

The Artist as Leader: Luis Alfaro



Interview conducted by Corey Madden

Edited by Betsi Robinson

Over the course of his 30-year career, Chicano playwright Luis Alfaro has lived the life of a true citizen artist. He is an incredible writer and performer who uses his artistic practice to grapple with deeply emotional and socially charged topics. Taking his art beyond the stage into the community, this artist leader challenges his students and colleagues to do the same.

In turn, Luis' passion for his community and culture informs his work, from which he has built a repertoire of critically acclaimed plays performed in theatres around the world.

Luis has received support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for a multi-year residency at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival as well as from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which awarded him a “genius grant” in 1997.

As a teacher and mentor to young actors at the University of Southern California School of Dramatic Arts, Luis is passing down his reverence for heritage, culture and community to a new generation of artists and, by doing so, is helping to mold the artist leaders of the future.

CM: Talk with me a little about how your background might have influenced your style of artist leadership.

LA: I was raised in downtown LA, Pico-Union, so that influences probably everything I still do. Even though I was raised in a really violent and really poor neighborhood, I was raised really religiously. My father was Catholic and my mother is Pentecostal. The thing that I keep circling back to in my own work is this notion of service. That was a big part of growing up, if you're Catholic — I was an altar boy, I did all that stuff. Service really got instilled in a formalized way. ... And I was a Boy Scout, which was, for our little barrio, a huge thing. In some strange way, it feels like teaching now is a form of service work.

CM: You have a name for it, don't you?

LA: I call myself a citizen artist, because one of the things I do is try to get my playwrights — especially my graduate playwrights — interested in the world. It's about how you connect art to culture and community here and now, and how we are vital to the expression of our community.

I also consider myself a public parent. I teach a class called Solo Performance and the freshman class is always packed. Because of the society we live in, half of us come from divorced parents and half of us supposedly come from alcoholic families. Part of what happens in this class is you see those things start to wind themselves into the material because the students are telling their own stories. ... It is extraordinary to watch what their issues are — the sense of abandonment, it runs the gamut. Sometimes the things are very beautiful, moments when they felt whole and loved. In a way, they're working out their issues early. I said to somebody one day, 'I'm going to write a book, and it's going to be called *Your Parents Messed You Up, and I'm Gonna Make You Whole Again.*'

CM: So is “public parenting” a form of witnessing their stories?

LA: Witnessing their stories and also creating. I talk about teaching as not really teaching, but facilitating someone else's journey, their artistic journey. In a way what I'm doing is creating the avenues for somebody to be as excellent as they can be in their work. Sometimes it's celebrating the thing they're really good at, and sometimes it's challenging the thing they're not so good at and need to work on. So in this artist class, for instance, we don't meet on campus, we meet at public sites. The first class is always a shocker, because we meet at the Fred Jordan Missions, and they don't know that they're going to go there to do an hour of service! They're usually like, 'Wow,' or super pissed at me, but somehow it's the beginning of a real dialogue: What are you doing with your art? What does it mean? We are in the middle of skid row, so how in some way are you a reflection of this, too? I teach at a very privileged, very expensive private school, so this is super important to be connected to this whole other world outside the gates of our school.

For a time I went away a lot to do these year-long residencies. I lived in Hartford, Connecticut, for a year, then in Medford, Oregon, for a year. With every theatre that had me I would do a community component. I was in a little clinic in Medford working on a project with the United Way around drug addiction, because Medford has the largest crystal meth addiction in the country. Those years of being away were really extraordinary investigations into how to live elsewhere, but also what is it that every town tells you it needs, versus what I think it needs. I learned so much about how my job as an artist is to get out of the way of telling people how to do their work.

CM: Could you talk about how being an artist influenced how you currently lead? At USC? Or in the field?

