Re-staging Rivera's Marisol: Identities, Projections, and New Mythologies

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Re-staging Rivera's Marisol

Identities, Projections, and New Mythologies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Theatre from The College of William and Mary

by

Kevin Place

Accepted for: High Honors

(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Richard Palmer, Director

Laurie Wolf

Francis Tanglao-Aguas

Amy Oakes

Williamsburg, Virginia
May 1, 2014
Addendum to the Committee Recommendation for

Re-staging Rivera’s Marisol: Identities, Projections, and New Mythologies

A thesis submitted

By

Kevin Place

The determination of honors recognizes the high level quality of the stage production of Marisol directed by Kevin Place in the William and Mary Studio Theatre, February 13-15, 2014

Richard Palmer, Director

Laurie Wolf

Francis Tanglao-Aguas

Amy Oakes

May 1, 2014
“This is the first play I’ve written with an eye on the next generation. We need to find new heroes and new myths for our society -- the old ones just aren't working. The God we know now is a right-wing, white male, corporate God, in whose world racism, sexism and political injustice are rampant. As the millennium nears, I am amazed these things are still valid.”

--José Rivera¹

The above quotation, from a *New York Times* interview of Jose Rivera at the time that his play *Marisol* was opening at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1993, sums up in many ways my rationale in directing the play in William & Mary Theatre’s Second Season. When I first encountered the play, I was struck not only by its ability to transport its audience to another world but also by its relevance to our world twenty years after it was written. My first avenue into the play was through its economic discussions, which are in many ways more potent today than they might have been at the time the play was written. As I began to consider directing the play, its greater relevance today became clearer to me. If Rivera marvels at the validity of society’s ills in the approach of the new millennium, then we should be ashamed these things are still largely valid nearly fifteen years into it.

As I started to plan staging *Marisol* in the Studio theatre, the task was daunting. To me, the themes of the work and the world Rivera creates to tell his story were both incredibly engaging, but I was not sure how those things would transfer to a performance in this environment. Specifically, how would being in Williamsburg change the show’s discussion of race and class, originally centered on the New York City experience? How would collegiate audiences react to the play’s themes and how would collegiate actors respond to working on such a bold and challenging work? How could the visual world that Rivera describes in the text be adapted to a medium-sized black-box space?

When I began reading reviews of previous professional productions, I realized that the things I had been most worried about—being in Williamsburg, being in a college environment, and working in the Studio space—could become advantages to my production if handled in the right way. Many reviewers talked about being overwhelmed by both the text and visuals in various productions. Nearly every review that I was able to find mentioned being overwhelmed
in at least one way, and most mentioned more than one. Some reviewers were overwhelmed by visuals used in certain productions, like the graffiti-covered walls that made up the Denver Center Theatre’s set. Though other reviews did not specifically mention being overwhelmed, they often used related language like “busy” and “unsparing.” Some reviewers had fewer problems with a production’s visuals but were instead overwhelmed by the play’s many themes, like the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer of the La Jolla Playhouse production who found the visuals “a compelling jolt to the senses,” but did not know which of Rivera’s societal critiques to focus on. Yet another reviewer found *Marisol* to be a play all based on tone, and that tone “felt odd” and made the play’s social and political message discordant with 2009’s headlines.

Though the negative comments were at first overwhelming themselves, it soon became clear that my production would naturally avoid many of these potholes, or should never be produced. By combining the input from these reviews with my own analysis of audience members’ sensibilities, I began to develop a three-pronged approach to tightening and focusing the script, centered on being in Williamsburg, performing on a college campus, and using the Studio theatre space; these three sections will also form the underlying concerns for the my six specific areas of analysis to follow. My goal in tightening and focusing the script was to strip away its excesses, at least temporarily, in order to take a closer look at the story’s spine. This served to both mitigate the issues of audial, visual, and thematic overload as described by the reviewers and to respond to the play’s context for a modern audience. Once a distinctive through-line and aesthetic sensibility were created, then we could add back as many wonderful

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4 Sylvie Drake, “‘Marisol’ a Jolt to the Senses: Jose Rivera Delivers His Strongest Play to Date. It is the First in La Jolla Playhouse’s Two-Play FutureFest Repertory,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 1992.
and messy theatrical elements, visuals, and themes as were useful in telling the play’s eccentric story.

