

Business as Usual at The Public Theater?

By Amalia Ortiz

June 24, 2023

It was never a surprise to many people of color (POC) in San Antonio that the tenure of former Executive Artistic Director of The Public Theater of San Antonio, Claudia de Vasco, would last under two years. She said as much at my very first interaction with De Vasco when she met with members of SAY Sí's staff. She mentioned a pattern of artistic directors of color being pushed out of organizations within a year. If all she had was one year, she would try to change as much as possible within that time.

To me, a lifelong Chicana theatre maker in this city, I understood the pushback and uphill battle she would face in actually implementing the "unites the diverse communities of San Antonio" part of The Public Theater's mission statement. The Public Theater's "regular" audience was not going to embrace all the diversity she planned to introduce. Mind you, that meeting with De Vasco at SAY Sí was the first time that I remember anyone from The Public requesting my presence at a meeting or asking who I was and what I thought.

No, it was not a surprise to many POC she connected with during her less-than-two-years-long tenure. What was a surprise, however, was to see 3 of the 4 members of The Public's "new" leadership team are returning or ongoing employees. One of them, Asia Ciaravino, was the President and CEO before The Public's pledge to address diversity issues — meaning she arguably had the opportunity to notice a diversity problem and implement change on her own, but didn't.

I went to college with Ciaravino. I respect her grind and professionalism. I also like what I have seen of J. Robert "Jimmy" Moore's work with The Classic Theatre. My apprehension about the "new" leadership is not personal, but rooted in a long history of a Public Theater mired in exclusion. Their likeability does not change the fact that, after De Vasco's momentous turn at leadership, I was really expecting something... new.

If you read the July 2023 article published in *American Theatre* which The Public has posted proudly on their social media, there is one glaring issue the article mentions and glosses over without a statement about how "new" leadership plans to address it:

"De Vasco, a Texas native, was the first Latina woman to lead the Public Theater and produced José Cruz González's *American Mariachi* in 2022, which was also the first time the theatre had produced a play by a Latinx playwright, despite San Antonio's predominantly Hispanic or Latino population.

The Public Theater hired de Vasco after artistic director and CEO George Green left in the fall of 2020 after he was placed on Actors' Equity Association's (AEA) Do Not Work list. Staff and actors accused Green of creating a toxic work environment and of flouting safety regulations for the theatre's reopening."

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2023/07/19/public-theater-of-san-antonio-announces-new-structure-and-ceo/>

Three years ago, a Change.org petition to The Public Theater's Board of Directors created by Trevor Chauvin cited the lack of equity, diversity, inclusion and ethics that Green represented. "In the 2020 national movement of theaters catapulting forward as leaders in a conversation about EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) and ethics, the Artistic Director/CEO of The Public is not the voice we want to represent our community or our city."

https://www.change.org/p/we-call-for-the-resignation-of-george-green-ceo-of-the-public-theater-of-san-antonio?source_location=topic_page

As The Urban Institute reported in 2021, “When just 21 percent of executive directors and board chairs are people of color, the nonprofit sector’s effectiveness and relevance to the communities it purports to serve are unquestionably at risk.”

<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/nonprofit-leadership-out-step-americas-changing-demographics>

