

## In The Margin Podcast Transcript

Episode 2: Let's talk community narratives w/Luis Alfaro

Host(s): Ramón Real

Guest(s): Luis Alfaro

**Ramón Real** 0:04

Hi, everyone. I'm Ramón Real, artistic director of In The Margin Theatre Company. Now in the margin is in full support of the protests and demands for change that are currently happening right now within our nation. We will be providing resources to combat systemic racism and will continue to be involved within community activism. Now, protesters: we have updated our website to include a protest safety section, you can find the link on our homepage at [www.inthemargintheatre.org](http://www.inthemargintheatre.org). And if you are in need of a gear bag, please email us at [info@inthemargintheatre.org](mailto:info@inthemargintheatre.org). We fully support the Black Lives Matter movement and will contribute to take part in obtaining the changes that we need. We will continue to work to combat anti-blackness within society, within our communities, and within ourselves. Now, listeners, we ask you to keep pushing for Social Justice and the dismantling of white supremacy. We asked you to contribute in any way that you can and we ask you to contribute in your everyday life. Because remember, this isn't just a trend. This is life.

Hi everyone and welcome back to *In The Margin Podcast* I am Ramón Real and I will be your host today and I am here with Luis Alfaro! Luis, so excited to have you here today.

**Luis Alfaro** 1:48

Thank you. I'm so excited to be here.

**Ramón** 1:50

Oh my gosh. So tell me Luis, Um, well how have you been, how are things going?

**Luis** 1:55

I'm good! The pandemic is trying to take me down but I'm not letting it. Um, I was teaching, teaching, teaching six hours a day and then it all stopped, of course, right. So now I'm--yeah man, I'm just, uh, trying to figure out how to make art and isolate and do all the things I'm supposed to do. So yeah, it's good. It's good, it's not as horrible as I thought it would be.

**Ramón** 2:18

Well, I mean, that's good. Well question, where were you teaching beforehand? Before all this happened?

**Luis** 2:24

Sure. So I teach at the University of Southern California at USC, and I teach undergrads, I teach a playwriting class. And then, um, in the grad students I teach a number of different courses because I teach a Latinx theater course and teach--I teach a lot of different kinds of classes. And then I work with MFA actors, and we do dramaturgy and stuff. So yeah, I was really busy, I was doing almost six hours a day a week through zoom. And then school ended a week and a half ago. So you know, I'm sort of figuring out the transition, right? And then, I live in LA downtown in Koreatown. So I'm trying my best to figure out how to maneuver through a very busy--I've always been here but--a very busy city because everybody in my neighborhood

works. I mean, they're essential workers. So, it's sort of how you, you know, how do you kind of like maneuver around an area where, you know, you just got to be really safe right now.

**Ramón** 3:23

Yes. Absolutely, I mean, that's kind of how it is in my hometown right now. It's, um, you know, everyone here are pretty much agriculture workers or they work in like, one of those **[help needed]** at night. So everyone here is considered essential workers as well, right? It is very interesting, I mean, trying to take the necessary precautions that, uh... well, and then on top of that, the town that we get all of our things, Atwater, just became a sanctuary city so everything's open. And they're "rightfully" defying, like, any kind of order. You know... you know.

**Luis** 3:59

Yes, it's very interesting watching--I come from a farmworker family from Delano, California -

**Ramón** 4:06

Oh yeah! Okay continue.

**Luis** 4:07

Yeah, so it's very interesting watching, um, what's going on because my family now is in Orange County, California where you know when I'm in LA here I'm you know, everybody's masked up most people because I'm in a Korean neighborhood are wearing gloves, you know, but when I go to Orange County people are completely defying all the orders, which is so frustrating and yeah, I just don't get out, you know, it kind of just avoid going out when I'm there.

**Ramón** 4:35

Hey so Luis, um, for some of our listeners that maybe, uh, perhaps don't know who you are. Do you mind telling us a little bit about yourself?

**Luis** 4:43

Sure!

**Ramón** 4:43

I mean like, **[help needed]**.

**Luis** 4:43

No, no, no, no, **[help needed]** Um--

**Ramón** 4:48

Awww. (They share a giggle)

**Luis** 4:50

I am a playwright. I am--was born and raised in downtown Los Angeles. Chicano and I started really as a, for about 15 years, I was a poet. And I toured the--kind of I started in LA and then I toured around the country. And then I kind of transitioned from poetry into what they call performance arts. And in performance art, I started to go to Latin America. So I did a lot of festivals in México and then farther down, and then I went up to Canada a lot. And then I started going to Europe. So it kind of opened up my world and then just on a chance encounter in I

think it was 1992 or so I met a woman named María Irene Fornés the famous Cuban playwright and she asked me if I wanted to come study with her and I said, Yeah, I didn't know anything about theater at all. So I went to study with Irene Fornés and that sort of changed my life and, and then I mostly now just exclusively work in the theater. So I write plays but I'm also, I guess what I'm known for is I'm a community based artist. So I not only write the plays, I bring the audience to the plays. So a lot of what I do is go to what they call regional theaters, which is where you and I work, and, um, and regional theaters, and I help people develop boards, develop audiences, develop community projects, develop... everything, right, how to make the art, what kind of art, who we include in the art? So I think of myself as what I call *citizen artist*, because I'm just as, um, interested in the politics of our community. But I'm also, um, very, very involved in how we... I guess--

**Ramón** 6:34

How we curate art?

**Luis** 6:34

--how we have--I mean, curate, but also how that is a very political job, right? How, how everything that we do is very political, because we're trying to involve the gente, but also thinking outside of our communities, and also how do we expand? What is the American, what we call the American narrative, what is the story of America, and how are we central to that story? So, yeah, so art is, you know, at times, it's just writing plays and then other times it's, um, you know, being a producer or being a director or being a dramaturg or being many things in the theater, and also, uh, going out and being a community organizer. Right. All those make up the thing of art. Absolutely.

**Ramón 7:15**

Absolutely. Yeah. All of the above. Absolutely. **Claro que si.** So, Luis, I didn't know that you started with poetry. Can you tell us a little bit about that? Like, what had you transition from poetry towards playwriting?

**Luis 7:30**

Yeah, so, you know, I grew up in I was--I think the central story of me is that I grew up in downtown LA in an area called "People Union," which was in the 1970s, the most violent, poorest neighborhood in LA. And I think that, um, the story of growing up there was a story that I really wanted to tell I didn't know that I was a storyteller, right. But I, I would write, I would write a lot of things down. I was always journaling as a kid. And then so when, by the time I graduated high school, I really knew I was writing a lot of poetry. I was entering a lot of like, you know, poetry magazines, there was a thing called the **[help needed]**, I think it was called, and it was in East LA. So I would go to the poetry festivals. So it was already kind of writing a lot of, you know, young-ish poetry, right. And then, by the time I graduated high school, I knew I wanted to do it and I started to kind of go for it gung ho, like reading in coffee shops and going on tours. And the way that I did it, which was maybe different than most people do now. I was an assistant to a lot of, um, poets. So the way that I kind of studied poetry, the way that I got into festivals was I used to assist a guy named, um, Charles Bukowski he was a very famous poet. And so in, in, uh, in exchange, you know, he would let me read like before him at a poetry reading or at a bookstore or something, right. So there was a lot of like, um, that kind of stuff where I would like, as part of my duties as my volunteering, right, my internship, a lot of people would let me read. And that's really how I sort of started to get involved. I had always been a

very political person, my parents were part of the United farmworkers. So, mix, mixing poetry, mixing politics came pretty easily and early on, I became very good friends with a poet named Marisela Norte, who is a famous East LA poet, I was part of a group called *Asco*, which is, um, uh, a performance collective from East LA and so, you know, like, getting involved with the Chicano movement, getting involved with, um, just really deeper into my culture. All of that, all of that was a really big part of how I started to write poetry too. So yeah, poetry was very, very intense and very powerful. I slept on a lot of floors around the country, and uh and you know, read over a lot of like **[help needed]** and all that, but also I met a lot, a lot of people. And the thing about poetry that's so beautiful, is there's so little money involved. So the people that are doing it are doing it because they really love it. Right. And that makes a difference. And you know, that was the beginning of like making community too, right, the community, uh, for me has always been a huge part of why I make art.

**Ramón** 10:12

Claro, claro, claro. Yes, yes, yes. Well speaking of community, I mean, like you always uh, well from the work that I know of yours, right? You adapt these kinds of plays, and then, well, now talking about your plays, um, you adapt them and then you incorporate your community into them, right?