In post-recession Williamsburg, the racial and economic concerns that Rivera writes about would have to be shifted from their original context, but doing so could help unite many of the play’s disparate themes and update some of the play’s outdated social criticism. When focusing on ethnicity in the play, I examined Marisol’s relationship with her culture and how that relationship can be honestly transferred to Williamsburg. Marisol’s journey of culture became a uniting idea for other themes like religion and politics in the play, and was highly useful in finding the play’s structure. Then, thinking of economics, I examined the play’s original political message about life in the Bronx and how it could be adapted in our production to engage more directly with financial issues in post-recession America. The play talks about many economic issues from the 90s, but they have more potency and more theatrical use in this day and age than Rivera’s critique of New York City.

To perform the play on a modern college campus, special attention had to be paid to both the makeup of the audience and the performers. Rivera tends to make sweeping statements about a lot of themes that bother him, but he rarely returns to flesh out a full discussion of the issues. This is especially true with gender and sexuality in the play and in the college setting, his missteps and vagaries on the issue are particularly noticeable. By pulling back on such moments, gender and sexuality could be adequately discussed without overpowering the text. Working with collegiate actors provides its own unique set of challenges, but with this script I found that the extra work involved was ultimately helpful in trying to flesh out the sometimes underwritten and flat characters, fill in the relationships, and find the play’s emotional extremes. As one reviewer puts it, Marisol occasionally has a habit of not “fleshing out its characters or the
The overall structure of the characters is largely there, but it needs the exploration and collaboration that a group of student actors can bring when given the right tools to do so.

Finally, the Studio theatre space and its aesthetic require the ambitious visual world and complex symbols of the play to be sharpened and simplified for a successful production. By using projections, creating the visuals that Rivera writes in his stage directions will be possible in the Studio and those projections, if implemented correctly, will be better integrated into the story and less overwhelming than other modes of visual storytelling. The visual symbols that Rivera uses in the play also must be translated to the Studio space, both physically and analytically. The Studio, with its black-box set-up, requires careful planning in the implementation of major symbols like the crown or the wings, but I found that this extra thought naturally led into ways to adapt these symbols that were both better for their use in the space, their conciseness, and their relevance to the play.

Before I continue on these topics, I want to emphasize two points about this process: my work with the production dramaturg and our methods for collecting audience feedback. As I hashed out my conception of the play, I was aided immensely by Rebecca Turner, who served as the dramaturg on the piece and is writing her own thesis focusing on the religious aspects of Rivera’s work in context of the Book of Revelation and millenarian movements in the 1990s. Rebecca and I viewed the dramaturg-director relationship as entirely collaborative when it came to the theoretical understanding of the text. We spent much time early on discussing major themes, diagramming the play, and brainstorming design aesthetics. I am much indebted to her

6 Kuchwara.
for constantly challenging my ideas on the play, and forcing us towards a clearer path in our production.

When it came to the practical implementation of the script, I was more solely responsible, though Rebecca did attend several rehearsals and give feedback. Meanwhile, she created an installation dramaturgy piece in the hallway leading into the Studio that set up the audience to understand the play visually, thematically, and stylistically. In addition, she ran audience talkbacks after each performance that served two purposes. First, they allowed the audience to further engage with the material by answering their questions about the script and the performance by members of the cast and production team. Second, by tracking what questions they asked and how they asked them, Rebecca and I could begin to form an idea of the audience’s response to the play.