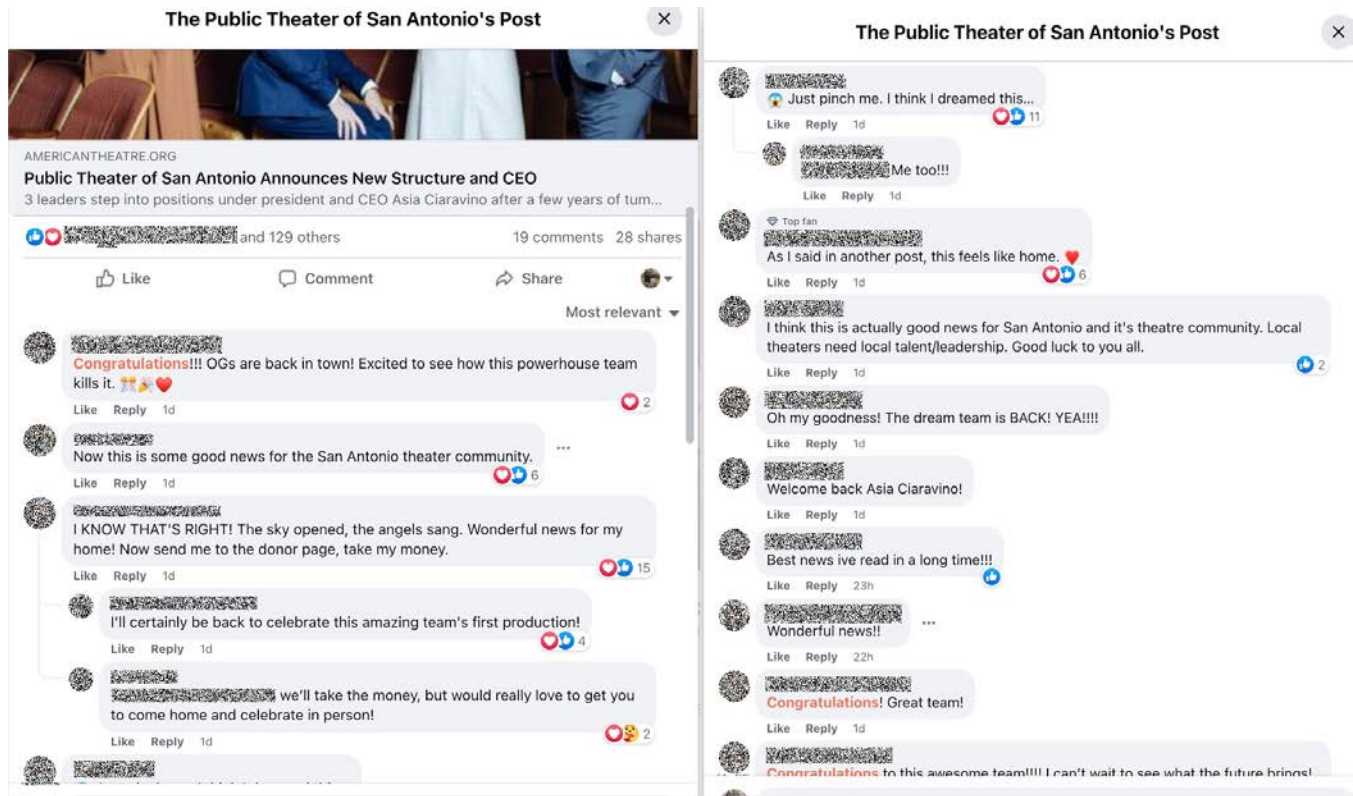
In the wake of Green's departure and the summer of Black Lives Matter, a national theatre movement prompted The Public to acknowledge what POC in San Antonio have felt and experienced since the theatre's inception: an equity, diversity and inclusion problem The Public had never before publicly acknowledged.

“In solidarity with Black Lives Matter, The Public Theater of SA has encouraged its committee and leadership to increase its EDIA efforts. We recognize that this effort from staff, leadership, board, and partners has not been at the level required.” That is what The Public admitted in a 2020 EDIA (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility) Commitment Statement found on their website.

<https://thepublicsa.org/edai/>

The statement goes on to pledge, “We understand that, as a white-led organization, we must be committed to using our platform, our privilege, and our power to act today and every day to dismantle the current system of oppression. Otherwise, our inaction makes us complicit in that very system. Therefore, we commit to a swift and sustained effort that invites People of Color to be an active part of our leadership, decision-making processes, and operations.”

Knowing the gravity of what it means to local POC to have had and lost POC representation among leadership paints fans of the “new” leadership announcement on The Public’s Facebook post with a slightly “Make The Public Theatre Great Again” tone, especially when fans celebrate the old leadership but are not asking critical questions.



(Above images from The Public Theater of San Antonio's Facebook page. Identities of commenters protected by the author. “OGs are back...”)

None of these Public Theater patrons is asking, “Since some of you preceded the Green scandal and The Public’s recent EDIA efforts, what are you going to do differently this time around?” There seems to be a lack of understanding of why POC might distrust someone’s longing to return to “good old days” which have never truly been good for all.

