

Center of Dreams: Talento Bilingüe de Houston

By Richard Reyes

“The mission of Talento Bilingüe de Houston is to educate all by preserving, presenting and promoting Latino culture.”

— Talento Bilingüe de Houston

Arnold Mercado, a Puerto Rican from New York, brought his love of theater to Houston and founded what is now known as Talento Bilingüe de Houston (TBH). His first choice for the name of this new Latino Theater was “Teatro Español de Houston.” With a Community Engagement and Touring Artists (CETA) government grant, he employed around a dozen young Latino actors from across the state of Texas. According to Mercado, a government site visitor questioned the name because even in 1977 controversy surrounded whether or not the U.S. government should fund “Teatro Español,” which would produce contemporary and classic Spanish plays. Without skipping a beat, Mercado immediately changed the name to “Teatro Bilingüe de Houston” and proclaimed it would produce bilingual plays, not yet sure if that meant productions would be performed in English some days and in Spanish on other days, or if the whole play would be performed in Spanglish.

One of TBH’s early plays and very successful productions was John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, in which the migrant farmworkers spoke Spanish and the local farmers and townspeople spoke English. Other early Spanish classic productions included Federico Garcia Lorca’s, *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* and *El Lugar Donde Mueren Los Mamíferos* by Jorge Díaz. TBH performed both productions totally in Spanish.

Casa de Amigos Community Center in Houston’s Northside first housed the theater. Approximately two years later, the Ripley House Community Center in the Second Ward became TBH’s new home. Two successive female directors took on the task from 1980 to 1983 following Mercado’s departure.

During this time, the theater expanded its Mexican American identity with plays such as Teatro Esperanza’s *La Víctima*, a ground-breaking play dealing with Mexican-U.S. immigration. Teatro Bilingüe also presented an original play, *Yo, El Pueblo* at the Miller Outdoor Theatre. This play, based on Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s famous epic poem, “Yo Soy Joaquín,” covered the history of the Aztec civilization and the fate of its descendants today.



Written by Richard Reyes (reclining), From Second Ward to Ben Taub in Thirty Days examines how barrio youth deal with bilingual education, poverty, and community politics.

All photos courtesy of Richard Reyes.

I joined the theater as an actor in 1981, and in 1983, “inherited” the position of director, (unpaid for the first three years). Finding that the required annual reports for the CETA grant had not been filed prior to this time, I faced the challenge of deciding whether or not to continue Teatro Bilingüe. Without the final reports, government art funders withheld their contributions.

The Community Center grew tired of small audiences and lengthy rehearsals occupying its prime space in the auditorium/theater; however, it did approve two original plays that I wrote for Teatro Bilingüe: *Pancho Claus*, written



The Latino Youth Theater traveled to performances around Houston in a yellow school bus driven by Richard Reyes and provided by Ripley House.



Written originally by Richard Reyes in 1981, *Pancho Claus* celebrates its thirtieth year in 2011. Pancho Claus, center in red, played by Richard Reyes, attends parades, and every year at Christmas, he gives presents to inner-city children.

in 1981; and *From Second Ward to Ben Taub in Thirty Days*, first performed in 1982. *Pancho Claus* was a Chicano twist of *Twas the Night before Christmas*. The main character wears a bright red zoot suit and decides, because there are not very many chimneys in the Second Ward, to break in through the bathroom window to leave presents for the inner city kids. Lines included “. . . and what to my wondering eyes should appear, but eight low-rider cars all jacked down in the rear” and “mama y papa ya estan en la cama, . . . mom in her nightgown . . . ay tu sabes dad don’t wear pajamas!” In between its Chicano humor, the play contained messages: Enjoy the gift of your family at Christmas; Respect your elders; Do not judge a book by its cover.