LA: Recently, at the Mellon Foundation, they gathered the Mellon fellows. I'm certainly not the oldest, but sometimes you feel like the wisest. This young writer says, 'I don't know why I'm here.' It's all about his self-doubt and sabotage. And there was this really great moment when he said, 'Is there anything anyone wants to say?' And I said, 'Why are you stopping yourself from doing the best play that you can do?' Twenty years ago I would have not had the answers. But I think if you're in the field long enough, if you listen enough, the answers do come to you. And I think there are things you learn from failure, and I'm happy to have endured the kind of failure I have. I'm happy to have been celebrated, too, but it feels like a young person's game right now, I have to say. It's hard right now. Every theatre I talk to is like, 'Yeah, but we want Branden Jacobs-Jenkins,' and you're like, 'Yeah, OK... .' What I'm trying to write is something very regional, and something more Chicano-specific than anything I've ever written. It's not the most popular thing, and it requires a certain amount of risk because it's hard to tell an old story in a new way.

CM: You've talked about listening, you've talked about being willing to tolerate failure, those are things we hear from other artists that we're interviewing. Are there other aspects of your creative process that translate into a form of leadership?

LA: I am a collaborative artist, even when I write my own plays. I am always in research a lot, and I'm always in conversation with somebody. Rather than read about someone, I go find the person and interview them. The collaborative nature of it is really interesting, because I think I bring it into the room in terms of how I teach and I think I bring it into every artwork I make. In a non-pushy way, I try to be very involved in design. I love working with the other artists — I want to translate something about their work and I also want to be inspired by what they do. I worked with set designer Robert Brill on a production, and he was like, 'There's something about the set that I've designed that doesn't go with what I think you're saying about your play, so I'm not sure you're articulating your play just yet the way I think you want us to see it.' It's so beautiful to have somebody who works in the imagistic world tell you that your language is not landing.

CM: It sounds like one of the ways you lead is also to be led, to let other people's influence help you take a step you might not take yourself, and to send that back and forth.

LA: We have this Latina/o Theatre Commons through HowlRound, and at the beginning I felt very much a huge part of it. We did a conference that didn't look like a conference... . Then we had this really fantastic thing, these listening circles that were intergenerational. But then the second one happened, and I was sort of involved, and by this third one, there's this whole other generation doing it, and actually I'm intrusive. It's funny because (theatre artist) Diane Rodriguez and I are having a conversation right now about it because she's on the steering committee

and she talks about how hard it is. And I said, ‘It’s not that I didn’t want to be a part of what was hard, it’s that there’s already one of me in there, and it’s a person who’s 20 years younger.’ So knowing when to support that person in another way, and let that person’s leadership instincts come forward, I think is like teaching.

There’s a moment where somebody’s writing a play, and you’re facilitating this process. And then they’re doing the work of the play, and you have to pull back until a dramaturgical moment arises where you can see the whole artwork. That’s a moment of real humility. And I find that this kind of humility is super important in our industry, because it’s the only way to do good work. There’s a lot of arrogance we have to have in order to make the work happen, so that balance is something that’s very interesting to me.

I just had an interesting thing happen. I wrote this play — “Delano” — and it’s a true story of a preacher who loses his faith. And I gave it to Michael Ritchie (Artistic Director of Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles), and he said, ‘Lucas Hnath (a young writer out of Chicago) has this piece called “The Christians” that’s all over the country. It’s the same story! I have to tell you, I’m not going to produce your play.’ It was a really good lesson in terms of what water he was swimming in, and it also taught me that in some way I have to go deeper into my own community. Because I think sometimes you buy into the whole regional theatre notion out there, and the 10 stories that are acceptable. Of course it doesn’t run that way, originality and authenticity will always win.

CM: So I’m hearing that as a writer-leader, you can’t be listening only to the voices of your industry — that to listen to your industry is to potentially get stuck. You have a belief in hearing a voice that’s connected to what’s actually going on in the world, and that you’re engaging.