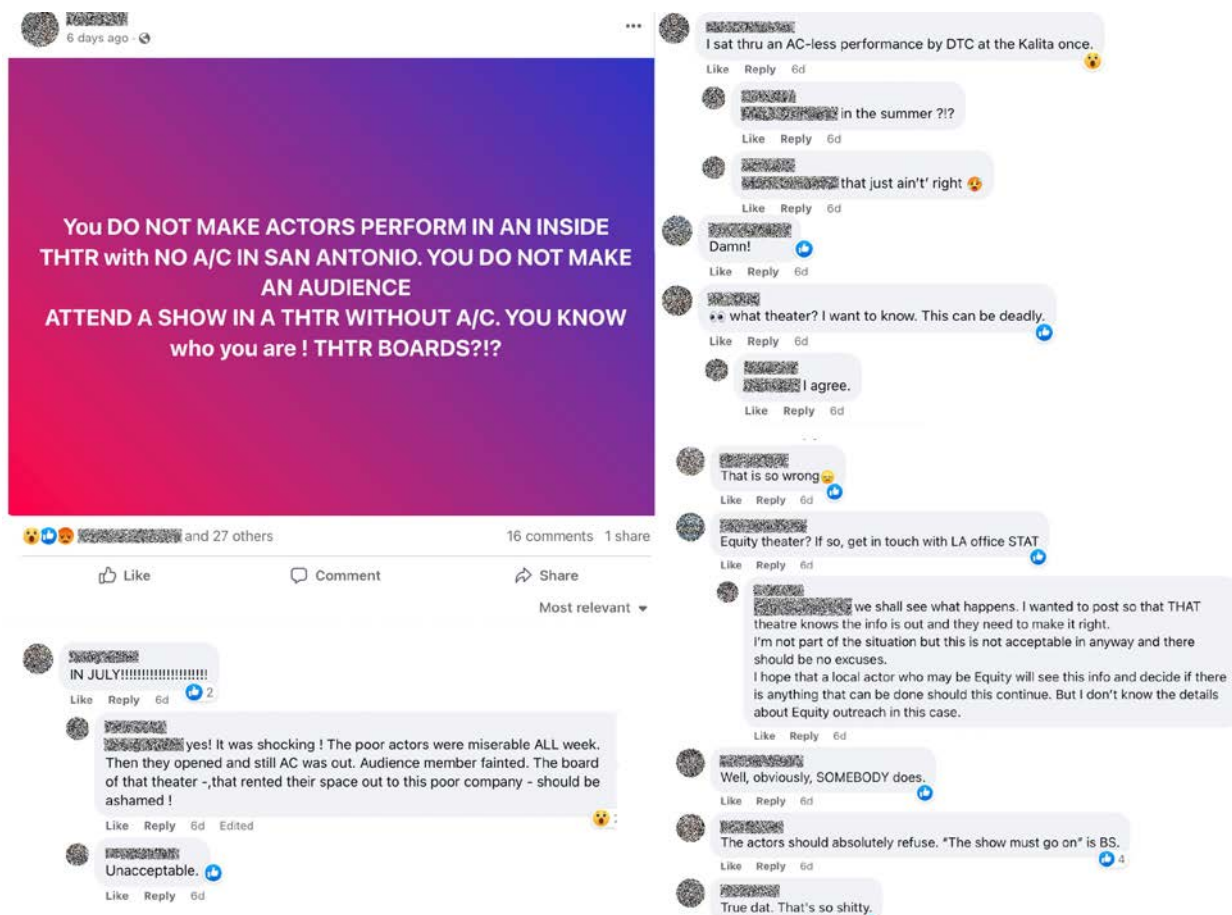
As explained in The Public’s EDIA Commitment Statement on their website, in FY 2019, The Public Theater of SA created an EDIA Committee. The Public subsequently posted on their website their 2021-2022 Season Staff stats (Yes, thanks. Can’t wait to see 2022-2023 and beyond.), a 2021 HR statement, and the announcement of a 2022 Artistic Advisory Committee. They also have a list of Community Agreements adopted in winter 2021 which were curated by De Vasco and “based on the work of many cultural workers, experts and writers including Adrienne Marie Brown, Melody Hobson, Aurora Lizardi, Brene Brown, among others.”