Pancho Claus, now celebrating its thirtieth year, has evolved into a play, a ten-piece show band, parades, appearances, and the giving out of thousands of gifts to inner-city children (performed independently of TBH). *From Second Ward to Ben Taub in Thirty Days* is a barrio look at inner-city youth dealing with bilingual education, poverty, and community politics. Both plays enjoyed big audienc-

es, touring, and media attention. Hence, a deal was struck enabling the theater to stay at the Ripley House Community Center and produce three to four adult plays per year.

The next logical step was to form a Latino Youth Theater. Felix Fraga, director of Ripley House, agreed to fund full-time salaries for me and Fred Perez, plus programming costs for a youth theater. This included expenses, an office, and a big, old yellow school bus, which we loaded with sound equipment, sets, props, and costumes. We travelled around Houston with me driving this big old bus and the students performing.

Teatro Bilingüe continued its adult theater with such productions as *Carnaval de La Risa*, *Death of a Salesman*

performed in Spanish, and Ray Bradbury’s Latino-themed *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit*. Original plays dealing with community concerns, co-written by me and the students, made up ninety percent of the youth theater productions. The plays included themes such as AIDS, gangs, Hispanic dropouts, racism, and community politics. With titles such as *No Where to Be*, *Color-Blind*, and *Broadway Cleans Up*,



The many TBH youth productions, like this one in 1990, have served as a creative learning experience for the children and an artistic outreach to the larger community.



The 1985 cast of Death of a Salesman performed the play in Spanish.

these youth productions many times included music, dance, and sometimes a live band. And it never hurt to throw in hip-hop and an occasional low-rider bike. During this time, Rutherford “Ruddy” Cravens, executive director of “Shakespeare Outreach” from the University of Houston, was instrumental in providing funding, guidance, teachers, and his personal time to assist the youth theater. In 1983, the youth theater began touring performances across Houston, taking its messages to community centers, libraries, schools, festivals, detention centers, and senior citizen centers.

The next step involved a change of name. Many third-generation Houston youth did not like, and some could not pronounce, Teatro Bilingüe de Houston. In 1984, with a vision of a community cultural arts center with theater, dance, and visual arts, I decided to change the name to “Talento Bilingüe de Houston,” shortened even more to TBH—a name the students loved!

Unfortunately or fortunately (depending on which side of the fence you were on), the youth theater soon began to outshine the adult productions in the media and the community. Auditions were held once a year with approximately 200 students auditioning for usually eight to ten vacant spots. The rigorous auditions included dancing, singing, and acting—having the ability to play a musical instrument was even better!

The student company performed in New York City and Washington D.C., at the University of Arkansas, Kentucky State University, and National Latino Theater Conferences in San Antonio and New York, and other places. Some of the youth alumni include State Representative Carol Alvarado, Houston Community College President Abel Davila, Golden Globe and Emmy winner, Rodney “J. J.” Alejandro, music producer Michael Barron, and many

members of the international dance crew, Havic-Koro.

Two individuals who played instrumental roles in TBH are Fernando Perez, now with the Houston Children’s Museum, and Rick Camargo, who now tours and performs internationally through the sponsorship of the U.S. Embassy. Both gave TBH fifteen to twenty years of service, beginning as children. Board members who helped with the growth of TBH included, Tony Villarreal, Peter Garcia, Yolanda Navarro, Rita Farias, Arturo Deleon, Alex Castillo, Dr. Larry Russell, Phillipa Young, Dr. Dorothy Caram, and community members Felix Fraga, Macario and Chrissie Ramirez, and many more.

In 1995, TBH received a \$980,000 Community Development Grant to build its current home located at Jensen and Navigation next to Guadalupe Park, two blocks from downtown in the Second Ward. The 18,000 square foot facility has a 240-seat theater, professional dance studio, rehearsal room, gallery space, commercial kitchen, and administrative offices. The City of Houston awarded TBH this grant as an “inner-city, gang prevention cultural art facility” based on its legendary work with urban youth.