**Luis** 10:28

I don't write the plays myself, I don't think about--

**Ramón** 10:31

You adapt them.

**Luis** 10:31

--well I adapt them in a way--I do a lot of original work, but I always think that every play is a collaboration with the community you're writing for, right? So every play is written by me, but it's really written in, in uh kind of collaboration with that community. So when I--

**Ramón** 10:49

What does that process look like?

**Luis** 10:51

So I do a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot of research, I call it I sort of eat all the words and then I get pregnant with the possibility of a play and then it just kind of births, right? (Ramón laughs a little)  
So that's my vision. (They both laugh a little) But uh,

**Ramón** 11:05

I love it. I love it.

**Luis** 11:07

But that's really, what, like the way I think about it is that I go out and I study every single thing about a play. So when I wrote that, I wrote a play called *Electricidad*, which is an adaptation of *Electro*, I went to work in a, in a, like a correctional facility for young ladies up to 17 years old, teen felons. And that's really where I got the language of that place where I met the characters of that play, where I started to understand--

**Ramón** 11:31

Wait Luis, you actually worked at that facility?

**Luis** 11:33

Yeah, I went and I do these things, what I call *ofrendas*, where I call up, I'll call a facility and I'll say, um, *I want to intern here*, or *I want to, you don't have to pay me. I just want to like, you know, volunteer* a lot of times and in exchange for that. What happens is that I'm really what I'm doing is - while I'm doing the work, I'm also learning everything, right? I'm learning about the community. I'm learning about how it works. So a lot of I think I would say that, uh, one of the reasons I think people like the plays is that they find them authentic. And I would say that the authenticity is because I do so much research around a play. So, I really think about the play, I think about the place. I think that the land is always a character in a play. I think that you know, the way people talk in Arizona is very different than the way people talk in California. Right? I think the way that New Mexico--and all of it, right, so when I started to write that, I really feel like what you're listening for is rhythm, and intonation and the way that people use words and Spanglish and you know, it's the language of our ancestors. And so all of that is really, really part of what I do. So I don't write a play immediately. What I do is I kind of just take it all in, and then when I feel like I've got it all inside of me, I start to write, really write right, and then that process is a very different process, but I'm really writing from a place I know by that point, right? I'm really writing about things that I know because I've really been working with people in the community, I'm asking them questions, and I have what I call *community dramaturgs*. My partners are not professional theatre artists, but they are the people who give me the language, who give me the rituals, who give me the gestures, you know, that's really the people that I say I'm collaborating with, or I'm making the work with. And I'm thrilly - that's really important for me

to tell the truth and to tell truthful stories demands that you - you get inside of something not see it from a distance, right? So I'm one of those artists who really goes inside. So I've done, I did about 10 years, which was, I don't recommend this for anybody at all. But I did 10 years where I went to live in a different city in America.

**Ramón** 13:51

Oh.

**Luis** 13:52

That was a, kind of, troubled cities. So I was in Tucson, Arizona; I was in Hartford, Connecticut; Houston. Texas; I was in - I was in Boston for a year; I was--and that's how I came to the Medford right because it, we used to call it "Meth-Ford" because it was the crystal meth capital of the US. And so every town has a kind of challenge. And when I would live there, I would just, I wouldn't have a car, I used public transit. And you just get to meet everybody. You just get to meet everybody. And then you start to hear the stories. And you start to realize that the stories that you hear are not the stories that are normally the stories that are told out loud, because these are hard. They're really hard stories, right? So that's kind of how I make the play. And, um, so those 10 years were really, really important. They were lonely years, but they were really important years in terms of my own development as an artist, right to live somewhere, to be inside of a community to not, you know, to really rely on the community. And that made a big difference. It made a big difference in the kind of writer I became.

**Ramón** 14:58

It sounds like an immense growth for not just artistry, but also like personally, right?

**Luis** 15:04

Yeah.

**Ramón** 15:04

And like, is just finding a lot of personal growth and finding out who you are. Y luego tambien haciendo muchos amigos on the way, right?

**Luis** 15:10

Yeah I was gonna say that in some ways like this pandemic, somebody was saying to me the other day, like, I was doing an interview and somebody said, *how have you been dealing with, like, are you feeling like, the stress or the fear?* And I was like, you know what, when I was a kid, I grew up in a really violent neighborhood where we had, you know, very, very poor families. So we had food insecurity, we had gang violence, so we had isolation. I mean, like, I know all these things, right? So I was thinking, the same way that when I travel or when I do these projects, I think that would happen since I realized that I am not a solitary figure, I need people. And so what I do is I become friends with people, right? I become friends pretty fast, because I'm going to have to call on those people to teach me to tell me what it is that I need to write and that makes a big difference. That's exciting because then your work is embedded in the community. It's not outside of the world of the world that you work in, you know, and that is cool.

**Ramón** 16:09

It's in tune. It's in tune. It comes together. It's very grounded and the authenticity.

**Luis** 16:14

I love that "In tune" what a great word. Yeah.

**Ramón** 16:17

Oh, yeah, you can use it (They both laugh). So you were mentioning community dramaturgs.

Um, so when you--How does this collaboration look like? Do you commission community dramaturgs? Is this like a, uh, one on one or like a group of people that you collect? Or is it like a, you know, you volunteered in certain, um uh, facilities or committee centers, and then gathering these stories or how does that collaboration work with the community dramaturgs?

**Luis** 17:08

Well, every play is a different animal, right? So I try not to write the same play even to look like the same play, I try to write a different play each time. So,

**Ramón** 17:17

[help needed].

**Luis** 17:18

(They crack up at this) I try to, I try to keep it--I try to keep pushing at the boundaries of even my own writing. But I do feel that what happens is that every play has the authorities attached to them. And each authority is not the ones you met the last time. So what happens, for instance, is I did a play called *Body of Faith*. I did it for a company called Cornerstone. And it was a

collaboration between LGBTQ people of faith. So like gay priests and lesbian nuns, and it was the, one of the most intense experiences I had. That crowd was just so different. From any crowd I'd ever met, but then I wrote a play because it was some--it was about people really wrestling with a very, very difficult question in their lives. And the center of that play became about transgender folk. So I met a young, a young woman who had been a man right from San Antonio, and a young man from upstate New York who had been a woman. And both of these characters became the centerpiece of the play. Because, uh, their - their faith was the thing that got them through this transformation of a body they knew was not the right body that they were in, right. So they knew they had to go on the journey. And it was going to be a hard, physical and emotionally painful journey, but they had to do it and they had to do it through faith. And so that's a good example of like the community dramaturg. So then what ended up doing was, I would work with them, interview them, and then I would give them my text and have them edit it. So I would say, "Listen, I'm not going to put anything in here that you don't feel good about." And then we would negotiate that. So sometimes it was a little harder because somebody would say, "Oh, I don't want to say this about myself." And you'd say, "Well, that's the most dramatic thing in the play. So I need you to say that," right? But I think what was really cool about it was that we were able to have real conversations about how something translates from your mouth into an audience's mind. Right. And then I did a play called *Black Butterfly*, where was about a Chicana girl from--it was a play for kids. And it was a Chicana girl from East LA and I actually hired three Chicana poets and I collaborated with them. One of them lived in the projects. One of them lived in like an apartment with her mom, single mom. And one of them lived, one of them lived in a house. So I really wanted to capture also, like different levels of class, right? different levels of how people live in East LA. And it was really, really fantastic. So that was called *Black Butterfly*. And that piece, oh my god, it's been done so many times since--we did it

at the Kennedy Center at the Smithsonian and ran all over the place, so, but those were like, you know, those were the three community dramaturgs right to work with the poets. So every time I start a play, I think, who is not in the room? Who needs to be in the room? Right? Are we writing the story and then not including the person who should be in the room? So a lot of times I invite people into the room, I like to have an open rehearsal room. That's not always cool with actors, you know, so you always have to negotiate that. But I like it when we're creating together. I'm just a guy who is using words, but there's another person who is using lights, who is using sound. And so I like to think that we're all equal in the making of this kind of beautiful expression, right?

**Ramón** 20:45

Yeah.

**Luis** 20:45

And the more that I can think of along those lines, the more open, you become, right, I can share, because it's not just on me, it's on everybody.

**Ramón** 20:54

Absolutely. And I think that's the beautiful thing about creating something together, is the collaboration, right?

