

Queer Latinx Voices

featuring J. Sebastián Alberdi and James Montaña.

Moderated by Tim Bermudez Sanders

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Tim Bermudez Sanders (he/him/his): Hi everyone, I'm Tim Bermudez Sanders, I'm the founder to the stage and welcome back to our second - or our *third* Change the Stage discussion with J. Sebastián Alberdi and James Montaña. Would you like to introduce yourselves?

J. Sebastián Alberdi (he/him/his): Sure. Hi, everyone. I'm J. Sebastián Alberdi and I'm primarily - oh, my pronouns are he/him/his - I am primarily a playwright, but for my day job I'm also the literary associate at the Huntington Theatre company, as well as a dramaturge there. And yeah, I'm originally from San Diego, been in Boston for like six years now and I'm excited to be on this panel. Thanks for having me, Tim.

James Montano (he/him/his): And I'm James Montaña. I identify with he/him/his pronouns and um, I would say in my life I consider myself a dramaturg primarily. On the side I do some playwrighting. I also, you know, write music for shows and stuff like that, but primarily right now my gig is dramaturgy and some criticism on the side. I'm originally from Santa Fe, New Mexico, and I have been in Boston, I would say about the same amount of time, I'd say about six years or plus. And currently doing freelance dramaturgy but for the last few years, I've been working at the American Repertory Theater and also as an educator at Harvard, as well.

TBS: Alright, so let's dive in, shall we? I'm going to start off with this question - what are some recent shows that strike you as exemplary of where the industry should be headed in terms of what stories we tell and how we tell them?

JSA: Yeah, I was actually thinking about this today and something that I hadn't thought about, like, a few days ago when we were talking about this for the first time was *How to Defend Yourself* by Lily Padilla. I saw it at Humana about a year ago and it kind of blew me away. It's sort of this play about, like self empowerment. It's set in a self defense class, and it's about sexual assault culture on campus, like rape culture on campus. And it's also about, like, the ways that we socialize men and women, or even just like little girls and little boys, because that's all sort of society sees, you know, when raising kids and the ways that we sort of affect them in their whole life. Just the ways that we you know, talk to them, the things that we get them, you know, all that stuff. And it kind of just blew me away and

something that I really loved about it is that one of the main characters is Mexican-American and you know the play is about sexual assault and living on a college campus and dealing with the things that college students deal with while also not even not like trying to be like, “oh, she's not Mexican-American”. It was a really awesome blend of it not being like a trauma play in terms of like cultural trauma, like - racial trauma, I mean, not cultural – while also dealing with all these...I don't know. I don't know. I'll just say that play is wonderful. If you haven't read it, please read it. I've been trying to get it someone in Boston to do it for like so long 'cause it's brilliant, and I hope to see it everywhere one day.

JM: That's exciting. I've heard of it. I've heard really good things about it. I haven't seen it yet, but it sounds great. I would say for me, I would say - we talked about this a little bit, but it is something that still stands out to me. I think it was the beginning of this season or early in the season, Huntington had *Quixote Nuevo*, and, not to toot Sebastian's horn here, but I thought it was so good.

JSA: I'm doing it -

JM: Hahaha, you helped! No, that was definitely Octavio Solis?

JSA: Yeah, Octavio Solis

JM: Um, gosh, it was such an impressive production. I had so much fun. I didn't really know what to expect outside of, of course, the kind of Don Quixote narrative. But coming from the southwest and coming specifically from New Mexico and a family who identifies primarily, I would say, as like Hispanic Chicano, there was so much to Chicano-ness built into this piece that it was - it felt for the first time in a very long time that something was just speaking to me in my own language, which I hear of that, you know, I've heard of people having that experience. Being able to see a piece that really resonates with their experience of, you know, being whatever identity that they are. And I - in the years of theater, this is the first time I actually got to share in that I would say. It was something about the fact that it's happening in Boston, and that it was so clearly a border play and so clearly - well, it was like incredibly produced. I just thought - I appreciated that there was not only great thought into the narrative, great thought into the performances, but really, it was expensive. I know it sounds like such a crazy thing, but it's not something that you get the sense of with a lot of the work that I get to see from Latinx theatre makers. It's small and scrappy, and it's because sometimes you're given only small spaces and scraps. But it was incredible to see a work that had money behind it and investment and some real thought behind it. So that piece like I still think about a lot to this day so I'm very, very happy to have seen that.

JSA: Yeah. And that was - just to give Hartford Stage and the Alley some credit too - that was a co-production between all three of us. So it was really a lot of theaters and a lot of people really believing in that show. Which is just awesome. I also just want to -

[both speak – unintelligible]

JSA: Go, no go. I'm not going to talk, you go, please.

JM: I was gonna say you could feel - you could feel that there was like, a lot of heart and energy and thought into it. And that was something that I just loved about it. Sorry.

JSA: No no no, mine was not about Quixote so I'm glad that you got to say that. I also just want to do a quick shout out to the *Fefu and Her Friends* that I saw at Theatre for a New Audience in Brooklyn earlier this last year, I think. I mean, Mariá Irene Fornés is such a genius and such an inspiration to me and to like, every playwright that you like, know of contemporarily right now I feel like. Like, you know, like, she taught Luis Alfaro, Octavio Solis, actually, and like Paula Vogel and Sarah Ruhl, and just like, all these playwrights, some Latinx, some not, but just, you know, cite her as an inspiration and that play was just kind of mind blowing to see it in production. It feels like something that...it was so risky, you know, like, it's such a difficult play to pull off, but the fact that people are taking that chance and hiring directors of color and mostly a cast of color to tell that story and to just knock it out of the park felt really affirming and like, I left that show being like, "I'm really glad I'm in this field, I'm really glad that I'm reading plays, like, I'm glad that this is the tradition that I'm in."

JM: That's great.

TBS: Kind of on the flip side of that question, are there any pieces that we need to retire, things that are too regressive or problematic in that content to be salvaged in a meaningful way?

JM: Ooh, good question.

TBS: Controversial question for sure.

