



 **Texas Theatre Journal**

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## Texas Theatre Journal Interview

### Playwright Gregory Ramos

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Gregory Ramos, an actor, director, and playwright, discusses his writing process which uses verbatim interviews with residents of El Paso and Juárez to create the text of a theatrical anthem for a variety of voices that comprise many kinds of borders, both real and imagined. His play *Border Stories* has evolved and changed over the past the decade. Ramos reflects here on the personal and artistic dynamics that permeate not only this particular play but also his subsequent work. He recently co-directed a staged reading of his script *A Visit From San Cristobal* with Company of Angeles theatre company in Los Angeles. Currently he is conducting interviews for a new play inspired by Mexican myths, legends and family ghost stories with the working title *Cuentos de Josefina*. Ramos is Chair and Associate Professor of Theatre at the University of Vermont.

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**AM:** This play was initially called "Border Voices?"

**GR:** I was connected to an organization called ALLGO—the Austin Latino/a Lesbian and Gay Organization. They are really about community engagement. I spent about a summer there in residence, but I honestly can't remember how I got connected with them. It might have been someone like Alicia Gaspar de Alba who saw me do a reading of the piece at a conference—at, I believe, Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio.

The first thing I did with the interviews was crafting the characters and I would go to academic conferences and present and discuss the characters and the project. I believe it was either Emma Perez or Alicia who saw me at a conference and connected me with ALLGO. They asked me to come and do the piece and through discussions we decided it would be a good idea to do it as a community piece.

At that time under the title "Border Voices," we had auditions for folks who were interested in performing the piece. I cast twelve actors. Some played more than one role. Some played one role. Some were actors who had been trained at graduate programs and others were just community folks who liked to go to the ALLGO center, so there was a wide range of different training that people brought to the piece. And we performed it there. We put it up in their space. I served as the director.

I didn't perform in the piece. That was the initial production of it even though it was under a different name.

**AM:** And what about the process up to that point?

**GR:** It was about a three-year process for that. I stated collecting data in 2000.

**AM:** And that took place in El Paso? What brought you to El Paso?

**GR:** The real story is I had finished graduate school at UCLA. My goal in life was to be an artistic director of a theater. Frankly, at age 38, I wasn't ready to go back to New York and, you know, wait tables or do whatever I needed to do to get my company off the ground. Edit Villarreal, who was my mentor at UCLA told me I was a gifted teaching assistant, seemed comfortable in the classroom setting, and that it would be possible to consider academic positions and still maintain my writing portfolio.

Long story longer, I accepted a position at University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) as a visiting assistant professor, and at the time I thought I would stay there for a year and move on. That first year I was there I found out there was an oral history institute. When I went to the oral history institute to see who was there, what voices were collected, I could not find any queer voices. There were no gay or lesbian voices. There was one transgender person who had been interviewed. The person who was the director at the institute told me that they really didn't have that body of work.

Coupled with that and being a gay man, I was now living on the border and I was looking for a community. My partner had stayed in LA. I was used to living in LA and New York, and in those geographical locations—at least in my view—the gay community is visible. In El Paso it was not visible. And that's not to say that I couldn't intuit that there were gay and lesbian people around, but what I came to learn was that there are gay and lesbian people there like there are gays and lesbians everywhere, but the texture of the culture takes on a different appearance. And I started to ask myself questions: Why? What is it?

My analysis was that one component was economic. That what I had come to perceive as gay culture was related to an economic status that allowed people to dress a certain way and go to certain restaurants and clubs and do certain things that people that didn't have those means couldn't do. So in Los Angeles and New York, what we called gay culture and what I perceived to be gay culture, were people who had access. I've come to feel like there are different kinds of gay culture, or what we can call broadly gay culture, can take on different manifestations.



So I was looking for community, and looking for—subconsciously looking for myself—a way to integrate my sense of self as a gay man and my sense of self as a Latino man, because I had never taken time to do that. I had come from a family that was very conservative. My father made it a point not to speak Spanish at home, so I had other kinds of finding myself issues going on. So on a personal and artistic level I was trying to integrate these two pieces of myself. So I wrote a grant to get money from the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies at UTEP. Money that was funded by the Ford Foundation. And I got the grant which allowed me to conduct interviews and do the transcripts, and then donate them to the oral history institute there.

**AM:** What was the canvassing experience like for getting the interviews? Who was receptive to you?

**GR:** I made it a point to go to where I thought gay people would be. There is a gay and lesbian community center there. I met the executive director who ended up being one of the characters in the piece. I left fliers there. I found out there were in fact gay bars and clubs in El Paso and Juárez. I went to those clubs and wherever I could I would leave a flier up. And people responded. Because this started as a personal exploration, I guess subconsciously my initial intent was to interview gay men, and the responses initially came from women. And some of them were very vocal. They said, "You're not going to do this project and leave lesbians out of it." The first people I began speaking to identified as lesbian. And from there it became like snowball sampling, you know that that oral history/social science term for finding subjects from other subjects. So I started interviewing people by referrals.