To get more concrete, if still informal, data on this response and to initiate substantive conversation in the talkback, we also implemented a post-show survey. After the curtain call of each performance, our house manager distributed surveys and writing implements to audience members. The anonymous survey asked for basic demographic information, the most relevant theme of the play, and two questions asking them to rank the usefulness of the dramaturgy materials and the projections in the show. Counting both audience members who stayed for the talkback and those who did not, we received 111 completed surveys, a number which falls between one-third and one-half of our total attendance.

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7 For specific question phrasing, please see the survey itself, attached in Appendix B.
8 Unfortunately, exact show attendance numbers were not recorded. The capacity of the Studio in our set-up was 86 people, and we completely filled those seats two performances and mostly filled them for the other two. Thus, 300 is a safe rough estimate of total attendance.
Using this data, recordings of the talk-backs, and my own thoughts while watching the performances of the show, I will attempt to construct an understanding of what happened in the performance of the play, and how effective it was at telling the story of Marisol. Theatre is by its nature subjective, and thus I make no claims at objectivity. Instead, I will evaluate the issues from several viewpoints in addition to my own, ultimately explaining why I chose the route I did. I will then evaluate these choices on the basis of what the audience members and I responded to in the performance of the play.
Ethnicity

For a show whose title is the shortened version of the Spanish devotional Maria de la Soledad, the beginning scenes of Marisol feature a titular character who is relatively unconcerned with her ethnicity in any tangible way. Yet by the end of the play it is the “Angelitos” in the graveyard that give her the impetus to turn towards revolution (61).9 One of the most significant journeys of the play, then, is Marisol’s movement from cultural isolation to cultural realization.

For Williamsburg, Virginia ethnicity seems like it might not be a particularly relevant theme, especially because the specific Puerto Rican identity that Rivera uses is one not found widely in the area. Some reviewers, though potentially short-sighted in their analysis and certainly biased in some way, have seen this as a major problem for the play. Speaking of Rivera’s conception of god in the play, a review for the Atlanta Journal lamented, “Evidently we’re meant to see him as the big white patriarchal meanie in the sky,” and went on to praise Rivera’s writing despite it’s being “politically correct.”10 Though clearly this reviewer does not speak for all, it is worrisome that the production might have forced the issue of ethnicity to the point of it taking away from other themes, when it should in fact unite them.

In casting the play and understanding its comments on ethnicity, I focused the importance of Marisol’s changing understanding of her ethnicity and culture as a way to unite the play’s at-times disparate themes into one character’s journey from assimilation to acceptance without overplaying her specific racial identity and experience.

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9 José Rivera, Marisol and Other Plays, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997: 61; all further references to this edition will only be in the form of parenthetical page numbers.
10 Hulbert.
**Marisol’s Journey of Ethnicity and Culture**

Excepting the stage direction upon Marisol’s entrance that identifies her as “an attractive Puerto Rican woman of 26,” Marisol as a character is rarely connected to her cultural heritage except in moments of distress (6). Excluding a couple of bursts of Spanish when she is being assaulted by voices in the night during the second scene, Marisol does not say or do anything that would indicate her being Puerto Rican for six full scenes (9, 11). When the Angel makes her experience certain sensations, one of them is the taste of *arroz con gandules*, the national dish of Puerto Rico, which Marisol seems surprised and excited to taste: “Oh my God, *arroz con gandules!* Yum!” (12). But this admission comes only in the fugue-like dream state created by the Angel’s entrance into Marisol’s apartment, in which the other pleasures she experiences, namely the smell of the ocean and the sensation of orgasm, seem to be ones which she has denied herself.

Both in the Bronx and in Manhattan, we do not see Marisol willingly associate with other Puerto Rican or Latina characters, practice anything social or religious outside the mainstream, or even acknowledge others’ comments on her culture. In her apartment hangs a “large romanticized picture of a traditional Catholic guardian angel,” not, as one might suspect, a Caribbean- or Latin-American-inspired version (8). On several occasions in the fifth scene, June mentions aspects of Marisol’s culture like the number of people named Marisol Perez listed in the phone book and even pokes fun at her for being “Miss Puerto Rican Yuppy Princess of the Universe,” but Marisol never reacts or takes the bait (20).