JM: Yes. I mean, it's interesting because you have someone who works in the literary office so has a little bit more power over that. I tend to think of this a little bit as a dramaturge/educator, because

as an educator you are also, you know, exposing - choosing what to expose your students to, you know, young playwrights or young actors and so that is a thought because it - you know I'm not in a place, personally, where I can decide what gets on stages at this moment in my life. But gosh, I really struggle with it. I really struggle with this question. I think the one thing I would say about it is we tend to, I think there's a big - there's an approach in theater where we think of it as we're coming from a place of lack, right, we're coming from a place of, "we only have so many spaces in a theater to put on a show," so that means, who do we put on and who do we let go of? And I, I think sometimes that's where we get into some sticky questions because I don't know if there's always like a - I don't generally think we should stop producing *this person*. I mean, I have people in my head that I would gladly, you know, like, never see another play from and - but equally, I actually think as an educator, it's important to teach a little bit of it too. 'Cause you got to talk about where your theater - where we're going. And the only way to talk about where we're going is where we've been. And so I'm not - the educator part of me thinks we do need to expose a few small things to our students. We need to give them the room to be able to acknowledge what is stuff that feels regressive, what is the stuff that feels like it exclude certain voices, and I think there's plenty of that kind of work out there. But in terms of people, like if I was - if there was an option for me to program a theater and I was an artistic director and, you know, someday big dream that's like a big goal of mine, um, I would say that it's not a matter of me getting rid of certain people, it's me deciding who to highlight in terms of voices. When we start talking about who to stop playing and who to stop putting on stage or who's play to stop, you know, producing, what we're actually saying many times is "Artistic directors, listen. These are people we don't like anymore." And that's fine. Like, I think there's a great, there's a good debate that should happen there. But I actually think it's more of like "Artistic directors, listen. These are the people whose voices - who should be heard right now." And maybe in that case, in that way, we can stop kind of playing all the same, like old white males, straight white males who have been played forever and ever.

JSA: Yeah, I love what you're saying, James, about like, while maybe - maybe like ,we shouldn't produce certain people, like I think people should still be exposed to like, these artists and these plays that like, we now, for whatever reason, find problematic or regressive or offensive. Like, the play that I'm like thinking about like - someone who I would easily never want to see another play of his staged is like David Mamet like, hell no. Like, I don't want to go to that, I'm not interested, and I'm just going to say it and whatever. But like - something - like a story that I find interesting about that is like, at the Huntington, we did *The Niceties* by Eleanor Burgess and a lot of people compared it to *Oleanna* and we were like, "Yeah, like, it actually is a response to that play, like... we know, like, don't worry. We know that she didn't just like plagiarize..." like she

didn't plagiarize this, basically. And like, I think there is an interesting conversation to be had with these past pieces. And I think a lot of those conversations sometimes are really bad and like not interesting. I think that people like, do a Shakespeare play, and they're like, "Oh, I'm going to do this really interesting thing with it" and like, sometimes it's actually not interesting, and it's probably worse. Like *Taming of the Shrew* with all men, like that's not gonna do anything.

JM: Right.

JSA: And you're just like, excluding women from like, Shakespearean roles which like, they're already dealing with weird shit in those roles anyway, like they're used to it. Which isn't a good thing! But you know what I'm saying. But like, yeah, I don't know, I think, I think it's hard for me to say. Like, "These are the plays that we should retire," 'cause I also think people today are making plays that I hate, and that I find offensive and regressive and like, shouldn't exist. So like, it's not really – like, I think it's going to be something that's always happening. You know, there's always going to be someone who writes a play that I wish had not made it on the stage, but there's only so much you can do other than being like, "Well, I'm gonna, you know, try harder next time, and be like, 'this is why I don't like this play, this is why we shouldn't do it.'" And sometimes people listen and sometimes don't, and that's something that, you know, has been an experience I've had working at the Huntington. So, yeah. Yeah, I think it's hard to just, like, pick out specific things, but I think it's an interesting question. And I think - I honor the like, feelings of people really hating a play and being like, "This is really offensive and I hate it and like, it made me feel like, uncomfortable and it like, hurt me in, you know, in a way." So yeah, it's complicated, and I don't have an easy answer except that I don't want to see Mamet on stage.

JM: Yes, good point. Yeah, one more thing I'd add to that. I think that's great. I totally agree with that. And I also think that once the nature of theater and the nature of, at least, the written dramatic text is that we're going to see works, you know, Shakespeare, you're going to see Shakespeare done over and over and over again. And what you pointed out, which is a great example, is that these may be fine plays, but much of what we do in theater is also about interpretation. And so I have seen interpretations of plays that I think are okay that have turned the play into being something that I found offensive and bothersome and just bad overall, and that's one of the other elements that like - then we start getting into, should this director not work anymore? Should like - and I feel like that's when we start getting into like sticky territory overall. I'm - I agree. I think it's, I think that's a really interesting point. There's going to be plenty of things over this time, over years and years of seeing theaters that we're going to disagree or dislike. I think this is where this minor situation - I'm sorry, I

think there's some loud stuff outside - when we have power, to take advantage of that and highlight the voices that we can at that time. It's all we can do, right?

TBS: So that actually segues pretty well into the next question. Um, you're talking about power. So like in your opinion, where should we be focusing that power when we are given it to create the greatest change in the industry? Is that in literary works is that in who's behind the scenes....?