**AM:** What position did you take as an interviewer with conducting these oral histories? What did you begin to find useful in this process?

**GR:** That was important to me early on when I began interviewing subjects. I made it a point to identify myself as a gay man and we could have conversations about that. In fact, I don't know how this aligns with the rules or guidelines of how folks typically conduct oral histories, but I found it successful to talk about myself initially. To talk about my background, my sense of self as a gay man, and—not to take all the airtime—but if I laid the foundation of honesty which ended up providing a space for people to talk about themselves, then people would talk.

So there were two things going on: the first is that everyone has a story and that everyone wants to tell their story. I learned that. The other thing is I was writing a dramatic piece, so facts and figures were not really what I was looking for. I was looking for stories. The universe is made of stories [chuckles]. That's what the challenge was of the piece. To get people to provide a beginning, a middle, and an

end to either their coming out story, or their story of abuse, or their story of triumph, or whatever it is they experienced. The fertile ground that was necessary for people to reveal intimate experiences, I think was predicated on my willingness to share myself.

**AM:** How transparent were you with the subjects with regard to their interviews, the oral history and the artistic piece? Or, how much did *you* know at the point of the interviews?

**GR:** They knew everything. They would sign a release form that said something like, "A: I'm recording this with the possibility of donating it to the oral history institute at UTEP, and by signing this you're acknowledging that your voice may be there. You have an option for whether or not this will be anonymous. And B: you further understand that I am creating a theater piece and there's a possibility that your voice or a monologue or character may be inspired by your story and you have an option to be anonymous in that way as well." So people had full information of what I was doing and what my intentions were when they signed up. And in fact that's what whittled down the number of people who were willing to speak, or would lose interest in participating in the project.

And nine times out of ten—and this is the irony of the piece—the reason they weren't interested is that they weren't out to their family. I spent an hour and a half with one guy who was a really interesting person who had owned a gay club on the border in the 1950s that was kind of a Mecca for gay life at the time. At the end of the interview he said, "You're gonna do what?" When it became clear what was happening he said, "I have an aunt who lives in Juárez and if she ever hears about this it's not gonna be good. So you can't use it."

That was kind of an interesting irony. The folks that weren't interested in participating typically were not interested in participating for the very kind of cultural and social tensions around which I was doing the piece.

**AM:** What was general feedback you got from your collaborators? Was it fun?

**GR:** I think people enjoyed it. A couple of the people actually came to see the early *Border Voices* version in Austin. I think two of them. And there were some informal readings that I did around El Paso that a number of people came to see. I think they enjoyed it. I think my experience of the people was that the interview itself was enough. It was beneficial. The sharing part was valuable for them.

**AM:** That's an interesting dynamic. So when you select the monologues, is each character an actual testimony, or is this an amalgamation of testimonies? What values do you bring to the construction of the piece and why?

**GR:** I don't think I do what I believe Anna Deavere Smith does. Which is like a docudrama kind of approach. At least in her pieces like *Fire in the Mirror* and *Twilight Los Angeles*. From what I understand and I what I've read in her interviews is that she's very interested in documenting, and I'm really interested in story. What I did for the *Border Stories* piece is I gave myself a goal that all the words in a particular monologue had to come from a person, but I allowed myself the creative flexibility to move the words around if in my mind they serve the story in a deeper way. I didn't manufacture words for the folks I had interviewed, but I allowed myself to actually use those words in a different order, or part of a story in a different place if it helps support the notion of a dramatic structure.

**AM:** Has the play been adapted over time?

**GR:** It hasn't been reworked a lot, but what I tried to do in order to craft the piece, you try to craft something with dramaturgical structure. Because it's a set of stories, my attempt was to structure the stories so that there is constant interest, and tension and release, so you don't get all the weighted stories at the beginning and the informational stories at the end. So I tried to structure it in a way that the piece had a difference in tone and a difference in tension.

**AM:** When reading this play again, it appears to serve more than simply an LGBT narrative. More broadly it implicates many groups of people who comprise the border town. How do you suppose El Paso lends itself to the play in a way that no other location could?

**GR:** I think I know what you're getting at. It's very complex, because El Paso is a complex place, for those reasons you cite. I think there's a sense of alienation there. It's geographically isolated from other Texas towns. And in interesting ways it is isolated, or at least separated from Mexico, so there's a very real kind of an imagined but very real border there. It's not like New Mexico in many ways. So it's a really unique place.