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11 At the beginning of the seventh scene on page 30, we do hear her sing in Spanish: “Madre que linda noche / cuantas estrellas / breme la ventana / que quiero verlas...” (“Mother, what a beautiful night, how many stars! Open the window for me, I want to see them.”). The act of singing in Spanish and the lyrics of the song that she chooses, which come from the traditional Spanish song “The Ballad of Poor Adela,” connect her to her heritage in a casual and authentic way as she considers stepping farther away from her roots in the Bronx and moving to Brooklyn.
As Marisol moves into its second act, its titular character breaks her silence on ethnicity, and begins to acknowledge her heritage. Lost and confused with a hint of amnesia in a wasteland version of New York, she eventually turns to her childhood and her ethnicity when her identity is questioned by the Man with the Scar Tissue. At first she remembers basics like where she was born, where she went to school, and what she does for a living. Eventually though, she remembers something about herself that she might not have ever realized before:

I lived in the Bronx…I commuted light years to this other planet called—Manhattan! I learned new vocabularies…wore weird native dress…mastered arcane rituals…and amputated neat sections of my psyche, my cultural heritage…yeah, clean easy amputations…with no pain expressed at all—none!—but so much pain kept inside I almost choked on it…so far deep inside my Manhattan bosses and Manhattan friends and my broken Bronx consciousness never even suspected (48).

Thus the same character that had almost no association with her culture in the first act explodes the delusion of her previous reality and moves into a new self-realization, with her culture at the center. Though there is a sense of longing in these words for the time when her “clean easy amputations” were in place, she is stunningly honest with herself for the first time.

In the pages immediately following this realization, we see her make another huge change: she helps another character. Throughout the first act, Marisol is self-serving; she does what she needs to for survival and little else. She does not act in an outright selfish way, but she never chooses the needs of others before her own nor does she ever lend a helping hand to any of the characters she meets. Something very different happens when she encounters the Man with
Scar Tissue’s deformity. She gently removes the bandages from his face, and utters a phrase in her native tongue: “Ay Dios, ay Dios mio, ay Dios…” (51). She then even tries to help another homeless person who is being burned by the Skinhead. Using the energy she has harnessed from her moment of realization, she begins really to exist in the world as it is, not in the constructed world of her assimilation.12

All she needs to ignite a revolution is a push in the right direction, and Lenny gives her a big one. At first he seems to take control of the situation, giving Marisol a bite of the apple made from salt and ordering her around. Then he goes into labor, and Marisol must not only take charge of the birth, but must also arrange a burial for the stillborn baby. And it is finally when she reaches the graveyard that Lenny shows her in Brooklyn that her cultural journey comes to completion. While burying Lenny’s little Marisol there, she discovers the graves of the “Angelitos”, children of the street buried on the street. Most importantly, these children’s names, when they are even given them, have Latino and often Puerto Rican-specific origins like “Fermin Rivera,” “Jose Amengual,” and “Delfrio Perez” (62).

Rivera’s stage direction, “Marisol can’t read anymore. She sits in the middle of the child cemetery, exhausted, not able to think, feel, or react anymore. For all she knows, this could be the end of the world,” indicates that this has a huge effect on Marisol (62). But she recovers quickly, for she soon affects the biggest change yet: she brings June back from being a skinhead. Borrowing from both the Angel’s dialogue, “Cut that shit out you fucking Nazi!” and using the awakening electric touch that Angel previously used on her, Marisol is able to bring her friend back from the brink. The once non-committal, terrified assimilationist triumphs over evil and

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12 Her large speech that follows continues this point. For the first time we see her weigh options and make decisions for herself. She wishes for home and for June, but then when it is clear neither of those things is going to happen, she takes both the Angel and God to task for abandoning her. She is ready to take action, though the wrong one.
does not stop there. She is ready for a fight and for the first time knows what to do; she has been infected by the Angel’s vision of a world without a senile God and is ready to revolt. Even though she is killed in the moments following, the power that she has finally gotten infects those around her, inciting them to revolution as well.

