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The Color Brown and American Musical Theatre

July 25, 2016

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Quick! Name 5 Latino Broadway musicals!

What came to mind? *In The Heights?* *On Your Feet?* Those would be great choices.

If what came to mind are musicals like *West Side Story* or *Evita* then let me explain the problem. I love to pretend I'm Anita and dance to "America" as much as the next person but the truth is that the genius writers of that musical are simply not Latino. This means that these stories do not accurately reflect my culture and my heritage. Their work comes from research and imagination as opposed to experience. I know this might be shocking but my Latino American experience does not include twirling around in intricate ballet moves. Even more shocking is that Che Guevara and Eva Peron had very little to do with each other.

Another challenge: Name 1 Latino musical set before 1970!

Hmm... Options are running thin? This is the area where I need us to be more reflective. In order to understand what I'm really talking about we need to look at the bigger picture and talk about general American history. Isn't it funny that the Americas know very little about the history of Latino people? It seems that our society has done a grand job at erasing our contributions to American history, of which there are many. Subsequently our faces have been erased from American musical theatre.

I remember my first couple of years as an immigrant in this country, I migrated here from Colombia as a 4th grader with very little knowledge of American History. They don't teach you American history in Colombia, just little they don't have bob sleds in San Juan (see what I did there?) I remember quickly being taught of the Civil Rights movement and slavery of African Americans. I learned about Rosa Parks, the underground railroad, and segregated water fountains fairly quickly. Then I remember thinking: Which fountain would I have used? I'm simply not white enough to drink from the white water fountain, yet I don't seem to be represented in any of the tales of African American struggle. In fact, it's as if the color brown did not exist before the early 1970s.

But back to American musical theatre. In 2016 Broadway saw its most diverse season yet. For the first time in 70 years we saw 4 black actors take home a Tony Award for all musical theatre acting categories. This is a huge feat in a year where we also saw no actors of color represented in any of the acting categories at the Oscars. The stunning *Shuffle Along* opened to rave reviews and 11 Tony nominations. Asian Americans were represented in the beautifully flawed *Allegiance*. The story of Japanese internment was incredibly moving and it was inevitable to draw a parallel between the story we saw on stage and the hate Muslim Americans are feeling today. Latinos celebrate a huge hit with *On Your Feet: The Story of Emilio and Gloria Estefan*. The musical boasts an all Latino cast and its infectious Latin rhythms. I celebrate these accomplishments but as I look at the season ahead I see little promise for diverse stories; certainly nothing shedding light on darker historical subject. I also worry because if I look at seasons past I have to go back almost 40 years to find another historical Latino American musical.

Let's go way back to 1979; The year when *Zoot Suit* opened on Broadway at the Winter Garden theatre. The Chicano musical played for a whopping 41 regular performances and 17 previews. *Zoot Suit* was written by Luis Valdez and told the story of the Sleepy Lagoon Murder trials during World War II. It was

really a play with music but I'm stretching it for the purpose of this writing. It later became a movie directed by Valdez and starring Edward James Olmos. This was almost 40 years ago! Then came the

directed by vaidez and starring Edward James Olmos. This was almost 40 years ago! Then comes the inevitable question: What about *Hamilton*? Of course no conversation about color in theatre can neglect the subject of *Hamilton*. Yes, this show is amazing and it deserved every single one of its 11 wins at the Tony Awards. The Pulitzer prize winning musical struck a sentimental chord with me especially because it reminded me that this country was built in collaboration with immigrants. What Lin-Manuel Miranda has done is open the doors so that the rest of us can start to tell our own stories. It is my hope that the Hamilton effect inspires Latino writers to look into their own history for new source material. After all, Latinos make up roughly 18% of America's population, which if we correlate to amount of Broadway theatres we should have 7 – 8 shows running at any given time.

Latinos have done incredible things for this country. Brown Latinos played vital parts in the civil rights movement, we built entire communities on American soil, we left our countries behind in the pursuit of the American Dream. These narratives are not easily found in a text book but they have the potential to be the heart of the next ground breaking musical.

Bingham Camp Theatre Retreat

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