The facility opened in 1996 with spring, summer, and fall youth visual and performing art classes. TBH offered over thirty different classes per semester at little or no charge to inner-city youth. It offered classes for youth and employment for adult artists/teachers. Summer art camps provided art classes and free movies and free lunches for neighborhood children. Many came from the Clayton Home Project next door and the poverty stricken area known as “little Mexico.” Itza Garza, Maria Lozano, and Jesse Lozano invested many years in the TBH summer art camp and many other youth programs.

Many professional artists came to contribute through

performances or workshops including, Comedian George Lopez, Edward James Olmos, Carlos Santana, Selena, Maria Benitez, Teatro Flamingo from Santa Fe, and, yes, even rapper Flava Flav.

From 1993 until 2003, TBH collaborated with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department and funded two full-time employee salaries. TBH had many activities at Guadalupe Plaza, including music festivals, car and bike shows, movies, and holiday parties for Easter, Halloween, and Christmas as well as Thanksgiving dinners. For this reason, TBH painted its Cultural Center to match the southwestern colors of Guadalupe Park. Major collaborations financially and artistically included the Museum of Fine Arts, Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts (MECA), Alley Theater, City of Houston Convention and Entertainment Facilities Department, Southwest Alternative Media Source, Leisure Learning, Houston Symphony, Houston Media Source, Kumba House, Houston Artist Collective, Institute of Hispanic Culture, Houston Ballet, Main Street Theater, University of Houston, Chicano Family Center, *Houston Chronicle* photographer Ben Desoto, Houston Grand Opera, filmmaker Carlos Calbillo, and others.

All of these collaborations were instrumental to TBH's opening its Cultural Center. Though TBH had obtained over a million dollars in construction money and negotiated a thirty-year lease for one dollar a year, it lacked major operating capital. The philosophy was quite literally "build it and they will come" or, as the *Houston Chronicle* put it, a "Center of Dreams." It took all of these big and small organizations, moms' cooking and cleaning, and a poorly paid



First gang prevention program at TBH, "R Gang," took place in 1991.




Rick Camargo is shown here with his low-rider bike in 1994. In order to get youth interested in theater, Reyes occasionally added hip-hop or low-riders in the productions.

staff to open the center and keep it open.

In 2002, with the help of Convention and Entertainment Facilities director Jordy Tollet, TBH received a facilities up-keep contract. The city took over utilities, security, cleaning, maintenance, and landscaping of the property. TBH officially became part of the city entertainment facilities right up there with the George R. Brown Convention Center, Jones Hall, and the Wortham Theater.

In 2003, Nellie Fraga's Ballet Ambassadors received a \$100,000 government grant to build its own dance facility. Through my collaboration with Nellie Fraga and the City of Houston, it was agreed that this money and matching funds would be used to construct a major dance room addition to the TBH Cultural Center. The Ballet would have primary use and accessibility to the dance room, and TBH would have a beautiful new addition to its facility at its disposal.

In 2002, the board of directors adopted a business plan prepared for the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County (CACHH) that targeted Talento Bilingüe de Houston as the appropriate agency in the City of Houston to develop itself further as a Latino Cultural Arts Center. To the board this meant stopping all youth classes, original youth productions, and in-house adult theater productions as they were structured in the past and allowed organizations to rent the space, including Latino and non-Latino groups. In 2003, since the emphasis on youth programming was dropped, the board decided that, after twenty-two years, my services were no longer required.

In the past eight years, TBH has seen a change in mission, a reduction in budget, and a flurry of several new directors and interim directors. TBH recently welcomed its newest executive director, Cristy Jennings, bringing new hope to Talento Bilingüe de Houston. The dream lives on with a new board, new executive director, a new staff, and new dreams. TBH's many alumni wait in the wings to ensure this icon of Latino arts in Houston endures. 

Richard Reyes was executive director of Talento Bilingüe de Houston for twenty years and with TBH for twenty-three years. He is now director of the Pancho Claus Art and Education Project, primarily working with at risk teens.