JSA: Yeah, so I sort of, I was thinking about this. Because, you know, I feel like we need so much change in the industry, so I was like trying to think of like, "how can I answer this in a way that I'm not just like saying random things that I might not know about?" Like, I think something that happens in theater a lot is that people get frustrated for very good reasons but like, what I hate about theater sometimes is that we're so, like, not transparent about what's happening behind the scenes. So like people are like, "Oh, they're doing this and I can't believe they're doing that, I'm really mad about it" and like, they have a point, but like, they also don't realize that like, maybe they already asked like eight directors to direct and all of them couldn't do it with the time and like, they had to do this director who like might not be the best fit for the play, but like it was either that or not doing the play in the first place. So like I think those things are complicated, but I think, I think a way that I was thinking about this for myself was like, thinking about how everyone individually, depending on the role in the theater can create change in their field. So I was thinking of how I can hopefully create change in the industry as a playwright. And, you know, as a playwright and - I feel like every play right sort of says this - like, I am interested in creating roles and writing stories that feature people who you know historically are under-represented on the stage or ignored and for me that is like, queer Latinx people. Like that's - that's sort of the interest that's - those are the actors and those are the people that I'm interested in uplifting and giving roles. And I think that that creates a ripple effect of them letting me also work with a lot of Latinx - some of who are queer, some who are not - directors who are then able to hire more actors and you sort of spread the wealth around that way and like, create this community where you're helping everyone build up their own career, and everyone to be able to help these people out. So that's one way that I think about it as a playwright. But also, you know, as a literary associate at the Huntington, like, you know, I don't have all that much power in terms of like what goes on our stage but I think - I think it is about, you know, pointing out - you know, something that I try to do is I try to point out when like we are doing something and it's like, "Oh, this season looks like very, very white" like you know like, "It wouldn't make sense to actually do that show, like I know that would be easy, but like, maybe we should look at something else" and you know sometimes people listen. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes there are reasons that they can't listen and, you know, we just have to deal with that, unfortunately. I hate that, like, that sounds awful like we just have to deal with it. But sometimes it -

it feels easier than the alternative sometimes, which is a whole 'nother problem in the arts. So yeah, those are ways that I am thinking about creating change in the industry, but I mostly try to think of it as what am I doing in my plays, what am I doing in my work, how can I uplift directors, actors, dramaturges who I believe in and who historically are underrepresented in the field.

JM: Thank you for that. That's really good. Um, yeah, that's, I think that's the core thing that I get challenged by is that idea of like, I think what you were hitting it, right at the beginning of, like, "Who are we?" and this, this question right, who are the "we" in this moment? And I think like, if I'm very much thinking about myself in this moment as part of the "we", I think in my place, you know, as a dramaturg, I can do my best to encourage voices that aren't seen as often on stage. I do, every so often, like, script coverage for theaters. So I try to find work that I think is not only speaking to an experience that I just don't see very often on stage, but also voices that I just, "I don't know this playwright, this would be great to open a door for.". So similarly, in that way, I think, like the "we" of what we can do at this moment is basically highlighting as many other voices as possible, but also -and this is kind of, this I think is like the biggest thing, is really starting to take consideration about what space you are taking and whatever environment you're in really thinking about, "Is my voice heard in this process?" I think one of the things I definitely heard at the tail end of what you were saying, Sebastian is like, there is also, there's a system in place in which it's really challenging to figure out when is the exact right time to speak up and when isn't. I mean, if we really went with the, I don't know, the kind of like, academic energy or the energy that we see on Twitter, it's "Speak up right away, don't let anyone talk down to you." Not practical all the time in the real world, and also not the best way to work in a theatrical community environment, that's just not how things work. So I think, I think, in that respect, there is a way in which the only thing I can really do that's maybe not just elevating other voices is to make sure that at least my voice is heard that at least people hear me and I think one of the things I would say, early on, at my time at ART where I'm not - I'm not with them anymore, so I can kind of say this - but early on in my time, I felt like I wasn't - not just not heard, but also not willing to speak up. So it was like this double problem, right, and then I'd look around and be like, "Well, when is someone going to give you that opportunity?" Nobody's going to give you the opportunity. You at some point just speak up, and you figure out a way to do it in a way that's respectful in the tone of that everyone else speaks in the language that they speak and you then use that platform to start pointing out the - when you can, when it makes sense - the, like, deficiencies. On the stage, the deficiencies behind the stage the, like, just those people who work for the organization like "why are hiring practices this way?" And, you know, using that platform that you have at that moment in your life in a way that is effective. So the "we" I think at this moment, in this particular question, is going to change constantly and it's going to change as like, all of our careers grow and, you know, we kind of find ourselves in different rooms.

And then when we're in that room, that's when we figure out how to navigate and lift up other voices as well as take whatever space we feel we need to take in order to make that one lone Latinx voice - which tends to be the case in my situation - that one Latinx voice speak up. Right. Yeah, I think that's the only thing I can do at this moment.

JSA: And I think - I think something that is also just inherent, unfortunately, is that change is slow. Like, very slow. Like painfully slow. And I think one of the things that we can do - and it's something that we were sort of talking about in chat, we sort of had before this, of like, getting, like, people who are not white into these artistic director positions and into these, like, casting director positions and getting them into these positions where like, you know, like - there's only so much you can do from the bottom. Like that's the truth. Like, it sucks. And it's like, bleak. But I think we need to be focusing our energy on uplifting people and helping them, you know, get to the next level of their career so that they can then, you know, help other people keep coming up. So I think that's - any way that we can doing that is helpful. Any way that we can uplift people who you know - I'm specifically thinking about Latinx people because that's sort of what the talk is about. But you know anyone will be so beneficial for whatever, the rest of our time. Like, going back to Quixote for like a hot second, like I sometime - and this is not, like, a Huntington exclusive problem or issue - but like, I feel like sometimes people are afraid, especially in the northeast, to do Latinx stories because like the audience won't come? And like, "Oh no, like, like, we're going to lose all this money." I'm like, "Of course, money, we need it to stay open!" But I feel like a lot of people use that as an excuse to then not do it. And then, like, it's like, well, "It's never going to happen if you don't build up - if you don't start building this up right now." Like, we need to start building it up slowly so that four years, five years, six years from now, like, we will be seen as a theater that actually *does* support Latinx voices and, like, people will trust us to tell these stories, and the Latinx community will *want* to come to the theater and feel comfortable in our spaces. So I think that's another thing of just like, taking the very first step into change can really, really grow into something exponential in like, six, or eight or ten years or however long.