At the same time, however, ethnicity is not a theme that permeates the play as a whole. No explicit discussions of race or ethnicity are featured at any point in the play and no other character experiences a change in his or her understanding of ethnicity as a reinforcement of or foil to Marisol’s journey. Relying too heavily on Marisol’s journey of ethnicity could deprive her of her agency in deciding to revolt. Much of the impetus might come from her ethnic community and a desire to put the end to the suffering she has witnessed on the street, but that is not sufficient to send her on this path. If it were, then others with more direct and prolonged exposure to the issues would have revolted long before. Instead, some inherent goodness in Marisol, buried beneath her modern assimilationist attitude but seen by the Angel, June, and Lenny, forces her on in spite of the terrible consequences that she faces and cannot be explained by ethnicity alone.

The overall severity of the change in Marisol’s character, however, convinced me that Marisol’s cultural journey is still an essential part of the story being told and in many ways frames the religious and political journeys of the play. Many of the religious and political questions that the script raises are linked with Marisol’s culture. Her religious views, which are originally dominated by traditional Roman Catholic theology, are thrown open by the Angel, and in the end she leads a revolution for all people, no matter their belief. The political issues too can be encapsulated within the cultural context, as issues of representation in minority communities and the policies of poverty all come to a head in the graveyard scene where Marisol
sees firsthand the plight of her own people. Marisol’s ethnicity and culture form the key arc of the story.

Therefore, the discussion of how to portray Marisol is highly important to this production, both from a viewpoint of what actor to cast but also through the perspective of how to bring Puerto Rican cultural narrative to unite the themes of the production.

Casting Marisol

The most straightforward answer to the issue of casting would be to cast an actor of Puerto Rican or other Latin American heritage for the title role. This would allow the creative process for the actor portraying Marisol to focus on the distancing from culture as demonstrated in the first half of the play while allowing the real connection with her culture to come more naturally at the end of the play. Having this sort of precise understanding of the background of Marisol could also be helpful in understanding the specific racist and sexist confines that the character has to deal with on a daily basis.

But in reality, finding an actor with that kind of background who has the training and ability for the massive undertaking of the role would be very challenging at William & Mary. The role of Marisol is massive in the play: in our production, she was onstage for every word of spoken dialogue, and only briefly exited the stage for two costume changes. Several female actors of Latin American or Caribbean heritage have been involved with theatre at William & Mary in the past few years, but none of them had nearly enough training or experience for this demanding and central of a role.
that the character feels and understand just as well her journey towards reunification with her culture?

In saying this I do not mean to suggest that two people of any minority group have dealt with the same experiences in their lives. I simply mean that the larger themes of Marisol deal with the minority experience in a broader way. Rivera himself supports a similar position in the quotation on creating new mythologies from the very beginning of this piece. What is important to Rivera is not what Marisol is, but instead what she is not. By the end of the play, Marisol is the antithesis of the God that Rivera had known: a left-leaning woman of color who leaves the corporate world behind. But at the beginning, she attempts to embrace those things, rejecting her own heritage and even screaming a homeless man on the subway, “why don’t you just get a job?” (7). The specifics of Marisol’s Puerto Rican heritage are only important insomuch as they are inherited and then locked away. Thus, especially for this particular William & Mary production, an actor who can access the minority experience in some way while handling the many acting challenges that Marisol poses will have adequate preparation for the role.14

I am lucky in this process in that Marisol’s character is Puerto Rican because Puerto Rican identity is such a moving target. In the 2010 census, the island itself was about 75% white and 25% mixed or other, including those of African, Asian, and American Indian descent. While the vast majority of these people in some way identified as Hispanic or Latino, they were by no means homogenous in their cultural heritage.15 Thus, I had a lot of leeway in casting this show with someone who could be believably of some sort of Puerto Rican heritage as long as I could

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14 An actor’s imagination is a powerful tool, but in this circumstance, some form of real-life experience in a minority role will be greatly helpful in understanding Marisol’s character quickly and completely. Since I myself have no experience as a member of a racial minority, I was doubly interested in having someone with that experience to work with.

stay away from casting someone too similar to whoever is playing the Angel for reasons that I will delve into in the next section.

