

The *Electricidad* Project: A Collaboration between Classics, Theater Arts, and High Schools at Illinois

The *Electricidad* project emerged from a collaboration between the Classics department, the Artistic Director and Founder of the acclaimed Out of Chaos Theatre (London, U.K.), Paul O'Mahony, the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts (KCPA) of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and local high schools in Champaign-Urbana with the support of the Champaign Community Coalition and their Race Relations division. It was envisioned as a project for the post-pandemic period and aimed to put theater at the center of a conversation around gun violence, race, citizenship, and trauma. The main event was a staged reading of Luis Alfaro's *Electricidad* which took place on campus in April 2023 and was accompanied by theater workshops on *Electricidad* and Alfaro's adaptation of its original, Sophocles' *Electra*.

Many theatre companies, artists, and playwrights have re-envisioned ancient Greek theater to speak to issues of social justice. The Theater of War Project by Brian Doerries, Luis Alfaro's work with Greek tragedies in Latino and Chicano communities, and Paul O'Mahony's work with Out of Chaos Theater and the *Reading Greek Tragedy Online* project (CHS) are outstanding examples of what can happen when we use theater to build community and work within local communities, not around them.

Our choice of Alfaro's work and the *Electricidad* performance further aimed to highlight the uses of the ancient plays and their adaptations by modern playwrights whose work on trauma continues to address the experiences of African American, Chicano, migrant and refugee communities. Alfaro's adaptations of the Greeks address the trials and challenges of Chicano families and communities in the U.S. (Alfaro 2020). Re-envisioning the ancient plays as a lens for channeling pressing political questions, his plays ask the questions that matter most in our

present moment: “What drives people to commit unthinkable acts?” How does the proliferation of violence relate to racism and the marginalization of communities of color? As Alfaro said in his conversation with Aaron Muñoz on our campus in February 2022: “Follow the thread that leads from ancient theater to the community today... everything is possible in community.”

Luis Alfaro’s *Electricidad* transports the story of Sophocles’ *Electra* to an East L.A. barrio, a Chicano neighborhood, and focuses on the modern-day tragedy that unfolds after *Electricidad*’s mother kills her father. In this revenge tragedy, *Electricidad* is bent on exacting vengeance and in the end persuades her brother, Orestes, after he returns from Las Vegas to kill their mother. Alfaro’s young protagonists perpetuate the cycle of violence in their family; their coming-of-age stories are those of young cholos (“gang members”) (Powers 2011). Alfaro’s play situates the root causes of violence in Chicano communities beyond the barrio. *Electricidad* explores the continuing cycle of violence, and paths to change and redemption (Delikonstantinidou 2019).

This talk outlines how performances and adaptations of ancient drama offer an example of Classics as Social Practice and discusses outreach strategies, pedagogical goals, and community engagement. The presentation will feature clips from the performance and the post-show discussion by the actors, students from local high schools and University of Illinois students, undergraduate and graduate, from Classics and Theater. The staged reading at the Knight Auditorium of Spurlock Museum provided students and their audience with the opportunity to come together to discuss the impact of gun violence and family trauma beyond the play itself. The student actors spoke openly and directly about their experience of working together and with Paul O’Mahony toward this performance and reflected upon the characters’

difficult choices during their coming-of-age journeys, relating them closely to their own as young adults and to Alfaro's involvement with youths-at-risk.

Works Cited

Alfaro, L. 2020. *The Greek Trilogy: Electricidad, Oedipo El Rey, and Mojada*, edited by R. Andújar. London: Bloomsbury.

Delikonstantinidou, A. 2019. "Luis Alfaro's Chicano Take on *Electra*: A Barrio-Bound *Electricidad*." In Y. Kalogeras and C. C. Waegner, eds., *Ethnic Resonances in Performance, Literature, and Identity*, 35-50. New York: Routledge.

Powers, M. 2011. "Syncretic Sites in Luis Alfaro's *Electricidad*." *Helios* 38.2: 71-84.