**Luis** 21:00

Absolutely.

**Ramón** 21:01

It's, it's, well, (laughing to himself a little) I, now I'm imagining the the birthing metaphor that you use, right? It's like we're all getting impregnated. And we're creating a baby together and seeing what this is going to look like, right? This, what the baby's going to look like. You know what this is going to look like. (Both chuckling again)

**Luis** 21:22

But you never know. Right? The best part is when you don't know the best part is when it's happening in the room. So I'm, I'm reading--

**Ramón** 21:30

That's the exciting part! I love it.

**Luis** 21:31

Yeah! And I'm really known as one of those writers who writes in the room. So I will write up to opening. I will keep changing the play, I write to an actor's strength. So even though it's maybe my words, what I'm doing is I'm really listening to how the actor uses words and what kind of words they sound really good in. And so a lot of times I adjust my text to help the actor do their best work right? So that's part of the journey also in those years in poetry, those years on the on the road in the performance art world, all of that is about how I come into the theater, right? So I come into the theater, in that kind of open space ready to play. I have a word called *deliberation* and the act of doing nothing, you're always doing something, which I love. It's kind of a little bit like improvisation where I'm, I'm always ready. I'm always open. I try to open my heart when I come into the room. I know it sounds a little hippie dippie, but I come into the room, and I just try

to stay open. So what I'm doing is I'm really listening, not just to the art that's being made, but to the electricity in the room, so I can kind of go off on that wave. Right. And that's what's so great about art when you make art on that level. It's so much fun, right?

**Ramón** 22:49

Yes, absolutely! That's where you want to live in, que no?

**Luis** 22:53

Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Ramón** 22:56

Luis, um, so, I love hearing about, you know, like you encompassing the world around you and, you know, putting them in funneling them into your play. I directed *California Scenarios* not too long ago, and one of the little excerpts was Gardens of Aztlan, which is yours verda?

**Luis** 23:16

Yes. (Laughing a little).

**Ramón** 23:19

Um, you mentioned Orange County a lot. You mentioned Electricidad, you mentioned Aztlan, you mentioned so many different things. And one of the biggest ones that always sticks out to me is about El Torito, because it actually exists, right?

**Luis** 23:33

Yeah, you know, that's why I wrote the play not to be... cómo se dice, not to be **[help needed]**. But I was, I was commissioned by South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, California to write a play but they didn't want to do it inside, they wanted to do it outside. And I had actually been commissioned six times for them, but I never had a production there. And so I thought we... okay, I'm like, super grateful for the money, but I'm also starting to feel like these people are just not taking me serious. So I wrote a play about the lady who makes the tortillias, right, inside the El Torito, and she escapes. And there was an actual lady that I based it on who made the tortillias at El Torito across the street from South Coast Repertory and, uh, and she came to the play, it was fantastic. And so, um, yeah, no, I was really kind of talking about that place in that moment, at that time. It was really about - also the history of Orange County is so fascinating. So I really wanted to capture a sense of, you know, sometimes I think a play is just a document of a moment. I, my teacher, I mean, she used to say to us, which I love, she used to say, um, there were many great artists before you, and there'll be many great artists after you, your only job is to tell the story of today. And I love that, you know.

**Ramón** 24:48

Ooh. I love that.

**Luis** 24:49

Yeah, 'cause I was one of those writers when I was young, where I would put everything in there love and death and sex and murder and everything right. And then she used to say, *Oh my God, your play is so much*. So she would say relax, relax. Every play is a little slice of you, right? And if you think about it, don't think about the one play you're writing today. But think about the

50 plays, you're gonna write over your lifetime. And you can relax into every one because each one is a kind of, you know, a kind of book of you right? That makes up the library of your work. And so I love that because in a way that was that play felt to me, like just at the moment, right. People came, they sat outside, you know, it was a site specific work. That was really what it was built on.

**Ramón 25:35**

Hmm, Got it. Got it. Got it. That's wonderful. That's what so--and then you mentioned that, um, you felt like you weren't taking you--taken seriously. Has that been something that has occurred throughout your career as a playwright and other writers that you know of is that something common when it comes to playwrights?

**Luis 25:58**

It's common when it comes to people of color. Because the deal is, the deal is, in our regional theaters in the theaters around America, we are woefully, woefully underrepresented. So when I started in the 1980s, gulp, when I started in the 1980s, I would go to these theaters like I had a big career in Chicago for a long time. And I would go to Chicago and I'd walk into the theater and say, is there, "Are there any people of color here?" And they'd say, "Oh, no, like you're the one that they brought in. You're like, the first one." And you go like, when I went to Hartford, you know--so I have a kind of trick that I do now, where, where I kind of politicize the theaters and the first thing I do is I always buy a dozen doughnuts, and I take it to the box office because the first point of contact that our audience in our community is going to have is with the box office, right? So I go to box office and we become friends. And same thing happened when I was in

Oregon Shakespeare Festival, it was the first place I went to. We became great friends at the box office.

**Ramón** 26:58

Oh, I love my box office there.

**Luis** 27:00

Yeah, I know! And I said, "So who here speaks Spanish?" And that was when we first started many years ago, and actively looking for somebody who spoke Spanish or another language, right? Same thing happened to me when I was in Hartford stage. I did a play called *Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner*, and I said, um, "A lot of Puerto Rican people are going to come because the talent is, is, I think, 70% Puerto Rican" and I said, "Do we have anybody to speak Spanish?" And they were like, "No." "Well we got to get somebody to speak Spanish, even temporarily." And they, and they opened the position. And they've had that position now for like, 15 years of somebody who, what they call the, you know, like the Spanish box office person. And it's super important, because if you're going to invite the community, they have to feel like they're being invited.

**Ramón** 27:45

Yeah, they have to feel like they're being welcome and not just kind of like, a one time thing, right? Like, oh, here's something **[help needed]**.

**Luis** 27:53

You're building a relationship, right? So--

**Ramón 27:56**

Sí. Claro que sí.

**Luis 27:56**

--Yeah so the first thing I did was the donut in the box office, and then the second thing I would do is I would go to marketing. That was my second department always at every theater. And I say, "So what does the ad look like? What is the cover of the art? I want to see how we're being represented, right? I want to see how my play is being sold, does it? Is it authentic to what I'm writing?" So there's always that kind of conversation. So those are kinds of the ways that you kind of politicize a theater. It's the ways you can make your politics, um... you know, work in a theater, because in the early days, you wouldn't see anybody you know, and I had like these amazing, I mean, a contemporary, somebody that I adored as a writer named Octavio Solis, right? He was, he is of my generation, Octavio was our golden boy. I followed his career like I was like, God, I just want to be Octavio Solis. Right. So, you know, I would hear the stories about like the theatres he would go to and then I would come through and we were kind of like on an interesting migratory trail right? Where José Rivera was here, Caridad Svitch was here, Migdalia Cruz was here, you would almost follow somebody, right?

**Ramón 28:59**

Sí.

**Luis 29:06**

And so you never saw them because they were in the previous season or something. But you knew that you were on the same kind of like trail doing your work. And so I think that now what's happened is so different, right? But when it first started, it was really about finding my tribe, right? And my tribe always look so different. Right? It always looks like a very different community. Because it's always a different community I'm in. When I was in Texas, I did a project with teen prostitutes, so working with kids on the streets is very different than working with maybe poets in a poetry center in Boston, you know, like every community is different and needs a different sort of attention. And so this is the thing I think you get good at when you you keep writing and saying you learn how to pivot your writing, how to try something new, how to take risk, how to jump off the cliff how to walk through fire, you know how to really take some serious risk with your writing?

***Ramón***

Take that leap of faith. Yeah.

***Luis***

Absolutely. And it's something new every time. You know, I try not to do the same thing. So I am myself trying to explore something new. It's like painting with a different color each time, right?

***Ramón***

Mm hmm. Mm hmm

***Sponsored Ad*** 30:45

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**Ramón** 31:55

Speaking of these companies that you felt--Well, first off, *deja decir*, that is a great way to kind of infiltrate those systems verda?

**Luis** 32:03

Yeah. I kill them with kindness. So my thing is that I'm, um, you know, I get in trouble by some of my community members sometimes, but I am, ultimately I'm a diplomat. My job is to, I could call a lot of people out of their awful racist politics, but that's not ever going to get them over on our side. So one thing that I do a lot is I kill them with kindness. So you know, just recently in the last week, I was part of a group of playwrights who quit a theater in Chicago because the theater bypassed it's, uh--

**Ramón** 32:32

What Happened?