<https://thepublicsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CommunityAgreementsTPTSA2022.pdf>

While these efforts are seen and noted, it is all the more important to see real commitment to diversity at the forefront of The Public’s “new” leadership. It is bad optics to see new leadership adorned in evening gowns and tuxedos in a story in The San Antonio Current touting “Looking forward our theater needs to continue focusing on inclusion, communication, transparency, and creating art that tell [sic] everyone’s stories.” They missed out on a real opportunity in the local press to draw in diverse community members by dropping a few specifics on how they plan to do that.

<https://www.sacurrent.com/arts/public-theater-of-san-antonio-unveils-new-leadership-team-32204528>

Also not good for optics is the recent relocation of Teatro Audaz’s run of *The Ghosts of Lote Bravo* from The Public’s Cellar Theater to Woodlawn Pointe (New Living Spiritual Center). This came after The Public’s air conditioning problems went unsolved and an audience member passed out during a show.

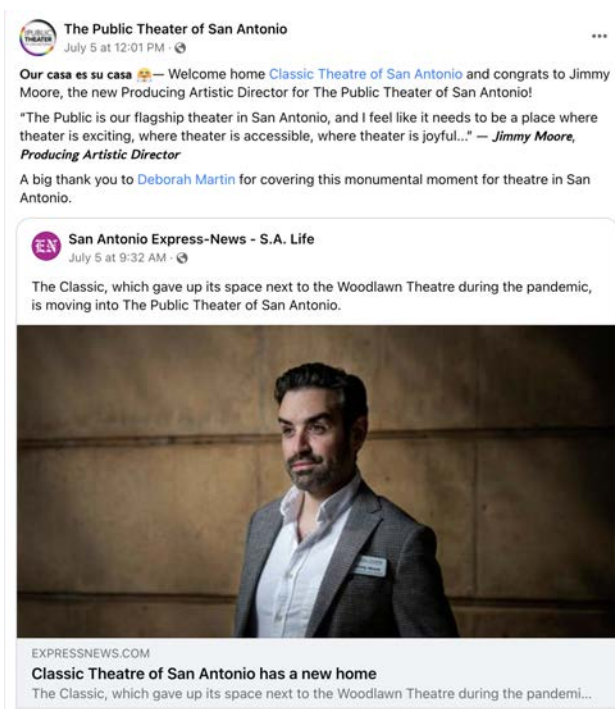


(Above images from a public Facebook page used with permission. Identities of commenters protected by the author. “True dat. That’s so shitty.”)

Local Latinx theatre makers are well aware of The Public's annual/semi-annual production of one Latinx play relegated to the Cellar, with union memberships and union protections rarely extended to those majority Latinx casts and crews. This tradition goes back decades and is what made De Vasco's sold-out main stage production of *American Mariachi* feel like such a hard-won success after a century of no main stage productions by Latinx playwrights.

Teatro Audaz has a history of producing plays in the Cellar, citing on their 2023 season announcement in the *San Antonio Report* their residence at The Cellar Theater alongside a residence with the fine arts department at San Antonio College.

<https://sanantonioreport.org/san-antonio-teatro-audaz-2023-season-reclaiming-our-roots/>



(Above image from The Public Theater of San Antonio's Facebook page. "Our casa es su casa.")

Knowing that history, it was surprising to hear of The Classic Theatre's move into the Cellar this fall as its resident theatre company. In an interview with *The Express News*, Moore said, "I think this is going to be a wonderful opportunity to bring the best of theater to San Antonio under one roof."

<https://expressnews.com/entertainment/article/classic-public-theater-partnership-18182603.php>

While it is great to see Teatro Audaz expand its presence to other venues such as Woodlawn Pointe and SAC, given its history of producing Latinx theatre in the Cellar, it is hard to understand why The Public's "casa" is not Teatro Audaz's permanent "casa."

I reached out to Teatro Audaz Executive Artistic Director, Co-Founder, and Board President Laura T. Garza who spoke matter-of-factly about the timeline of the air condition issues. She cited concerns over lack of communication from The Public at a time of so much change (i.e., De Vasco's departure, The Public General Manager Laura Michelle Wolfe Hoadley's departure, the

new leadership announcement, and the announcement of Classic Theatre's new residency).

