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Teatro Luna paints unvarnished portrait of Latina life

By **BY CASSANDRA HARLAN**

published: Apr 14, 7:31 AM

It began with a chance meeting at an audition.

Teatro Luna theater company founders Coya Paz and Tanya Saracho were vying for a role at the Chopin Theatre in 2000, and began sharing industry stories.

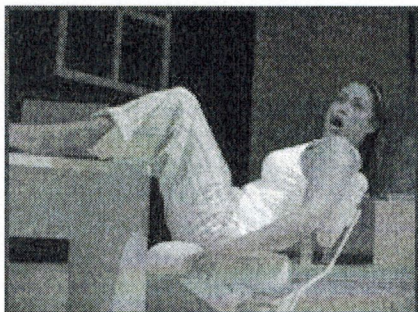


Photo courtesy of Teatro Luna

They found that, as Latina actors, they were each offered the same stereotypical roles. They decided to do something about it, and four months later, Teatro Luna was born.

"When we started the company, there hadn't been a lot of leading ladies that were Latina characters," says Saracho, 32, the group's writer and director. "There wasn't a lot of opportunity on stage and when we were on the stage we were maids and prostitutes and gang bangers and that's what we were auditioning for."

Every member of Teatro Luna, from the stage director to the set designer to the writers and directors, is Latina.

The non-profit theater group performs at the Chicago Dramatists' theater at 1105 W. Chicago Avenue. The group also tours college campuses across the country, with the goal of providing a space for Latinas to tell their stories in their own words.

Those stories are connecting with audiences in new ways.

Irasema Gonzalez, whose Tianguis Bookstore in Pilsen collaborates with the theater group to produce spoken-word performances featuring Latina talent, says her first experience with Teatro Luna was unique.

"It was the first time I saw myself on stage," says Gonzalez. "They really addressed the fact that you

can't categorize us (Latinas)," Gonzalez says. "When I watch mainstream plays, I see them and I think 'that was good,' but I'm not able to connect with them like I am with Teatro Luna."

Teatro Luna's most recent production, "Solo Tu," is an examination of motherhood through the eyes of four Latina women.

Saracho, a resident playwright with Chicago Dramatists, is also the founder of the Chicago Latino Theater Alliance and the Latina Playlab.

Windy City Times theater critic Jonathan Abarbanel says what sets Teatro Luna apart is its evolution into a company that tells stories that are touching, memorable and fun.

"I've been following Teatro Luna since very early in its existence," says Abarbanel. "Teatro Luna shows and scenes and monologues sometimes are vulgar, but always with an honest edge or a twist of humor and sometimes with both at the same time. The fact that their stories may be based on real-life experiences is a bonus."

The writers, directors and actresses at Teatro Luna borrow experiences from their own lives to shape their fictional characters on stage.

Teatro Luna is a family, a sisterhood. Members of the close-knit group hang out together at restaurants, shop together and invite each other over for dinner, says Saracho.

Their chemistry is apparent on stage.

Since 2000, the group has produced at least two plays a year, on topics ranging from sex to motherhood. The company also does not shy away from discussing issues affecting Latinas within their communities.

In addition to the spoken-word series, Proyecto Latina, held every third Monday at Radio Arte, at 1401 W. 18th St., the group has also developed a performance series in collaboration with the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum at 800 S. Halsted St.

The series, called "Oye! -Listen," features two to three artists or performance groups each month.

The group's next project, "Restaurant Spanish," is a play examining the reaction of some Americans to hearing Spanish spoken in public places.

"People ask us not to speak Spanish around them and this has happened a lot," says Saracho. "And they say, 'Oh, well, I speak restaurant Spanish.' So we were like, 'we are going to write a play about that!'"

Saracho says the play will explore the concept of being the marginalized "other" in a society.

Saracho says that while Teatro Luna has made inroads toward expanding perceptions of Latina women, they still have a long way to go.

"I'm not singing victory ... until my girls can feed themselves on acting, but they can't because the opportunities aren't there," she says.

"Actors are the lowest on the totem pole and have the least amount of power. When we start incubating

more writers, producers and directors, we (will) have done our job."

Correction: Irasema Gonzalez works with Teatro Luna on the Proyecto Latina spoken-word productions. An earlier version of this article spelled her name incorrectly.