



**World Theatre Day  
International Theater Institute  
ITI U.S. Center**

**Written by Luis Alfaro**

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Hello Friends,

I am so happy to be speaking with you from the ancestral lands of the Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, otherwise known as El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora, la Reina de Los Angeles, or as we simply say, Los Angeles.

On this very special occasion, I hope I don't sound like a crazy optimist when I say that theatre saves lives. I know this because it changed mine.

As an artist who was raised in poverty in a barrio in downtown Los Angeles, I am conscious of a violence that accompanied me in my youth. A way of thinking about my limited choices which were constantly confirmed in mainstream images that distorted my culture and its options.

The message was clear, survival was the objective. For some it meant joining gangs, addiction or learning prison systems. For others, like me,

it was the refuge of a public library where I discovered, that I was, what they called, an artist.

Which is to say that exploring and practicing expression was a way of learning what freedom was.

Discovering this freedom in every play I checked out from the library, showed me that language was attached to feelings that lived in bodies that had metaphorical wings, capable of transport.

Words, as I read them, carried me far when I was growing up. They were comfort in a harsh world. When I wrote words as a teenager, my restlessness to know more stories, took me on real journeys. To you, and your stories, which, I often find, are my stories. The details are different, but the feelings, the same.

Theatre has an extraordinary power to cross all borders and let us see each other, not just on stage, but in the audience as well.

My parents, with their farmworker history, did not know how to access this world. We simply could not afford it, but they desperately wanted it for me.

I collected cans and bottles. At football soccer games, I sold sandwiches my mother made. I raised enough money to buy tickets to see theatre.

My parents drove me to see the first national tour of Stephen Sondheim's 'Pacific Overtures' starring the legendary Asian American actor, Mako.

Then, they drove me to my first play, the first national tour of Ntozake Shange's 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf'.

Then, Luis Valdez's seminal Chicano work, 'Zoot Suit', a history of Los Angeles and Mexican Americans. My Story.

They waited in the car across the street from the Mark Taper Forum Theatre at the Music Center of Los Angeles County.

My parents had no clue what I was seeing, but they could see that something was expanding in me.

I began to understand that the world was much bigger than the one I had been given. There was another world out there. I had little idea how it worked, but I could see that even if it was foreign, it was also capable of being me.

Each play, from the Mahabharata to Nagamandala, were my story too.

I collected more bottles and cans. I sold my mother's tamales in my neighborhood. I was able to go to New York to see Broadway shows when I was fifteen.

My best friend and I held yard sales until we had enough money to go to London.

Eventually, the theatre paid me! To go to Chicago for my first production. To London for my first residency. To Mexico City to perform in my native language. To Canada to meet Canadian-Latinos telling their own immigrant stories.

A play is an invitation to another world.

I am a Chicano, a politicized Mexican American. I yearn to tell more audiences the stories of my people. For me, these are often hard stories, about the disproportionate poverty and violence we are born into. But they are also love stories.

I have adapted the Greek classics so that you can see that we belong to the world too. Our humanity is not limited to barrios and prisons, regardless of what the dominant culture often portrays us as.

I am - a world artist; I belong to the shared humanity of our stories. We, my people, built civilizations, and systems, and rituals, and meaning, from the very dirt we will be buried into.

In La Kech. We believe that we are the other you, or should I say, you are the other me. Your story is also my story. We are one expression of feeling in a world of languages.

This is a difficult time for the world. Violence, poverty, hunger, war, fueled by the lies that support such actions.

We artists must stand in truth, both our own, but also in yours.

In La Kech. Tu eres mi otro yo. You are the other me.

Let us speak to each other in stories, through words and feelings.

This is what theatre does best. We learn how to be better human beings, by coming together and wrestling with all that is conflict, and all that is joy.

The communal experience. This is what I share in the theater, and with you. On this day, when we get to share each other.

Gracias and thank you.