

The Making of the Shiny Knight of Chicanos: An Interview with Octavio Solis, Part One

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The Making of the Shiny Knight of Chicanos, Part One

A Conversation with Octavio Solis

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ESSAY BY

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OCTAVIO SOLIS

Octavio Solis is one of the most prominent Latinx playwrights of our time. He has written over twenty plays that have been performed at prestigious venues such as the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Denver Center for Performing Arts, the San Diego Repertory Theater, Dallas Theater Company, and many more. He has also taught creative writing at universities around the United States. His work incorporates the Mexican American experience of the border, bringing Chicano culture to the mainstage. This interview is part of Glenda Y. Nieto-Cuebas' and Erin A. Cowling's work on **Siglo Latinx**, a larger project that examines how Latinx artists are updating early modern Spanish theatre to reflect their experiences. Solis discusses how growing up in El Paso, Texas on the Mexico-United States border shaped his work,

focusing on his adaptations of three pieces from the Baroque period: *Man of the Flesh* (from *El Burlador de Sevilla*), *Dreamlandia* (from *La vida es sueño*) and *Quixote Nuevo* (From *Don Quijote de la Mancha*).

Glenda Y. Nieto-Cuebas: How did your background and upbringing in El Paso influence your work?

Octavio Solis: I was born and raised in El Paso, Texas by immigrant parents. My father was undocumented in his first year; he was apprehended when I was a baby, and my mother pleaded with the officers not to take him because she had to go to work, and no one could care for the babies. They gave her a number for a judge who might offer a reprieve since they felt really bad for her. It was a different time, they weren't quite as severe as they are now, though that varies from person to person. My mother contacted this judge, who granted my father temporary residency while he arranged his papers before finally becoming a permanent resident. My parents are now full American citizens and have been since the early eighties, when President Reagan offered amnesty to all undocumented people. I grew up half a mile from the Rio Grande, so I saw the grim and sometimes macabre games of cat-and-mouse that the Border Patrol would play with the immigrants coming across to find solace and haven in this country. We were caught up in the middle of that.

I still could not get over this nagging feeling that I was a child of the border, and I was a little lost as an actor for a while.

The border made a deep impression on me, and so did El Paso. I didn't realize how much I was a child of the desert, even if I couldn't wait to get out. I really wanted to study theatre. I did stage work early in high school and wanted to be a stage actor. I pursued that through four years of college in San Antonio, three years of grad school in Dallas, and one year in England. But I still could not get over this nagging feeling that I was a child of the border, and I was a little lost as an actor for a while; I couldn't get work. I decided to become a writer to show off my acting, because I would cast myself in these plays. That didn't work since audiences were more interested in the play than in my acting. That's essentially how my career as a playwright started.

I still felt lost until I found a theatre company, Teatro Dallas, that asked "Why don't you write about your culture? Why don't you write us a play about who you are and see what you find there?" And I did. I have never looked back since. Although I had studied all these great playwrights—Harold Pinter, Henrik Ibsen, William Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht—all these fine voices, I never thought I could be these guys. I would never be them. But no one could adopt my voice and bring in the border's dynamic, fluid presence, politics, and tensions like I could. So that's when I realized that El Paso was the way to go.



Herbert Siguenza, Lawrence Redmond, and the cast in *Quixote Nuevo* by Octavio Solis at Round House Theatre. Directed by Lisa Portes. Scenic Design by Milagros Ponce de Leon. Costume and Puppet Design by: Helen Huang. Lighting Design by Alberto Segarra. Composer and Sound Design by David Molina. Photo by Margot Schulman Photography.

Erin A. Cowling: Is there something about the Golden Age of Spanish literature that has inspired you? What attracted you to the pieces you have adapted?

Octavio: I was drawn to the works of the Golden Age by theatre companies that wanted me to adapt them for contemporary audiences. Many companies conflate Spain with Mexico too often, but they are not the same. They are entirely different worlds, states of being, even. They have some similarities, and I believe we draw from a lot of that; but that American Latinos would be the right interpreters for the Spanish Golden Age seems odd to me. There was something to it, though, because Don Juan has become an international icon. He is our newest archetype, and we have him because Tirso de Molina created him. He didn't just arrive through myth, story, or legend; he arrived in *El burlador de Sevilla*, which was then updated by José Zorrilla in his play *Don Juan Tenorio*.