**Luis** 32:33

It bypassed its hiring policy and just installed somebody, uh, to a job that we were hoping lots of people of color we're going to be at least considered for and because it didn't happen we wrote a letter and we resigned. But the letter was so nice. I wrote the nicest resignation letter while I was calling people out on their bullshit, right, like while I was calling people out on their racism I was writing a very diplomatic letter. And what it did is it allowed the theater to not be so humiliated that they couldn't come forward, first of all, and apologize. But second of all, try to work with us and how to make it better right? So in some ways, I believe very strongly that we must have allies that we must have coalitions. So I believe very strongly as a Chicano that I have to work with the black community, I have to work with the native community, I have to work with many, many communities to build up a kind of force that battles, you know, whatever the injustice, whatever the oppression is. So sometimes, you know, you're at a rally and has nothing to do with you. But it's really important that we show up for each other.

**Ramón** 33:42

That's great. Solidarity.

**Luis** 33:44

Yeah, solidarity. So the same thing with art, you know, in some ways, I would go into these theaters and find my tribe. Sometimes my tribe would be like the kind of like nerdy avant garde, sometimes it would be the people over there in the dramaturgy department, the literary department--or sometimes you know, it would be the audience. You know, I become friends with audience members, and you'd hear what they wanted to see. And then you would kind of debate with them and you try to convince them you know about something. So I think I, I like becoming friends with people. I like, I think it's important to call people out when they're being

really, really bad. And but I also think there's a way to do it, that allows them to work through whatever they're going through, right. So and I think this is part of my teaching practice. I never, I believe in affirmation, right. So I work with a lot of young playwrights and I'm going to highlight and I'm going to unpack the things that you're really good at. I'm going to challenge you to think about the things that are really hard for you. And I'm going to create a space for you to explore the thing that makes you the most excellent. So that is not me bullying you or knocking you down or anything like that. That is me helping you pull out the things that are really good in you. What are the things that you are genetically good at? And how do we use that as the base for your great artistry? Some people have no clue about what it is, some people are already on their journey. Some people are creating that muscle. Some people sometimes feel they're completely on the wrong road. And then you know, it's about like, how do I get your back on the road? That's your road. You know, I just had an amazing experience with a student who is so wonderful, a great actor, he's from Puerto Rico, and he is having a lot of trouble with language. He has a very thick accent. And he has a hard time understanding English, right? and so even struggling with the Shakespeare and I, and we were talking about Raúl Juliá, the famous Puerto Rican actor who did Shakespeare in the Park, he did Taming of the Shrew with Meryl Streep, and I said, Perhaps I think Sebastian, that something's happened here. You came from Puerto Rico, but you didn't bring yourself with you. You left Sebastian in Puerto Rico. And now you've come to be a well trained white actor. But the Sebastian who knows Shakespeare really well, has a very thick Puerto Rican accent. Shakespeare. In itself, the English language of Shakespeare is not our language. So why cannot you adapt it to your language, to what you, how you speak and how you think? Because it's not just about your accent. It is about a sensibility, a rhythm, it's the way you use words. That is what each of us bring into a room, right? We bring the poetry of ourselves into the room. So it was the most amazing experience

because he was in tears. And he said, "You know, you're right. I just, I don't know what happened. I forgot to bring myself. I just left myself on the island. And I'm not acting like me, I'm so lost. I'm, I'm just lost my footing." Right? And I said, "You have to find you because you translating all these great plays, including the canon of Puerto Rican plays, is what you're meant to be doing." Right? It's so hard for us because we all have dreams, right?

***Ramón*** 37:20

And, you know, I think it's so, it's phenomenal that there are professors like you that are able to mentor students. You know, like the younger generation, where, especially when you go into institutions that are designed to pretty much craft you or sculpt you into being a certain way right to be trained in a certain way. And this goes across all multiple subjects, right. And that are taught in schools, but the institution itself is based off of some really atrocious things. So it's really cool to have and really enlightening to hear that there's a professor out there that is encouraging and helping people find their own aesthetic throughout their personality and throughout their whole being of their persona, right, to funnel it into their work. You know, it's interesting, something that you mentioned, you mentioned this letter that you wrote, and it's, it's so fascinating, um... Not, fascinating. It's just so interest--I don't even know what words to use right now. But-- (Luis chuckles at this) It's, for lack of better words, interesting that we tend to have to craft things very light, uh, and with like a soft blow, in order to not trigger something bigger, right? And I think--several years ago, my cohort and I, we also wrote a letter addressing certain issues. And it was also in the manner of: Okay, how do we go about this? And when we read back on it, we, it is very kind and, but it's very straightforward. So it's interesting to hear like, okay, maybe it had to be an even softer blow, even though we're talking about these

injustices and these things that happen towards us, right that were very hurtful and very like, detrimental. But--

**Luis** 39:11

Yeah, it's interesting, I love, I love what you're saying, because what's always interesting to me is, I love it when I am calling somebody out on their bullshit, but I'm doing it in the nicest way because I need to, I know that I'm going to take it farther, I know that I'm going to either we're going to have a relationship, and then I'm going to go deeper with you, or you're just going to be very defensive. And then I'm gonna have to approach it another way. But this is just a really good example of where the letter happened. And then the board of the president of this board called me, and we had an hour like an hour and a half conversation. And he said, "You know, I'm very hurt." And I said, "Why?" And he goes, "Well the letter feels like an attack of me." And I said, "Why don't you tell me where in the letter I mentioned, you or I attacked you." He was like, "Well, I just feel like you're, you don't understand what, what I was trying to do." And I go, "Well, explain to me what you were trying to do." And as he explained, he talked, he talked, and he talked, and I said, "So I want to tell you how the majority of my community responds to what you just said, that is called a system of oppression. That is a you, what you just described is a construct for how white supremacy is able to stay rooted in the community." And so you know, he was really, really angry. Had I started by saying, you know what, you're a racist it would have never gotten anywhere. (A quick laugh)

**Ramón** 0:32

Yeah.

**Luis** 0:34

But, I think what happened was, as he described his political processes, when you fail to - when you bypass a process, and people of color are not allowed to be considered not that anybody thought they were going to get that job, but when people of color are not allowed, to be considered, to be seen. Then you have enabled this structure, this system of how exclusion works, and you know, as he's listening, you can tell that he's angry, his silence. He's trying to take it in, you know, an hour and a half later we get into some really interesting agreements, right? Because it's very, very hard for people to own their stuff. Right. And what I really - what I'm calling people on is - I'm calling people on their, their racism, right? So that's really important, right, that I do that.

**Ramón** 1:43

And it's a very - it's a very strategic way. It's a very strategic way of approaching things. Absolutely. So Luis, what are you, in Luis's opinion and Luis's mind, what kind of support would you ideally want from a theater and actually opening that up for like any writer? Right? That you have probably -- no, no. Luis's opinion, what are some things that you feel would be ideal theatrical support from a theatre company that you work with? As well as giving other writers support?

**Luis** 2:21

Well, I think you know, that, um, plays don't just come out of the air. They're really birthed and they're, they're made, right. And they're made, and, and that's really, really important. So I loved my time at OSF was really important because I had a little office, a place I could come to that made me feel like I was part of the family. So becoming, joining a family is important, because

you're going to share very vulnerable things right, you're going to share your process in all of its different stages. So becoming part of a family and having literal spaces important, but also being able to engage with people on more than just your play, right? So sometimes they come into a theater. And the first thing I do is they want to talk about your play, you say, Well, I don't even want to talk about my play, I want to tell you when I'm dreaming about or when I'm thinking about right now or what's going on in the world. So I want us to, to find out what we have in common. So before you give me your notes, I want to know who you are. Because partly what happens is, a lot of times when they start, they're like, Okay, so we have some problems and you're like, Who are you? (Both chuckle at this) So becoming becoming friends. I think that as a dramaturg. My first job is to find out about the playwright, to find out the playwrights heart. A lot of times, I'm getting ready to do a dramaturgy for an East LA library project. And the first thing I said to the writers is, what do you want me to tell you? And, you know, one writer was like, give it all, give it all, give me the hardest stuff. And then another one was, I want to hear that I'm on the right track. Another one was, I don't know what I'm good at, you know? Like they were all coming from different places, right? And I said, Is it okay if we start from what I think is really good?' And you know, starting from a place where you say to somebody, I really like the way you use this language. I love this scene. I like this character. We are becoming vulnerable with each other, right? We're becoming friends. I need to tell you things, things that are hard, because that's what building a play is about. But in order to do that, you and I must agree to marriage, right? And so that's the lesson I learned. So I was at the Mark Taper Forum in downtown LA Music Center for 10 years. I had a very crazy boss, but I remembered something that was very important. There's a play by culture class called *Chavez Ravine*. And it's about the history of Dodger Stadium. So I was in that first level of that brought into the theater with Richard Nagoya. And what happened is that my boss said to me one day, he goes, I never

