

## ***Mil Lenguas/A Thousand Tongues: An Experiment in Devised Productions During the Age of COVID***

Frances Roberson

### **Introduction**

Spring 2021, at the height of the COVID pandemic, the small theatre department at Arkansas Tech University was struggling with the same issues as most across the globe. How can we continue to teach students and offer opportunities to hone the skills necessary to compete in the theatre industry, while also maintaining student safety and meeting the stringent COVID protocols of our university?

At this same time, our small program was examining how (or if) we were serving and representing the diverse voices of our community. Specifically, the Latinx demographic had been consistently growing over the years in our student body; however, our productions were still largely through a white lens. The director of the theatre wanted to have a production with a more representative and equitable approach.

The result was *Mil Lenguas / A Thousand Tongues*, an experimental devised production that was a theatre/film hybrid. This project was streamed on our social media account, as well as posted to our webpage, thereby making it available to everyone without risk of COVID exposure.

Advancements in technology (recording and streaming) have brought about an uptick in a hybrid approach to theatre. This approach leads to a more equitable theatre experience, as viewership is no longer bound to only those who can afford tickets. It also makes it easier to broadcast stories from multiple perspectives. This is especially true in a devised production where participants of diverse backgrounds are allowed and encouraged to take ownership of the creation process.

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This paper discusses how Arkansas Tech University managed to create an inclusive, digital, devised production amid a global pandemic.

### A hybrid production

Since Covid prevented live productions on the ATU campus, to continue providing educational opportunities for our students, we selected a production that could work as either a stage play or a film. This benefited our students, as streamed productions are becoming more of a standard in theatre, and this project allowed exposure to elements of both.

*Mil Lenguas/A Thousand Tongues*<sup>1</sup> had several qualities of a live production. The crew was organized as a live production, and we used stage actors. The sets were built in the theatre and had a more theatrical feel than most film sets. We also used stage lighting in some parts of the production.

At the same time, there were several distinctly filmic qualities to the production. Most notably, it was filmed, edited, and distributed on digital media. We also had to address the legal issues concerning distribution of recorded materials (copyright and release forms, for instance). We also shot many parts of the project on location and used portable film lighting for those scenes.

### A devised production

To ensure the project truly represented the group's myriad perspectives, the director decided to approach this project as a devised play. He subscribed to John Brockway Schmor's definition of a devised approach, which defines it as "works which are not initially or primarily scripted by a playwright or dominated by a director-auteur's score, works which are instead created primarily by performers, with designers and directors in intensive collaboration."<sup>2</sup> This process specifically lends itself to small theatre departments because of its ability to easily scale to production and budget size. Essentially, the production can be crafted with only the talent and materials on hand.

*Mil Lenguas/A Thousand Tongues* took a devised approach to production, as it is a collection of various filmed shorts involving the theme of language. All the films are brought together by an overarching story about a young man who loses the love of his life because of language and cultural miscommunications. This story serves as the framework for the production.

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<sup>1</sup> View *Mil Lenguas/A Thousand Tongues* on ATU Theatre's Video Portal: [https://video.atu.edu/media/Mil+LenguasA+A+Thousand+Tongues/1\\_0be109x1/162146481](https://video.atu.edu/media/Mil+LenguasA+A+Thousand+Tongues/1_0be109x1/162146481)

<sup>2</sup> Schmor, John Brockway. "Devising New Theatre for College Programs." *Theatre Topics*, vol. 14 no. 1, 2004, p. 259-273. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/tt.2004.0010.

Dozens of students, faculty, and staff members participated in this project. To reflect the purpose of inclusivity, it was important to have each person's voice be heard and perspective shared; however, we needed to do so in a cohesive, unified process.

To begin, the director selected a broad theme for the production: language. He then held auditions. Again, keeping in mind that a primary purpose of this production was to be inclusive, and auditions tend to exclude people by their very nature, the audition process was atypical. Anyone who wanted to participate was invited to do so. The audition process was more about gauging interest than trying to fit people into specific parts.

Once we had a list of students, faculty, and staff members who were interested in participating, we separated them into six committees: English Language, Spanish Language, Song and Dance, Unity, Technical, and Public Relations. The first four groups were tasked with content creation while the last two groups served in supporting roles.