JM: Yeah, I mean, that's one thing I will say, that one of the ways in which we *do* see Latinx people stepping into theatrical spaces is anytime, especially if you're - if you're looking at kind of the behind the scenes stuff, is you have a lot of interns and a lot of people who are coming in and it's like, you know, fellows or associates and in those positions, it's very hard to kind of see a place in which you - your voice can be heard, effectively, especially, you know, if your fellowship is like, timed-out after a certain point, right? You know, you only have two years to make as much impact as possible! And that's - it's a scary thing! It's a really, it's a very difficult thing because, you know, it's - you own, you have a certain voice and you have a certain job and it's challenging. One of the things that I noticed

during my time that was like, helpful, though - and I think this is a really powerful point that you're talking about - which is like, building a base and encouraging the theater to think about how we build a base because this is one of our big complications, right? It's, "How do we bring people into the theater who don't want to see a Latinx story?" But then if we don't do Latinx stories, we just don't see Latinx people. So then if we *only* invite them during these Latinx shows...? So, the one thing I will commend, for sure, Huntington for doing is by highlighting, I think, is her name Melissa Lopez? Is that her name?

JSA: Melinda Lopez!

JM: Melinda Lopez, thank you. She's - last few years, has been having new works that it kind of - and Huntington, I would say almost every season has had one Latinx play in the last, like four years, maybe? Three or four years? So Yerma was last year, last season - and they've been, they've been very conscientious about building an audience slowly. That's the way you do it! That's the only way you do it. It's - you kind of keep people - you don't just reach out to the Latinx community when you need them to buy tickets, you make them know that this is a part of your home. And I think that's one small area that we can make a difference in is, like, encouraging theaters to keep going in that direction. To say like, "No, no, that community, they're going to come. They're going to keep coming." If you are - if you consider them valuable, they will consider you an asset as well. And yeah, I think that's one of the only ways that can happen.

JSA: Yeah, and something really quick, something that you're saying like, don't just invite this community for this play about their like, community issues like, invite them for every play in the season. Like, you can't just like be like, "We want you in the theater for this play! But like, don't come to this one 😊"

JM: Right! Hahaha.

JSA: Which like, I feel like, It's an easy thing to like, mess up on - not that it's a mess up, it's like, it's more sinister than that, than a mess up - but you know, it's, it's something I think people overlook sometimes and it's like, no, you can't. You can't do that.

JM: Yeah, yeah. It's at the core – at the core of it, it's one of the challenges with the framing of outreach. This idea that, "We are reaching out. You would be lucky to come and see our show." When in fact, that is, I think that's - that's one,one, I think - this is a little off our topic, but that is

something that I think about in terms of how I think of community functioning at all. That is not how communities are built. And so, think that's one thing we *can* do is also like ,build up communities. How do we build communities?

TBS: Right, so something that I - cuz Sebastián, you were talking specifically about uplifting queer Latin people and we're kind of, you know, we're in - that's kind of, you know, that's part of what I wanted to bring us together to talk about, you know, it's like we're all - we all come from that identity. So, what do you have to say to younger queer artists who are struggling with that identity at home or in their work?

JSA: Not gonna quote Dan Savage, because I hate Dan Savage personally, but like it does get better! Like actually! And I think, I think something that was super - you know, something that was really important to me was like, owning my art. Like back when – like, I just came out of the closet to like, my family. Like I've been out of the closet to like, a lot of my friends and like, everyone since like eighth grade. But like to - and, like, my family knew, but like, I haven't said it - but like I told them I think, like, it must have been like two years ago now? And I'm 25, so I was like 23, I was like, done with college like it was after that. And sort of what made me want to do it is that I was finally getting some traction with my work. Like, it wasn't just me being like, isolated in the room and like, sending out stuff and getting rejections, 'cause when that was happening and I was working on my place and it wasn't going out to the public, like it was, it was - it was easier to be closeted in terms of being an artist, you know? But like, once I got to the point where I was like, “Oh, I actually, need to like, start marketing myself a little bit, and like telling people that this is happening!” And like, everyone uses Facebook to do that, and like my family's on Facebook, and it gets so exhausting to like “hide” from your family, like, that *specific post*. It's like, exhausting. So I kind of was like, you know, I need to just tell them, I need to come out, I need to own that. And I'll say that. I was like, very, very lucky – like, my mom still says, like, horrifically homophobic things to me and my partner, sometimes, but like we, we still love her. And like we try to, you know, guide her sort of in the right path. And, you know, she actually has listened! Like, it's kind of amazing, like, the way that - family members who are homophobic, sometimes they will say homophobic, and it'll be awful - but then sometimes they'll actually like, you know, in their own real way, like, “work through the pain” - not that I think there should be pain - and like, come out better on the other side, or different, or changed or trying. So something that I would tell people is like, you know, keep making your art. Like, you're gonna have to come out eventually, like, please don't be one of those people who stays in the closet forever, like it's not worth it. And yeah. And like, don't be afraid to like, meld the two things, like, it's - I don't know, I feel like queerness sometimes, especially in the Northeast, is like a very white thing. Like there's a very white way to be queer and like, it's very different from like, being queer and, for

me, Mexican-American. So yeah, it's like, find your - find your other queer Latino people and like, be friends with them. Like, you can be friends with white queer people too, a lot of them are great!

JM: Hahaha!

JSA: But like, don't let that *just* be your group, you know. And like, just - and like people who are not Latinx and, like, white, you know, that also like, obviously....be friends with them too.

