New & Noteworthy, March 2017

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El Colectivo’s Día de los Muertos performance/community altar
What led to the creation of El Colectivo at Yale?

The year I applied to Yale, I attended the Los Angeles Theatre Center’s Encuentro 2014. When I arrived, I instantly knew I was home. I realized it was the first time I’d been in a dedicated space for Latinx theatre makers and scholars. I’d entered something that felt rare, powerful, important.

When I visited the School of Drama as a prospective student, the overview of student life nodded to FOLKS, the affinity group for Black students founded by Angela Basset in 1981. During the Q&A, I asked if a Latinx group existed; the answer was “in the past.” I made a promise to myself: if I came back enrolled as a student, a Latinx affinity group would come back, too.

At the annual picnic before classes start, I made my way to every table, introducing myself and the idea of a Latinx group. We gathered under a tree and scheduled a formal meeting on campus. About thirty people came. We talked about affinity spaces, the “commons” approach (inspired by P. Carl), and what might make us a group. We asked ourselves why we’d want to circle up again. A first-year said, “I want to be in a room of people who know what my abuela's cooking smells like.” There was an apparent desire to both share in and belong to something by/for us, like an ensemble or... “Un colectivo,” someone stated. Just like that, we had both our purpose and name.

What is the group's mission?

Our mission statement, which was collectively drafted, articulates our collaborative and inclusive spirit. In it, our own words meet those of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, the late queer Chicana feminist (who’s a hero of mine):

El Colectivo is a home where Latinx artists at Yale School of Drama unite expressions of Latinidad under one roof to uplift ourselves, our art, and our communities in conocimiento.

“To be in conocimiento with another person or group is to share knowledge, pool resources, meet each other, compare liberation struggles and social movements’ histories, share how we confront institutional power, and process and heal wounds. In conocimiento, we seek input from communities so as not to fall into elite collective, isolated cells that widen the chasm between campus politics and grassroots activism.”

—Gloria E. Anzaldúa
We actively try to not only reclaim space, but bring our communities wherever we go. It’s important that we create belonging—within ourselves, those who’ve walked before us, those to come. Our biweekly meetings happen over food that we cook together. We host prospective Latinx students and alumni whenever they come to campus, and we create together both in and outside of school. Colectivistas create a sense of family by freely expressing ourselves and our culture; it’s this feeling that then propels us into our art. Our *gente*, our lifeways nourish and connect us both as artists and as human beings.

How has El Colectivo impacted student life at Yale?

Hosting Latinx prospectives and alumni brings so much joy. They’re so excited to know that El Colectivo exists—and then usually surprised at how many we are! Like many cultural institutions, Yale privileges, mythologizes, and reinscribes an exclusionary history. El Colectivo resists and corrects these narratives as we build upon and lift up a more inclusive legacy. We want our people to not only see but deeply believe that they have a home and a family here at Yale.

*Interview by Megan McClain*
Some playwrights here write original plays about their own society. Several plays are based on historical events and Old Persian literature, using poetry such as Ferdowsi’s epic poem, *Shahnameh — The Book of Kings* (c. 988 and 1010 CE), and prose like *One Thousand and One Nights*. In addition, many plays are translated into Farsi every year, and many of them are produced in Iran. Some artists juxtapose the plays with other texts, images and videos. The artists try to make their plays palatable for Iranian audiences.

Nonetheless, I believe that many productions are unsuccessful nowadays. Majority of the artists have minimal knowledge of dramaturgy and thus they are not capable of creating adaptations to really speak about their own society. Even many original Persian plays are set in foreign lands and usually use western names for the characters, which makes the audiences distanced from the stage.

Such plays do not respond to the Iranian sociopolitical issues, let alone do activism. Many plays tackle issues that are not essentially related to Iran. However, the artists claim that they think globally by creating a landscape without any border. Setting their stories in unknown spaces or foreign places is utterly absurd, often presented without any sociopolitical implication. Additionally, my observation is that the theatre artists are fundamentally isolated, and the audiences of most of the plays are primarily the community of artists in Tehran.

On the contrary, the Iranian films, like Abbas Kiarostami or Asghar Farhadi’s ones, depict stories related to Iran with their Iranian characters, which have found a large audiences in the world. In my point of view, as long as original plays are not sufficiently written about Iranian stories and also translated plays are not appropriately adapted for the society, the Iranian
theatre will not progress; therefore, dramaturgical skills are required.

Moreover, another drawback is that there is almost no link between the critics and the artists. Basically, the artists and most of the audiences disregard reviews and criticism, even if a critic would offer a constructive comment. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that the new generation, who has the knowledge of international languages, could learn the critical skills and create a vibrant dialogical sphere with the previous generations, and thus a fruitful intellectual arena, which would engender cultural, sociopolitical, and economic commentaries. On the plus side, some theatre artists recently have sought to collaborate with other artists from different nations in order to start dialogue among cultures. I actually made a short documentary film to introduce the contemporary Iranian theatre to the west.

The Tehran theatre has changed due to the proliferation of the theatre venues recently. Many non-governmental theatre venues have been established because the Center for Dramatic Arts decided to fund limited productions, and therefore gave permission for establishing venues for non-governmental/unfunded productions. Yet, most productions cannot sell enough tickets to pay their cast and crew. Surprisingly enough, there is still no consensus on specific definitions of the designations 'non-governmental', 'private', and 'independent'. Regardless, all productions are monitored by the CDA.

After graduating from the Yale School of Drama with an MFA degree in Dramaturgy, I returned to Iran in 2011. As the only trained and practicing dramaturg in Iran, I have looked to bring the craft and practice to my colleagues. I have lectured and held workshops about dramaturgy in various places. I established the first department to develop new plays at Senoghteh Theater and the first screenplay development program at the Farabi Cinema Foundation. I introduce dramaturgical positions in the film industry such as executive development, script evaluation and editing, etc. Currently, I am evaluating screenplays to admit five talented scriptwriters to the program at Farabi. I designed the program in a competitive and merit-based approach so that the artists would receive full scholarship for the tuition fees. As the instructor and director of the program, I will bring ten other famous scriptwriters, filmmakers, and producers during the course to offer insightful advice to the scriptwriters. I believe that such support is crucial for the emerging artists because their voices will be heard and grown. In spite of numerous obstacles, I am absolutely delighted to continue such arduous tasks to contribute to the culture of Iran and consequently world, to make a more peaceful universe.

events

May 6 - LMDA and TACTICS present the Creator Exchange in Ottawa. For playwrights, directors, and dramaturgs in the Ottawa area looking to make new connections. Info and
June 22-24 - 2017 LMDA Conference: Access, Activism & Art, Berkeley, CA