24-25. Fri., 7:30pm; Sat., 4 & 7:30pm. Hicks House, 100 E. 27th. \$5-15. [www.salvagevanguard.org](http://www.salvagevanguard.org).

**SCHADENFREUDE: AN EVENING OF ONE-ACT PLAYS** Cold Frame Collective offers this double feature where the struggle is real ... but only for the characters onstage. You're probably familiar with **Christopher Durang's The Actor's Nightmare**, yes? Well, these folks are staging it and **Waiting** by **Ethan Coen**. Aug. 24-Sept. 1. Fri.-Sat., 8pm. Center Stage, 2826 Real, 800/595-4849. \$10.

**TESTIFY: CHEMISTRY** True tales of attraction and reaction galvanize the stage as the Testify storytellers share stories of running from chemistry, searching for the right chemistry, living through overwhelming chemistry, feeling the lack of chemistry, and discussing chemistry with Hermione Granger. That's right, Gryffindors, we said Hermione Granger. Thu., Aug. 30. Spider House Ballroom, 2906 Fruth, 512/480-9562. \$5-6. [www.testifyatx.com](http://www.testifyatx.com).

### CLOSING

**A REAL BOY** This satiric play by **Stephen Kaplan** tells the story of two marionettes with a human child who starts growing strings of his own. Can his kindergarten teacher save him? Directed by **Chelsea Beth** for **Last Act Theatre Company**. Through Aug. 25. Thu.-Sat., 8pm. Trinity Street Theatre, 901 Trinity. \$12-25. [www.lastacttheatre.com](http://www.lastacttheatre.com).

☛ **DAT BLACK MERMAID MAN LADY** What is this? This is "a gathering place. An imagined living room – at the bottom of the ocean – a home, where all there is is Love." This is a new performance and installation from **Sharon Bridgforth**, featuring **Sonja Perryman**, **Walter Kitundu**, and **Florinda Bryant**, with songs in the tradition of Black spirituals, with oracle readings, with "everyday objects that shapeshift ... as we call the ancestors forward, and celebrate." Through Aug. 25. Wed.-Sat., 7pm; Sun., 2pm. Picture Box Studio, 701 Tillery Ste. A-7. Free, but RSVP. [www.datblackmermaidmanlady.com](http://www.datblackmermaidmanlady.com).

**THERE AND BACK** He's brought us *Confessions of a Mexpatriate*, among other powerful works of theatre, and now look: Austin playwright **Raul Garza's** newest is about the current immigration crisis – illuminating the fraught history between the U.S. government and Mexicans seeking that "shining city upon a hill." Starring **Karina Dominguez** as Gloria and **Giselle Marie-Muñoz** as the Virgen de Guadalupe. Aaaaaand:

**Mical Trejo!** Directed by **Patti Neff-Tiven** for **Ground Floor Theatre**. Through Aug. 25. Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 5pm. Ground Floor Theatre, 979 Springdale, 512/840-1804. Pay what you wish. [www.groundfloortheatre.org](http://www.groundfloortheatre.org).

### ONGOING

**THE GRAPES OF WRATH** City Theatre is trampling out the vintage with **Frank Galati's** stage adaptation of **John Steinbeck's** literary masterpiece, following the Joad family's troubled 1930s journey from the Oklahoma dust bowl to that promised land of Califor-nigh-ay. Directed by **Andy Berkovsky**. Through Sept. 2. Thu.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 3pm. City Theatre, 3823-D Airport, 512/524-2870. \$10-25. [www.citytheatreAustin.org](http://www.citytheatreAustin.org).

**THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE** The new **Austin Actors' Studio** presents this classic Tony-winning play by Texas native **Jay Presson Allen**, here directed by **Milton R. Zoth**. Set in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the 1930s, it's a cautionary tale about a passionate, charismatic teacher and her students. Through Sept. 2. Fri.-Sat., 8pm; Sun., 3pm. St. Andrew's Episcopal School, 5901 SW Parkway. \$20. [www.austinactorsstudio.org](http://www.austinactorsstudio.org).

**THE GREAT AMERICAN TRAILER PARK MUSICAL** When a "stripper on the run" comes between an agoraphobic housewife and her tollbooth collector husband, mayhem ensues among the tight-knit array of manufactured homes. This country-rock and blues musical about Eighties nostalgia, spray cheese, roadkill, hysterical pregnancy, a broken electric chair, kleptomania, flan, and disco is directed by **Sarah Gay** for **TexARTS**, with **Susan Finnigan** as music director. Through Sept. 1. Thu.-Sat., 7:30pm; Sun. 2pm. TexARTS, 2300 Lohmans Spur, 512/852-9079. \$43 and up. [www.tex-arts.org](http://www.tex-arts.org).

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