LA: As much as I love being an artist, I think I have to be equally as interested and as excited about being a citizen. Both of those are really working in tandem with one another, so when I lose my interest in this citizen notion is when I lose my way as an artist. It's also to know when to get out of the way. The Latino Commons is a good example. The Commons is not my moment now, it's somebody else's moment, but I have to support it and be there.

CM: Which also sounds like it's about not being too hungry about the career. Meaning that the career, the ambition to keep wanting to have a trajectory that always goes up, is a double-edged sword.

LA: I would say that maybe my biggest fault is that I never worried about career. I just didn't. My agent, Morgan Jenness, was livid with me for all those years. I thought I was going to stop being busy in the '90s, and that didn't happen. And then I got to the 2000s and I never stopped being busy. I'm always busy. I like to diversify, so for me writing an article for a magazine is as exciting as writing a play. And I think if you open yourself up to it, lots of opportunities come forward that are not the opportunities that were going to be yours.

A good example is, seven years ago I got asked to do the dedication for Disney of a tree in Anaheim. First of all, I would have been terrified when I was younger to even consider that. But I thought the dedication of a tree, the research of that, sounds kind of exciting, right? And I really don't know about Anaheim, and I've always flirted with South Coast Repertory, and they're going to give me a commission, so I should do some work! And it was the best experience of my life. I did a film, I would have never done a film! For me, it was a little, low-budget film that sustained me for like a year and a half money-wise. So I would say the more fun stuff is when you open yourself up to the community needs and wants, because things come out of that. ...

My current agent keeps saying, ‘We should talk about what the next five years are.’ I don’t really want to talk about what the next five years are, I never have. At some point maybe it will dry up, but I think if you stay interested in community, I can’t imagine that will ever dry up.

CM: It sounds like you push away from the notion of professionalization, you see it as a trap.

LA: I have a student, Montrey Shekar, a young Indian writer who I took under my wing, and I said, ‘We’re not going to do any of that career stuff.’ And I was really worried at the end. Then Susan Booth (Artistic Director of the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta) took her, and she’s done two youth plays at the Alliance, two plays that she walked out of school with and were guaranteed productions. I knew — I could sense it — that she was that right writer for the moment, and that she had the work and was committed to the work. There was no reason for her to think about career. Except she has the biggest agent now and she’s got productions lined up for her next five years. That’s great, that’s as good as you should be thinking. You should probably just be writing plays, and let somebody else think about that, right?

CM: You are a figure in our field. What’s the hardest part of being a leader as an artist?

LA: I think the field is hard. It’s very painful watching people drop out of the field, especially really talented people. I would say I live a very minimal life. I live in a little cottage, it’s 250 square feet. So I keep it really simple. It makes me get out into the world. Most of my writing is done in public, most of my life is lived in public, and I’m always out. The idea of simplicity allows me to just be able to move, move, move, and go, go, go. Until recently I wasn’t making a lot of money. Now that I’m a Mellon Fellow, I’m finally making money and saving money for a

house, but I don't think that most of the people in my group who stayed in the theatre have very much money.

Now, a lot of people we know have gone to cable, they make a *ton* of money. But I do think that there's a sacrifice, and the thing we don't talk about in the field is that there is a discipline you lose. And there's a way of writing that you lose as well. So it's creeping into our theatre, this notion of sitcom plays and all that. But I believe in staying true to the form, staying true to the old techniques. I find myself gravitating more to Chekhov these days, and I'm reading all of Ibsen and Strindberg. I think the reason I'm doing that is the modern world really pushes against it. I think the hardest thing is, how do you survive it, how do you survive it in a practical way, and then how do you survive it artistically? For me, I artistically survive it because I've made a commitment to be interested. I've made a commitment to be not only interested, but passionate about the things I'm doing.

CM: So, the devotion to the practice of being an artist in theatre is the hardest thing, and it also sounds like it's the most rewarding, too.

