

INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA MEDRANO OF GALA HISPANIC THEATRE

I'm Rebecca Medrano, the co-founder and Executive Director of GALA Hispanic Theater, which stands for Grupo de Artistas LatinoAmericanos. We were founded in 1976 in response to a big influx of political exiles fleeing very repressive regimes in South America. And we are located now in Columbia Heights and Washington, D.C., at the intersection of a very changing neighborhood that was formerly principally African American and Latino and now has is really developing into a quite mixed neighborhood. We have renovated an historic theater, the Tivoli, that was built in 1922 into a permanent performance space with 274 seats. And we are really a cultural center in the heart of the city. We're very proud that we've been here for 40, opening our 47th season and really preserving and promoting Hispanic LatinX culture.

The core of our mission really is to be able to provide opportunities for LatinX artists to tell their stories. These are stories that have been marginalized. Unfortunately, these are stories that are not told on main stage theaters, American theaters, yet they are really a part of the mosaic of our American culture. So we like to shine a light on that and have been doing that, as I said, for 47 years through theater, through dance, music, film festivals, a year round program called Paso Nuevo for LatinX immigrant youth, who create and perform their own work on our stages. And the use of Spanish is extremely important because this country, the United States of America, is the second largest country in the world after Mexico for Spanish speaking people. So there is a huge need to preserve that language and to provide a link for immigrants to stay connected to their native language and culture.

And that is what we do. We perform in Spanish, mainly, with projected surtitles, however, we have developed bilingual musicals, we performed In the Heights for the first time in Spanish and English as well as we did with our musical Fame and our recent musical On Your Feet in Spanish that had some English. Our bilingual children's programs are intentionally developed bilingually within the same play because children have an easier time transitioning from one language to the other. So we use the language to advance the dramatic plot, but we really feel that language is key to your cultural heritage and once you lose that language, you're losing a part of your cultural heritage. So it is our mission to preserve that and to spread that to and share that with the wider non Spanish speaking public.

FOOTAGE

You're all pathetic... at what point did you think that Maripepa was going to notice a bunch of jerks like you. Huh?

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We certainly were founded by and for the community and rooted in the

community and we continue to do so and also to stay in touch and engage with our audiences so we know what they would like to see us produce and present and make them a part of that process. We have done a lot of work using community artists and community residents to develop works about issues that affect them, such as housing, education, immigration. We've worked with performing artists to do story circles, especially during the pandemic in underutilized spaces in the community, bringing together residents, seniors and youth to ask about the issues affecting them, and then creating stories and dramatic works around those issues. We have performed, for example, with the day laborers and engaged them in producing the work about the issues that they face as day laborers in the city.

Principle to our connection and to connection with families, especially with immigrant families, is the Paso Nuevo program for youth who are underserved and many of them are new arrivals. Some of them have arrived unaccompanied. They come to GALA where they are free to create, express their fears, their hopes. They have a wonderful experience producing plays, writing their own stories, performing on our stage for the community. And we always do three of these shows throughout the year to invite community members to come and have a discussion with the youth and give us their feedback. So we continue to get our lifeblood really from the people we are serving.

FOOTAGE

...and help all the women who need our support.
See you soon, I miss you so much.
I also love you very much, soon we will be together.

INTERVIEW

Every day I learn from the young people. I learned from that changing community we serve. And it's every day is a new day and a new opportunity and I think that's the joy of it. I think we need joy in our work. We have to go forth with joy and that's really what's behind, I think, a lot of creativity or what gets people to be creative is the joy of creating.

FOOTAGE

Shut up, because yesterday was Tuesday...
At the foot of your window, I come to sing to you...
Shut up, because yesterday was Tuesday...

Or of the men... taking out with shame...
You all already know me...

Keep on singing boys, more couplets come now!

You want me to shut up!

We don't feel like it, sing more!

Shut up!