As rehearsals began, Garza recognized it was not just Texas-hot, but the air conditioning was not functioning properly. Garza reached out through email several times over these concerns. Portable air conditioners were brought in by Hoadley before she was let go. This helped during rehearsals, but Garza recognized that theater lighting and a crowded audience would exacerbate the problem. Garza reached out for Public's assistance again.

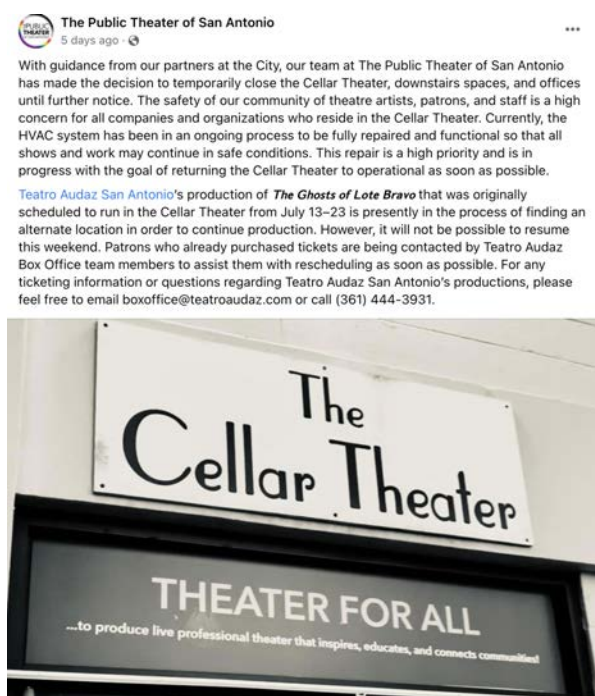
Once Moore joined The Public's staff as new Producing Artistic Director, he reached out via email, and a phone meeting was scheduled with Garza. At that point two days before the show's opening, Garza was informed the air conditioning was completely broken and was most likely not going to be fixed by the time the show opened because The Public was waiting on bond money from the city. It was then that Moore suggested that Teatro Audaz move the show.

Other piece-meal options were discussed and employed such as fans and signs with warnings to patrons. Opening night, the patron passed out during act 2 of the show. EMS was called to aid the man, and Teatro Audaz paused the run of the show to reevaluate the situation.

The next day, members of Teatro Audaz showed up at a meeting with the city that new Managing Director Christina Casella had already planned to discuss the HVAC situation. Casella confirmed bond money which was not yet available would be needed to fix the HVAC. In search of a solution to safely continue the run of the show, Garza brokered a deal with an air conditioning rental business willing to reduce their \$3000 estimate to \$800 for a small nonprofit. Audaz sent the estimate to The Public via text, but at that point, the city stepped in and made the call to end the run at the Cellar. Both Moore and Casella were helpful, reaching out to other venues on behalf of Teatro Audaz, but Garza secured the move to Woodlawn Pointe.

Garza wanted to convey thanks to The Public staff, specifically Michael Wark and Annette Arcos who assisted the team as much as possible with water, ice, and cold towels when the patron was waiting for EMS to arrive. "I would like to express my gratitude to technical director Carlos R. Nine who has been extremely helpful. We are grateful for his assistance in loaning us all the Cellar lighting equipment we needed in order for our show to be able to continue at Woodlawn Pointe."

While The Public announced the change of venue on their Facebook page, nowhere was there a public apology to Teatro Audaz, the majority Latinx audiences who pre-purchased tickets to see the play, or the patron who passed out in their basement. Juxtapose the mental image of the dehydrated patron with "new" leadership in formal wear just two posts later on their Facebook page:



(Above image from The Public Theater of San Antonio's Facebook page. "Comments disabled on this post.")



(Above image from San Antonio Current. "Bad optics.")

Garza expressed sadness, however, about The Public's board, who she requested a meeting with and has yet to hear back about that request. Teatro Audaz has only heard from one board member who reached out to ask about the status of the patron who passed out. "As their theatre in residence, their lack of communication with us during this time is disheartening."

With the amount of labor that went into moving lights, sound and other scenic and theatrical properties to Woodlawn Pointe, Garza pointed out how all of this could have possibly been prevented had The Public communicated the air condition problem before Teatro Audaz moved into the Cellar instead of once they were in the space.