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Teatro Dallas commissioned my first play, but with two conditions: it had to contain the Day of the Dead holiday, and it had to be about Don Juan. I worried that these two elements were too incongruous. I felt like a wild pony, bucking against any restrictions on my writing. But those parameters gave me borders within which to work, and I realized the benefits of that. I didn't know anything about the Spanish Golden Age theatre, so I had to do my research. I read *El burlador de Sevilla, Don Juan Tenorio*, listened to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and read *Man and Superman*, where John Tanner is Juan Tenorio. There was even an earlier Chicano version called *Johnny Tenorio*. However, Cora Cordona at Teatro Dallas wanted me to do my own adaptation around Day of the Dead when they would perform it. When we examined this particular holiday, we found a nest of ideas to draw from by mixing American and Mesoamerican ideas with this European archetype. For example, the concept of the *calaca*, the living skeleton as portrayed by the artist Posada, is part of our culture in a way that Juan Tenorio is not. I incorporated the skulls and skeletons into the work and after doing further research, found myself drawn to the comic style, which allowed me to also have fun with the Tenorio and the classic *calaca* to explore sex and death, two of the most important hallmarks of my plays. It started with this play which became *Man of the Flesh*. It was the first time I had written a play about my culture with a Mexican director who employed Latino and Texano actors, a play where I could write original Spanglish songs. I had a character named Fracas speak in wonderfully witty rhyme, which felt more like a real throwback to the theatre of the Golden Age. He was the earthy one, so I imagine him as a kind of Sancho Panza character, too. I had a blast writing him.



Raúl Cardona and the cast in *Quixote Nuevo* by Octavio Solis at Round House Theatre. Directed by Lisa Portes. Scenic Design by Milagros Ponce de Leon. Costume and Puppet Design by: Helen Huang. Lighting Design by Alberto Segarra. Composer and Sound Design by David Molina. Photo by Margot Schulman Photography.

At the same time, I had the San Diego Repertory Theatre ask me to join a team that was producing an opera based on *La vida es sueño* [*Life Is a Dream*] by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Although it didn't turn out to be exactly that, it presented itself as an excellent opportunity. The more I worked with another playwright colleague on this play, the more it started steering away from the essential story of *La vida es sueño*. When we finished, we called it *Burning Dreams*. The San Diego Repertory produced it, but I couldn't feel true ownership because the work had moved too far from our original concept. Still, I never let go of the idea of adapting *Life Is a Dream* to contemporary times.

So when Richard Hamburger at the Dallas Theater Center phoned me, I offered to work on *Life Is a Dream* as a contemporary adaptation. This work was titled *Dreamlandia*, and it felt more like my kind of work. I explored the border in a magical fairytale manner.

The idea of somebody trapped between dream and reality, constantly shifting and moving between one side and the other felt like the experience of the people that live along the border.

My Rosaura character was named Blanca, and in the course of the play she learns her name denotes her origin, since she is the daughter of a white border patrol chief. It was easy to follow the original; in *La vida es sueño*, she crosses a border from Poland into Muscovy disguised as a man until her father, Clotaldo, recognizes her as his daughter. I thought it was a lost opportunity, however, to have this discovery happen so early in the play, as Rosaura might have remained disguised through the end.

The idea of someone coming across the border disguised as someone else, trying to pass for a citizen, instantly translated onto my life situation on the border. The idea of somebody trapped between dream and reality, constantly shifting and moving between one side and the other felt like the experience of the people that live along the border—like myself—who feel like we are American but know we are also Mexican. The real life, the real me, is Mexican. Still, Mexicans reject us and tell us that we should embrace our Americanness. Instead, we are somewhere between realities, and the world of fantasy, “Dreamland,” feels more like two distinct experiences.

That’s why in my *Dreamlandia* Lazaro (Seguismundo in the original) is raised on a sandbar in the middle of the Río Grande. By the time the Río Grande runs through El Paso, it is scarcely a little canal. Still, in my imagination, it is a mighty river with a sandbar in the middle where somebody could conceivably raise a small child. In *Life Is a Dream*, Seguismundo is raised in a cave, which is fictitious, magical, and feels like the world of alchemy. A chemical symbol of the ivory tower, of Plato’s cave. All of these things resonated with me. The cave could easily be transformed into a river, which is constantly flowing and maternal. You never step in the same river twice; it’s magical that way.



Carlo Alban, Zabryna Guevara, and Geno Silva in *Dreamlandia* by Octavio Solis at the Dallas Theater Center. Directed by Richard Hamburger. Set Design by Russell Parkman. Costume Design by Claudia Stephens. Lighting Design by Steve Woods. Sound Design by Martin Desjardins.

The conversation continues!

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