The literature on minority and so-called “non-traditional” casting is contentious and varied. In two opposing essays in various editions of *The Drama Review*, Roger Schulz and William Sun forward two very different theories for casting in regards to race. Schulz’ concern is primarily educational, serving in the role of the director of Texas A&M University’s theatre program. He advocates creating valid opportunities for minority actors to become involved in productions which correspond with their own heritage as well as those that do not. He sees actors of color playing parts traditionally written for white actors as the way for the theatre to fully integrate, and from his experiences in from 1984 until the article was published in 1991, he found this to be both challenging and rewarding.16

Sun, who writes in 2000, challenges Schultz and others for not allowing “non-traditional” casting to go in both directions. Citing examples as diverse as Chinese blackface productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to August Wilson’s admonition of black actors in a production *The Cherry Orchard*, Sun argues that cross-ethnic casting can be both enlightening to actors and useful to educational and professional productions alike when done in both directions. Through the logic of Victor Turner’s theory of “performing ethnography,” he argues that members of different racial and ethnic groups can better understand one another by portraying each other onstage.17 Furthermore, thematic use of cross-ethnic portrayal can highlight themes inherent in the piece and even distance the audience from the story in a Brechtian way.18

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18 Sun, 91.
No conversation on race in the contemporary American theatre is complete without reference to the great playwright August Wilson, who in his 1996 keynote address at Theatre Communications Group conference “The Ground on Which I Stand” firmly rejected the idea of colorblind casting. Wilson insists that, “To mount an all black production of Death of A Salesman or any other play conceived for white actors […] is to deny us our own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as black Americans.”\(^1\) Though Wilson’s larger and more valid point is about black producers and playwrights not being able to fund their own projects while seeing black actors performing in plays written and funded by white men, he sets up a troublesome standard in which the modification of the racial context of a show is an affront to the culture and history of racial relations. Wilson certainly has valid concerns about the black experience being performed only for white benefit, but goes so far in his general condemnation of colorblind casting as to make interracial art nearly impossible.

Though I do believe that more complications to casting in this manner exist than Sun presents, I tend to agree with him more than either Schultz or Wilson. I think Sun raises some very strong points about regarding cross-ethnic casting more simply as an artistic choice, and looking more at what it means for the work. In terms of Marisol, I think that his thoughts on the alienation factor of her ethnicity are particularly potent. If an actress that one would not traditionally associate with Puerto Rican heritage plays the character, her issues of ethnicity will be more immediately understood by the audience. If they can then be persuaded to buy into her cultural awakening later in the play despite the differences they noticed before, the themes of ethnicity may well be served strongly by a non-Puerto Rican actress.

In the audition process, my suspicions about finding an actor to play Marisol were largely confirmed. We had a couple of actors of Hispanic background come out, but unfortunately not one seemed like she would be able to hold an audience’s attention for the entirety of the show in the way that Marisol must. A couple of black actors could have taken on the role and would have worked with the diversity of Puerto Rico, but such a choice would have lessened differences between Marisol and the Angel, a point I will describe in further detail in the next section. After callbacks, it was clear to me that our best choice was a half-Chinese, half-white actor named Brittany Liu who could not only bring an incredible sense of truth in her acting but also diversity in her mixed-race background.

