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Americans Lost In America: Jose Rivera and the Meaning of Home

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Americans Lost In America

Jose Rivera and the Meaning of Home

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ABSTRACT

In the fall semester of 2018, with artistic and financial support from the department of theatre, I directed a full production of Jose Rivera’s *The House of Ramon Iglesia*. The play concerns strained relationships within a family of Puerto Rican immigrants in New York. When the patriarch, Ramon, resists an overdue return to their native home, conflicting desires test bonds and open old wounds. I used the production to explore the meaning of “home” to disenfranchised, Latinx immigrants. Our company soon discovered that a universal answer will never satisfy everyone’s needs and desires. A constant search for home defines life in the United States, for immigrants and natural-born citizens alike.
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PART ONE: PLAY ANALYSIS

I. Play Summary

_The House of Ramon Iglesia_ opens on a cold day in New York, 1980. Patriarch Ramon Iglesia returns home from Puerto Rico to a house full with two of his three sons, Julio and Charlie, his wife Dolores, and his eldest son’s girlfriend, Caroline. He limps to his chair from complications with diabetes, producing the deed to their New York house, signed by the original proprietors in Puerto Rico. To Dolores, it’s their ticket home, as they can now legally sell the house to their neighbor, Nick Calla. Ramon has finally fulfilled Dolores’ 20-year desire to leave the United States. The family celebrates and Caroline asks to sleep on the couch.

Later that night, Ramon’s first son, Javier enters. He opens a letter from a local politician in which he is offered an administrative job. Caroline awakes, but the good news doesn’t faze her. The couple argue over Javier’s lack of loyalty to the relationship. They settle their argument and make love.

The next morning, Charlie begins to pack. Javier storms in seeking answers, disapproving of the family’s return to Puerto Rico. Charlie berates Javier for turning his back on the family and Caribbean culture. Charlie also reminds Javier that he had the opportunity to go to college because Ramon spent years working as a janitor. After Javier explains that he can’t feel Puerto Rican because of bad past experiences, such as molestation at the hands of a cousin, Nick Calla barges through the door. As he demands to see the deed to the house, the water heater explodes. A frustrated Calla leaves and the three brothers fight. Dolores and Ramon enter in the middle of the quarrel with their own argument. The two spoke to a lawyer, who claimed that the deed could not be notarized because Ramon had forged the signatures. Ramon does not lament his mistake,
covering his tracks as if he had intentionally sabotaged their chances of selling the house. Ramon has enough of his family and begins to drink, threatening to hit Dolores. Dolores faints after her sons intervene and pin Ramon down. Leaving a mess in their home, Ramon stomps off to the local bar.

Javier escorts Julio to the Marine recruiting office a week later. Julio has been planning to leave for some time, but Javier thinks he can still prevent his brother from enlisting. The military bus arrives, and Julio tells Javier that it’s his responsibility to care for the home, and warns him not to ruin the family’s dreams.

A week later, Ramon and Dolores have made up. Dolores upsets Ramon after writing a letter to her friends in Puerto Rico about the family situation. Calla arrives to speak with Ramon about selling the house. When Calla leaves, Dolores urges Ramon to come up with a plan, and calls him a coward for never standing up to Javier. Ramon claims that he would rather die in the United States pursuing a dream of financial success, than live as a laborer in Puerto Rico. Javier enters the living room ready to leave for his job interview with the politician. Ramon cracks under Dolores’ demands, and he asks Javier for money to take another trip in search of authentic signatures. Javier refuses, and insults his father for being an alcoholic with a “peasant,” Puerto Rican mentality. Ramon threatens to kick Javier out of the house and once again leaves for the bar.

Javier tries to leave too, but Dolores stops him, begging him for help. She tells him that she can never accept the United States as her home, because she holds it responsible for the death of her infant daughter, Felicia. Felicia’s death occurred in Javier’s childhood, and he hardly recalls the event. There’s a knock at the door as Javier tries to comfort his mother. Caroline
enters as Dolores goes upstairs. She wants to seduce Javier back into their relationship, but Javier breaks up with her as she enacts her scheme. Caroline responds by lashing out, exposing Javier for his selfishness, and leaving with the last word. A guilty Javier forgets his job interview and ventures into the night to look for his father.

Javier finds a drunken Ramon outside the Marine recruiting station. Ramon looks for Julio, “his son,” and pretends that he doesn’t recognize Javier. Javier tries to help his father home, but Ramon claims that he would rather die in the snow than go anywhere with his son. He proceeds to mock Javier, challenging him to leave, calling him “a little Puerto Rican.” He says Javier will never be an American, and that he will always be a pet to white people. Javier snaps and tells his father that he should have never toiled to grant him a good education. He considers leaving, but drags his father to the hospital.

Javier returns the next day to a worried Dolores. She fears that the cold weather has worsened Ramon’s diabetic condition. Javier assures her and Charlie that Ramon is fine. Javier and Charlie fight over the topic of Puerto Rico again, but this time, Dolores disciplines them both. She uses Felicia to shame Javier into agreeing to cut a deal with Calla. Javier and Calla reach a financial settlement, and the former travels off to Puerto Rico to procure a legitimate deed.

The play closes with Charlie, Dolores, and Ramon moving away. Julio writes from the military expressing his excitement with the move, and with his new life in the military. Caroline returns to bid Javier a final farewell, and pitying him, hands him a wad of money he can use to find a place to stay for the next few nights. The three Iglesias leave Javier behind in an empty house. He lingers onstage, unsure of his identity, doubting the future.
II. Jose Rivera

Jose Rivera, born on March 24, 1955, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, immigrated to Long Island at four years old. A production of Rumpelstiltskin that he saw at 12 years old prompted him to study theatre. Inspired by the magical realist writing of the Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Rivera often forms narratives in the same poetic tradition. Plays like Marisol and Cloud Tectonics tell the story with symbolic images and surreal events. Magical realism is a literary genre developed exclusively by South Americans in the mid-20th century. Creating within the magical realist framework inherently grants Rivera ownership of his art as a Latino. In writing like a magical realist, he keeps a Latinx tradition alive and well. Upon discovering the ouvre of Garcia Marquez, Rivera had an epiphany, realizing that the narratives of Latinx people were as important as those Anglo-European stories that the American education system spoonfed him. Before becoming a celebrated playwright, however, Rivera says he spent four years working a dead-end job, writing himself to sleep at nights. The House of Ramon Iglesia, not yet tinged by Garcia Marquez’ aesthetic, won Rivera a production and a 5000 dollar stipend. After the check cleared, Rivera said he never worked outside of show business again. Rivera would later be mentored by his hero when studying in the Sundance Institute. In 2005, Rivera became the first Puerto Rican to be nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Adapted Screenplay category for The Motorcycle Diaries. He proceeded to write another adaptation of a travel diary with On the Road to lesser acclaim. Rivera’s other accolades include the Fulbright Scholarship, and awards from the NEA, the Kennedy Center, and the Whiting Foundation.

III. The Meaning of Home to Jose Rivera
In 1898, Spain ceded the three territories of the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico to the United States after suffering defeat in war. The country’s rich supply of sugar, fruit, coffee, and its strategic location in the Caribbean proved valuable to the American economy. Puerto Ricans welcomed the arrival of American troops. In *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, Cesar Ayala and Rafael Bernabe write, “Several manifestos signed by the most prominent political leaders on the island welcomed the representatives of the US republic, which many had long seen as an embodiment of democratic and progressive ideals” (Ayala, Bernabe 15). The islanders prepared for emancipation from years of abusive, royalist rule by any means necessary. Many Puerto Ricans quit identifying as Spanish to reclaim political agency. The struggle to assert political autonomy through nationalist movements would continue to define the island in the 20th century. One of the intersections in the triangular trade, European, African, and indigenous cultures all influence Puerto Rico’s ethnic makeup. The territory hosts some of the highest racial diversity of any Latin-American land. Selecting a national culture proved to be a chore as it was, and an entire history of colonialism wouldn’t help matters. Other Latin American countries with similar rates of *mestizaje*, or miscegenation, would have the privilege of independence. However, in 1898, Puerto Ricans united under enlightenment principles just as their American occupiers had 120 years before. Ethnicity and culture became an afterthought in the fight for autonomy. Americans thus found it easy to take hold of Puerto Rican political structures, the two entities sharing deep ideological ties from the beginning.

However, not all American legislators saw the prospect of annexing Puerto Rico as attractive. Those who opposed the idea worried that the annexation of a territory in such proximity to the United States would lead to mass immigration. Puerto Rican statehood would
not keep America white. These legislators also pointed to religion as a cause for concern, hesitation to represent Catholic people preventing the United States from claiming more land in the result of the Mexican-American War years before. However, the clergy’s stranglehold on the island loosened as Puerto Ricans began to associate religion with Spanish rule. The matter was clearly racial. Meanwhile, Puerto Rico segregated its own people by race, as many Caribbean societies still do in the 21st century (Ayala, Bernabe 31).