LA: Of course, the thing that's most punishing is also the most rewarding. ... Originality and authenticity are really hard to get, and they can't just filter through somebody else. You get them, they live inside of you, they process in you and then they come out of you.

CM: How do you cope with the parts of the field that are cynical? What's your approach to people who are cynical?

LA: Well, you know me, I'm Mr. Positive. I wasn't always. I'm super Mr. Positive these last 10 years — I had to be to get through the seven years of tenure, because I was very miserable. My joke is, I see the face of Jesus in the people I hate the most.

This is a good example, I wrote this play, “St. Jude,” about the year my father died. My father was in the hospital for a year, so I lived with him in the hospital and I wrote. Of course, I’m dealing with grief and loss — it’s all shooting through me. My committee had come to “St. Jude” opening night at Kirk Douglas Theatre. I just spilled my guts, I literally bleed, because I cut myself and I drew blood the way my father has to draw blood. Right after the show people would line up like a funeral line — they were giving me their mortuary cards from family members who had passed. People were coming because they were in their own loss and grief. My committee chair comes up to me, the first person I see, and she says, ‘I would have preferred a multi-character play.’

Loving a person like that is very hard, and it took a long time, but I have to say the journey with her taught me everything I needed to know about university life. What a great gift! It wasn’t until two years later that I had the nerve to say, ‘You really hurt my feelings and, more than anything, I just found it odd that you came to the opening night of my performance and said that.’ Then, of course, she told me the story of how her father was dying, and she was stuck on a Southwest airline flight that got diverted and she never got there in time. So everybody has a back story, everybody has a reason for why they are who they are. That’s where the real stuff lies, and that’s where you start to understand humanity. So I walk through all this really positive.

I have colleagues that I don’t spend any time with. I love them dearly, but they don’t work from the positive. And I think you’ve *got* to see the positive. I have to see a result toward making an artwork, so I’ve got to stay driven toward that. It’s a long race, and I have to be enthusiastic about it. Everything I’ve written has gotten produced, and I think part of it has to do with staying in the game, staying positive about it, loving it, learning to love the things that are super hard. Just because of my life circumstances, grief and loss have been the thing that I’ve had to love. ...

All that truly changes the way you think about how you lead. A lot of what I'm doing with groups and anything I'm involved in, is bringing in the positive. I think I've seen my 12th show in two weeks, and I don't think you should ever walk out of a show and not say to somebody, 'I know how much work it took to make that, and thank you so much.' It's the least you can do, and I'm not a liar for saying that.

I don't think I'm ever anywhere where something doesn't teach me something. There was fight on the bus the other day and I thought, 'What can I learn from this, because it's so pathetic and pitiful and dumb!' And I see this young guy, and I think, 'Where is his anger coming from?' He's a lion trying to roar in a city that won't let him. Sometimes it's really challenging. I'm challenged right now, surprisingly, by the issue of diversity. I don't want to talk about race anymore.

CM: Why is that?

LA: I'm fatigued. I think the conversation is so dramatic at the moment that it's hard for people to see both sides. So I try to facilitate spaces where we can hear each other, where we can talk to each other. Right now, quite honestly, we're having this big problem with our hair and wig department. I was asked to come in and facilitate a talk. It was so fascinating. They're just talking over each other — everybody has a series of hurts, and each one is valid. But they just can't hear each other ... and I just don't know how I can engage. Maybe it's my own failings as a leader that I'm fatigued by the subject. But we've been on the subject since, God, how long have I known you — 25 years? This is a long time for a conversation that hasn't moved. I hear the rattle of the class issue in this country, I hear about the loss of the middle class, and if you don't have education what it does to you. I hear all that pain. ...

