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Guest Profile: Tanya Saracho, Playwright and Artistic Director

Tanya Saracho was born in Sinaloa, México and is a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists and Teatro Vista, a Goodman Theater Fellow at the Ellen Stone Belic Institute for the Study of Women and Gender, an Artistic Associate with About Face Theater and the Co-Founder and former Artistic Director of Teatro Luna. Saracho is a recipient of the Ofner Prize given by the Goodman Theatre as well as a 3Arts Artists Award. Tanya is also an actor and a voice over talent.

Tanya visited Hollins as one of our guest speakers in July. While at Hollins she met with students individually, performed at No Shame, led a writing workshop and gave a public talk on her life in the theatre. Here are some of the answers to questions our students put to her.

How did you get into theatre?

I’ve had to answer this a lot this year. Because of my accent. It’s such a circle. I moved to Texas in ’89, and I had a big accent. Big, thick accent that I’ve been trying to get rid of all my life. It was junior high when I moved to Texas and there were posters in the hallway saying “Speech and debate.” But, I was like, oh, they will rid me of my accent. It’s like speech therapy, I thought. So, I showed up and they handed me Cinderella by Roald Dahl. I was a ham. I could do some voices, so it seemed natural. I didn’t know what I was reading, but I could do the voices and the next thing I knew I was on the bus on the weekend at a tournament. I didn’t know what I was reading but I could do the voices. Wh ich later on, voices and accents became very important because it’s how I eat now. I do voiceovers, that’s how I make a big chunk of my living.

Why Chicago and not New York or Los Angeles?

I kept going to New York to see my friends starve and live in shoe boxes. And I like to eat. I can’t be starving and can’t be like walking everywhere. And, I like to drive. So, I was real stressed out on New York and somebody had some kind of book on Steppenwolf—you know, the Ensemble and John Malkovich. And I was, like, “Wait. I could go to this Chicago city and start my own company? And then be in the movies and be famous like John Malkovich?”

So, I seriously arrived in Chicago with two bags and I found this apartment that weekend and twelve years later I’m still in that apartment. I’ve lived three lifetimes in that apartment. But, the night I moved in...two girls who are upstairs, they came to welcome us and they gave us the lay of the land. They were explaining, “Over there is a Jewish family and over there’s some black people that live over there, but they’re OK, just don’t walk over there at night. And down the street there are some Mexicans. Oh, wait...none of you are Mexican, right?”

And I had never heard the word Mexican like that. Mexican.

I said, “I am Mexican.”

And she said, “Oh, no, the other kind of Mexican.”

What I realized is that first night in Chicago I’ve been tracking for twelve years in all my work. So, complicating the image of Latina women, I think it was from that night, the fact that she didn’t think that I was Latina right away and the fact that there were “other” types of Mexicans. I’ve been tracking that. And I have a feeling I’ve been tracking that forever.

But then, Chicago became a really good town for new work.

I did start a theatre company. Not Steppenwolf, it doesn’t have that budget or anything, but Teatro Luna, half of the Latinas that I started working with had never done theatre. Because in our culture they tell us that actresses are prostitutes or loose women. They had never gotten training but they’ve always had this dream and so we formed this sisterhood where we were telling our stories and there was a freedom in that. We just started playing. We hadn’t studied interview based performance, but we invented it for ourselves. We got together and it just became this really beautiful thing and I really don’t think it could have happened in New York. It would have been too Caribbean. It couldn’t happen in LA, it would have been too Chicano. Chicago is perfect because a quarter of the population is Latino and people go see new work. People go see anything. And they will give you a second and third try.

And in Chicago we were able to live in the margins a little bit. But we would sell out and have to turn people away. People in Chicago go see theatre. And people in Chicago see new theatre. I guess, Chicago is a great place to grow. It is good, fertile ground. The critics are really...I don’t know of any other city where the critics are so supportive of new work. In fact, they champion new work and they kind of look down on big, established things.

Come! Move to Chicago!

How did you connect with Steppenwolf?