By 1900, the United States passed the Foraker Act, establishing a limited popular government in Puerto Rico and facilitating future trade legislation. It took 17 years for the United States to allow for an insular, Puerto Rican government through the Jones-Shafroth Act, which also granted citizenship to the boricuas. It only took the requirements of a World War to make American citizens out of Puerto Ricans. Out of the 240,000 inscribed for selective service, 18,000 served in World War I to some capacity, according to the Center For Puerto Rican Studies (CUNY). Ayala and Bernabe add, “From the start, installed what we may call the orbit of non incorporation, the island thus pushed and pulled in opposite directions: increasingly tied to the United States and insistently defined as not a part of it” (Ayala, Bernabe 28). Puerto Rico was stuck in a cultural and political limbo, exploited for rich agriculture and key ports. In 1917, however, Puerto Ricans began to reap the benefits of American citizenship. The Jones-Shafroth Act spurred an exodus of Puerto Ricans, now moving to the the already industrialized mainland United States, searching for higher wages and better living conditions. Puerto Rico would not industrialize its own economy until long after WWII (CUNY). Today, half of those to identify as Puerto Rican reside outside of the island (Ayala, Bernabe 1).
Puerto Ricans staged their own Great Migration along with black southerners. By the 1920s, Puerto Ricans began filling seats in the legislatures of major cities like New York (CUNY). It’s no wonder that Puerto Ricans dreamed for a better quality of life. American colonialism had pressured the island into an unsustainable, export-based agricultural economy. State capitalist policies and the Great Depression made it hard for laborers to earn a decent living (Ayala, Bernabe 45). Those who stayed in Puerto Rico would form labor unions, often stimulating support with a nationalist message, offering a revisionist history of America’s once-welcome arrival. Jose Rivera provides his own commentary on this model in his plays, Benito in In References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot refusing to work on a “plantation of death” (Rivera 34).

The Rivera family, moving to the United States in 1951, perhaps shared a spirit with those Jones-Shafroth Act migrants. Ramon does fall enamored with the American dream in The House of Ramon Iglesia. And as mentioned before, Puerto Ricans in 1898 strongly held common beliefs with their American “emancipators,” so to speak. But would have Rivera’s parents called themselves American? Probably not, if only demonstrated by Dolores’ behavior in House. The Center For Puerto Rican Studies recalls of WWII, “When Muñoz Marin, as president of the Puerto Rican senate, called the Puerto Ricans to arms he did not appeal to their sense of duty as ‘Americans’ or ‘US citizens’ as it was the case in WWI. Instead he appealed to the virility of the Puerto Rican men who would join with other peoples, including the people of the United States, to defend their rights and freedoms” (CUNY). Historically, Puerto Ricans, born on the island or in some mainland city, have never fully embraced the label of “American.” The United States has not done itself any favors, either. Likely due to racial prejudice, the American government
has never accepted Puerto Ricans. Out of those 535,000 Puerto Ricans that registered for selective service in WWII, only 47,000 were accepted, at a rejection rate of 91 percent (CUNY). Where Puerto Rican nationalists would argue that American citizenship was a mere product of WWI demands, the US government turned away Puerto Ricans who were willing to die for the country that had claimed them as people. Like black people and other minorities, Puerto Ricans have had to engage socially to earn dignity in the US.

So where does that leave Rivera? *The House of Ramon Iglesia*, Rivera’s first play, drew from many facts of his own life. Both of his parents were uneducated, and his father worked through menial jobs to support the Rivera family. For the playwright, the process of creating art serves the purpose of “...[destroying] things you hate in the world and in yourself,” as he revealed in an interview at Emory University. Did Rivera ever share Javier’s shame, writing *House* to eradicate the feeling? The Iglesias come from Rivera’s hometown of Arecibo. Dolores is a devout Catholic, like Rivera’s own mother. Julio appears in other of Rivera’s plays under different names, such as Nelson in *Cloud Tectonics*, and Benito in *References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot*. Rivera has been recreating somebody he knows to include in his plays. All of this suggests that Rivera identifies with *House’s* characters in a primary context. However, it’s difficult to tell if any of the three brothers serve as a self-insert. Like Rivera, Javier is the only sibling to have immigrated to the United States from Puerto Rico. The play unfolds from his perspective, all of its conflicts coalescing around Javier’s particular arc. Self-insert or not, Javier is the protagonist. Rivera uses the three brothers to present clear alternatives in the immigrant experience: an immigrant can long for their “motherland” like Charlie, identify with the “new land” like Javier, or stay agnostic like Julio, instead seeking material gain from the
circumstances. At the end of the play, Charlie and Julio demonstrate satisfaction with their choices. Javier doesn’t. He stays in the United States, ruminating over Ramon’s warnings, wondering if he’ll ever truly feel at home here. Why is the family’s only American lost in America?

*The House of Ramon Iglesia* closely parallels Rene Marques’ 1953 play, *La carreta.* However, there exists no evidence that this canonical, Puerto Rican work of theatre influenced Rivera directly. That our playwright’s first endeavor so intimately mirrors *La carreta* only speaks to the universality of immigrant life in the United States.

Marques’ masterpiece, translated to *The Oxcart* in English, concerns a rural Puerto Rican family’s acclimation to city life. A widow, Doña Gabriela, abandons the only home she ever understood when the bank forecloses her countryside farm, and seeks refuge in a newly industrialized San Juan upon the insistence of her eldest son, Luis. Luis assumed the role of family patriarch upon his father’s death, as per genealogical Latinx customs. An unabashed futurist, he does not hesitate to drag his mother and two siblings out of the boondocks. Luis, privy to the secret that Doña Gabriela isn’t his birth mother, also feels as though he owes the family for shouldering the burden of his illegitimacy. Doña Gabriela’s father wanders to a remote cave as the family arranges to leave, preferring to die alone than to renounce tradition. He curses Doña Gabriela’s dead husband for his financial irresponsibility as he farewells the family. The family struggles to survive in San Juan. Street life catches up to Doña Gabriela’s youngest son, Chaguito, and his new, thieving habits result in arrest. Doña Gabriela’s daughter, Juanita, attempts suicide after a man rapes and impregnates her. Meanwhile, Luis has lost five factory jobs, and must tend the garden of a wealthy family to support his mother and siblings.
Acknowledging the irony of fleeing the countryside for a gardening job, he suggests that the family move to the Bronx. To claim agency as a woman of color, Juanita takes up sex work and rents a room elsewhere in New York City. Luis begs her to return, claiming that he is fully capable of providing for her with his new factory job. The once enterprising Doña Gabriela refuses to recognize Juanita’s recent exploits, and succumbs to a depressive state. She submits to all of Luis’ demands and lacks the spirit to assimilate into American life. As Luis plots a trajectory for “upward mobility,” a factory machine accident causes his death. Doña Gabriela buries his body in Puerto Rico, the land that he never embraced.

Luis’ character arc offers obvious similarities to House’s Javier. Both characters devote their faith to lofty, American ideals, while disavowing Puerto Rican tradition. Both must operate without the support of a father- to Javier, the incompetent Ramon might as well be dead. However, Javier cannot deny that Ramon’s constant struggle as janitor is what paid for his education, something that the other two Iglesia brothers will probably go without. This detail resembles Luis’ burden as illegitimate child to Doña Gabriela’s husband. Some kind of responsibility inextricably attaches the two characters to their families, and for better or for worse, both will attempt to rescue their kin from the “backwardness” of Puerto Rican tradition as recompense. And like Luis, one can accuse Javier of not being his mother’s son, at least figuratively. Dolores shows Charlie and Julio a more profound affection in House’s first acts. Her other two children have not spurned the only culture that defines her identity, or fundamentally oppose her super-objective of returning home. Dolores and Doña Gabriela suffer the fate of deferred wishes because of the will of their sons.
All of these characters explain Marques’ title- *The Oxcart*. Of course, an oxcart metonymically defines agricultural life, but it also represents *burden*. Though Rivera never mentions Marques as one of his influences, both playwrights explored Puerto Rican identity via the burden that their characters must carry. Doña Gabriela and Dolores must contend with their traditional, matriarchal roles, and an unfulfilling life in a new country. Ramon and Doña Gabriela’s father battle regret and cowardice. Javier and Luis, meanwhile, must shoulder the burden of *home*. Luis dies by *La carreta’s* end. Something dies in Javier, too.