In Medford, there's a wonderful clinic where I go and do creative exercises for doctors. They have horrible burnout and turnover. They have OBGYN, but hardly

anybody gets to do it. They have general medicine, but hardly anybody gets to do it, because they're overwhelmed by what crystal meth has done to people. It affects the gums, so a lot of dentists go through the clinic often, and they get tired of doing the same thing, the same work, and it feels like it never gets better. I do these exercises and ask, 'Why did you get into this? What made you love it in the first place?' And I feel in some way I'm kind of asking myself those same questions, 'How do I remain consistent? How I do never lose the spark of the thing that I first loved? What is the thing that you hold onto, that's just your thing?'

I find that I'm getting better and better at making great leaders, maybe because I facilitate people's processes. My job is to do that, to help the next generation. And I feel like that's a huge enough job to do for the rest of my life, and I love it.

Then there's a whole other issue about how do you honor the people who have been in the field for so long? We had this interesting thing at The Commons — we were in Chicago last year for a Carnivál, a festival of new plays. They had a very young artist with their first play, plus Octavio Solis, so they kind of mixed it all up. But in the middle there was a group of folks who I think the committee failed to notice, and it was the Migdalia Cruzes of the world. She's been in the field for 30-plus years, helped make the field when she ran Latino Chicago — we forget that she ran the first Latino theatre company — and it was really odd for no mention. So I feel like sometimes that's my job, too.

CM: I noticed that you do acknowledge people online. That's an interesting practice of yours.

LA: You know what it does to me? It helps me get a clarity about how we got here. But also I think it's super important to acknowledge the work that people do. Sometimes it's really small things. I started talking about going to see a play, and how wonderful an actor is in a play. I was there, I witnessed it, I should write about

it, I should post it. We should know that this moment existed, because we're in the ephemeral — once it's gone, it's gone.

CM: What I'm hearing is that the big debates don't necessarily interest you, that what you believe in is more about being kind and helping to hear someone's story.

LA: I think I'm most effective nationally when I'm recognized for what I'm doing in very small ways. Everything I'm doing is kind of smallish and very particular. So I'm diving into something, and I can dive into community and become friends, and then I dive into community and become partners, and I can dive in and become essential.

CM: What advice would you have liked to have received, when you were starting out, that you would give to a young person today? What should somebody have said to you 30 years ago that you didn't hear?

LA: I think I got the advice in a way that I wish I would have heard it from somebody. I think about "Straight as a Line" a lot, when we went to New York and we did off-Broadway. I had this amazing experience where we were at Primary Stages, and everybody was loving it. We were at 85 percent, and I went to Edward Albee's house for lunch, Meryl Streep sent me a basket, Tony Kushner had given me this amazing collection of books. Everybody was showing up, amazing people, Regis showed up to the play! Then we had this amazing opening in the Village, and the next day Jon (Lawrence Rivera of Playwright's Arena) and I were walking around New York, and I remember we went to see a movie, and I said, 'Isn't it weird that nobody's calling us, and it's the day after our opening?' And he said, 'Yeah, this is weird.' And as we were walking to a record store, I looked at *The Village Voice*, and I had the worst review of my career. And we walked some more, and I picked up *The Daily News*, it was maybe worse than *The Village Voice*.

Then we went from 85 percent to like 30 percent. So I stayed for two weeks because the guy at Primary Stages made me stay. Then I had to get out, it was just a bad scene, to be in a theatre that went from full to all the sudden not full, based just on those reviews. So I'm at the airport and I pick up *The New York Times*, and we have this gorgeous picture that runs the entire length of the paper, with an amazing review by a guy named D.J.R. Bruckner. And everybody came back. But by then, the lesson had been learned: What am I doing this for? The critics? New York? Who am I doing it for?

And that same trip, I saw (artistic director and producer) Mark Russell. I said, 'I want to perform at PS 122,' and he said, 'I don't think you should perform at PS 122, because I don't have any money. You should go and discover the country.' He sent me to upstate New York, and that's how I got to meet the people who work in Texas. And that's how I got those great relationships in San Diego and San Francisco. All my life in San Francisco is built around all those spaces — the Mission Cultural Center, the Lab, Theatre Artaud. That was Mark Russell saying, 'Don't come here.' I don't know why he said that to me.

