

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

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

By Marco Antonio Rodriguez

The stage is set. Years of paying bills doing potato chip commercials whilst writing a piece I'm passionate about have finally paid off. After a strong recommendation by a mutual friend, a New York-based theater company commits to a one-night only public stage reading of my play, *La Luz De Un Cigarrillo* (The Light Of A Cigarette), the story of an estranged Dominican mother at odds with her emotionally and sexually conflicted son. There's a catch: The reading is to take place on a cold, February, Monday evening. Regardless, it is a resounding success.

Standing ovation from a surprisingly multi-cultural audience hungry for Latino stories and topics rarely explored. Surely the potato chip chewing will come to an end. Bourgeoning writing career, ¿cómo está, señor?

An offer for a full production never materializes. El zero in el teatro. Like a three-day-old chicharron, perhaps it takes a few days for it to sink in and digest? Yep, potentially shattered dreams make my metaphors contrived and depressing. I'm a writer in angst with a looming potato chip on my shoulder! But this ruffled chip isn't full of ridges just yet. I drown my anxieties in Barbie pink liquid for the stomach and wait a few days...

Two days before I am to depart, emails and phone calls trickle in. I am being summoned for “meetings.” Independent theater producers and even some of the theater companies that initially passed on the play would like to “chat.” Dios mío, I hope I’ve been a good boy otherwise I have some ‘xplainin’ to do, Lucy! I begrudgingly change my plane ticket (more potato chip chewing funds depleted) and stay an extra week.

Meetings are taken at several coffee shops and cluttered New York basements passing as offices. Some request I submit the play for consideration. Others desire to discuss possibilities: Could I shorten the play to just one-hour? How about a one-woman tour de platano? We don’t think the Latino community is going to respond well to that sexuality thing. Let’s make the son epileptic instead. Better yet! Let’s make him epileptic, limbless and turn it into a merengue musical! The first merengue musical about a depressed, Dominican single mother living in Manhattan with her epileptic, limbless son!

This potato chip is getting staler by the minute, folks. Someone please throw me a hot cheeto!

Most spiritual masters agree passion and clear intention leads to purpose. This story is my passion. Sexuality and the complex psychology of the immigrant are topics rarely explored in the Latino community. My intention is to educate and create dialogue. Passion and clear intention... check. I still leave New York with no offer. Months go by. Instead of drowning in tequila and Vicente Fernandez rancheras, I use the time to strengthen the play with further re-writes. My production prince shall come along someday...

A couple of months in, I receive a phone call from a representative of another company in New York where the play had been submitted. They love the piece and would like to give it a production! WEPA! Then I get the contract: A lifetime buyout and no creative control. It was... not quite what was desired. Although I had written other moderately successful works, I felt this was my big one. My Dominican debutante ball in the big apple. Should I just accept these terms? No one else was stepping up with a contract.

For an up and coming young writer, any offer is thrilling. When one is building a career there is temptation to say yes to everything. Paying your dues as they say... Yet one must remember anything you attach your name to will haunt for longer than perhaps desired. One thing is chewing a potato chip to pay bills another is working on a project you are truly passionate about and letting it dissolve into something other than your original vision.

I'm not currently living in New York or Los Angeles. I'll get there eventually. I live a full life and all my needs are met. Translation: rent is super cheap and I get to do what I love without having to take on odd jobs. A bulk of my focus can go towards acting and writing. I can fully trust my instincts and not feel the need to say yes to everything. What to some is "If you're an actor/writer/director, what in J.R. Ewing's life alert button are you doing in Texas?" is for me, a blessing. Yes, the potato chip is a source of ongoing inner conflict, but it pays the bills and allows for interesting moments when recognized at an airport bathroom stall. It may be a slower climb, but my inner little mountain goat is enjoying every step.

I continue to chew the chip, do more re-writes and work on side projects. A few months later, the theater company that originally hosted the reading makes contact and wants to produce. What took so long? "See... wha' ha-happened wuz... WE BROKE, CHICO!" But... the company carries plenty of heart, passion and love the play as is. They also have the right negotiating arm: Aside from fair compensation (thanks to dynamite grant writing), I get to direct and have full creative control! No limbless, epileptic merengue dancers in this production! Because of limited staff, I also jump on board to assist with publicity and marketing. Just like the initial reading, I become a one-man machine working day and night. Making sure the NY media and Latino theater community gets to know me via hundreds of persistent emails and phone calls. I use the community support amassed in Texas and build a successful online donation campaign to help pay for certain production expenses. And, of course, those potato chip-chewing residuals allot time and money for me to focus on the project without having to worry where rent is going to come from. On the good chip lollipop!

One crazy, hustling year later, the play goes up. Success! We extend by popular demand and walk away with 5 HOLA and 4 ACE awards (the top awards for Latino theater in New York City) including best play and best director. The play is picked up for release by three different publishers, added to the University of Puerto Rico Spanish curriculum and is now set to return to New York in two separate productions! Even Pulitzer Prize winning Dominican author Junot Díaz calls the production: "A must see!"

Opportunities and possibilities are flooding in. The permanent move to New York or L.A. has yet to happen. I'm still in Texas happily doing the occasional potato chip chewing to subsidize my passion and I am ecstatic! I didn't follow a specific rulebook but I read them all. Mostly, I follow my instincts. With passion, clear intention and a strong work ethic, ain't no chip too big for these shoulders to carry.

I have this new play I'm working on... Care to read? Pass the chips!

Let's recap parts I and II of these writinglandia chronicles:

- Learn the rules of the craft your heart is calling you to do so you can break them if need be.
- Don't just write what you know. Write what you are passionate about.
- Find brutally honest friends and colleagues that will give constructive feedback.
- Really listen and receive feedback with an open mind. Try to remove ego from the equation. No matter how many years you've been in this business, always be willing to ask questions, grow and learn.
- Have a private reading for just a few folks that have no invested or potential interest in your piece.
- Don't rush to share your work but don't hold on to it forever. After many Rounds in the Ring with Re-writes (my three R's) the piece should be strong enough to be shared with potential producers.
- Look for companies that will take an interest. Research their target audience. Does it match with your piece?

- Use the resources at your immediate disposal (i.e. friends, relatives, etc) and find a way to stage a free public reading (preferably in the city you are intending for it to get produced). Once that is scheduled promote the living huevos rancheros out of it!
- Follow up! Even if folks initially lacked interest share, what we hope, is the success of your reading. Persist!
- Don't feel the need to say yes to every offer. If it feels wrong, no matter how juicy, it probably is.
- Once you receive a production negotiate being creatively involved. You know this world better than anyone else. Be a CEO of your own endeavor.
- Take control of your career. Agents and managers are great but there will be no better hustler of your material than YOURSELF! Passion leads to purpose which leads down the road to success!
- Colorin Colorado este cuento solo ha comenzado para ti! Success awaits...

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