To today’s Puerto Ricans, the question of identity proves complicated. Statehood looks like an appropriate answer to stopping a century of American colonialism, at least from an economic perspective, but Puerto Rican nationalists have disapproved of the choice. A baseball-loving people reject such a close relationship to the United States. Wounds run deep.

2017’s hurricane Maria ravaged the island, and the United States provided marginal support in a time of harrowing crisis. The Red Cross, an independent organization, took most humanitarian responsibility. And yet, it committed less than half of the 70 million dollars in donations it had collected by March 20th, according to the Washington Post. To gain support from the government that made them citizens in 1917, there has been a movement to remind that United States that Puerto Ricans are Americans, too. Most journalistic sources referred to Puerto Ricans as “Americans” when reporting on the natural disaster.

It’s difficult to deny the American-Puerto Rican relationship benefits one party more than it does the other. The flood brought the Jones Act of 1920 to attention, which stipulates that merchant marine ships doing trade from the US must be American-built, American-owned, and crewed by US citizens. This piece of legislation makes international trade difficult for Puerto
Rico, and drives up the cost of living. Bitterness to the United States might be warranted. The circumstances parallel those of 1898, in which Puerto Ricans ignored their Spanish roots to honor ideals of freedom and prosperity.

Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of smash hit Hamilton, will prefer to be called Puerto Rican to his grave. The auteur was born in New York to parents already integrated in American life. And yet, one can find him sporting a t-shirt with Puerto Rico’s flag on it, or speaking in Spanish at nationally televised awards ceremonies. He takes pride in his “broken Spanish,” as he once said of his abilities at the Golden Globes. Recent events have brought Puerto Ricans together under a complicated national identity. Years ago, it may have been impossible for Miranda to take pride in his poor language skills. In Puerto Rico, he may have been discriminated against, his Latinx identity denied for being born and raised in the United States. Jose Rivera presents the audience with a choice. Return “home,” or don’t. Circumstances have made it so that Puerto Ricans like Miranda don’t have to take such hard stances. Regardless of where he was born or raised, he knows he is Puerto Rican. And he always will be. The Jose Rivera of 1980 didn’t have that privilege back then. Perhaps he does now.

PART TWO: DIRECTING PROCESS

I. Preface

Born in Venezuela, I came to the United States with my mother, father, and sister when I was six years old. Our parents told us we were going on vacation to Universal Studios. They didn’t tell us we would stay. To this date, I never understood why we had to leave our first home. I haven’t stopped associating childhood with the feeling of confusion since.
Moving to another country presents a person with a monumental set of new given circumstances. Like most immigrants, our modus operandi is to survive and succeed in this nation in pursuit of the American Dream. As the old adage goes, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” That phrase might as well be the world’s first acting manifesto. Little did I know then, that my role as an American immigrant would be my first role as an actor.

When I wasn’t at home, I was acting. I’d go to school and pretend to understand the rules of football, or the plot of Star Wars. Home would be my backstage where I could shed my costumes, my make-up, say whatever, do whatever. I could speak my native language. I could acknowledge the details of being an immigrant that my parents forbade me to speak. It was only for our own safety. The stakes were high.

The shadow of fear that follows every immigrant didn’t fail to stalk me, and coerced me into feeling that it could be my only friend. It clouded my judgment, and continues to today, even as a US citizen. I grew up seeing the world as a dangerous place, because thinking otherwise would have jeopardized us all. Performing requires courage. Especially when you could be exposed at a moment’s notice. It’s no way for a child to grow up. At a critical age, where a sense of belonging makes a monumental difference, I saw myself as something that my community would rather be without. But I’m so grateful for the experience.

We became permanent residents of the United States when I was about 11 years old. My father always brags that he is more American than those who were born here, because he chose this as his home. Whereas I hadn’t. I considered the United States my foster home, my adopted home. No matter how grateful I was for the opportunity to belong someplace, I still felt as though I slipped in under the wire. I suffered from a serious case of impostor syndrome. Guilt
overcame me: “How could I be so unkind to the only home I know?” I have spent most of my life here, after all, and I’m not exactly *Venezuelan*. I had forgotten how to live between two worlds, just as I had as a young kid. I had a hard time accepting that both worlds *mattered*. All that I saw was a choice between two opposites. Black and white. I had yet to learn *yin and yang*. I didn’t have the courage to stop performing.

It was only after I started college, when I began to realize that my strange circumstances were a gift, and not a curse. It begins with me taking an acting class taught by an Asian American who understood full well my plight, another immigrant. And she helped me, not by excusing my fears, but by seeing through my theatrics. Because people like us aren’t bound by a home, we can aspire to be our best selves. We have the privilege of choosing who we truly are. We can honor who we once were, and where we once came from, and we’re richer for it because these things inform where we go next. She taught me that performing didn’t have to be a process for hiding. It could be a process for *revealing*. For taking risks. For finding the truth. I could use theatre to express who I am, and figure out who I will be. My objective shouldn’t be “to survive without a home,” but to “search for a home.” And maybe I’ll never satisfy that objective. But the first rule of acting is never to give your objective up. And I’ll be the better person for it.

In my first semester at CU I decided to pursue a career in the arts. I applied to college without drafting a plan, and lacked direction in life. When arranging my schedule, I added an acting class to satisfy a personal curiosity, and never thought that it would determine my fate.

My mentor suggested I try a monologue from a playwright that was then unknown to me, Jose Rivera. I toiled to find the play she recommended, *The House of Ramon Iglesia*, which was
unavailable in the school library and which I thought to have a funny name anyhow. I didn’t realize that Jose Rivera would remain a staple in my development as a theatre maker.

I used that monologue to audition for the theatre department’s acting BFA. I had a major breakthrough acting in another Rivera play a year later, References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot. The director of Salvador Dali wrote her honors thesis on the production, and now I am also writing one for my own production of The House of Ramon Iglesia. I’ve come full circle, guided through and through by Rivera’s work. I’ve come to recognize him as the premier Latinx playwright of the English language.

I began cultivating my passion for directing in another class taught by the same professor that mentored me through that first acting class. When it came time to arrange a senior project, I knew that I wanted to direct, and that I wanted to direct this play. It only made sense to end my undergraduate career where I started, using my mentor as an adviser. I submitted a proposal, and months later, received an email stating approval for my project.

I had almost an entire year to prepare for this venture. Even so, I felt as though certain moments of my own life offered adequate preparation. I read the play several times with a pencil and paper ready, relating its story to anything that I thought paralleled my family’s arc in the United States, writing it down. Using this process, I sketched preliminary ideas for tableaus, motifs, and moments, peppered in specific details that only Latinx immigrants might notice. I quickly learned that Jose Rivera wrote this play for people like me. That he was able to stage the play in major theatres pays tribute to his skill as a writer, and his ability to create the universal theme of searching for a home within a unique, Latinx experience.
There were mysteries in the play that I had yet to solve. I hadn’t formed any conclusions about my own Latinx-American identity. I dove into the rehearsal process eager to play and learn.

II. Play Analysis

A. Given Circumstances

_The House of Ramon Iglesia_ takes place in Holbrook, New York, 1980. The Iglesia family immigrated to the United States 20 years prior, with oldest son Javier in tow. Jimmy Carter faces his final year as president. Poor infrastructure, high crime indexes, and de-facto racial segregation continue to plague the boroughs of New York City. Fearing for their lives, Nuyoricans (Puerto Ricans raised in New York) returned to their native homes, spurred by the danger in the New York City streets. Only a few years before, legendary salsa artist Ruben Blades started his career by satirizing Latinx life in New York. He would sing, “_Dame la maleta, que me voy de Nueva York,_” on his first album- “Hand me my suitcase, I’m leaving New York.” Later, he would sample _West Side Story_ on his album _Siembra_, in which he exposed the superficiality of American society. “_I like to be in America,_” Rita Moreno would echo on one of Ruben Blades’ most biting tracks. These salsa cuts served as soundtrack to a growing dissatisfaction with American life to Caribbean immigrants. Surviving with mediocre jobs, falling victim to benign neglect, and with no prospects for the future, Latinx immigrants were fed up. By looking out the window into the Bronx, any notion of the “American Dream” would billow up with the smoke pouring out of the disheveled buildings. With all of this in mind, and with the freezing cold biting at their bones, any Puerto Rican would wish they were back home.
Those Latinx immigrants without the resources to leave would often take comfort in a strong, Catholic faith, or in alcohol.

For Nuyoricans born in the United States, the choice wasn’t so simple. Regardless of where they may have turned, they were bound to endure discrimination. They wore a label of otherness in America, despite having citizenship, and perhaps a close relationship with the land in which they were born. If they returned to Puerto Rico, they would have to endure taunts and accusations of not being truly Puerto Rican. The diaspora still cast a shadow over Puerto Ricans, years after its apex.