produced anybody that I don't know. I need to be friends with him. And I said, Well, that's ridiculous. Why is that? And he goes, because I'm going to ask a lot of them. So I need to know that they're, as my friend, I can ask them stuff. So the first thing I did, you know, and I still think of myself as the lead producer on that play. I had, I went home and I had all these talaveta plates. And I brought them to the theater, and I went to Pollo Loco, and I did this spread. And I had my boss come down, and I had the guys come. And we all sat down to a meal. And I got up and I left and I closed the door. And when I came back two hours later, he got up and he said, oh, we're going to produce this play. And I said, oh great, and it was such a good lesson about - He wasn't going to produce that play until he knew he can be friends. You can be friends with them. They loved him. He loved them, and then they could really create something magical, right?

**Ramón** 5:51

Mm hmm. They could conceive--we agree to the magic.

**Luis** 5:56

Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Ramón** 5:57

Yeah. (laughing)

**Luis** 5:57

And this has really been an important part of what we do as artists is that we go so deep we tell we're hopefully telling the truth about the things that live in the darkness we bring to life that

which is in the dark, right? So if we do that, if we do that and really believe that it's very important that we see ourselves as something bigger, as a larger part of humanity. So I've never sorted like - when, when people say, well, you're a Chicano playwright. I say, I am a Chicano. I'm a playwright, but I also am part of this larger world, right? I don't want you to dismiss me. I don't want you to put me in this little corner because I'm many, many things. So in my early days, I had a lot of struggle because I'm queer. So I'm a queer playwright and one of the things that would happen--

**Ramón** 6:45

Woop woop, queer fam!

**Luis** 6:46

And we did a lot of (They both crack up for a moment) so I did a lot of stuff at the Different Light bookstore in West Hollywood. I did a lot of readings for the queer community, and I would always open with something Spanish and Chicano. And when I went to the Chicano community, I always opened with something queer. And it was really problematic in the early days, right? People were really like, "What?!" they were all angry and all that. But you know, it was a way of bridging the worlds that I belong to. And so I have to think about that all the time. When I go to a new theater, when I go - I work a lot at Victory Gardens Theatre in Chicago, and I work a lot at the Magic Theater in San Francisco. Those are two different worlds. San Francisco is so different than like, let's say me in New Mexico. And so each one requires a different kind of thinking, for me a different kind of approach, right? Each staff is different. There's always somebody on the staff who's working their butt off, and you have to recognize and find them and support them and use them right because that's the person who's going to help you assure your

playthrough so it's almost like you know, everything. I guess what I'm saying is that everything I do is a building of a family. Everything I do is a building of relationships. When I write a play, when I teach playwriting, when I dramaturg work, when I do my politics. I am really always working with the notion of family, family, family, family, and that comes which is, you know -

### **Ramón**

Oh, it's so, it's so like rooted in culture almost. Verda? It's very family oriented. Also I see a lot of your posts with you and your mommy and they're the cutest. Yeah, so it's like, it's no surprise to me that you're very family oriented and also like, creating and developing these beautiful friendships and relationships, people.

### **Luis**

Yeah, I feel very strongly that what I do is, I go into a room. And I try to and I try to connect, right so my job is to be a connector. And this really is the mentorship right? This is the way I was mentored and this is the way I'm meant to work. So I was mentored by, you know, Irene Fornez, I was mentored by a guy named **Steven** Jackson, who ran a space called that *Inner City Cultural Center* in downtown LA, which was mostly black theater. And that was, you know, because I grew up really in a black neighborhood. So that was sort of my first entry into Performing Arts. But I feel like all of the mentors have been people that are like that, that extra father, that extra mother, that extra sister, you know, that I really build, I really build a family. And I think that's a great way of working. I always have, I've never, I've never really felt alone. And you know, I'm a single guy who lives alone in Koreatown. I'm never alone, right? I'm always surrounded by the world of art, by other artists, you know, you know what I'm saying?

***Ramón***

Absolutely. And all that people you got to meet as you were traveling around on a community building like all those people, too. Yeah. Never alone.

***Luis***

Yeah and that's why I do them. You know, like I've been doing a lot of conferences lately, and part of the conferences. It's like, you know, when the moderator says, oh, listen, we're going to talk about this, I'm like eh, give me a call, we should talk about this. So I'm like, so what are you thinking? it's like, it's not that I don't want to speak off the cuff. It's just that, I want to join you in the thing that you want to do. And I always find that you have to be thoughtful, right? So meditation entered my life late, late in my life, right? But I feel like thoughtfulness, empathy, those are not things that I'm thinking where it was necessarily taught. I was always, you know, thrown in a big lump of - you know, I grew up in a farm worker family. So there was always groups of people. It was very migratory, we're always moving that kind of thing. And but I think that empathy and consideration that came probably from religion, right, that really came, I grew up in the **[Help needed]** churches, I was raised in the Pentecostal religions. So I think that really that really made a difference right? In the way I see the world I see myself as part of a of a congregation. Right?

***Ramón***

Got it.

***Luis***

Yeah, theater is a congregation. Theater is the church. Theater is the place where, where I tell the truth, I tell the story, right where we hear the Gospels, right. Theater is the place where we're able to understand something about ourselves. And you know, for many, many years, I would tell people that I go to the theater to learn how to be a better person. And I really do believe that. Sometimes you see something about a very evil character, especially in the Shakespeare's right, like Iago, I'm so connected to Iago in Othello. He basically destroys his best friend because he's so jealous of him. And who amongst us, has never ever felt that kind of jealousy for somebody that it kills them, right? And he says it, he goes, he says, I hate myself. I hate myself for being so jealous. How amazing to see something that echoes the darkest parts of us. Then to see something beautiful and alive and positive that celebrates the human condition. That's what the theater gives us. It gives us the yin and the yang, the darkness and the light, right? That's what it's about. Right? It gives me the opportunity to learn how to be a better human being. That's why I love the Greeks.

### ***Ramón***

And it's, it's also like again, it's a congregation of folks right, it brings people together and with the telling of all the stories and the pieces of what is happening in the now like you mentioned, it's very powerful. And I think at least for myself, as well like chime in as well saying like that is exactly why I do it as well and why I love it. It is the learning of humanity and the learning of like how to be more empathetic and passionate and also just wanting the best for one another.

### ***Luis***

Being an artist is choosing a life right like I understand it from a religious point of view. But I think about this a lot being an artist is a way of life, it is a way of living. And it's different. You

have to be in the world, but not of it because you have to see the world. And I think that's a beautiful way for me to reconcile this part of me that's always like a loner writing plays, but also a citizen who is really involved in my community, right? I have to play both parts, I have to be - I used to say that this way, I have one foot on each side of the border, but the borders are not just Mexico and the US. The border could be queer and Chicano. The border could be artists and citizen. The borders are all you're always straddling two things in your life. That is what makes great drama. That is what makes tension and also that is how we live. We live having to make choices, having to struggle with how - with the world that we want to see right? And I love that, I love that about how I can express that in art, sometimes.

**Ramón** 14:01

So, Luis, you mentioned, you know, Chicanizmo multiple times. What got you into activism and, you know to be a Chicano?

**Luis**

Well, you know, my parents for sure, because, you know, the United Farmworkers. I think when I was a kid, something happened. It's a very kind of extraordinary story. My father was at the Hollywood Park racetrack and my mother was at her church called **[need help]** Manuel in Lincoln Heights. And my brother and I were babysitting my sister, and there was a bar at the corner called *Club Jalisco*. And there was a fight at the corner of that bar and a man walked out of the bar, he had a piece of pool cue sticking out of his stomach and he kind of like marched slowly, and he died in front of our house. And it was a horrific scene and my brother took my sister to the back room and I could not stop looking. I had my face pressed up by the window and then you know, cops came, the ambulance on the corner. You know, my parents came, it

was just like opera. But I didn't have that word then right. I didn't have the word opera, but I knew something was going on. So anyway, all of this to say that the next day I had to present this report in my school and the report was interesting things that happened in your neighborhood. So I wrote this story -

***Ramón***

Oh, my God.

