

ONE FOOT FORWARD WITH A POTATO CHIP ON MY SHOULDER...

Getting a play produced in New York City while living in Texas!

By Marco Antonio Rodriguez

An old Hasidic proverb says: "Give people a fact or an idea and you enlighten their minds; tell them a story and you touch their souls."

We live through the stories we share. Whether they be seen, spoken or heard. For spiritual, intellectual or entertainment. Some used to manipulate and oppress, others to heal and empower. When a story is shared with conviction, passion, and clear intent, it carries power to influence and bring cause to action.

Even after acquiring moderate success as an actor/writer with my own plays and screenplays, doubt still manifests as a pesky, yet at times necessary thought. This is show business after all. Stories of doubt and rejection are constant within my circle. Yet the need to tell a story, regardless of how it may be perceived or received, always wins. I gravitate towards stories of or about people who are often marginalized or ignored. My definition of a "successful" work is one where I can shed insight and awareness on topics we typically shy away from: addiction, sex, spirituality... ya know... all them goodies!

That is how I came to write my stage play, *La Luz De Un Cigarrillo* (The Light Of A Cigarette), the story of an estranged Dominican mother and American son wrestling with his sexuality that reconnect after five years. Torn by hidden secrets and disparate opinions about one another, they come to realize that the bond between mother and child knows no boundaries. With no clue as to when or if it would get

produced, I wrote out of sheer compulsion. A need born out of a void I felt required being filled. No one in New York (or anywhere else in the U.S.) was exploring the Caribbean immigrant experience, certainly not in the native Spanish language.

The beauty of the dialect. The complex psychology of the immigrant who has lived in the United States for many years and now carries an aversion to their own roots. And the biggest taboo in our Hispanic culture... SEXUALITY! Cue melodramatic telenovela music... TAN TAN TAN!

I began work on the play and quickly realized I had no point of reference as to where or how to market such a specific piece. Particularly since, although born and raised in New York, I had been living in Texas for many years. How, you ask yourself, does someone in the arts already living in New York end up in Texas? I was given a full scholarship to receive my MFA degree from Southern Methodist University, landed an agent within days of graduating and have been working in the industry ever since. That's how. See, I'm not that loco in la cabeza.

As I supported my craft shooting television commercials (or what I call "CHEW ON THAT POTATO CHIP AND LOOK LIKE YOU FREAKING LOVE IT SO YOU CAN PAY YOUR BILLS!"), I developed this play that seemingly had no audience. My intention was to honor my Dominican heritage and create a conversation in the Latino community about topics that had been ignored too long. The great spiritual masters agree that passion and clear intention leads to purpose. With my play carrying both, surely I would find success, right? Or was this to become a writing exercise buried in the abyss of unproduced works. Hello again, DOUBT! ¿Cómo está, señor?

I continued to eat the potato chip and pay the bills... yet, the need to tell this story would not surrender. The very thing that frightened me (no one had done this before) also provided inspiration and drive. This idea of jumping into uncharted territory; where no Latino in New York had gone before. Could turn out disappointing or incredibly thrilling. What's there to lose? A thriving, potato chip-chewing career in Texas?

It took two years to crank out a strong draft. Then I proceeded with the next step: exploring the resources at my immediate disposal. Working as a producer, actor and director in Texas, I had amassed an army of brutally honest colleagues. I had a private reading and received constructive criticism, which in turn motivated two more years of revisions. There was no rush. If something new and different was going to land in foreign eyes it'd better be in its best shape. With no literary agent (the market for works written in Spanish in the U.S. is close to non-existent), I researched the few Latino companies in New York doing Spanish works and submitted. Only two showed curiosity. One passed, the other would give it a public reading only as a favor to a mutual friend. A reading that was to take place on a Monday, in the middle of a cold, February evening in New York... One opportunity, señor. That's all the burro brought so chew on that chip and look like you freaking love it!

It only takes one (semi) YES and acting as if an opportunity is your very last. I became a one-man machine promoting this one night only reading. Using my own potato chip funds to get the word out via post cards, emails, social media, press releases... And I did it all from TEXAS! Gotta love modern technology and an excellent cell phone plan. The theater company hosting the event complained I was going overboard for "just a reading!" Back off world. I got a passion chip on my shoulder! I called in a few favors from actor friends in New York and was ready to Rock 'n Roll! Well... in my case, merengue 'n roll!

The cold, February New York night arrived. It was time to debut this baby, and with strong effort, I managed to get a full house! The buzz in Manhattan was strong but the real test was about to take place. Four hard years of work could be destroyed within minutes, heck, seconds. I felt like the guy introducing King Kong for the first time. "The eighth wonder of the world!" This beast better not let loose, trample on everyone and destroy my existence because the climb up the Empire State building is arduous and I have major juanetes.

Not so much as a few words from the opening of the play were uttered when the entire theater burst into an uproar of laughter and applause. By the end everyone was on their feet! To my surprise, it wasn't just Dominicans. There were Colombians, Peruvians, Mexicans... a diversity of Latinos gathered together, expressing gratitude and love for a story, which, for them, was universal. Manhattan was abuzz about this reading that had knocked their chancletas off. WEPA! No more potato chip commercials! My writing career shall take off! I shall frolic up and down the snow-capped New York streets in glee. Free... free as the wind blows...

But even in the presence of what seems a sure success, the universe has ways of deviating course towards a different and unexpected destination. I returned to Texas with no offers. It would be another two years before the play would receive a full production. Six years after I initially began to write it!

Next month I conclude the journey as the play lands in a wrestling match with New York producers, almost fades into oblivion and finally sees the light at the end of Off-Broadway! Colorin Colorado, este cuento solo ha comenzado!