JM: Yeah I don't - I'm not going to quote Dan Savage either - but I - and I don't necessarily - it's really hard for me to think about the whole like, if it's going to get better, because I think, you know, sometimes in order for things to get better you actually have to make some uncomfortable decisions to get yourself - like, I think about this a lot because my family's back in New Mexico, and I definitely, you know, had come out to them, probably in late teens, early 20s, and then, you know, moved out here! And our relationship could not be better! Haha! I think a good portion of it has to do with the fact that that distance kind of helps. But one of the things that I discovered in the time since is that as young artists that - the thing that makes you most interesting isn't the sounding like everyone else, it's always sounding like yourself. It's always owning whatever narrative you have at that moment. And that changes. That narrative is going to change many times as *you* change and as your point of view changes and as your sense of what your identity is changes. But that's the stuff that's going to make you interesting to anybody anyways! I think the mistake that I've seen from a lot of young writers especially is that they see the work that's out there in the world and they think, "oh, I need to emulate THAT." So, I'll give an example for myself is that - I remember I was working on an adaptation of a play, and I set it intentionally in New Jersey amongst the Puerto Rican community because even though I wanted to place the story in Albuquerque with the kind of older Hispano community I knew, I was like, "I've never seen a play done in Albuquerque. Who's going to watch that? Nobody! They'll watch stuff about York or New Jersey or LA, so that's what I gotta do." And I remember I presented to a mentor of mine, both plays, right? Just like kind of, the introduction to both these plays and he was like, "What, what is this? What is this New Jersey thing?" And I was like, "WELL, I JUST fELt liKe -" and he was like, "No. No. don't do that." And he was like, "First of all, it doesn't even sound right. You don't know anything about Puerto Ricans in New Jersey." He's not wrong! And he's like, "But like, the other piece sounds so - there's something about it that feels so real, and so - and, you know, I'm not saying you can only write out of your own experience, but that's what makes you interesting anyways! That's, that story is so uniquely yours. And I can only say this out of my own personal, like, journey, is the only way that each step of my journey has been able to kind of, I've been able to find that next step is because I laid seeds sometimes along the way that were all about who I am. Right? That I was very - I was

always thinking about at that moment, like, “Who am I? And what - where do I come from? and what – “ and you know, you do this when you're applying for graduate programs, you do this when you're applying for grants, you do this all the time. Honing that narrative is what's going to set you apart, right? Thinking of, “How do I hone this narrative of who I am?” And that actually means really - again, kind of going back to my earlier point - standing for who you are. Standing up and taking the voice and the space that you need to take because it's very easy to sort of want to blend in, in order to think that's what going to get you ahead, but it's not. *You're* going to be the thing that people are going to want. They're going to want *you* and *your* story and *your* individual experience. That's not to say that's going to make you successful. I have no idea how people are successful in this field. That's a whole other conversation. But I think in terms of being an artist, that's the stuff I'm most drawn to as a dramaturge. That's the stuff you can kind of see when you hear someone's individual voice, you go like, “That's it.” And I think that's the only thing that, in the long run, is going to save us, is being able to just speak our own truths. I think as Latinx, or queer people, or anything else is - speaking your own truth is not just about speaking to other people your truth, it's many times speaking it back to yourself. And that helps you keep refining and defining yourself in the process.

TBS: So we're talking about kind of owning our own narratives and I know for a lot of Latin artists, that involves either Catholicism, Christianity, or a break from that tradition. So I know you both come from religious backgrounds, so I'm wondering how that has colored your work, like, how that influences what you bring to the table.

JM: Do you mind if I take this one first? I'll start with this one. So, I grew up in a family that's Evangelical Pentecostal. My dad was a minister for a period of time growing up. We are not just like, “We're going to preach the gospel to you,” we were the type that would also protest gay Pride marches. Like, pretty intense people. And what I found - well, first of all, this goes back to what I was *just* saying about narrative is that it has been one of the things that I have been able to - it took me a long time to realize that I definitely wanted to run away from that. I needed to step away from it. It was destructive to who I was as a queer person. It is - it was also, it's just destructive overall. Like I found - there were people in my family who find peace and solace and understanding and all that. It did not provide that for me. It provides confusion and frustration for me. But that said, what it also provided for me was that my church in their evangelical bent, believed that you try to save people in any means possible. And so we did a lot of, like, devised theater. We would do shows about drug life and people who would come to Jesus and we would stage them, we would travel across the Southwest doing these plays on black tops, and doing these plays in, like, in government housing communities, and we were basically doing site specific work. I would call it that

now. We also created the Hell house, the idea of like people going into – like, that was our invention in the early 80s. And, so I was starting to write and direct those and act in them - I think the last time I acted I played a school shooter. True! And so, I bring all that up because on one hand, when I moved out here, one of my, one of the things was, like, “That was my previous life. That is not who I am. I refuse to believe that. That is not the kind of point of view which I have.” But that also built who I am. That is, all of those things now, when I think of immersive theater, I’m like, “Oh, we did that. We did immersive theater, we got that! We did site-specific, we did devised work, we did –“ And now I just have more of an academic relationship to it, but I also have this, like, emotional relationship to it that really informs every bit of how I think of audience, every bit of how I think of the relationship between the performer and their work and how does that really speak to the people that are in that audience at that moment. And that is actually part of my story. It is not where I sit anymore. And my - for a long time, I wanted to run away from that and have that as my separate life back New Mexico, not who I am anymore. But what I’ve realized is that that is an essential part of who I am at this moment. It frames where my theatrical energy comes from and where I kind of, like, started building these roots early on. It also frames how I think of audience to this day. And it does change my relationship with my family still. They actually contract why I’m in theater. They don’t *love it*, but they can understand why. They saw me doing that and being very - loving all of that and being pretty effective in it when I was younger. So it kind of makes sense why I’m doing it? Um, but I would say, like, the way that now I engage - I actually still struggle with how to engage with - I was just talking to my therapist about this this week - how, how I deal with religion in the world at this moment in my life. It is a challenge for me. And I guess the only thing I can come to right at this moment is like, it provides meaning for people in my life. It does not provide meaning, but it did *define* a lot for me, and I still use those definitions to this, to this day.

The one minor, minor thing I will say is that Evangelical Christianity, like the Pentecostal Protestant version, basically created a version of culture that kind of flattened and whitened everything in my family. So my dad comes from a very large family that - my grandmother had 10 kids - and my grandmother was very much hardcore Catholic, raised all of her kids to be Catholics, and within their, like, family, they have songs that they can, that are tied to - they can, they sing “De Colores,” and it’s something they would sing at church, and they also would sing for fun, and I didn’t grow up with it. And so I’m realizing that that’s one thing that I’m, I kind of – I kind of am sorrowful for, and that is that I kind of didn’t get to experience - as much as I don’t necessarily want to be Catholic, there was at least some ties to culture that I just don’t share because of the flattening, the like, “Body of Christ,” which happens to seem very white when you’re in Evangelical background.