The other issues of The Classic Theatre's permanent residency and "new" leadership announcement beg further conversation with Teatro Audaz. When asked, Garza confirmed Teatro Audaz has had no communication about how The Classic Theatre's residency or the "new" leadership will impact their future with The Public.

At an after party following a performance of *The Ghosts of Lote Bravo*, I huddled at a round table with Teatro Audaz Managing Director and Board Member Abe Ramirez, Public Theater Artistic Advisory Committee Community Representative Analisa Leos Garcia, and *Lote Bravo* cast member Cindy Rodriguez Martinez, who works with Seniors In Play "in community centers all over San Antonio." I asked them to let me know if I have been off-base about the issues I am raising. Their answer was unanimously no.

It became obvious to me that these issues beg for a larger community conversation where more people can share their Public stories. Leos-Garcia informed me that she stepped down from The Public's EDIA Artistic Advisory Committee. She suggested I speak with her brother and former Public Theater Board Member and Artistic Community Representative Omar Leos. He recently left his position on the board and asked that his and his husband's names be officially removed from The Public's Ovation Society long-term donor list.

"POC, especially brown people, have been working at the Public for years even though we continue to get 'burned.' But why do we keep coming back? I think it's because we love our craft and have nowhere else to go," Leos added when contacted for a comment.

As I hugged everyone at the afterparty goodbye, Rodriguez Martinez, 71, began weeping in my arms. "I feel abused, neglected... hurt on so many levels," she cried.

The following evening, I attended *The Ghosts of Lote Bravo* with two Chicax teatro colleagues. The play follows a maquiladora laborer tormented by the disappearance of her daughter in Ciudad Juárez. It is a border tragedy birthed by toxic machismo and American capitalism. Up until then, I had been writing about the production in abstract. By the final scene, my colleagues and I were weeping. The cast, crew, and producers of this production are not "entertainers." They are activists. After the curtain call, Rodriguez Martinez, who played the role of "La Santa Muerte," hugged me as I cried in her arms.

On the drive home with my colleagues, I mentioned how Bertolt Brecht didn't want audiences to feel the relief of catharsis. Brecht wanted them to reflect on the play, from their discomfort. I tell them that even though we broke down crying, for us there is no real catharsis. We didn't cry for the imaginary characters on a stage, but rather for the incalculable real-life tragedies they represent. They are our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, cousins, neighbors, friends, lovers... and there, but for the grace of God...

(Side note: As the Director of Theatre at SAY Sí, I had planned a field trip for our high school ALAS [Activating Leadership Arts and Service] students for the 7/21 "Pay What You Can" performance of *Lote Bravo* at The Cellar. When the run was canceled, I notified students and parents of the cancellation via email. Then when I discovered the venue change late at night on 7/19, I felt I did not have enough time to communicate yet another change to parents and decided it was too last minute to attempt to take students. One parent still showed up that Friday with a student at The Cellar, and I had to apologize over the phone for the confusion. After watching the show, I now wish the students who I took to see The Public's production of *Footloose* last month could have seen *The Ghosts of Lote Bravo*. It would have generated a great conversation about theatre as entertainment compared with theatre as activism.)

As for De Vasco, her legacy at The Public may be unfairly judged by many. Whispers from the local Chicax community that she did not change enough clash with the not-so-quiet rumblings from The Public's "regular" community that she tried to change too much. The truth is, De Vasco has the skills to do the job she was hired for: to lead a nonprofit theatre. San Antonio didn't get a chance to see all that De Vasco is capable of, my guess is because of resistance and pushback from all sides.

When I reached out to De Vasco, she offered no comment for this article on the record. She was candid, however, about initiatives she pioneered and the difficulties of being a woman of color in leadership on her Facebook page:



Claudia de Vasco
April 19 · 🌐

Last night was the graduation for my cohort of the Equity Fellowship with the [San Antonio Area Foundation](#). I'd never heard of a fellowship like this, bringing together BIPOC leaders of SA nonprofits. I'm so thankful for the Area Foundation and the vision [Patricia Mejia](#) had, together with our amazing trainers, I've never experienced anything like this in all my leadership years and experience.

