


As Boyle Heights' Casa 0101 Fights for Its Life, Funding to Improve Diversity in the Arts Dwindles

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It's a Saturday night in Boyle Heights, and the second weekend of Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme, Casa 0101 Theater's annual Latina playwrights festival, is standing room only. Onstage, actors Ana Tapia, Diana Cruz and Raquel Salinas act out a harrowing catalog of familial dysfunction that includes rape, child molestation and teen pregnancy.

"Finally, somebody listened and didn't blame me," Tapia's character, the family's sexually traumatized granddaughter, testifies in the playlet's final affirmation. "I'm taking parenting classes and I'm in therapy now."

As if on cue, a telltale chorus of sniffles breaks out across the darkened house. "It got me," a nearby audience member is overheard whispering to her friend as she wipes away tears with a tissue. *Cycles* — writer Suzanne Linares' raw parable about how secrecy, shame and silence have allowed trauma and sexual abuse to be transmitted across generations of low-income, culturally conservative Mexican-American immigrant families — has struck a deep chord.

Now in its sixth year, the popular showcase for local Latina playwrights shows no sign of slowing (like past editions, this year's run will eventually sell out). That not only makes Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme a success story unto itself, it also adds a layer of bitter irony to the Jan. 29 announcement of the possibility that neither the show nor the theater will be back in 2019.

In a statement, Casa 0101 founding artistic director Josefina López startled Los Angeles' Latinx stage community by announcing that the 18-year-old company would have to close its doors by June unless a new source of revenue could be found to stabilize its finances. "We need your financial support," she pleaded. "If you believe in what we are doing, please support us now."

López went on to cite what for all of Los Angeles' intimate, 99-seat-and-under stage community has become an all-too-familiar refrain over the past decade: "We can't pay our rent."



Josefina López with husband Emmanuel Deleage

Emmanuel Deleage, Casa 0101's executive director and López's husband, simultaneously announced the launch of #CASA350, a 120-day fundraising sprint that seeks to sign up 350 new subscribers at \$25 per month by June. As of April 19, however, only 190 had signed on.

That leaves the theater's fate in the hands — and the hearts — of 160 more of Boyle Heights residents and others who value the theater and its mission at least as much as they do their morning cup of coffee.

For a city that is more than 48 percent Latino, the loss of Casa 0101, one of only three all-Latino stages that produce regular seasons of plays in Los Angeles, might be incalculable to its audience, but it would be a Richter-scaled catastrophe to L.A.'s Latinx theater artists. Casa represents a disproportionate amount of the stage roles available to Latina/o actors — lead roles that are essential to every actor for developing the craft that is a prerequisite to better-paying film and TV work.

But the very fact that Casa 0101 finds itself in fiscal straits underscores what grant makers and Latino theater makers alike say is a larger dysfunction in the nonprofit arts.

Some of the system's starkest disparities are found right here in Los Angeles. In a groundbreaking 2011 study, arts research group Helicon Collaborative found shocking inequalities in arts funding relative to demographics. A follow-up [Helicon report](#), published last year, concluded the inequalities had only gotten worse for underrepresented communities of color. How unequal can be summed up in a single statistic: Though Angelenos of color represent 72 percent of L.A.'s population, funding for "culturally specific groups" amounted to a mere 8 percent.

"[We] are under-resourced in a way that is particularly heinous," says Armando Molina, artistic director of Company of Angels, the venerable Los Angeles diversity theater. "The [funding] formula currently, as it exists, is about the size of the theater, not the size of who the theater serves."

Chicanas, Cholas y Chisme is among eight main-stage shows that make up Casa 0101's annual slate of what Deleage said is 80 percent to 90 percent new works by local writers. With its inclusive, 28-person company, it is a model of a community-based, social justice–infused mission that López likes to describe as "giving Latinos a place where they can be the heroes of their own stories."