JSA: Yeah. Catholic guilt is real. I was raised Catholic, and I’m sort of in this, in a similar place with religion, where I’m like, a little bit more anti-religious than I want to be sometimes? Like I want to,

you know, be okay with people doing like, practicing whatever religion they want, and like happy with it, but I struggle with it a lot personally. Like, I think spirituality is very important, but in terms of organized religion, it's hard for me not - it's hard for me not to see the negatives of it overshadowing the positives in, in, sort of, society and in culture. Especially in America right now, like, the way that religion is sort of utilized in this sort of evil way - and I know that's not, like, what *actually* organized religion is, but a lot of those people - there's, there is overlap, unfortunately, and I think I experienced that a lot growing up in a Mexican Catholic household, you know. Like you were saying, James, like, there is a lot of culture there, like, Mexican Catholicism is very different from, like, like, American Catholicism and like the, the - the celebrations, the, the rituals, the prayers, all of that, super different. And, and a lot of it is really beautiful. Like - so I struggle with it, you know? I - like, if anyone, like - for anyone watching this, if you know my play “¡Mamáguá!” at all, it's like, like, I still sometimes feel like the Virgin Mary is gonna, like, whisper in God's ear and be like, “You gotta smite this like, young queer Mexican kid, ‘cause he's doing this horrible shit to me on stage.” And it's like, I don't know, it's, it's like this weird thing where, um... yeah, I am very attracted to the mythology of it, and I find the stories, like, very interesting. And something about Christianity is that like, a lot of our cultural stories, at least in the West, are like - mostly in the West - are formed by, by sort of the Jesus myth and like, sort of this idea of a Messiah and a Savior. So like, in college as an English major, I felt like I had a leg up on so many people because, like, people were like, “There's like religious themes in this!” And it's like, “Actually, you're wrong. Like, that's not actually how that story works, and I'm glad that you thought so, but that's not how it works. Like, I went to Catholic school.” So like, as a storyteller, I'm very grateful for, for that upbringing in away, even though like personally, it can be really hard sometimes. And like my mom still doesn't want to read “¡Mamáguá!” which is totally fine. It's like, not about her, but it is a, it is a coming out story between, like, a young man and his mother, so like I think she feels like it's too intense - which like, I totally respect. But like the idea that she, like - who she thinks that she is in the play, even though it's not her, like kills a priest in the end is like truly horrific for her.

JM: Hahahah!

JSA: So I'll just say, like, super big part of my identity, super big part of my, my art, I think. I think all of - usually like my Mexican characters mention Catholicism, at least like, once in whatever play I'm doing, and it's just like, it sort of just naturally happens. And I think I associate Catholicism, for better or worse with like, conservatism? Which like, it's - it's not *not*, but like, there *are* liberal Catholics, so it's complicated. So I think I - it's hard for me to, I don't know, take it in as a - as a thing that I can currently practice in my life, and I don't think I'll ever really go back to organized religion as something in my life. But I'm glad in a, in a sort of twisted way that I was raised Catholic

because it does give me a lot of fuel to sort of rage against something that I find unjust and like that - that *did* actually caused me a lot of pain, growing up. Like, being queer and Catholic is really hard. But like, my mom like - my middle name is Sebastián, that's what I go by, but like, he is like, the most homoerotic saint in like, ALL the Pantheon, so like, she knew what she was doing, even if she didn't. I kind of, I kind of love that whole mythology and sort of twisting Catholicism on its head and like, "What can you do with these myths that we uphold, that Catholics uphold, and that are so Mexican?" Like, Mexican Catholicism is interesting to me, and a lot of it is really beautiful to me. Like, American Catholicism, less so. Like, I don't know, like the little Easter lamb? Like, cake? Like, it's cute but, it's - I don't know. And - I don't know. Yeah.

JM: Yeah, I would say one of the things too that I've been really working through with this idea - and you were hitting on this idea of the myths and the value of myths - is that it is so embedded in our culture. I think there are there are a lot of myths embedded in our culture, we just don't realize. Like, a good simple one that's not necessarily biblical, of course, but like *Romeo and Juliet*, you could ask a bunch of junior high school students what it's about - they may never have read it or seen it, but they could be like, "Oh yeah, it's this person and this person," and they, they know enough of the, like, basic premise. And that's sort of how the myths have functioned for so long, and so many of those, I would say Judeo-Christian myths, sort of are spread throughout society, and I would say are even deeper within Latinx communities. And so in a weird way, they can be a very strong way to shortcut conversation, to really get deep into some ideas just by using myths an effective way. So I think, I think - I think as storytellers that is something that's very valuable. Actually religion shows up in a *lot* of my work in the same way, because it is so essential to who I am. But the final piece of that that I would say is religion has provided something to me that's very important, which is, it has provided for me the one thing - I've only since really grasped this, but - the real reason I love theatre - and this moment is a good example of this - the real reason I love theatre is because it is a group of people coming together with a singular purpose. And there's two - technically two groups of people. You have the audience, of course, but you also have this, these artists who are coming together to create this thing. And that is the one thing I really value and miss about the religious experience, or at least that practice of it. As much as I do still kind of bristle at organized religion, I do miss the organization in some ways. I do miss an audience. I don't - I'm struggling in this moment to, like, enjoy watching plays on computers because I'm realizing one of my favorite things is hearing other people respond to something in the same moment, or respond differently from me. And that is something that I really miss from the religious experience, is that kind of communal approach. And that's why, I think - you know growing up, my parents werer insistent I was going to be a minister. And I actually think my work right now is a form of ministry. I think I'm - there's some, a lot of crossover! I'm still working with, you know, a

group of people that really want to come together with the same purpose, that want to change the world somehow, that want to present myths in a really beautiful way and reframe them for new audiences all the time. And so I think there's a value of it, not just for us Latinx people, but - even though for us we have it embedded in a different way sometimes - but really for me as an artist, I do feel enriched by a lot of the concepts and the core ideas of organized religion, even if I don't follow a specific path at this moment.