***Luis***

And I presented it to my - I think it was my fourth grade class. Anyway, my teacher -

***Ramón***

Oh my God! (trying to hold his laughter)

***Luis***

And she took me to the principal. And then my mom came. She was crying and the principal. They suspended me for a week I supposed to the psychiatrists. And, it was hilarious, right? All based on this, like very, I guess I wrote it very well. Right. And so anyway, I remember that we, we came home and my father was like, What happened to my mother said, Oh my god, he wrote the story about the guy that died lalala and my father says, Well, you have to bring to light that which is in the dark. He was just telling the truth of our neighbor. Right and, and it made me think, although I didn't have this language, then it made me think that somebody was trying to stop me from telling the truth. Somebody was censoring me right now, I don't know what censoring was then. But I knew that. So that's when it really started writing as a kid. And I used

to write this little book I had called True Stories from the corner of people in union. And I used to write about the like, the borrachos in the corner, I would write about the gang members, I would you know, because we knew everybody, right. And so I think that that, that that really was the thing that empowered me towards politics. Somebody doesn't want to hear our story. Why is it that they don't want to hear our story and our story, as I understood it, is the American story. I'm an American, I was born and raised in the USA. So why am I not considered an American? Why am I not treated like an American? So when I was a kid, the other thing that happened is we went to school and this was the olden days, the 70s, right? So we went to school, and my mom, they called my mom and the teacher says, I've changed your son's name to Louis (Ramon gasps in shock) because he's got to be American. So you know, we're not going to call Luis anymore. We're going to call him Louis. So my mother, very, very Mexicana and we went home and my mother said to my dad, like, I mean, I don't know the nombre a Luisa a Louis and my dad goes Louis? **[need help]** And you know, my family was just laughing. And now every year, for my birthday when we sing, we always go to happy birthday, happy birthday dear Louis! But that was so jarring, right? When you think about it politically, it's so jarring because it was basically somebody saying, you cannot be that thing you are anymore and that's the way I think even from a young age. I understood the difference right? And then and then when I started to make art. My art was really about like why, why do they not let us talk about this? So like some of the first things I did was, I did a famous art piece where I was a political action supporter that people of El Salvador. Where I um, spray painted my body on sidewalks throughout LA County. And, you know, when I was trying to do was highlight that there was a civil war in El Salvador and that real people were dying, and that we needed to see those people dead on our street in that outline, that we needed to be reminded that there would have been a human there, right that somebody had paid the price. And, so I think even my early art work was like, deeply

loaded already, right? with the idea that that, um, you know, I needed to tell the truth, and that's always been shown in my search as an artist is, how do I tell the truth? How do I make the truth happen? And, you know, and I've had some great teachers who have, who have helped me do that right, great teachers who have allowed me to do that to talk about things that are really hard and have created a body of work, I think that speaks to that condition. Telling the truth about who we are. You know, I think I wrote a play recently, **the use of Chrome and [need help]**

You know, when I first started writing that play people were - there was a scholar from UC Santa Barbara, who wrote a scathing thing call me vendedo(?) and a whole bunch of stuff, right? Because she said, How dare you tell that story. How dare you tell people that story? And I said, you know, it's really important. I have to tell the truth of the story. And the truth of this story is that more than half of all women across the southern border into the US and documented are assaulted. That is the truth of our story. We have to tell that more than half of us come from divorced families, more than half of us, Latinos come from an alcoholic family. Those are our stories, whether we like it or not. We also come from loving, wonderful, extended families. And those stories are important too. But I really remember like in my early days, as a writer, I used to call it "a pat on the back theater" where like, we're okay, we're alright. And I wrote this piece where a woman came in, she was naked and she had just gotten through her change of life, and she and she was being sort of like, feeling like she'd lost her sexuality, right? And it was such a disturbing piece and the theater did it. And people were protesting and it was like a whole crazy thing, right? And somebody came up to me and said, How dare you? How dare you show a naked Latina body talking about her sexuality? How dare you, right? And nowadays, it would be like, right? Like that happens every day. That's vida, right the show. But in a way, I was thinking, wow, we've come a long way. Because then there were things we were not suppose to talk about. And for me, I felt like I needed to talk about these things. Because I was

trying to give myself an hour myself, to give myself my voice. I was trying to find my voice as a writer. And it was really, really hard, right? So, man, I'm so grateful to my parents. I'm so grateful to my teachers and that's why I mentor and why I get mentored still. I believe very strongly that we are a part of a connective tissue, right? We are all connected to one another. And it's really, really important that we keep supporting each other and listen, not everybody loves each other, and not everybody's ever gonna get along. But that does not mean that we don't - that we have to be competitive with each other, right? There's enough of - if you walk away from the scarcity model, there is so much going on. There is so much opportunity for us as artists and as writers to discover ourselves and I love it. I want to support every writer. You know, somebody at a TCG conference said a few years ago, they said I wish that when I was younger, I realized that not every job I got was meant for me. How beautiful right? Not every branch, not every branch you get, not every opportunity that comes your way is meant for you. Right. You don't have to do them all. You have to do the ones to talk to you. That speak to you. But that's a really good lesson because I think that's a great lesson for me too, that I've learned in my career is, you know, I gave up some pretty big gigs and, you know, but it was just not my game. Right. I wanted to write a play for years for a Broadway theater and when they finally came and asked me for permission, I was like, I don't so. I don't think this is right and I'm not this kind of writer. I don't do plays that you do. I don't do that. And she said, You know what? I think you're right. I think we just needed a Latino. (Both laugh at this moment) She was so honest, but I said there's the right Latino out there for you. It's just not me. But you know, the ego part of me was like, Oh, I want to be this writer. I want to be the writer that writes that, you know, you know, mainstream joy, but that's not me. That wasn't for me. It was not meant for me. And I think knowing that sometimes it's such a great lesson. This is not my gift. It's your gift, right?

**Ramón** 23:47

Mm hmm, mm hmm. It's so enlightening to hear. Well, you in your in your personal process of like, just who you are as like your own entity and knowing who you are and like owning up to it right? and accepting every multifaceted factor about yourself. And I think that's a huge lesson for other people is just, or for others that they would like to right? is literally that and just owning up to - owning who you are in a good way in a very, very good way. And pretty much like you mentioned, one of the things I always say is if we don't lift each other up, then who will?

**Luis** 24:26

That's right. That's beautiful. Yes, I believe, I believe - you know what at USC. A lot of people were like, why are you there like this? You know, it's been a long journey, right. And I was at UCLA, and then I was at Cal Arts and when I finally came to USC to teach, everybody was like, You're a fool, right? It's like a white privilege lalala. So you know, what happened? Is that I am a special - students who gravitate towards me, is sometimes I don't have a single white student. I have all international students. So when this last year they said, We have never taught and we have never offered a Latinx theatre course. And I was like what?!, and they were like, we've never offered Latinx theatre course next year, and they go, nobody would take it. And I go well, let's put it in the thing and see. Well, I went from, like, you know, the day they offered it, I went from, like, 12 students to like 76. Like, just wow. And, and all the students there were Latino. And then we had the most amazing experience because I said, Oh my god, guys, what is going on? And they were like, Well, we've been waiting, we've been waiting. You're like the - and I never forget this was a young Latina girl, she was a freshman. She goes, Wow, I've never been taught by a Latino (Both chuckle). And I was like, Well, you know, this is the way we change the world, right? This is the way we change it. So most of my students are people of color who are

on scholarship, who are really struggling being at a very prestigious university, where class and you know, and privilege is the way that people model themselves. So I create a little oasis, I create "the sanctuary space" right? where the students can come and be who they are. And that really makes a difference. So we have to remember all the time that every space can be our space, and that we have to make the spaces and we - a really great lesson I learned I was talking about this the other day was, in my youth, I got into an organization with a bunch of different nonprofits and we used to fight all the time, it was all people of color. Oh my God, we just couldn't stand each other one day I was like, in tears. And I went to see a friend of mine, a woman named Bernice Johnson Regan Shill(?). She started a group called Sweet Honey in the Rock an acapella, like a political group that sings and she said, if the coalition all gets along, the coalition is too small. If everybody in the coalition gets along, the group is too small. You need to open up the group. And I thought, what a great lesson. I don't have to like everybody but I do have to respect everybody, and I do have to try to listen to everybody. And that has really shifted my thinking, right? Sometimes there are students who come in and you're like, Oh my god, I can't stand this kid, right? But somewhere in the process of teaching, I'm going to make that student love me. And I'm going to love that student, we are going to have a very, very deep relationship in 30 sessions, right? Because I am going to be respectful of you and I'm going to demand that you be respectful of me. And I'm going to focus all my attention on finding out what's stopping you from being extraordinary. And the thing that's usually stopping somebody is something that's always painful and hard and personal. I always tell the story of this guy, he's an amazing actor. And he came in and he just defied me for like, the first 10 weeks and I'd say here's the - here's the exercise, and he would do his own thing right. And then he would never do the exercise that I showed. And then one day, he gets up and I go, did you write the monologue? He goes, no, fuck that, I'm not going to write that monologue. I wrote a rap song.