I think it's true that people there identify it as a border town. It's not part of Texas in the same way as other parts of Texas are. My experience in this piece was that the geographic location and the cultural capsule and the historical capsule around that geographic region dictated that certain themes came up in almost every person I talk to: religion, family and surprisingly to me, AIDS.

This was the year 2000, and almost every person I spoke to had been touched in some way, deeply, significantly or at least marginally, by AIDS. So that was kind of an interesting discovery that I didn't expect. I think one of the reasons is that those things are kind of interrelated. I was speaking to these people around a particular historical period. Around the millennium. I think there was a coming to terms that

was happening historically. We were at a place where it wasn't quite the epidemic it was as it effected the gay community. What I think I'm saying is that AIDS served as a catalyst in that community probably like a lot of communities around America and maybe around the world and forced folks to look at gayness. I think one of the reasons it came up in the interviews was because it had left its mark. It forced the community as a whole to look at that.

It was not a mistake that the last piece was the character of Esperanza, a mother talking about her son who died of AIDS. It was a piece of the play based on a real person. That even with such a visible figure in the community, no one really spoke about it. Esperanza even says, "We couldn't say what it was." But what it did was force people in the confines of the home to start addressing those issues as that character addresses those issues.

**AM:** She's my favorite character.

**GR:** She's pretty great.

**AM:** Can we please talk about the audience? Who's seen this play? Has it played El Paso?

**GR:** You know, I never performed it in El Paso. There's been talk about bringing me back to the university to do it. It hasn't worked time-wise because of my other commitments, but there was a production for a fundraiser and I gave an organization permission to do it. And they did it at a place called Ardovino's Desert Crossing, it's about 15 minutes out of the city. But, that was the official full production in El Paso.

**AM:** What have been some of your observations about audience reactions over the span of the last decade?

**GR:** I would say my predominantly Anglo audiences see it...how can I say this? They see it as kind of a "Huh? Wow! What an interesting thing that those people deal with." Whereas when I've been to places where there are people of color whether it's Rutgers or Cal State LA where there was a very mixed audience, there seemed to be kind of an energy of identification that people of color have communicated to me that other audiences have not. I did *Border Voices* at a performing arts center in New England and although the response was positive it wasn't quite the same.

**AM:** Is it a pleasure for you to have elicited these varied reactions to the piece? Are you objective about those reactions?

**GR:** I'll just be honest about it. It's very moving to me when I do the piece and there are Latino folks who are in the audience. I've stayed in touch via email or Facebook with people who have seen the piece or who are touched by the piece and I think that



gets back to what I was saying initially about going to Texas and trying to build, or understand community, or understand myself in some ways. I think that's one of the gifts people have given me. That these people are identifying with it. Maybe they're thinking: "Oh, that story is like me," or "That story is like my aunt," or "That story was like me when I was in high school and I was beating up the gay kids," or whatever the case.

I think it's two things. I think one is that Latino gay and lesbian folks can identify with the piece in a way that maybe Anglo audiences don't. And the other thing is kind of cultural in terms of how folks express their reaction to an artistic piece that they see. Living in New England for the last six years, I can say that my perception is that New Englanders aren't as effusive when they respond to something as other folks are in different cultures like Latino folks. That may be a generalization, but again, when I perform the piece and there are people of color and predominantly Latino people, the response in terms of how they communicate to me one-on-one afterward is more effusive.

**AM:** You mentioned earlier that this project was partly about finding yourself. Did you find yourself? Did you find what you were looking for in this process?

**GR:** That is such a good question! Someone like Martha Graham said the artist is always asking "Who am I?" And it's a continual process of "Who am I?" Maybe I'm always asking that question, but with this piece I learned a lot about myself. Maybe I came closer to understanding who I am as a person. I found parts of myself, and maybe that's what we are. A bunch of parts.

**AM:** There's relevance to so many demographics in this play. I think it's a flexible piece.

**GR:** I would agree. I think this is a flexible piece. I think if there's ever the interest on the part of a community group or artist to work with the piece, I would be open to making whatever changes, additions, alterations in the text, so it is relevant in speaking to the audience.

At the same time my hope is that there is enough that is human about it—essentially—that the message can remain the same. That it is not going to be perceived as something that doesn't matter anymore.

**AM:** Of course. And perhaps it's flexible in its context as well content. How might *you* classify this piece? Is it a gay play? Is it a play about Latinos?

**GR:** Ultimately, it's a play about identity. I think it's an identity piece. In some ways it's just a meditation on identity and the social and cultural forces that bear upon our



sense of identity. How we carve an identity against the canvas of where we are, where we live, who we were born to.