TBS: Alright, we have time for one more question. I want to touch on this because I loved what you had to - I loved what you both had to say about it when we had our planning meeting. So, colorism is a big issue in the Latin - in Latin communities and in Latinx theater. What have your experiences been with colorism in your careers and how can we combat that in our work?

JSA: Yeah, so - sort of going back to - well, first of all, I'll say like, obviously, I am very, like, white-passing, white-presenting, whatever you want to call it - I use white passing. So in a way, I think colorism has affected me in a sort of positive way, which is kind of a messed up way of phrasing that sentence, but it's true, like, when people want someone who's Latinx in the room, like, I am the - I feel like for white institution, sometimes that is the easier, like, safer choice or like, the one that feels less "different" while also still "ticking the box" for, for that. So, in terms of how I combat it in my personal life, I think it's something, sort of going back to this idea that I was talking about, how do we focus our own energy to create change? I think it's, it's - it's always a conversation that I, that I talked through with myself in my plays of like - like when I when I'm writing Latinx characters, I always have in my head like, okay, is this like, a specifically, like - is this specifically a track for like, someone with darker skin, or can it be, like, any Latinx person, or is it - does it have to be someone who is more white passing? Like, that's something that I think about in my own work a lot. And also, I also think about it when I'm talking to directors and like, and like, casting directors, or like, when people talk to me about like "How do you want to cast this?" I try to be very explicit and advocate for the fact that, like, you know, "I want these actors to be Latinx, but I don't want them all to look, you know, just like, like slightly tan white people." Like - 'cause, that's like, those people are usually who are casted. Like, I mean, if we watch any telenovela like on anything, like, usually, like, very white looking people in these roles. And like, even if we look at a lot of, like, the famous, like, Latinx artists in America right now, a lot of them are, are - are, you know, more on the whiter side of the scale in terms of skin tone. So yeah, it's complicated. It's something that I, that - I don't know. It's complicated. And it's something that I have been thinking about lately. I'm thinking about it a lot lately. And it's also different, I think, depending on where you are in the United States. Like in San Diego, I never really thought about it because I was always just like - like, I was just Mexican. Like, it was obvious; like, there were a lot of people who looked like me, there were a lot of people

who didn't look like me, but we were all Latinx, and it was fine, we all spoke Spanish. And like, out here in the northeast, with the, the fact that there are less Latinx people, it feels like there sometimes is a microscope of, like, like, who should be getting these opportunities, who should be getting these roles, like, what voices do we uplift? And sometimes I think it's not the, like - it's not always like, the, the right way. Like, it's not always the right person who's being uplifted. Like, sometimes I think the easier route is chosen, and I think sometimes I *am* the easier route, which - it's its own like, sort of fucked up thing about the American theatre. So yeah, it's complicated.

JM: Yeah, it is. And I think, I think one of the things that kind of - almost like piggybacking on what you were saying about, like, who we are and in this moment. I mean, obviously I, too pass as, like, white, and so that helps in a lot of ways. But I'm also, like, not onstage, right? So, a lot of this conversation isn't just about - this is a field that's about visual representation. It is a visual medium. And it is problematic that we don't necessarily always have access to the ability - the ability to like, cast a group of people, so what - what becomes problematic is that we have limited imagination, sometimes, on the sides of casting directors, or directors in general, who, when they say, "Oh, I think- how I see this character..." they're only seeing a very slim version of what this character can be. And you know, that's not something necessarily that we can change unless we're in that room, but it is something that we can, like, do our best to always advocate for. When you're in a place like - when I talk about like, being in a similar situation - because I was an associate as well - you can kind of get yourself, eventually when you're comfortable and you figure out the language of the place, to be able to like, acknowledge the problems of that. To acknowledge internally, like, "Why are we doing this again? Why is this - ", you know, "Why is this casting done this way?" And so when you can take that space, you definitely should. And I would say this also equally as like, theatre makers, when we're making small works, when we're trying out, you know, just getting something staged with some friends, and like, being able to figure out a way to do that, I think it is essential to acknowledge that our lightness or whiteness still comes with its own version of privilege that's going to maybe let us get into certain doors in a different way. And so in that process acknowledging what that means, we lift up the voices that we can. But one of the things I want to kind of touch on, which is, I think, something we did talk about previously, is that a lot of times what we're talking about is a sliver of a sliver, right? I mean, what we're - I was looking at the 2018-2019 Season in Boston, just like, doing a survey of all the theaters out there. And I think you can count on *one hand*, out of - what, it's like 50 shows or whatever? Considering all the major theaters? One hand, how many Latinx plays were on stage. And that's - that's unfortunate. I mean - and what we're talking about in this instance, many times isn't just "There was a Latinx play on stage." It was a Latinx play - or, a play with Latinx playwright - that hopefully, maybe had a Latinx cast, not always has a Latinx director, like - there's a lot of choices within that that sometimes it feels like what we're fighting for