And I go and do you want to perform it? And he goes yeah. I go before you perform it, I just want to tell you something because we've now gone through 10 weeks together, and I go and I think the reason you're not listening to me is because you think I'm going to abandon you. This is just completely instinctual on my part as your professor. But I just want to tell you, that I am not going to abandon you the way your father abandoned you. Now, I don't know, if you have a father, I don't know if your father's in your life. I don't know your father's alive. But I can guarantee by the way, you exhibit your behavior that your father has abandoned you, and it is making you act out and he starts crying. **This is Roger back (need help)**. And he starts crying, he starts crying. So I'm going to tell you for the next 20 weeks, I'm going to be here. I'm going to show up early, and you're going to show up early. And we're going to have little conversations, and we're going to do a little pre class and we're going to get clear with each other about what we need from each other. But I need for you to know that I'm not going to abandon you. And he became like one of my, my favorite students. He's having an amazing career. He is an extraordinary young man. But I never forget that moment. It was like, it was like something in me just said, I gotta call him out. But I gotta call him up from a place of love. And I got to acknowledge that he is in pain. He is in some sort of trauma. Right? And it was the most amazing experience and from that moment on, he became the star student. I mean, he became the most extraordinary young actor. And I, and I think that um, sometimes we need to be there for each other's trauma. (Both chuckle at this moment) You know, trauma bonding. You know, what happens is we don't always start off as nice people when we're in trauma or when we're hurt. We act out, right? Why are we so jealous of each other? Why are we competitive? Why are we talking smack about each other? Why are we doing that? Well we're doing that because we're afraid and fear leads to a kind of hatred, right? That's really your issue, right? So when I come into those rooms and a student's acting loud, I'm like, Okay, so let's figure it out what it is.

And usually, it's something that's happened to you that you can't let go of. And it has nothing to do with me. It has nothing to do with me, but we need to deal with it, because now you and I are together. And together, we're going to make some great art. We're collaborators. So the marriage has happened, right? (Both laugh)

**Ramón**

Yeah, the marriage has happened, let's conceive another baby.

**Luis**

Exactly.

**Ramón** 30:32

It's wonderful to hear that we have these professors in these institutions like you. I mean, like, you know, it's USC. So of course it is, from what we hear, is the privilege and how white evidence of tuition it is. But it's very crucial that we have professors just as yourself who are there and say, like, Hey, I'm here for you. I'm not you know, I'm not going to abandon you. I'm here to help. Let's help each other out. And I think that is one of the biggest inspirations for me specifically is meeting these mentors and meeting these professors who are, who are like, Well, yeah, men can train their students -

**Luis** 0:00

Yeah, I always feel like, one of the things that I love of students is, I always get in trouble at USC because I opened the semester by saying everybody has an A, congratulations. I don't want to worry about grades, this is not about grades. This is about. I'm gonna make you love

theater, I'm gonna make you love writing. This is not about me putting a grade to it. But you have to show up, and you have to show up on time. So the grade is going to be really a reflection not of your writing, but a reflection of your discipline. It's going to be a reflection of whether you can get your butt up in the morning and show up. That's what it's going to be about right? And then I say, um, and I'm not going to call you student and I don't want you to call me professor, because we're collaborators, so I'm going to treat you the way I treat professionals in the field, and I'm going to demand the same things that I demand to professionals in the field, do you want to do want to work that way and when they say yes, we have a really great - It's challenging but we have a great experience. And at the end of the year, I'm happy to give all A's, but you know what it never happens when I give them all A's because there's going to be some pendejo who is going to be always late, or somebody who's not going to show up or whatever, whatever right? and that's the way the curve gets me right. And so I think about it a lot because I think a lot about how, how can I treat you like the artist that you are, how can I treat you with the dignity and respect to you that you are entitled to as a human being. Right. And so everything if we can approach all of the work, teaching, art making, living. If we could treat it all that way. I think we could go into a very different world. I am in a neighborhood. It's the densest neighborhood in all of LA County and LA County is, you know, over 10 million people right so this neighborhood has 93% renters. And it's a, I think it's like 50% Latino and 30 something percent Korean. So when I get up I get up at five in the morning and I go do my little walk to just not be around everybody right? so then I have to wear my mask in a park. And, um, but everybody's up, and everybody in my neighborhood up because they're all essential workers right, they're all in uniform, they're all in McDonald's outfits. Right. And I think about this a lot. My job is to honor and respect the thing you're doing right now which is you have to get up and you have to go to work, I have to get up and I have to go teach right. And so while everybody else

was dealing with the isolation. I'm still getting up and I'm in the zoom for six hours right. I'm doing all that stuff. That is a different way of looking at things. I want to acknowledge and say that I see you, I want to be seen, because this is something that didn't happen for us for a long time. So when I walk into these experiences now, and I say, I want to see you really see you. It changes the way I live and move through the world. I'm a better person, and a happier person. Right, I'm a more relaxed person. I don't come with all my craziness right. And I think, I think that's really, really important. It's really, really important to click that thing, the thing in my head was that I grew up in a very hard place that could have made me very hard, right? And I worked really hard to stay soft, in a very hard place. Right? And that, and I think that's been part of the journey right? how to find the tender, in what is really, really tough.

**Ramón** 3:35

Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean I grew up in - Oh, well you know Merced, right?

**Luis** 3:43

Yeah, very well. Yes.

**Ramón** 3:45

Yeah, so I grew up in Winton and it's like pues como el barrio of like Atwater and Merced. So, yeah, like I grew up with a lot of gang - gangs here, like gang violence, like drive by's, helicopters arriving at the park to pick people up, etc etc. But it is. It's one of those things of like how do you keep that softness and how do you keep all of that with the surroundings being hard and rough, and almost wanting to push you towards becoming that as well in the sense of like, or almost defense right so it's like how do you then lean into the song , into the empathy, into

the growing and personal growth, which has also been a very interesting journey. Interesting is just going to be my go to word. (Luis chuckles)

**Luis** 4:39

Well interesting is interesting it's good because it's like a big pool of like of questions right and I think about this all the time when I start when I do this freshman seminar and they all like are super, they're like, when you're 17 years old and you show up at college. They're like a mess right, they're an emotional mess, they're like, they're like slobbering they're like, coughing their germs and everything. And so when they show up, I always think about this, I pair them up, and I make them go, and I say, tell the person that you're walking with a secret something they don't know, that nobody else knows about you, and you know depending on how deep they get with each other, is how deep they're going to be in their friendship, and in every semester, I get a note from somebody saying, oh my god I'm so happy we did that thing because I found somebody just to connect with at school because I felt so isolated right. And I think that maybe our job as theater artists is to just connect. We connect with an audience, we connect with other artists, we're always in the business of connecting, we're connecting, connecting, connecting, and I'm cool with that right? The translation, the channeling, the, the, the journey of telling our stories, it's all about how we want to share ourselves. And that is so cool how we share ourselves is a great, great powerful way to work in the world. So I think that when I was a kid, rather than shutting off, I sort of turned on. Right? And you know I would get my ass kicked and stuff all the time with the cholos and everything but you know to say like in, in another way. We knew all the cholos on the block, we knew all the drunks, we knew everybody right and you kind of that was your hood. That was just your hood. That was just the way you were raised right? So, I think, I think, um, yeah, I love this thing about soft and hard because I think it's one of our

biggest problems especially as men right? How do you not get hard? The world is hard for, for many people, and how do you not let that hardness take over you? How do you not grow hard?