This group of beautiful people and intelligent professionals have been a safe space for me since last fall, as we connected and commiserated about our lived experience as BIPOC leaders navigating racism, colonialism, and acceptance, and explored all the ways we could not only work to tackle this in our own organizations, but also how we can unite to support each other in this exhausting fight.

This group has been a rock for me as I've led our theater, and I will continue to try to show them my support, in gratitude for their brilliance and generous spirits.



Claudia de Vasco
July 24, 2022 · 🌐

We kicked off our summer fundraising campaign while I was overseas and I didn't have the ability to write the post I wanted to, so here we go now!

SA and non San Antonio friends, please read?

It's almost been a year since I have had this job, as the new EAD of this historic theater, and it's now the end of the season. IT HAS BEEN A YEAR, is an under-statement. Not just because of the pandemic, on top of all the things new leaders go through the first several years into a position like mine. There are the added hurdles of being a Latina leader of a non-culturally-specific-arts-institution - a PWI, in a city that is seeing its professional performing arts institutions either reduce programming or completely shut down (see: the SA symphony).

A few years ago, I started questioning if theater was worth the effort anymore. If American Theater was able to transform to welcome previously excluded communities, but also to change and adapt to younger generations and the way they interact with the arts. My conclusion was YES, we need it. The impact of performing arts, and in our case theater, is a slow effect, but it transforms communities and cities. I was transformed by working in the theater, and I have seen people changed by experiencing it.

San Antonio...Texas...our nation...needs transformation. We need something that gives us access to other life experiences, that reminds us of our common humanity, that gives us relief during difficult times.

We are working to keep that alive in SA, along with all the other theater companies doing the good work! I hope to do that by improving our wages for creatives and admin, by making our work environment a better place for BIPOC, women, LGBTQIA, people of different abilities, and others to work. By telling stories that better represent San Antonio and this country. By working to make San Antonio not just a city where great artists are from, but a city where great artists are made and where they stay and work. Already we have made changes towards these goals, and I hope you follow along as we tell the story of what we've accomplished this past year.

BUT THE BOTTOM LINE IS WE NEED YOUR MONEY. Our theater needs your money. That's just how regional, non-profit professional theater works in our country, outside of for-profit Broadway/cruises/etc. We need support, not just from our local supporters but also from people all over the country who recognize the need for transformative arts institutions outside of NYC, LA, Chicago, etc.

Please consider donating. I can't do this work without you friends and colleagues.

THANK YOU.



Claudia de Vasco
September 7, 2022 · 🌐

Thank you [Deborah Martin](#) for this feature. I am honored to be presenting this show to the city. Also [Cristina Kelly](#) look who's the main image!! 😊

From the article (a memory from my time years ago doing Bodas de Sangre with [Mark Valdez](#)):

Listening to them reminded her of her own experiences. The first all-Latino production in which she was cast was a staging of "Blood Wedding" by Teatro Visión in San Jose, Calif. It was a revelation, she said. For one thing, she could switch between Spanish and English, and be understood. And it also opened the door to roles she had not thought she'd be able to play.

Up to that point, she said, she thought she would spend her career on stage and in film playing tiny roles as moms and sassy best friends. In "Blood Wedding," she was cast as the ingenue.

"What people outside the craft don't understand is those bit roles are one-dimensional," she said. "So as a performer, you never really get to flesh out a whole life, a story, a journey. And that can feel demoralizing."

"When we are finally given the chance to play roles with layers, with depth, that have a journey from start to finish, we feel dignified again."

She believes "American Mariachi's" cast members are responding in the same way.

"This is what it feels like to not feel less than or reduced or diminished, to show up completely and fully in our identity and then be allowed to put that onstage and share it."



Deborah Martin
September 7, 2022 · ExpressNewsCommunity · 🌐

Big thanks to [Claudia de Vasco](#) and the rest of the folks at [The Public Theater of San Antonio](#) for making the time to chat about "American Mariachi" and for lett... See more



Claudia de Vasco
September 14, 2022 · 🌐

It occurred to me today that yesterday was my one-year anniversary of starting this job as Executive Artistic Director of [The Public Theater of San Antonio](#).

I can't describe what this year has been or meant in one post. It hasn't been easy. It's also been a blessing, serving in my dream job. At times it's been lonely, and at times I have felt so full surrounded by an amazing community. I came here with toddlers, and now I have two little boys. There are people I've had to say goodbye to, and people I can't imagine not having in my life.