in terms of uplifting the voices, or uplifting, you know, people who don't - who aren't as white as us is that we're fighting for this tiny little, you know, slice of land, that, like, how do we just get any voices, any Latinx voices heard at all, right? And so I want to, on one hand, acknowledge the value and the importance - the absolute value of, of acknowledging what we see everywhere, what we see in all - and advertisements aimed towards Latinx people or even towards, like, black people or anyone else, it's always *lighter skin wins*, somehow, right? So if we can acknowledge that and then do our best in our small way to question that and to acknowledge the problems with that and then start pushing things in different direction, great. On the other hand, I want us to, like, be like, oh yeah, this is also just - we have very little land to walk on at this moment. And I'll be completely honest, I want to elevate as many Latinx voices in general as I can. *But*, that's because I work on the writing end, I don't work on the - I don't work on the casting end. So this conversation, many times is about who gets to represent what story on stage, and at this moment in my life, I don't have the ability to change that, I can only change it in the way that I can at this moment. So I think it's valuable when you're saying that as, like, a writer because as a writer there are times in which you can acknowledge it, like, "Oh, this should be only played by -" and this is one of the things that is very new in American theatre, but playwrights are explicitly writing into their work, "This should only be played by a Latinx character, a dark skin Latinx." Like, that stuff is incredibly valuable and that is stuff that, on my end, I do encourage playwrights to do. A lot of playwrights will be like, "Well, I don't really care," and then I'll say, I'll give them like the *worst case scenario*, I'll be like, "Okay, so then you're saying you want María Whatever to - could be played by, you know, a white girl from Oklahoma?" They say, "No, no!" "Well, then you've GOT to be specific!" Be very clear in your script What you *don't want*. Say what you want and say what you don't want. And a lot of, I would say, we get afraid to like, do that, but that's, again - the slight ways in which we can change something, take the ground that you can. And I think that's one way you can do it as a playwright. At least that's my dramaturgical point.

JSA: Yeah, I personally always get frustrated when I read a play without - like, unless, like - I hate when they're not specific about, like, three characters, then just very specific about one character. Like, sometimes that works, but most of the time it's just like "These characters are white, so I don't have to be specific!" and like, "These, this character is *not* white so I *do* have to be specific." So like, I also, like, always try to be very specific about who these people are, because I also think, like, if you're not doing that, then you're doing a disservice to the character in the play because they are navigating that world and whatever body that they are in. So I don't know, I just found that very interesting, and I'm glad that it's becoming more of a thing in scripts.

TBS: All right, we have to wrap up, but is there anything that you want to leave our audience with? So that's students, educators, theatre artists who are either new to this conversation, who haven't had a lot of experience talking about equity in theater, or people who have been doing this work in their time in school. Is there anything that you want to leave off with?

JM: I'll just say briefly, I mean - this moment is really interesting, that we're in.

Obviously. I feel like that's such a cliché, every commercial is saying that now. And in a way, this is probably - I would, I can say, just for myself, it has been one of the best times for me to be able to take a moment to survey the landscape in a way that I haven't been able to do before.

For those of us who work regularly in the theater and, in my case, you know, I'm, I'm educator primarily and a critic on the side - which means I'm seeing a lot of work and I'm constantly engaging with work - it is interesting to not be seeing the same level of work, but then it's allowed me to take a step back and really look at the communities that are being built, or the work that could be done. And I've been able to read playwrights that I've never read and found ways - and I've been able to access people in different ways, and create connections, because this moment, we still want connection somehow, we just don't know how it is. And this is,

in some ways, the best way to do it that is not being forced upon us, like when we normally would just walk into a theater and whatever audience is there, that's the audience, we're connecting with at that moment. This is a moment where we can be intentional about it a little bit, and I think it can give us a little bit of room to be able to start to see how do - what other voices are out there and how do we elevate those, or how do we talk alongside each other? Like this! This is a great example of this. We weren't necessarily - we were going to do a version of a panel, but like, this is the way in which we've actually figured out to, like, narrow the scope of this conversation. And I think that's exciting because that's allowing us to start thinking about these - I haven't really thought about this or needed to in my own capacity, or had these conversations and my own capacity with other queer Latinx people. Just hasn't happened, unfortunately. So it's exciting that that this moment is not only encouraging and facilitating it, but I think it allows us to take a little bit of a moment, a breather, to be able to hopefully start making more of those connections and being - seeing what's out there.

And then, hopefully whenever the next step is, wherever we go after this moment, we are a little bit more connected and a little bit more able to fight the battle together rather than being this, like, solo voice in Boston or feeling like that's what it is. Which, you know, I - that's sort of how I felt for a very long time, being in a large institutional theater. And so I think I would just encourage people to, like, live in this moment as much as we can. It's very hard, but *utilize* it in a way, if you can, to like, find new people, find your people. But new people!

JSA: I love that. Um, and I agree so much with that. Something that I have found so kind of incredible about this moment is - I haven't had an MFA yet, and I didn't study theatre in undergrad, so like, I didn't - I don't really have like a formal, like “training”, in terms of playwriting at least - which is fine, like, I don't lament it. Like, I'm figuring it in my own way, and then one day I hope to get an MFA, and I feel like I'll be all the better for it. But something that I have been doing a lot is like, taking advantage of these free, like, Zoom classes that a lot of, like, leaders in the industry are doing right now that like can range from, you know, like Lynn Nottage did, like, something about meditation, like, it wasn't even about playwriting, and she was like, “Don't ask me about playwriting,” like, “I'm not going to answer it.” And just like, these ways that we are finding the time to connect and also to take a break a little bit and like you were saying, James, like sort of assess the landscape. But I think taking a break is really important. I think theater is a very - theater is an awesome industry, but it also works you to the bone sometimes for, like, very little money and like, very little breaks. So I think for some people, not for everyone, like a lot of people lost a lot of opportunity and jobs, too, but in a way, if we can find a way to take this as a much needed break to like, regenerate in a way, like, our energy and just like, what we know and what we think about the theater, I think that is important. And obviously not everyone can do that. Like, some people are, are. - have had COVID affect their lives in a much more personal way. I've been very lucky so far, like, knock on wood, but like, it hasn't infiltrated my, my immediate circle. But just to say, yeah, like - the flip side of that is like, don't beat yourself up if you can't do the work right now. Like, I think, for like two months I was, like, beating myself up every day of being, like, “You need to be writing!” like, “You have so-“ like, “You have more time now!” like, “You don't commute, you don't do this – “ And I think, I think accepting that actually we're all going through something very, very difficult right now, like, that is bigger than our than our field that sort of affects the whole world is really important and humbling and helpful to me as a, as a person, as well as a theater artist.

TBS: Thank you both for being here. I'm going to go ahead and stop recording now, but thank you so much. I loved having you and thank you so much for taking time out of your day to speak with me.

JSA: Thank you!

JM: Thank you!