B. Characters

Javier Iglesia

Objective: Javier Iglesia wants a life in the United States. This includes coercing his family into staying in a country they do not understand.

Obstacle: Dolores and Charlie can’t bear to stay in the United States for a second longer. Ramon, while sharing Javier’s objective, does little to mitigate the damage he has done to his home with years of alcoholism and unemployment. While attempting to restructure the Iglesia home, Javier must begin to set up his own life, searching for jobs and questioning his relationship with the irresponsible Caroline. Julio, Javier’s only useful partner in restoring the Iglesia home, will leave for the military shortly.

Arc: Javier enters the Iglesia home looking to reform his alcoholic father, and to exorcise any demons that might scare Dolores back to Puerto Rico. He believes in the power of the American dream. If he could lift himself from a poor childhood and living situation, his other family members can too. After a local politician offers him a job interview, he finds that the
issues of the Iglesia household prove too large a burden to shoulder. He accuses his family of hindering his American dream with their petty, “peasant” attitudes. By the play’s end, Javier loses his objective. He never accepts his Puerto Rican heritage, but realizes that he treated his family poorly, and arranges their return to Puerto Rico. The play ends with only Javier onstage, now more lost than ever.

**Julio Iglesia**

*Objective:* Julio wants to be his own man. Unlike the other two Iglesia brothers, he has not sought refuge in a national identity. Rather, he plans to join the Marines, fleeing his poor living situation with a practical plan. He only expects to live decently, using the Marines as a tool for career advancement, and nothing more.

*Obstacle:* Julio’s guilt almost stops him from “abandoning” his family. In the time of Javier’s absence at university, Julio held the fort down. As much is evident in Act I Scene III, in which he quells a violent argument between Ramon and the rest of the family. He can’t stand to be in that position for much longer, now over the age of 18, trusting that Javier’s return home will bring peace. Simultaneously, he understands that Javier operates with duplicitous intentions. If the family finds it best to return to Puerto Rico, that’s fine by Julio, and he wouldn’t want Javier to spoil his family’s plans for selfish reasons. He must somehow settle the house’s problems before finally joining the military.

*Arc:* Julio escapes the Iglesia home by Act I Scene IV, winning his objective. He’s quick to snap in the play’s opening scenes, but occasionally exercises empathy when it comes to family matters. When he briefly returns for a monologue in the play’s closing scene, he demonstrates maturity, and expresses his desire to stay as far away from combat as possible.
Charlie Iglesia

*Objective:* Charlie wants to return home to Puerto Rico.

*Obstacle:* Charlie must contend with his father’s incompetence while he ostensibly prepares for their return to Puerto Rico. He also carries the responsibility of protecting his mother, as the only member of the household that sympathizes with her pain. The characters share the same objective, and battle against stubborn, opposing forces in Ramon and Javier. As a teenager, Charlie also fights to form an identity, and must reconcile his Puerto Rican identity with the fact that he was born and raised in the United States.

*Arc:* As the third brother, Charlie represents the desire to reconnect with one’s roots, in contrast to Javier’s resistance and Julio’s indifference. This distinction explains why he would prefer his family to call him Carlos instead of Charlie. Considering that Charlie wins his objective by play’s end, he doesn’t come to change his perspective. Rather, he matures into his “Carlos” persona, and becomes instrumental in the Iglesia exodus.

Ramon Iglesia

*Objective:* Ramon wants to leave a legacy in the United States. For 20 years, he has failed to realize his American dream, and now scrambles for a way to save face. Returning to Puerto Rico means coming to terms with personal failure. To prove his competency, he must rescue his New York home.

*Obstacle:* Since their arrival in the United States, Dolores has pressured Ramon into returning home. She has done everything to guilt him, never learning English, and using the death of their daughter as an example of what the United States fails to offer its citizens.
Dolores’ complaints exacerbate his remorse, and he turns to the bottle for relief. Meanwhile, the home’s new proprietor, Calla, rushes the family’s departure.

_Arc:_ Ramon juggles the demands of several characters by exercising his power as patriarch. He builds up Dolores’ hopes by staging a move, keeps Calla busy with empty promises, all while trying to satisfy Javier’s expectations of him. He worked hard to afford Javier a quality education, and does not let his son forget the fact. Ramon has more cards up his sleeve than any other character. By play’s end, he must swallow his pride to make his family happy. He sacrifices the American dream in trying to repair the bonds he has broken with 20 years of wheeling and dealing. At least he can put his demons to rest. He returns with Dolores and Charlie to Puerto Rico, abandoning the American dream, along with 20 years of painful mistakes.

**Dolores Iglesia**

_Objective:_ Dolores wants to return to Puerto Rico. Her identity inextricably connects to the land in which she was born. If she can’t live in Puerto Rico, she can’t be herself. She refuses to understand any other world.

_Obstacle:_ Javier and Ramon burden Dolores with their own dreams. They have pushed her around for long enough, and she will no longer accept their folly. However, she must pursue her objective within the role of housewife, resorting to threats of divorce and emasculation to get her way with Ramon. She must also assure that her boys will travel on the right path before she leaves. God knows that Ramon, who might as well be considered her other child, can’t take care of his children.
**Arc:** Like Charlie, Dolores wins her objective, but learns to express her pain in a way that doesn’t sever her relationships. When she confides in Javier and tells him about Felicia’s death, she reaches a turning point. When it’s time to return home, she sees the value in Javier’s American upbringing, and leaves without regret for the past 20 years.

**Nick Calla**

*Objective:* Calla wants the Iglesias to leave their home so he can turn a profit.

*Obstacle:* Ever since Calla bought the house, Ramon has filled his head with lies and empty promises of a hasty move. Calla has already invested a lot of money into the Iglesia home, and is in no position to withdraw from his business venture now. He has no choice but to contend with the family’s odd problems. The Iglesias are foreigners to the United States, making Calla a foreigner in their home. To achieve his objective, he must cross enemy lines, and deal with people he fundamentally misunderstands.

*Arc:* Calla earns his money by the play’s end. He doesn’t learn anything new about Latinx people, nor does his heart change. Calla remains the same man, except richer.

**Caroline**

*Objective:* Caroline wants Javier to love her.

*Obstacle:* Javier avoids Caroline, except when seeking sex or comfort for his troubles. He uses Caroline like Ramon uses Dolores. Caroline is a simple prop that helps Javier pursue his dreams. Now, Javier threatens to leave her, and she suspects him of sleeping with somebody else. Her own home life crumbles and she has no place to take refuge.

*Arc:* Caroline desperately tries to steal Javier’s attention, but the issues of the Iglesia house foil her plans. She tries everything from coercion, seduction, to bribery. After she breaks
up with Javier, she returns to the Iglesia home, in a last-ditch effort to win his love. She accepts that Javier will never love her, and leaves him a wad of money as a “loan,” thus forcing him to one day return to her. The audience can tell that while she still pines for Javier, she has learned to love herself.

C. Dramatic Action

*The House of Ramon Iglesia* centers around Ramon’s inability to sell the house and fulfill Dolores’ wish of returning to Puerto Rico. Ramon must field the desires of all Iglesia family members while coming to terms with his failures. In the midst of such turmoil, his sons seek answers from a country that isn’t theirs, and a father that’s difficult to love.

The play places its dramatic turning points in: Ramon’s arrival with the deed, the discovery that Ramon forged the deed’s signatures, Julio’s departure, Ramon’s drunken expedition in a snowstorm, and Javier’s financial offer to Calla.

D. Language

Rivera packs the play’s language with subtext and definite action. Subscribing to an American realist aesthetic for his first play, the author does not waste a single line. Everything that the characters say is in pursuit of some objective. The characters use humor not for the audience, but to shame their scene partners into submitting to their will.

When Ramon and Dolores speak in Spanish to Javier, it’s to truly stir him into seeing things their way. Javier is their only son born in Puerto Rico. By speaking to him in Spanish, perhaps they could awaken some primordial part of his being, and get him to budge.

III. Casting
As soon as the department accepted my proposal to direct *House of Ramon*, I worried that our lack of diversity was a concern. I decided to spread the word about the theatre department’s opportunities for students of color weeks before the casting process.

In attempting to contact Latinx organizations on campus, I found that most have not adapted to the digital age. Most of these organizations never returned my emails, or took days to reply. I understand that students, and oftentimes only a dedicated few of them, manage activity for these organizations. Every fall, they promote themselves as “clubs,” and I’m therefore not sure how much financial or administrative support they receive from the university.