"I tell people that theater saved my life," López reflects over the phone, "because when you grow up undocumented, when you're Mexican-American, when you're working-class, you don't realize the toll it takes on your psyche. ... I wanted to empower my students, my community, to see themselves as the powerful people that they really are and understand that we're not the victims in somebody else's story."



Casa 0101 in Boyle Heights

López, a lifelong Boyle Heights resident who was born in Mexico, is probably best known for the 1987 play *Real Women Have Curves* (which was adapted as a film in 2002). She and Deleage joined forces in 2001, the year after López had founded Casa in a small storefront at 2009 E. First St.

A move across the street into a 5,400-square-foot former boxing gym came in 2011 after a capital campaign that included a \$50,000 city grant facilitated by District 14 councilman José Huizar. An expansive 99-seat theater allowed the company to add family-pleasing, \$35-per-ticket Broadway musicals to its programming.

But it was the space's new classroom and López's evangelizing passion for teaching playwriting and acting that inspired the move.

"My thing is that I teach playwriting, because in this community, it's either you join a gang or you join an extreme Christian group to stay out of gangs," López says with a laugh. "It's almost like we want to be the middle path, where we inspire people to go into the arts or at least to learn self-confidence, acting and at least value their lives by telling their own story."

If there's a poster child for what that inspiration looks like, it's *American Crime* TV star Johnny Ortiz. A Highland Park gangbanger from a home racked by domestic violence and extreme poverty, Ortiz had already been shot and stabbed and had served 24 months at a high-security juvenile facility when, at the age of 15, he started classes at the theater's free youth acting program.

With the guidance of teacher Edward Padilla (also Casa's board president), Ortiz landed his first professional TV gig on the gritty L.A. cop drama *Southland* when he was 17. It was only when he turned on the broadcast and saw himself on TV for the first time, however, that he understood the magnitude of the corner he had just turned.

"I basically transitioned from gangbanging to acting in like four minutes on TV," he said by phone. "And I remember at that time it was a moment of life-changing experience for me. ... This year I have three films coming out and two others in production, and it is all thanks to Casa."

According to Deleage, the immediate circumstances behind Casa 0101's fiscal crash include the kind of vagaries that are typical with any small nonprofit arts institution but can be fatal under the knife's-edge economics of funding inequality.

Multiple grants expired at the same time. Several high-profile shows with big expectations drew small turnouts. Necessary tech upgrades were poorly timed.

Untimely sanctions hit hard. The California Employment Development Department (EDD) insisted that theater volunteers be considered salaried employees and added to the payroll, and that Casa pay three years' worth of back pay and employment taxes (the ruling is being appealed). In addition, the theater found itself blacklisted by the stage actors union, Actors' Equity Association, and was forced to spend itself back into Equity's good graces by using union actors on its anti-gentrification play *Enemy of the Pueblo*.

Deleage also acknowledged that the opening of CasaFina last year, the Boyle Heights Mexican restaurant created by López as both a hedge against gentrification and, eventually, an additional revenue source for the theater, distracted the couple from fundraising.



Josefina López in the couple's Boyle Heights restaurant, CasaFina, which was supposed to help subsidize Casa 0101

Understanding the winners and losers in arts funding begins with looking at the complexions of the board members of Big Arts and Big Philanthropy. Last year, the Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative launched by the L.A. County Arts Commission found that 68 percent of local arts organizations' board members are white, compared with roughly 27 percent of the county's population.

That mirrored Helicon's finding that the "pronounced lack of diversity among arts foundation executive staff and board members" directly exacerbated grantmaking disparities, which Helicon pegged to a staggeringly familiar statistic: The richest 2 percent of the arts organizations reap nearly 60 percent of the philanthropic wealth.

Against that backdrop is the historic ambivalence of state political leaders. California has long been a blue state with scandalously low levels of public art support that have remained dispiritingly flat over the years. What's changed is the explosion of cultural institutions with their hands out.