CM: So, in a way, you would say to young people, find your own connections.

LA: It's a very big country, and if you think that going to New York is the way to do it, I'm not sure that your work is explicitly telling you to do that, so look at your work. I have a young student from Bellingham, Washington, he should go back to Seattle; he's writing the great Pacific Northwest plays. They're quirky, they're beautiful, they're meant to be performed at Seattle Rep, there's a story to that region. They're gorgeous. Why send him to New York?

CM: Does it make you upset that the theatre's gotten so focused on New York?

LA: ...It's very clear to me. When I go to the Magic Theatre, I write Magic plays. I go, I do my research there, the first play was about Daly City. When I go to Victory Gardens Theatre (in Chicago), the greatest of the successes I've probably had was with "Mojada" ... because I spent a summer in the southside of Chicago interviewing teen felons. That paid off tremendously for that play. By the end of it, I really understood Chicago. I got up at the first post-play, and I said, 'If we want to bring young people in the theatre, we can do it tonight. Each one of us, I will buy the first ticket, it's \$10, if you put \$10 in the hat.' We made \$2,300, and I said, 'You can take the ticket with you, or we will give out the ticket.' It was unbelievable. We just started having busloads of kids come in. Then, of course, it became very diverse, and (Victory Gardens Artistic Director) Chay Yew was smart to say, 'We can't have a kids' section, they have to sit with everybody, they have to learn the rules of the theatre and the whole bit.' It was one of those summers where we were packed every night. It's the right play, you did all the research.

So the Joyce Foundation asked me to come in and talk about that amazing idea; it's not an amazing idea, if you want to make it intergenerational, bring a kid! I said, 'I think the thing I learned here is a very simple lesson: There's a north side, there's a south side, and never the two shall meet. And how do we make that happen? Because right now what's happening when I do post-play discussions at Victory Gardens, we're talking about *those* kids, not *our* kids. So when do we make one city?' ...

And I'm just bringing the message four mothers in a circle told me one night, because I spent the night at the most violent street corner in the southside, and they did the most amazing thing. They got their grandmothers to wear those orange vests out there, and they drank coffee, and it brought the violence down. Nobody's going to shoot their grandmother, right? And it was amazing. It came from those women. So, in some way, can you dig that deep, to bring it that high up?

Epilogue

Shifting our frame of reference into new lights can expand our “sight” from what we want to accomplish and acquire to, ultimately, how we want to be in the world. Luis Alfredo has made the conscious choice to adjust his view and expand the way he impacts his world. This level of conscious awareness is a powerful leadership tool not to be taken lightly. Core takeaways from our time with Luis include:

- **Recognize when you can be of service to others.** It’s a special leader who recognizes mechanisms to support others. Whether through community engagement, teaching, mentoring, providing resources or removing roadblocks, find ways to empower others’
- **Get out of your own way.** It’s a common misnomer that being a successful leader means having the answers and providing direction to others. This choice, however, hamstring the leader with relationships of dependency. Instead, help others to achieve their own independence of thought and action; to discover their own voices.
- **Check your ego at the door.** Self-importance is a form of self-deception. Know and leverage your strengths, *and* balance them with a healthy dose of curiosity in others’
- **Be a catalyst.** Have a clear sense of what, where, how and why you are making your choices as a leader. Willing followership comes with a compelling vision that communicates its impact on others.
- **Don’t underestimate the power of passion.** Being interested is one thing, but sharing your excitement can be contagious. People typically aren’t enthusiastic to be a part of something mediocre.
- **Develop a positive mindset.** Successful artists and leaders benefit greatly from being resilient. Focusing on what’s not working will breed more brokenness. Instead, feed optimism, potential and a progressive viewpoint.

- **Build a network.** The old adage of “it’s who you know” continues to be true. Opportunity comes with persistence, timing, good execution and connections.

— *Rob Kramer*