**Ramón**

And that can be taken in different, and a different sense too Luis. (Both laugh at this moment)

**Luis**

Oh my god. Now all of a sudden there's going to be a "bum,bum,bum,bum,bum,bum,bong" I get it.

**Ramón 7:03**

I mean, you did say you were single right? So for any listeners out there Luis is single so and--

**Luis 7:08**

And available for socially distanced dinners across from each other, like, at a park. (chuckles)

**Ramón 7:17**

Absolutely, yeah, yeah, yeah! So, hit up Luis. (They laugh it out) Luis. What would be some of, like - Yeah, some word of advice or some young aspiring or emerging artists, whether they're a writer, a poet, etc.

**Luis 7:39**

Well I think you know this is something that the most successful young writers that I'm meeting, are the ones who do not, do not doubt yourself. What you have to say is so powerful and so

beautiful. And when you say it in your own language, the language of your people, the language of your family, the language of your friends, you're already writing in poetry. So the challenge is, you have to take great risk, right, if you take great risks. you are rewarded with great, wonderful work, but if you don't take great risks. You also don't get great wonderful work. Which it comes from - great work I think comes from experiment. So I guess I would say to - I always think about what I would say the younger part of me was I would say, Don't doubt yourself, mess up as much as you want. I had a great teacher, a wonderful man named Mack Wellman who was my teacher for a while with Paula Bobo and the both of them said, you need to fail more, you need to really embrace failure, and I had a year, a very strange year in LA, oh my god it was hard, I went to learn how to ballroom dance with the senior citizen. These Japanese senior citizens in Gardena, and I didn't know how to ballroom dance, but I just went to do it for like six months because I wanted to learn, and fail and then see if I could get it. So I did three things I ballroom danced. Number two, I did a cabaret act. I don't sing, and I worked with an arranger for six months, and it was terrible and I did a show at a club in Hollywood. It was awful. And then I did stand up comedy. And I'm not an extended comedian, but all three of them were actually not failures, they were like really interesting. Right. But they were three things that scared me the most. So, how do you - I say to students all the time, you have to jump off the cliff, you have to walk through fire with your work. Do not doubt yourself, believe in yourself more than anybody will believe in you because there is a moment where nobody believes in you, right that's just part of the journey of being an artist. So, believe in yourself, so that others will believe in you, right, you attract the energy that - you really attract that energy that comes to you. People are attracted to people who want to do the work. And so, yeah, I guess I would say that - I would say, I would say, take great risk and believe in yourself, right, because you're wonderful when you're failing. I love it, I love it, I wish I could teach a class called failure, (chuckles) where I can't

let you succeed in any way. I just give you things to do - it would be such a great class because I think you will learn a lot. Right. It's just a failure. Just fail.

***Ramón***

I think there's a lot of pressure of - there's a lot of pressure within society nowadays of just being like you can either get it perfect within the first try. So yeah, fail, try new things, why not? and that's how you grow.

***Luis***

And I think it's also ridiculous like in some ways inserting an American Idol dilemma, right, where it's like, Listen, not everybody is born, hitting the high C. that is something - that's a muscle right? That's something you have to really work at. And if you could be okay with working your way up to something that would be very exciting because that requires you to really invest to really study to really work at the thing you do, nobody starts off with the great boom. You know, writing - the art of writing is rewriting right? The Art of writing is getting the thought that you know - I scribble a lot. I spit out a lot, my first draft is a vomit draft. You know when I go to a poetry reading I have something new I say this one still Bheki (?), you know, I know that I have to give myself process, processes, everything. And so, perfection. That's non-existent right; it doesn't exist. I really don't believe it exists, everything is flawed, everything is just a beautiful expression of your brain and your job. There was a great interview the other day with Ann Boghart (?) Do you know who she is? In The City Company, the director -

***Ramón***

Yeah viewpoints?

**Luis**

Yeah and she said, she said one really interesting thing you said, she goes we need three things in our culture, only three things that's all you need is an artist. You need a point of view, you need craft, and you need passion. And she goes, it's like a three legged stool. And if you don't have craft technique, passion desire, and a point of view, something's really missing in the art, and she said right now, what's missing is a craft technique. We have a lot of passionate people. We have a lot of points of views, but people don't know how to express themselves, I thought, Oh, that's interesting, right, and I kind of agree that you know - yeah those three are the three things that we need to work at passion, technique, pov. That's easy.

**Ramón 12:46**

I love it, I do. (Both chuckle) I love it, now I'm processing. You're right. Um, it's strive for progress, not perfection is one of my mantras, strive for progress not perfection.

**Luis 13:00**

That's right, it's beautiful. It's beautiful. I love it.

**Ramón 13:03**

And then you know there's also like clowning which is all about failure, (laughs) and all the fiasco.

**Luis 13:09**

And improv about saying yes right and saying yes to all the possibility. Every great art is, you know, built on this notion that you are, you don't know what's next. You don't know what's going

to happen next. Right. And I love that, I love that about art, art, if I come into the room and I already know what I'm doing. I'm usually bored or I'm lying and so I have to clock myself constantly. I have to check myself. And say what am I doing here? I want to be lost. I want to get lost. I want to get lost. Right. Let's all get lost.

***Ramón***

It's all the unknown. Let's get lost together. Absolutely. And so Luis, what are you doing nowadays to just, I mean, keep some joy?

***Luis***

Well, I have a mother who has dementia and she brings a lot of joy, taking care of my mother sounds a little corny but it's like being able to give her back. The thing that she gave me is intensely satisfying. and I have a nephew who has autism. So I have two very intense people in my life that I caretake, and the both of them are hilarious. And they're a handful, and they are all encompassing, and then I have art. So art is a huge part of my life. I'm looking at it, I'm reading it and watching it, and I'm making it, and I think it's a lot of work, so you know I find joy along the way and like I'm reading right now. I've been reading. I got rid of my TV four years ago, and everybody thinks that's super intense. But um, I haven't seen TV for so long and finally got Netflix when the pandemic kicked in because I thought that I was gonna get like stir crazy and I watched one episode of Tiger King and I was like, oh my god I can't watch this right now. It's so intense. This poor tiger -

***Ramón***

Yeah, I watched like two episodes and I was like nah, nah, nah, I can't.

**Luis**

Yeah it's too intense. So, I've been reading a lot and the stuff I've been reading it's really stuff that I know nothing about. I'm reading a book by Pete Carl called Becoming a Man, about transgender culture. And so, you know, I would say like in that way, my world keeps opening up, right, and I volunteer a lot and I, I'm very active in my students lives still and I have a weekly check in with my alumni graduate students so you know like I stay the thread, I stay in the thread with them. I stay in the world of making art with them so even though they leave, we never really stopped being in the classroom together. Right.

**Ramón 15:35**

Yeah. Yeah. That's beautiful. So Luis, if other folks want to follow you on any of the medias and take you out on a date, social distance at the park, where can folks find you? Like, can you, can they follow your Instagram or do you have a personal, not a personal like an artist page or anything like that?

**Luis 15:58**

I have a really very busy Facebook because I write these essays on Facebook. These thousand word essays. So if people want to look me up on Luis Alfaro. The Luis Alfaro on Facebook and The Luis Alfaro on IG but I tend to, because I'm a word person, I tend to not be attracted - I have a Twitter, but I never get on it. And partly it's just because I like to use words right so um yeah I'm less intrigued by the visual image I'm more intrigued by the language so yeah my Facebook and I'm always around I'm doing a lot of stuff i'm doing i'm getting my stuff ready for next year. When we open again, hopefully have a play, and a lot of different theaters and writing a lot of new plays and doing a really amazing new play with The Bob Baker Marionette studio, the

oldest company in the country, about a Chicana poet who stutters, a puppet that stutters. So it's really fun stuff. Yeah, so, yeah, I'm doing a lot of stuff. So, just look me up on Facebook, follow me, I have like, I think I'm up to like 10,000 people on there so it's a little intense but it's good.

(Ramon laughs)

**Ramón** 17:05

That's good. So, um, off of the podcast I would love to hear more about your, your play that you're writing for the--

**Luis**

Yeah, that would be really nice.

**Ramón**

Well thank you so much Luis, for being here with us today. It was amazing, incredible I loved it, because I love you duh. Thank you so much everyone for tuning in today with In The Margins Podcast. If you want to know more about us by all means please visit our website at

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