"[Arts] funding has not increased in many years," says Danielle Brazell, general manager of the L.A. Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA). "As a matter of fact, we're still at 1990 levels for funding, and our grant portfolio has doubled. So we have less funding than we did basically, in the early 2000s, and we have twice as many grantees."

"This is not a city of philanthropy," DCA performing arts director Ben Johnson dryly adds.

But Brazell adds a caveat: For most foundations, you must have at least a \$500,000 budget and have a formal audit to even be eligible for grants. And in Los Angeles, the only stages with both the requisite budgetary clout and the grantwriting prowess are the regional giants — Center Theater Group (encompassing the Ahmanson, the Mark Taper Forum and the Kirk Douglas Theater), East West Playhouse and the Geffen Playhouse.

"We have a tendency to be poor organizations that cannot hire a professional grant writer," laments Frida Kahlo Theater artistic director Rúben Amavizca-Murúa. "We are artists. But we never learned administration. We never learned accounting. We never learned contracts. [And] we cannot pay somebody who knows."

If that wasn't enough, all of L.A.'s Latinx and diversity stages were blindsided in 2016 by a tectonic shift in funding priorities by the \$2.3 billion James Irvine Foundation, which had been a mainstay grantmaker for smaller theaters of color. CEO Don Howard, who took the reins at Irvine in 2014, and who brought an expertise in data management engineering to the job, gave notice that Irvine would cease funding traditional play producing companies in favor of poverty programs.



Emmanuel Deleage and Josefina López on the stage of their old storefront theater, now known as Little Casa

Although Casa 0101 had been technically eligible for Irvine funding, Deleage, who had learned grantwriting on Skid Row while working with John Malpede's social-justice theater company Los Angeles Poverty Department, says the application process had been onerously complex and too time-consuming for the theater's small staff to consider.

Other major diversity arts funders, such as California Community Foundation, soon followed Irvine to varying degrees. The shift echoed a similar abandonment of art and the humanities in public education during the 1990s and 2000s, when education reformers gutted arts education in favor of high-stakes achievement testing for math and English, where answers can be right or wrong but never maybe.

As theater makers reeled, funders urged minority companies to rely more on individual giving or to become more competitive with the foundations still in the game by punching up their cultural equity statements in their grantwriting. In 2015, the DeVos Institute (yes, *that* Betsy and Dick DeVos) went so far as to suggest that donors should apply Darwinian tough love and allow weaker African-American and Latino nonprofits to wither so that the strongest ones can survive.

"So we're seeing a shift away from arts funding, and then we're seeing some dog-and-pony stuff about how to nurse your individual giving," Latino Art Network chairman Tomas Benitez explains. "I mean, individual giving is good. It's a healthy activity, it's a profile of a nonprofit organization, but we don't have that \$35,000 one-check wonder, or that \$35 million one-check wonder. We're getting \$5 from a woman who may only have \$5 but she's giving everything she can to us."

Benitez echoes all the theater makers interviewed for this story by insisting that the cultural equity needle will only continue to move in the wrong direction if left to the whim of private foundations. Efforts such as L.A. County Arts' Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative, which is mandating cultural equity statements in grant proposals, is fine, he says, but government arts agencies can only do as much as political leaders allow them. "It cannot stop at just a statement."

"We've seen a lot of companies come and go over the last 53 years," Teatro Campesino artistic director Luis Valdez says by phone. "I think Casa 0101 needs all the help it can get." Valdez, who is credited with creating what in the 1960s was called Chicano theater, had come to Casa 0101 in 2013 for its revival of *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges*, the Valdez play that López says inspired her to become a playwright.

"Casa 0101 is an object lesson for every theater company that's looking at each other and seeing how they survive," Valdez says. "What I've seen Josefina doing is building that connection to the community in Boyle Heights, at the grassroots, and developing an artistic sensibility and a narrative that's common to all of us. In L.A., all of that is absolutely essential."

To support Casa 0101, go to casa0101.org/support-us.