Because of COVID protocols, we only were able to have one face-to-face meeting with the entire group. We used this opportunity to discuss overall ideas, as well as to organize everyone into specific groups, and to outline the process. To prompt ideas and responses, a linguistics professor gave a brief presentation on language and its importance in culture—especially in the American power system.

With the group primed with this information, we endeavored to flesh out a more specific theme and general idea for the framed story. This process was led by the Unity Committee members and was ultimately decided by a virtual vote. We met as a group using WebEx one time afterward. During this meeting, the participants received general technical advice on producing, filming, and editing, as well as having the workflow explained to them. After that, most work was done in committees.

The director set a goal of each content committee submitting one film per week, but otherwise, each committee was given almost complete autonomy to create their works. They were allowed to establish their own processes and style. Each had a leader who was responsible for reporting back to the whole group during the weekly production meetings to provide updates on the process, as well as to convey the support they needed from the other committees.

The Unity Committee was tasked with the important job of taking the autonomous parts and fitting them into a unified production. They wrote, filmed, and edited the overarching story of the young lovers who were doomed by miscommunication that tied the production together. They also gave input on the other committees' films to ensure they fit within the production's overall theme.

Meanwhile, the Technical Committee was tasked with building generic sets that would best support the most films. This committee also helped provide costumes and props when required. The Public Relations committee was tasked

with promoting the production during and after the filming process. They worked with a Marketing class to establish a digital promotion campaign, utilizing social media, as well as school publications to let viewers know when and how they could access the project.

While we count this project as a resounding success as far as inclusivity and learning outcomes, it certainly did not come without its challenges. There were many balls in the air with this project. It was difficult to organize and sometimes felt like herding cats. Some leaders were more timely and structured than others, so there was quite a bit of inconsistency, which is always challenging when dealing with such a large number of people. It was infeasible to build sets for each film, so some films received more production support than others. Finally, there was little control over the production process, which led to films with varying production quality.

### **An experiment in inclusivity**

This project gave three languages (and those who communicate through them) equal opportunity: English, Spanish, and dance. The films intentionally were treated the same, regardless of the film's language. It was the director's choice not to treat the English-speaking audience with privileges not afforded to the Spanish-speaking audience. For instance, the Spanish language films were not subtitled in English, with the exception of one that was subtitled at the filmmaker's request.

Because of the autonomy of the groups, each group was able to make films that truly reflected their own voice and perspectives, and they were able to speak to issues important to them.

For instance, The Spanish Language Committee tended to make films that spoke to their experiences as immigrants in America or that highlighted the beauty of their culture. Their works ranged from the abstract and poetic, such as singing traditional lullabies to hyper-realistic, such as the following interview that asks its members of different genders, ages, and nationalities their thoughts and experiences. (The responses have been translated from Spanish to English for the sake of this article.)

#### Spanish Language Interview

Summer Dantzer: Dr. Ramirez, how do you feel about the media aiming to change masculine and feminine articles in the Spanish language to something neutral? What is your take on Latinx?

Dr. Ramirez: Well, what I've read is that there is a neutral pronoun... to incorporate non-ordinary identities. I find it

excellent. Surely, with time it will be included in the Spanish language. Spanish is a living language that is constantly changing and obeys the needs of different groups of speakers.

Ivy Guzman: I'm here for the philosophy of love, so if another person is asking me to do other pronouns, I'm not going to stop doing them because they make me uncomfortable. Because it's not a me thing, and it's not something I get to decide.

Yraima Newman: The way the discourse over the term "Latinx" has been developing is quite controversial because there are points in favor and against. It's a term that started being used about the year 2000.

Summer Dantzer: Do you feel that you have ever experienced discrimination from English speakers in the United States because of your ethnicity or language?

Yraima Newman: Yes. Often when I've been in a work environment, or in an environment like Walmart people will ask, "Where are you from? Your accent is different." Of course my accent is different. I am not from here. I've been here for some time and have studied English, but the phonetics and proper pronunciation of the language have been difficult. Some will say that they like a different accent, while others might say they don't like your accent.