The Association of Latin American Students (ALAS) only has a phone number listed on CU’s ethnic resources online directory. The same goes for the MultiEthnic Media Organization (MEMO), Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MECha), and the United Mexican American Students (UMAS). I successfully contacted a representative for the latter two organizations after finding his email address on CU’s student clubs directory webpage, of all places. ALAS has a website that can be found with a quick Google search, but it has not been updated since the early 2000s.

“UMAS y MEChA,” a coalition of the two student groups, has a website that has been “under construction” since 2015. I found this information via Google, and not through a directory provided by the university. I don’t know if they plan to launch the aforementioned website soon, but they update a Facebook page regularly.

The CMCI student clubs webpage mentions MEMO, but does not offer additional contact information beyond a telephone number. I called this number to no avail.
CU theatre hosts auditions the weekend before a semester's first school day. The other directors and I arrived at the theatre at 9:00 AM to receive instruction from our stage managers on how the schedule should progress. We hoped to cast up to 70 roles, and saw auditions from just as many students. Out of those 70, less than 10 were Hispanic or Latinx. Limited resources already presented an obstacle to overcome. I called back 30 students, including the aforementioned 10, among other actors of color.

An American student attempted an entire monologue in Spanish despite not knowing the language, and acknowledged *The House of Ramon Iglesia* as one of his top choices in production. I decided to call back any student that expressed genuine interest in our project. This student read for the Italian-American character, Calla, and for Ramon. I would have been happy to cast him as either of the two characters, but because he was a seasoned actor in the BFA program, a director with seniority cast him instead.

As a student director, the department allows me final pick out of the casting pool, so I had to be careful during callbacks to have three strong choices in mind for every character. I ensured that I had enough people to select from while minding time constraints. I first and foremost sought actors that played strong actions while honoring the play’s specific relationships. Because of the limited choices in actors of color, I had to compromise, and consider casting white actors in Latinx roles. I reasoned that under the careful direction of a Latinx student, audiences wouldn’t respond negatively to such a choice. It’s also difficult to ignore that educational theatre will always make do with less than ideal resources. The choice to cast white students also followed my sincere attempts to attract theatre-makers of color to our
department, which is an administrative task that other student directors may not have to learn until later in their careers. Needless to say, I’m grateful for the unique opportunity.

I also find it as unethical to cast an inexperienced actor because they suit the ethnic requirements of a role. If I staged this production with a professional, well-funded company, I would obviously commit to casting Latinx actors in Latinx roles. Artists should protest when monoliths in the entertainment industry whitewash narratives. Broadway and Hollywood, as lucrative as they are, have the resources to pursue artists of color to collaborate on their projects. However, as much isn’t possible when studying art in a research institution. Because my production intended to offer students a learning experience, it would not be fair to expect the work required of a lead role from a younger actor because they are a person of color.

I learned the above from firsthand experience while casting for the role of Charlie. A Latinx student, passionate about our project, simply didn’t demonstrate that he was capable of filling such a role. I tested him to the best of my ability, coaching him with several opportunities to read sides. This student did not participate in our production, but I appreciated his effort and willingness to try new things.

I found that our faculty respected the play’s casting requirements. Other directors were generous with their choices, and granted me the privilege of a few first choices despite my being a student director. I had to articulate clearly that I needed students of color to pay justice to Jose Rivera’s vision. After expressing concern about the play’s ethnic requirements, I persuaded faculty heads to allow a Filipino student to be double-cast. The other director who claimed him supported the choice charitably, understanding the circumstances, and trusting that the student actor could handle such a load.
I accomplished my mission of casting only Latinx or Hispanic actors for the play’s family roles. I managed to make compromises for the white characters only. For the roles of Calla and Caroline, I cast two students that I had not even called back. I hesitated in casting the actress that played Caroline, because she had not yet started her first semester in the BFA program, and I feared she lacked the training. However, I understood that she held a genuine desire to grow. I put my faith in her abilities, having seen her work either in directing class or other departmental productions. It also concerned me that Jose Rivera wrote Caroline as white, while this actress is Chinese-American. Because Rivera never makes *explicit* claims about Caroline’s race, only mentioning that she’s “American,” I figured that such casting would not undermine the playwright’s intentions. It presented another moment in which I had to consider the implications of educational theatre and the bargains that artists of color are asked to make. As for Calla, the available actor had already graduated from the BFA track, and I trusted that he had the skills to adapt to my notes and directing style. Moreover, I felt happy to work with actors whose potential I could help develop. As far as I know, our production boasted the most diverse cast in the history of CU theatre, initially including four Latinx actors, one Filipino-American actor, one Chinese-American actor, and a trans man as Calla.

I say “initially” because we encountered a scheduling problem with the actor set to play Javier. One week before rehearsals, I received an email from a director in the musical theatre department, claiming that my Javier had already committed his time to her production of *West Side Story*. The actor alerted me about his conflicts at callbacks, and I made it clear that I could not cast him if he were incapable of attending all rehearsals. He assured me that he would find a way to clear his schedule.
I did not have the time to negotiate the actor’s schedule with the *West Side Story* director. After deliberating with my project adviser, I decided to recast the role of Javier, letting the original actor go. I looked forward to working with him, and was sad to release him. Perhaps the future will afford us the opportunity to collaborate together.

Instead, I gave the role to the actor originally playing Ramon, and found a new actor to fill the gap. I immediately called an actor I had worked with in the past, who had just wrapped another departmental production. The department allowed this student to participate in two productions because of the extenuating circumstances. Although this actor is white, I knew that he would understand the material with some of my guidance. We gel in our director-actor relationship, and as an English double-major, he displays a sensitivity to narrative unlike any other actor. I did not doubt that with some research, he would be able to embrace the given circumstances unique to immigrant characters.

At first, other members of the cast did not feel the same way. A cast member sent me a text message in which they expressed their discomfort in the choice to cast a white actor as Ramon, and that they and the rest of the cast were sorry to see their friend go. I offered to speak to them in person. I reasoned that it was unacceptable for a single actor to miss a week of our rehearsals, because of the schedule’s brevity and the show’s artistic requirements. I wanted to start our rehearsals in a positive context, to do Jose Rivera’s beautiful vision justice. I also wanted the cast to welcome our new actor, especially after doing us the enormous favor of accepting the role in the first place. They decided to remain in the production after accepting my explanation.
However, the negative response led me to consider the challenges I may always face as an artist of color. Why were critics putting me under scrutiny for circumstances beyond my control? I acted only in the show’s best interests, and how could anybody possibly accuse a Latinx director of racism for his choices in staging a Latinx play? My priority became protecting the actor playing Ramon, who already articulated some reservations about playing a Puerto Rican. I assured him that he would not be succumbing to offensive stereotypes under my direction, and that everybody in the cast welcomed his inclusion. We met no problems from henceforth.

For the first rehearsal, I asked all cast members to share their interpretation of “home,” and how it may relate to the characters they play. I enjoyed watching this concept influence their character arcs during the rehearsal process. All of my actors grew considerably, a fact I take immense pride in.

**Javier Iglesia**

I cast Nick Galvez in the role of Javier. Though he was my second choice, I now can’t imagine anybody else filling that role. Out of the entire ensemble, he understood the play’s themes best. We discussed his upbringing as a third-generation, Mexican immigrant, and he came to the realization that his father’s relationship to “home” paralleled Javier’s. Nick’s father was born in the United States to Mexican immigrants. His own father was an alcoholic, and he grew to resent everything associated with his childhood, including his heritage. As a result, he served in the United States military as a means of “escaping” the socio-economic immigrant status. Serving in the military also represented a “rebirth” of sorts, as if he were proving his commitment to becoming a true American. For Nick’s father, there is no question that he found a
home in the United States. But whether or not he ever truly felt at home here is unclear. The process of proving himself as an American could continue ad nauseum. Already having American citizenship, what could tangibly mark the end to his pursuit? Nick discovered that for his father, like Javier, the United States offers the facade of a home. For those two, home will always be the pursuit of recognition from a sovereign people. Javier seeks respect from all those around him— in particular, blue-blooded Americans. Nick, on the other hand, thinks home to be any place where he could find comfort. With this in mind, Nick found it easy to carve Javier’s arc, which doesn’t conclude neatly because of the sisyphean task of becoming “American.”

Nick had little acting experience before coming to college, which is all the more reason that his callback impressed me. He has a natural ability to listen and play objective. He does not hold any of the harmful preconceptions of the young actor, in which performance is the dishonest process of “becoming” somebody else. Rather, he understands that acting is doing. Because of this, he took to my coaching style, which I root in Stanislavski’s process of objective and physical action. Nick always showed gratitude for notes and sought legitimate criticism, not just showing me that he cared about our show, but about his overall development as an actor.