**AM:** This is your first foray into developing interview based theater. What advice would you give to yourself or anybody else who might venture into this area.

**GR:** It's interesting you ask that. I just got a grant to create another piece that will be inspired by other interviews but it's of a different nature. It's a multi-character play and I'm going to do interviews to inform the content. I would say I've honed my ability to understand early on, which interviews are going to contain a dramaturgical nugget that will hold value for the play. So, that's good.

And I think it taught me to just keep at it. To not give up. When I'm in the process of identifying those who will be interviewed, to keep at it. When someone gives you a referral, be open to the possibility that there might be a great interview. You never know where a great interview will come from.

**AM:** There's a line in the play when two characters acknowledge that you, or at least that a third party or an interviewer has asked them a question. Can you tell me about the choice to acknowledge your position in the play?

**GR:** It was a way to remind the audience that these people were talking to someone. And in an interesting way, I struggled with whether or not to put myself in the piece as a narrator person. I can be a character cause I have so much to say. And in spending time with the piece, and crafting, and looking at what the piece was ultimately saying, it was all me anyway. It's clearly other voices, but the notion that I choose what to say and when to say it ultimately reflects I am saying.

**AM:** You mention this being an identity piece. What does it build toward? What is it that people are invited to take away through these stories?

**GR:** I'll answer it this way. I cannot tell you how many people I had met when I was living in El Paso or who had found out I had lived in El Paso and their response is some kind of fucked up and derogatory, "Oh, I'm sorry." I was at a cocktail party a couple of weeks ago in Burlington, Vermont. I was telling a man in conversation my story and that I had lived in El Paso, and he said, "Oh, I'm sorry." And I said, "Have you ever been to El Paso?" And his response was, "No." And I said, "You know, it's a great place. There's an amazing culture there. There's amazing food there. There's a vibrant artistic community of visual artists and writers. It's a great place."

And I think that's one of the take aways from the piece. The last character Manny, at the end of the play, is a framing device. He says, "You know, I'm at a place in my life where I look at the sunset over Trans Mountain. It's stunning. It's beautiful. There's nothing like that in the world, and I thank god I'm alive and I'm home!" And

for me, I hope that's a take away for people. That for better or worse, or challenges, or the conservatism, or religion, or the Latino families that live on the border that have created a tension in terms of gay identity, or whatever tensions or problems there may still be—it's home. That's where people live, and there's a history there that's to be valued and that's to be honored. And frankly, I think it's fucked up and racist for people to have an opinion about a place that they don't know shit about.

Can I also say, I really feel like the piece on some fundamental level was an exercise for me to figure out how to embed an über-theme of "love" into a theater piece, in addition to the themes people gave me: AIDS, family, religion. Themes that kept coming up. My experience of it was that there was some kind of love theme for me. And it came up in different ways: love for someone who was lost, or someone being in love with someone, or two women who loved each other and decided to have children together. I don't know that I wanted to forefront that necessarily so that the audience would leave thinking, "Oh! That was about love." But it was important to me as a guiding principle to figure out how to reach into the humanity of these characters so that there would be some identifiable component for the audience to latch on to.

**AM:** Would you like to do *Border Stories* again?

**GR:** I would love to. In the next iteration of the piece, I would love to direct it on an actor as a one-man-show, or a group of actors. And have it fully produced. I don't know if I need to experience it the same way as an actor. It's kind of fascinating to see what other people bring to the characters.

**AM:** Has this particular conversation or reflection on *Border Stories* made you consider something you hadn't before?

**GR:** In this interview I had the opportunity to express my frustration against folks who don't understand what the border is. Someone once contextualized *Border Stories* within the trajectory of my career, and described it as my valentine to the border. I spent five years of my life there and it was a really valuable time for me. It was a really great place to be. It was an opportunity for me to investigate these parts of myself. I had lived in LA and New York and had come to terms with myself as a gay person, but I had never really asked myself what it meant to be Latino and what it meant to be gay *and* Latino. I also happened to be on the border where my paternal grandfather was born in Jiménez and lived in Juárez, and my family immigrated to the U.S. through that city. It was a valuable time for me.

At one point I was seeing a therapist when I was in El Paso. It was at the same time I was working on this piece. I don't know how it came up in the conversation we were having during the session, but she identified in me something I hadn't even realized

which was a sense of isolation and a working through all of these issues: this gay and Latino identity stuff. Simultaneously, while the play was happening and I was working on it, I wasn't having conversations with myself reflexively. So it's kind of fascinating on the artistic process level how our psyches, our subconscious, our divine inspiration, or our angels are at work.

In the same way that I hope the piece is saying something about the border, and about a particular historical period, and the place as a geographical location, it's saying something about me as a person. So it will always have a special place in my heart.