Dr. Ramirez: In respect to Spanish, my students don't necessarily wish to learn it because I teach it. They learn because they want to improve, or others, perhaps, because they want to speak it as a second language. Working for an institution that teaches Spanish courses I feel like I'm in a privileged space.

Ivy Guzman: For me personally, the answer is just plain no. I've never been discriminated against because of my race, my ethnicity. I've always been praised. If anyone finds out I speak Spanish, it's a good conversation starter. They get excited, especially when they find out I'm international. It always makes everybody so happy. They ask me about my country, and they ask me where I'm from. Like, I've never felt anything but good about who I am here.

The English Language committee chose films that ranged from light comedies about a space alien trying to make sense of American idioms to dark dramas with important themes such as assault and consent. An example of this is a segment

about a woman having to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace and beyond:

Know Their Tears

LOU: Goodness. I cannot even relax in peace without my boss treating my phone like his own personal room service. Man, I really wish I had a paper tube filled with tobacco right about now. Oh well. I guess I gotta head home before the pup throws a fit.

LOU: A bit late for overtime at the office don't ya think, Charlie? Isn't that someone else's job? Charlie, you have a wife for a reason. I am a financial analyst, not a prostitute. I know a few hookers on the corner near work that might be able to help you out. Charlie, do not freak out. There is a guy following me down an alleyway.

LOU: What is your problem? Did I tell you that you could try to touch me? Was there a moment where I gave that to you? What gives you the impression that you have the right to do what you will with me. How hard is it for people like you to be decent? How can men look into my eyes and see past the tears, the bruises, and every "no" I have in my body and still use me for their own sexual worth. What gives you the go-ahead to touch me? Is it the way that my clothes cling to my body? Am I showing a little too much wrist today? Did I put too much care into how I look? Are my frogs too alluring to you? Or maybe it's just the insecurities of a man desperate to mimic love by taking advantage of a lady in the alleyway. Your expression right now, magnified a thousand times. And this is how I felt every day since that day.

MORGAN: I don't understand. Where did I go wrong?

The Song and Dance Committee tended to also deal with important themes, such as sexuality, relationships, and work frustrations, but they often handled them in upbeat, light-hearted dance numbers, such as Barstool Bop.

Barstool Bop

CALEB: I'll be with you in a second

KYNDAL: Pour me gin and juice, my boyfriend's cheated on me. Can you guess how many girls that he's been sleeping with?

CALEB: One?

KYNDAL: Uh uh.

MAVEN: Three?

KYNDAL: Nope.

CHELSEA: Five?

KYNDAL: Try seven.

CALEB: That's rough, buddy. Let me pour you something up. Some gin and juice—a good excuse to help you forget him.

MADELEINE: Everyday I go to work, and when I get there my stupid manager is constantly nitpicking every little thing that I do.

CALEB: Oh man, I get it. I mean, hey, I work too. A Cuba Libre really sounds like just the thing for you.

MAVEN: Water to sober up. I'm in a rut. Many years of being single, so what? I'm bi and hot and funny but that's really all that I've got.

CHELSEA: I could drink this whole damn bar. I got a real-life nightmare. I came home to find my husband in bed with my mother. I can't unsee that.

Likewise, the use of technology enhanced the equitable approach. Each segment was filmed and edited on the students' personal devices. They did not have to wait for any sort of official green light. This approach reinforced the idea that anyone can be an artist and can create with the tools available to them. Their voice is no less important than those with more privilege and resources.

Aside from this process being more culturally inclusive, it was also more equitably distributed. Because it was published for free on social media and our webpage, it was not reserved for only those able to afford box office tickets. This is a particularly important achievement, considering we are located in an economically depressed area of the nation.

## Conclusions

Often hardships lead to growth. The pandemic forced a small educational theatre with limited resources out of its comfort zone. The result empowered

students of various backgrounds to create art that reflects their own views and values.

Arkansas Tech University plans to continue taking a hybrid approach to its theatrical program by broadcasting its productions and incorporating digital media into its curriculum. We continue to strive to make theatre an inclusive, equitable experience for our entire community.



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