**Julio Iglesia**

Grant Bowman filled the role of Julio. In callbacks, no actor quite captured Julio’s forceful, commanding qualities. Grant came close, and was the only one who succeeded in establishing a fraternal relationship with his scene partners. I also knew Grant to be an enthusiastic, committed actor. I was sure that he would be able to make the necessary adjustments throughout the rehearsal process. To Grant, home is anywhere he could pursue fulfilling relationships. Because he is Filipino-American, I asked him if he felt a particular
attachment to either country. He said he hadn’t, and felt shame for not knowing how to speak Tagalog or Spanish, and for not connecting with his Asian community. But he also admitted that he hadn’t considered his identity all that much before coming to college. In his heart, he always took comfort in a natural feeling of being American.

I encouraged him use that experience in building Julio’s arc, because he makes no concrete choices as to what his identity is in Rivera’s play. As Grant said, to Julio, home is anywhere that he feels useful.

**Charlie Iglesia**

Dizaon Phifer played the role of Charlie. I noticed at callbacks that he suit the character well, and that he already had an idea of what kinds of tactics to play. I cast Dizaon thinking that he was black, but I would later discover that he is Latinx, too. I don’t know why he didn’t let on that he is Latinx. When asked about his idea of home, he briefly touched on his black heritage, but decided that those details were irrelevant to the question. He concluded that home is anywhere he feels as though he can be himself. For the character of Charlie, race and culture form an essential part of the equation. Dizaon said that for Charlie, home is anywhere where he has family, including the entire island of Puerto Rico. It’s a judgment that comes straight from the heart. Other than Stephanie, Dizaon was the only cast member to tie his character’s interpretation of home to a physical location. Charlie and Dolores conspire together toward the same objective. It didn’t surprise me that the two constructed a strong, onstage relationship so quickly.

**Ramon Iglesia**
The brave Marlon Jacobi assumed the role of Ramon. We quickly resolved his fears of playing a Puerto Rican person, and the topic never arose again. I asked him to do a Spanish dialect, as Rivera’s writing style and given circumstances suggest. Marlon took great care to develop this dialect, trying to create as accurate and respectful of a portrayal as possible. However, I noticed that he focused on the dialect too much, and that it would sometimes distract him from playing actions. Because Marlon holds a high professional standard, he had no difficulty overcoming his bad habits.

I also used cultural concepts to direct Marlon in rehearsals. Rivera writes such specific characters, filling the text with subtleties that only Caribbean natives might discern. For example, I oftentimes told Marlon to play “cara de palo,” or “face of stick,” as literally translated into English. It more or less means “playing the fool,” a skill prized in machismo. Marlon found the tactic useful in his evasive interactions with Dolores or Calla. I also impressed upon him the significance of some choices that Ramon makes as the house’s patriarch. In Latinx culture, for example, it’s appalling for a parent to kick their child out of the house, as Ramon does to Javier in the second act. It would be his responsibility to raise that scene’s stakes.

To Marlon, home is anywhere he can be himself. Marlon and I agreed that Ramon’s home is in Puerto Rico, but that he refuses to return because of personal convictions. Like Javier, Ramon pursues the illusion of a home in the United States. To Ramon, “making it” in the United States serves as a testament to his worth as a man, and his New York hovel doubles as a monument to his achievements.

Dolores Iglesia
Stephanie Saltis played the role of Dolores. She performed well at the callback, and I appreciated her enthusiasm in the project. Stephanie told us in the first rehearsal that she has no sense of home. For Dolores, however, the choice is clear. Dolores’ home is in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico not only represents a literal home, but the promise of freedom. Dolores is a prisoner in the United States, not speaking English, not knowing how to drive, and not making friends for 20 years. Her role as mother to three boys has occupied her life completely.

Dolores’ story resonated with Stephanie, who was raised by a single, Colombian mother in the United States. As a white-passing Latina-American, she worried that she’d never have the opportunity to play a Latinx character. Rivera wrote all of Dolores’ lines in English, though he expects the audience to understand that she’s in fact speaking Spanish. Stephanie and I translated a majority of her lines into the original Spanish, thinking it to be a poignant choice, and a source of strong actions. We were still careful not to omit important narrative information with her Spanish.

Stephanie does not speak Spanish fluently, but I was ready to work with her on memorization, and thought that acting in a different language would help her shake some bad technical habits. She sometimes allowed the challenge of speaking Spanish to overwhelm her. In directing class, I learned that a good director adapts to the needs of particular actors, which in the case of Stephanie, meant sometimes assuming the role of “therapist.” Stephanie tends to balk at certain directions, growing self-conscious. I became good at knowing how much pressure to apply when coaching her. Still, I expected a lot from her, and she demonstrated tremendous growth.

Nick Calla
I cast Victor Longman as Calla despite not having called him back. He had taken classes with me in the past, so I was familiar with his work. The summer before, Victor came out as trans, and started the process of hormone therapy. He would have to acclimate to a changing voice, and when I would remind him to project, he would joke that he was going through puberty again. He struggled at first to adapt, but grew comfortable as rehearsals progressed. I’m happy that the show offered him a platform to explore his new instrument. Because Victor already trained in acting, he understood his job well. He would assimilate my notes without difficulty. If I noticed him slipping into bad habits, he would acknowledge my warning without any hesitation, and made the appropriate adjustments.

Victor did not answer the question of home personally. For Calla, however, he figured that it’s anywhere he can exercise control. I asked Victor to research the race relations in 1980’s New York, particularly between Italian-Americans and people of color. Italian-Americans, once a marginalized class, have done well to preserve their cultural identity despite living in the United States for countless generations. Victor thought that this influenced Calla’s idea of home to a marginal degree, and he preferred to focus on Calla’s intentions as a businessman. If an actor would rather focus on their character’s objectives, who am I to protest?

Caroline

Mei Taylor played Caroline, and was the other actor that I cast after not having seen her work in callbacks. I pushed Mei the most out of any cast member. She had the least experience, but I held a genuine belief that she had great potential and could grow beyond even her own expectations. Mei struggled with fundamental technical issues throughout most of our rehearsal process. She had difficulty projecting, and committing to physical actions. She knew what verbs
to play, but didn’t have the training to understand how to play them. For the final two weeks of rehearsals, refreshed by Thanksgiving break, she began to shed her bad habits. She performed Caroline’s major second-act monologue to aplomb. It appeared that she had stopped doubting herself. In moments in which she could devote her full attention to playing action, it was as if bad habits never afflicted her performance in the first place. I asked her to focus on how Jose Rivera literally wrote and punctuated the words, and how the text itself suggested the appropriate actions to play. That way, she could dedicate her thoughts to something other than her hang-ups, and still inch closer to playing an objective. She grew more comfortable as rehearsals progressed after receiving my note. She charmed the audience in performance, prompting them to laugh with the simplest gestures. I was proud of her growth and appreciated her resilient attitude.

Mei was born in China, but has no recollection of her time there. An American couple adopted her at infancy and raised her in the United States. Curious, I often asked her about her identity, and if she valued the mores of one culture over the other. She replied that she doesn’t, and that she doesn’t really consider herself to be Chinese. She didn’t, however, claim to feel American either. I didn’t press further, sensing that the topic might be a source of pain for her. She thought her home to be anywhere she feels comfortable and safe.

Mei deduced that Caroline seeks companionship above all. Thus, Caroline’s home is anywhere she’s not alone. Rivera never mentions anything specific about Caroline’s ethnicity, as he does with the Italian-American Calla. He does intimate that she is of about the same socio-economic status as the Iglesias, often fleeing from a broken home for safety, and selling drugs for a living. We know that Caroline is the character that isn’t an immigrant, or the descendant of immigrants, and yet she does not exactly represent a grand American ideal.
I wondered if Rivera himself could answer the question of home. After all, his play never settles Javier’s internal conflict. Caroline’s arc only complicates the theme: if the play’s resident American can’t find an identity in “her” country, then can anybody? As the only member of the company that was born elsewhere, I can’t muster a response as to what I consider to be home, but I’ve always known that it isn’t exactly in the United States. And yet, none of the other company members felt as though their nationality represented them well. Everyone resisted the label of “American.” They chose to relate their notion of home to a personal ideal, instead. Was it because, despite not immigrating to the United States themselves, they all still belonged to a marginalized group? Does American society pressure people of color and queer people into staking claims elsewhere? I stopped to process Marlon’s response, which mirrored everybody else’s. As a straight, cis, white man, he too clung to a nebulous notion of home.