I've also been trying to write a post about the monumental moment that is American Mariachi in this city, and perhaps this show is the culmination of this past year all wrapped up. Seeing and hearing non Latinx patrons walk out of the theater in tears (happy theater ones) and saying it's their favorite show yet. Hearing Latinx audiences gasp, laugh, sing, throughout the show. Witnessing the most diverse audience I have seen in our theater since I got here. Getting to direct the first all Latinx cast produced by our theater in its 100 year history, and working with an all Latinx design team. Outside of American Mariachi, collaborating with local leaders and city government on how we can improve the landscape for all performing arts in town, and working to foster exciting collaborations with architects, the symphony, visual artists, and activists.

I am so thankful for my team at the theater. For my board, who supports what we are doing and the bold changes we are making. For the artistic advisory committee that has served as a sounding board. For our patrons who stuck it out through covid cancellations and masks-on/masks-off. And for all the people who have helped me and my family settle into this town through their friendship, coffee dates, play dates, and encouraging words.

I'm extremely thankful to my family for their understanding as I took this on, and especially to my mom who has been willing to take a bus over from Houston the moment I cried it's-tech-week-i-need-you.

Happy one-year-anniversary San Pedro Playhouse. I can't believe it went by that fast.

the hard work she did focused on diversity and inclusion, and they are committed to building on it. This must be with specifics. Not platitudes rehashed from their (De Vasco era) mission statement.

Back in 2021, De Vasco was immediately asked about what kind of changes she would usher in an interview with *Art Scene SA*. Answered De Vasco, “There will be some new things we will announce in the new year. Definitely, when I was brought on, it was clear to me that hearing stories about what the theater had undergone in the past year or so that it’s at a transition point, trying to reconnect with communities and people that it had burned bridges with or never tried to connect with in the first place.”

<https://www.artscenesa.com/exclusive-interview-claudia-de-vasco-of-the-public-theater-of-san-antonio/>

As a member of the community The Public never tried to connect with in the first place (until De Vasco), I’m waiting for the “new” leadership to answer the same question. Honestly, behind closed doors many SA POC are not being as diplomatic discussing this topic with each other. I’m talking real talk here. But I put a lot of time, effort and thought into writing this in a way that is “nice” and formal so that non-POC can really hear what I am saying and consider my valid points without getting defensive. As The Public lists in their Community Agreements curated by De Vasco:

“WE SEE COLOR Physical, mental, and emotional safety are of utmost [sic] importance. Look out for yourself and others. We are all here to make theater. To tell stories. To make art. That connects and inspires communities. "Niceness" can be a tool of oppressive systems used as a tool to silence harm. We value direct talk over tone policing. We see everyone and their whole identity for their beauty and their history. This is the only way we can move forward and address injustices in our work.”

I hope The Public Theater can listen to this direct talk. I also hope they understand above all, my questions and apprehensions come from a place of love for my theatre community. But ultimately, I haven't written all of this for them. I've written it to hear the reactions of the local POC theatre community. Am I wrong? I'm a reasonable person who can be convinced otherwise with facts. What say you?

More suggested reading:

<https://theconversation.com/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-is-lacking-among-nonprofit-leaders-but-there-are-ways-to-change-that-174490>

<https://www.expressnews.com/entertainment/article/American-Mariachi-Public-Theater-17422035.php>

<https://www.kens5.com/article/news/local/public-theater-san-antonio-2022-2023-season-art-stage-texas-claudia-de-vasco/273-3670f517-d320-4c63-9dcd-5002f1ae3432>

<https://www.kens5.com/article/news/community/public-theater-san-antonio-artistic-director-resign-play-texas/273-275cb39f-80c7-4691-868d-870373f99750>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/theater/broadway-race-depictions.html>

<https://www.npr.org/2022/09/28/1124721277/oregon-shakespeare-festival-theater-diversity-next-stage>

<https://www.kens5.com/article/entertainment/the-public-theater-san-antonio-seasons-greetings-show-change-plaid-tidings-christmas/273-c49674b6-78fe-4be8-b92c-4dcfd38c8342>

<https://thepublicsa.org/land-acknowledgment/>