They connected with me. I kept doing my stuff in the margins and Martha Lavey, the Artistic Director of Steppenwolf—she goes to everything. So, she kept coming to see stuff. That’s one. As an actor, I also act in plays and I was in a play at the Goodman, the dramaturg happened to be the literary manager of the Goodman. One of my cast mates, my friend, was like, “Tanya, tell him you write plays!” I didn’t want to be pushy, so I was like, “No, no, no, it will find me when it finds me.” And she’s like, “Hey, Rick! Tanya writes plays!”

So, he was like, “OK. Bring it tomorrow.”

So, I brought it the next day and he read it and then he was like, “We need to talk.”

And he told me he wanted to give me the Ofner Prize. It happened that fast. So then, you know, they announce it. They do press releases. Tanya Saracho, Ofner Prize! And then Steppenwolf is like, “Well, who is this Tanya Saracho? We want to have a mafia. You have to have a mafia. You have to have a community that nurtures you and supports you and cheers you on and yes, at times, checks you and keeps you honest. Start a writing group. With Teatro Luna I formed this artistic circle that was ready to nurture pages and new concepts. It was a great place to grow as an artist who devises work.

www.tanyasaracho.com
Best of No Shame

October’s BONS featured the work of several of our student playwrights, in addition to a variety of local writers and performers. MFA playwrights Darlene Fedele, Adam Hahn, Clinton Johnston, Samantha Macher, and Chad Runyon all had pieces performed in the show.

Offerings from our students included puppetry, a musical with piano accompaniment, as well as monologues about love, civil rights, and King Kong.

Best of No Shame accomplished its mission, to prove that at this venue anything can happen...and usually does!

Short original performance pieces. During the summer it is an important experiential learning lab for our students to “learn by doing” by getting their work up in front of a live audience. The rules are simple: pieces must be original, under five minutes, and not break anything (including the law). The result is eclectic, exciting, and often outrageous.

Twice each year 25 pieces that got the strongest audience reactions over the last six months are performed in a showcase called Best of No Shame (BONS) in front of packed, enthusiastic houses.

The Poe Plays: The Selected Dissected Works of Edgar Allan Poe by Sean Engard

Sean Engard is an accomplished actor, director, poet, and just completed his second summer session as part of the Playwright’s Lab. He’s also a graduate of the South Coast Repertory: Professional Conservatory and an Orange Coast College alumnus.

Sean recently collaborated with a group of southern California playwrights to adapt several of Edgar Allen Poe’s most macabre short stories and poems into a creatively creepy stage play that is perfectly suited for the Halloween season and presented as part of the Fullerton Shadows Theatre Festival 2010.

The festival is a month long celebration of fantasy, horror and science fiction which included over 120 events at eight different venues.

Engard wrote more than half of the eight short adaptations selected for the production, which was directed by David Chorley. These new plays put an inventive spin on the classic tales. *The Raven* is the name of a space shuttle, *The Tell Tale Heart* is told from two different perspectives and other shorts include same sex couples, interpretive dance, projections on a screen, and substituting weed for wine.

Sean is a member of the DGA (Dramatist's Guild of America) and the OCPA (Orange County Playwrights Alliance). His play *House of Atreus* will be produced next month at his alma mater, Orange Coast College Drama Lab. Engard is slated to direct this production himself.

STAGES theatre is Fullerton’s oldest storefront theatre and since 1992 their mission has been to present a broad spectrum of the very best of contemporary and classic plays that speak to audiences of all backgrounds. A significant part of their work is to provide an arena for new works and to foster the development of those works in a supportive and inspiring workplace.

http://www.stagesoc.org/
Playwright’s Lab at Hollins University

Learn the craft of writing dramatic works and study the collaborative art of theatre during our six-week intensive schedule—and earn an M.F.A. in playwriting in just a few summers. You’ll work closely with such guest artists as Ruth Margraff, Naomi Wallace, and Mac Wellman and form professional relationships that can lead to reading and production opportunities before graduation—a potent formula few other programs offer.

For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting for more information.