The experience challenged my previous conceptions about the immigrant perspective. I believed that only immigrants wandered through life in search of a home, but with new evidence before me, I could no longer jump to conclusions. Perhaps a lack of national identity has defined the citizens of this country since its inception. Hundreds of writers have already explored the values that bond the people of this country together, or if those values exist at all. They look to national beliefs for answers, because they certainly can’t find them in a shared ethnicity, religion, or holistic culture. The United States has always been the world’s orphanage. If anything, our play’s most disenfranchised characters, Dolores, Ramon, and Charlie, have the privilege of truly choosing their home.

However, I hold fast to the notion that the question of home haunts immigrants more than it does natural-born Americans. I regret not asking the company if they had ever thought about
the question before in the first place. Meanwhile, I ask myself the question daily. Would the question ever cross my mind had I been born here? Maybe not. I have not yet decided if it’s a gift or a curse.

IV. Metaphor

If a single phrase could describe the play, it would be:

*like birds flying home for the winter.*

I applied the above concept, among others, to all of the play’s aesthetic elements. In blocking actors, I drew inspiration from bird-migration patterns, applying those shapes to the stage. Because Stephanie and I found Dolores to be like a caged bird, I would at times block her behind lines the other actors would compose, as if her family itself were the bars that detained her.

We formed our shapes within a rather unique seating configuration, where the audience formed an “L” around the stage. Somehow, we managed to combine thrust and found-space configurations to develop something new. This configuration allotted us two separate dimensions to perform in, including the playing space confined by the “L,” and a small corner just beyond the seats. The former space served as the home’s interior, and the latter served as the home’s
exterior. Our configuration also allowed actors to surprise the audience by walking behind their seats when an interior scene would change to an exterior scene.

Up to five actors filled the interior space in a given scene, while a maximum of two actors ever paced about the exterior space. We planned for all blocking within the home to adopt a circular, erratic quality. Straight lines and firm motions ruled the blocking of the outside world. The former trumps the latter in size, but we tricked the audience into believing the opposite, highlighting the home’s complete disarray, and the void that engulfs everything behind the Iglesias’ front door. When Julio leaves for the military, he ventures into that desolate world of straight lines and firm motions. The audience doesn’t have to wonder why Dolores worries for Julio’s well-being after his departure. At home, an Iglesia can find company, good or bad depending on the day. At least there’s something. Outside, they can lose all sense of belonging in the winter abyss.

I ran the danger of obsessing over blocking, and did not realize until later that I did not trust the source material enough to allow for moments of stillness. In contemporary, realist plays, motion can kill the arc of a narrative. The audience needs time to process the words that the actors interpret. I didn’t understand that Jose Rivera had already imbued the play with profound meaning. As a company, Rivera had left us the simple but difficult task of playing subtext. I thus cut much of our blocking, and instead, asked the actors to help me form two or three tableaus that physically formed a scene’s arc. It was with these tableaus that we established relationships, literal and metaphorical.

Like stated before, Ramon’s house serves as a physical manifestation of his dreams in the United States, which risk amounting to nothing. I thus experimented with the motif of Ramon as
king of an empty empire. We placed Ramon’s chair in the middle of the room, suggesting a throne, never sat on by anybody else. I expected this placement to allow for many “prop punctuation” opportunities, or moments in which the use of a physical prop leads the audience to a figurative understanding of the play. I reserved my best stage pictures for moments in which Ramon rules from his “throne.” In the opening scene, as Ramon returns home from Puerto Rico, he tells tall tales of his trip while four other characters listen attentively. Of course, Ramon rests on his chair, while his “court” sits, stands, or lays about in Baroque fashion, heeding his words. Though Ramon’s story is three pages long, I trusted Marlon’s ability and the picture itself to keep the audience’s attention.

Ramon’s cane was also subject to prop punctuation, standing in as the king’s “scepter.” In the scene where Ramon returns drunk, Julio takes his cane in a usurpation of power, using to restore order to the house. After losing his cane, Ramon pulls a hidden flask from under his chair’s cushion: he trades one “crutch” for another.
The snowglobe that Caroline gives the family as a house present was another item essential to the royal motif. The actors devised a representation for emptying the house and moving away, by drawing the room’s curtains over saturated paintings, rolling up the loud carpets, and removing all clutter. A world once full of color, now swallowed by the darkness of our black box theatre. The only props that remain are Ramon’s cane, which he hands to Javier before leaving as a final farewell to his American dream, a portable radio, and Caroline’s snowglobe. Whether he knows it or not, Javier is heir to his father’s run-down kingdom. He takes the cane and snowglobe, and becomes the only other character to sit on Ramon’s chair- his new throne. Javier looks like Charlemagne with each prop in hand, his own scepter and orb. A spotlight shines on him as he Christens his kingdom with the words, “Dance for us, Javier. Salsa for us, Javier.” With his family gone, he is free to announce his new identity as an American. But he knows it can’t be quite so simple. Like the Iglesia house, Javier is left empty.

Meanwhile, Caetano Veloso’s rendition of *Cucurrucucu Paloma* plays on the portable radio. Rivera emphasizes the role of music in his script, asking for it to play in key moments. However, he never specifies what songs he prefers. A director can only assume that a salsa piece
is required, or at least something in Spanish. I saw it as a chance to take directorial liberties. *Cucurrucucu Paloma* is a traditional Mexican song about an alcoholic that mourns the departure of his lover to death. At the end of the song, the lyrics conclude that the man’s soul took the form of a bird, and continues to cry for his lover’s return. We could use this song, which may as well be about Ramon, to further establish our “migrating bird” motif.

I selected a different cover of the same song to punctuate Rivera’s musical moments. That way, we would fulfill the playwright’s request, while defining a metaphorical through-line. In the scene where Charlie dances to what the text defines as “salsa music,” we played Celia Cruz’s salsa rendition of *Paloma*. I asked Marlon to learn a bar or two of the song to wail while Ramon drunkenly stumbles through a snowstorm. And of course, saved for the play’s unresolved ending is Caetano Veloso’s orchestral cover, which first set the tone for Pedro Almodovar’s crushing film, *Hable con ella*.

V. *Designs*

I would first like to express my gratitude to all of the artists who helped me on this project. I find the greatest joy of directing to be the process of creative collaboration, and I couldn’t have assembled a better team of theatremakers.

A. *Set Design*

I designed the set with maximalist aesthetics in mind, trying to crowd the space with as many colors and textures as possible. Such a choice would further elicit feelings of claustrophobia in the audience. I also wanted to assure that all objects in the home pertained to Caribbean culture one way or another. If successful, I made the audience feel as though they were truly stepping into a Puerto Rican home, privy to a family’s most intimate moments. To
better orchestrate the illusion, I asked the actress playing Dolores to be onstage from house opening, praying the rosary at a bench facing the audience.

I covered the walls with vibrant paintings of *Carib* indians, and selected furniture that would complement a warm color palette. Three large, patterned rugs sprawled across the floor, and demarcated the house’s interior. In the center of the room, slightly beyond Ramon’s chair, stood a piece of furniture whose shelves we covered in religious images and statuettes of birds.

The home’s colors radiated heat, and juxtaposed with the cold winter that waited past the Acting Studio’s windows, it established a cozy but cluttered atmosphere.

**B. Costume Design**

Ayla Sullivan designed the show’s costumes, thrilled to work within the aesthetic context of the 1980s. They watched the show twice before committing to specific designs, and drafted a presentation showcasing inspirational photos, ideas, and make-up tutorials. They dressed the play’s four young characters in attire inspired by hip-hop and streetwear culture. As a nod to my
father’s taste in music, I also asked Ayla to make Ramon resemble legendary salsa singer Hector Lavoe, and they put thick-framed glasses and white shoes on him.

Even so, Ayla was always mindful of the through-line I attempted to define, and selected thematically appropriate pieces. All characters that intruded the Iglesia home, like Calla, wore cool blues, greens, and grays. They represented the cold that would occasionally drift through the front door. Javier also wore blues, demonstrating his abandonment of Latinx culture and his desire to be American. When Julio delivers a monologue while really “stationed” elsewhere, it’s serendipity that he sports a green military uniform. Caroline excepts this rule, as she doesn’t pose a threat to the Iglesia lifestyle. Instead, she wore blacks and reds, suiting her burning passion for Javier. Dolores and Ramon wore colors analogous to those found in the house. They accented the warmth that they had brought with them from Puerto Rico 20 years before.

C. Lighting Design

David Kocina designed the production’s lights. David, though part of the acting BFA, discovered an interest in lighting
design and had plotted the lights for his own show in the fall semester. *The House of Ramon* Iglesia would present him the first opportunity to collaborate with a director as lighting designer. David was quick to offer his own ideas, and had a confident sense of our means and how to bring all technical aspects to life. However, he put his faith in my vision, and always compromised when our opinions conflicted.

David washed the home’s interior with a yellow light, and the exterior with blues and greens. He shared Ayla’s instinct for the world of the play. As the show progressed, the lights inside the home would cool, representing the family’s departure. Dolores, Ramon, and Charlie would take all of the house’s warmth with them, leaving Javier in the cold. At first, David planned to do the opposite, intensifying the home’s lights as the prospect of migration loomed. I explained the through-line to him, and that Rivera’s ending wasn’t a happy one. The family would have to leave Javier behind in as cold of a wasteland as possible.

David also devised a brilliant idea for lighting the stage’s “secret” areas, including the space behind the audience. He hung three blue light bulbs along the seating arrangement’s axis. When the actors would appear behind the seats, the lights could flash an unobtrusive glow, and
just as smoothly switch off as soon as the actors hit their marks. They almost looked like genuine New York streetlamps.

D. Sound Design

My fearless stage manager, Katie Ross, designed our sound and ran cues during performance. The show requires a few sounds that could only be produced electronically with our resources. Fortunately, several speakers adorn the walls in the Acting Studio.

VI. Reflection

First and foremost, this process reinforced the importance of collaboration. A director’s duty is not to impose their vision onto a playwright’s text, but to assure that all company members can make unique contributions toward the goal of faithfully interpreting the script. The director must then coalesce these individual contributions within the framework of an aesthetic or thematic through-line. The task is much harder than it sounds, which is something I had to accept. I sometimes grew frustrated with my inability to make ideal choices, as I expressed above about blocking, for example. My adviser reassured me that it is only through making thousands of mistakes that we arrive at rich artistic solutions. Theatre will mystify even the most seasoned Broadway directors- because this difficulty is what makes the process of staging a show worth undertaking. No other art offers a spirit of discovery like theatre does. Orson Welles once said that good directing is contingent on happy accidents. The director must be ready to pounce on accidents as they occur, solidifying them into moments. Here’s to that sense of spontaneity.

I matured as a person as much as I matured as an artist. This play moves me more than any other work of art, not just because it is the source of the first monologue I’ve ever
performed, but because its themes and relationships resonate with my life so deeply. I auditioned with that monologue to this day, and it’s one of the pieces I performed for graduate schools last January. The play never fails to influence my art.

Because the play concerns the bond between parents and children in immigrant families, I thought it best to ask my father to help me with certain artistic matters. I put him in charge of curating the show’s intermission music, which calls for a mix of 70’s and 80’s salsa. My father loves salsa like any good Caribbean immigrant. He was the perfect man for the job. My parents brought my sister and I to the United States from Venezuela despite being successful business-people in their native home. They dreamt of securing a better future for us. Our education became their top priority. The thought of now having a hand in the culmination of my theatre training elated my father. To him, it symbolized a lifelong dream coming to fruition.

I rarely invite my family to the projects I work on. I’ve always been shy about showing my art to the people closest to me. Therefore, they’ve always been curious about what it is I do at school from dusk to dawn. There couldn’t have been a better show to invite them to than House of Ramon, especially since my dad had already worked so hard on his playlist. My mother told me that he spent the day locked in their room, glued to his Spotify account. He felt more than excited to see my work- our work, for the first time. What he didn’t know was that I added another specific aspect of our lives to the show.

In the play’s closing act, Ramon, now returning to Puerto Rico, asks Javier to kiss him on the cheek. It’s customary for Caribbean kids to kiss their parents when saying goodbye, but Javier, ashamed of his culture, had lost that tradition. After kissing their parents, Caribbean kids should ask for a bendicion- a blessing. Jose Rivera forgot to include this detail in his script. I
thought it appropriate to add that single word. Asking for a blessing is a custom that I had started to neglect myself. Every time I’d leave the house, my parents would look at me, innocently expecting me to honor the ritual. When I would inevitably fail to ask for their blessing, they’d bless me anyways. “Que dios te bendiga- God bless you, son. I love you.” I’d tell them I love them too, and leave.

My parents sat in the front row. I watched them nervously from a corner of the house while the show progressed. Intermission passed, and my dad looked satisfied with his selection of songs. He watched the rest of the show with a pleased expression on his face. It was finally time for the son to say goodbye to his father. “Bendicion,” he asks. “Que dios te bendiga,” replies the father, finally feeling loved by his son. I looked at my father- tears welled in his eyes. He had no idea what was in store for him. With such a simple moment, without having to use words of my own, I told my parents that I loved them. I told them that I appreciated everything they had ever done for me. Tears welled in my eyes, too. I haven’t forgotten to ask my parents for their blessing ever since.

On some days I have two homes, and on others, I have none. Japanese writer Kobo Abe, born in a region that doesn’t share the main island’s culture, described himself as sand blowing in the wind because he never felt at home anywhere. Many parts composed his being, and he would never settle. I’m glad that this play has shown me the beauty of being like sand. I may leave the house without a sense of who I am, but at least I’ll know I have a blessing from my parents- something from Venezuela that I will always carry with me. And I’ll venture forth with these gifts, these traditions, in search of new ones. But I’ll never settle. I now look forward to celebrating my identity in future artistic projects.
Works Cited


Emory University. “Jose Rivera Creativity Conversation.” YouTube, 4 Jun. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkMatJ0dTcU.


https://open.spotify.com/track/79k6qul4amlgmojxpmq1z?si=x7f88ce1rlcy2kgs1y17w
I. Rehearsal Schedule and Daily Call

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THE HOUSE OF RAMON IGLESIAS

DAILY CALL

Date: 10/22/2018
Rehearsal #1
Total Hours Scheduled: 4

Director: DANIEL JIMENEZ
Stage Manager: KATIE ROSS
Cell: (719) 425-0639

General Announcements: Don’t forget your scripts!

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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Rehearsal Location: LOFT THEATRE</th>
<th>Rehearsal Location: <strong>ROOM</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:30 PM</td>
<td>Actor Call: NICK GALVEZ, VICTOR LONGMAN</td>
<td>Actor Call: STEPHANIE SALTS, DIZAON PHIFER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MEI TAYLOR, GRANT BOWMAN</td>
<td>MARLON JACOBI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 PM</td>
<td>END OF DAY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SUBJECT TO CHANGE*
II. Rehearsal and Blocking Notes

-Bright red balls of pig's hair, Stuem hug Mei
-When we're scared, we seek comfort; when we're bored, we seek fun
-If I saw it dancing
-MEI LISTEN
-How do we do our blocking?

-Nick, everything we do is real.
-Were you expecting me? Nick, the kick makes you sit down.
-Mei, you go all the way to action in cross
-and then you go all the way to the corner.
-Mei, sit down where you were, let's as a act of defiance.
-Nick, do imitation at start.
-You walk to your mirror on an almost nothing.
-Nick, kiss freeze Mei and Nick.

-Counter Cross
-Grant point the Boshlight at his Dick.
-Diz, what's your objective for scene W/ Nick?
-Nick, remember the body we established for your monologue W/Diz.
-Diz, why do you stand when Nick tells you about his sexual flight?
-Stay in chair longer b/4 triangle Diz, Nicky, set Victor.
-Victor play with their houses, degrade it, look at the baby shit.
-Diz, only pull curtain.

-If I'm not a her, while coming to me.
-Steep quicker to broken thing, it's the most precious thing in the world to you.
-Ramon enjoy the show in your corner.
-Ramon do a paint thing during welfare.
III. Program

The University of Colorado Boulder Presents

The House of Ramon Iglesia

Written by Jose Rivera
Directed by Daniel Jimenez
Technical Crew

Lighting Designer  David Kocina
Costume Designer  Ayla Sullivan
Sound Designer  Katie Ross
Set Designer  Daniel Jimenez
Salsa Curator  Guillermo Jimenez

Cast
(in order of appearance)
Stephanie Saltis  Dolores Iglesia
Mei Taylor  Caroline
Grant Bowman  Julio Iglesia
Dizaon Phifer  Charlie Iglesia
Marlon Jacobi  Ramon Iglesia
Nick Galvez  Javier Iglesia
Victor Longman  Nick Calla

Special Thanks:
Cecilia Pang
Connie Lane
Markas Henry
Bennet Forsyth
Arturo Aldama
Issy Leustig
Ruben Bejarano
IV. KCACTF Adjudication

Respondent Description: Overall, a solid production. I wish this director had been given an opportunity to produce this work to a larger audience with greater resources. He was solid in his work and the story is one that should be told. The production brought to the fore in a successful manner, the idea of home and what it means to our culturally diverse population. Furthermore, the production addresses the differing definitions of home within a family and how the "American dream" may or may not work for all.

Dr. Toewe