With Brittany chosen and rehearsals beginning, she and I began to question how much she might perform Marisol’s ethnicity. We were not at all interested in stereotypical gestures or costume pieces, but instead about how Marisol’s childhood exposure to race might shape her behavior. Considering that she grew up in the Bronx in what we assume is a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood, we decided she might well have a bit of an accent. Considering her stated assimilationist tendencies, we also thought that she might hide that accent most of the time but slip into it during moments of duress. A nice idea in theory, in practice the changing accent often made it seem more like Brittany was forgetting and then remembering to do the accent instead it being a natural reaction from the character. When consulting a dialect coach on the matter, we decided it would be best instead to keep the accent understated for the entirety of the show, as if Marisol has tried to get rid of it but has yet to completely succeed.
Casting Other Roles

The only other character who is explicitly given a race in the script is the Angel, described by Rivera as, “young black woman…she looks like an urban warrior, a suffering burnt-out soldier of some lost cause” (5). Rivera is clear that the Angel is very different than Marisol and thus it was important to me that she and Marisol were not similar in their racial identity to both to create a visual distinction between the actors and also to play into the idea of new mythologies. It might well be easier for Marisol to relate to an angel who looks and acts just like her, but then the show becomes about one specific group overthrowing the racial hegemony and not about all of the oppressed people of the world joining forces in an attempt to topple an unjust system.

All the other characters are written as white, and it is important to keep most of them as white actors to create Marisol’s sense of cultural isolation. For the Woman in Furs, however, I was faced with a relatively new but very talented actress of South Asian descent named Emily Sen who played the role’s anger and fear in a quiet and understated way that I had not expected but found surprisingly scary. The question then shifted to how the Woman in Furs’ privileged downfall would play when the actor in the furs was darker in complexion than the actor playing Marisol. This effect was magnified by one of Woman in Furs’ lines to Scar Tissue in reference to Marisol: “This brown piece of shit is mine” (46). There is nothing else in the moment that would require her to have a lighter complexion, but the line might read a little odd if not approached carefully. We decided that having Emily play the role would be more important than avoiding a little awkwardness with the script, especially because the line could easily display the Woman in Furs’ own sense of successful assimilation to the point where she puts down people for their skin tone even when they are lighter than her.
When performance time came and I stepped back from my active role in shaping the show to just being an observer, I was struck by how little I noticed the theme of ethnicity alone in the show. Brittany’s physical appearance may have had something to do with it, but I suspect that it had more to do with the script being more simply performed. Only two moments stood out to me in terms of Marisol’s journey: her responses to another Spanish speaker in the voices section of scene three and the names of the deceased children that she reads before collapsing in the street cemetery. A massive change occurred between the moments, showing how far Marisol has come in her journey with her relationship to her culture. The woman once annoyed at the suffering of her neighbors was by the end so affected by it that she chose to risk and ultimately lose her life for their cause. In this way the subtle theme of ethnicity united the play’s other themes of personal responsibility and fate, among others, which in the final moments were used to ask the script’s dramatic question: did the revolution succeed? Was it worth it?

Additionally, by not dwelling on the specifics of Marisol’s Puerto Rican heritage, we were better able to extrapolate her specific experience to the universal. If we had dwelled more on Marisol’s individual heritage, the play’s potential to be specifically about the Puerto Rican experience in New York in the 90s might have been more significantly brought about. By avoiding the specifics in those instances, I believe we made the play more accessible to our Williamsburg audience.  

The audience response in our survey to the theme of ethnicity was also quite limited. Only one respondent, who self-identified as Latino, highlighted “race” as a central theme. Out of

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20 I do not mean to say in any way that specificity cannot allow for extrapolation to the universal in all circumstances. In plays with more detailed mise-en-scene and cultural connection, the specifics can indeed be the connection to the universal. With Marisol, however, this was not the case as the specifics were not strong or concentrated enough for this to take place, especially not for an audience that will include few Puerto Ricans.
111 respondents, 10 others also identified as Latino, and none of their responses indicated ethnicity or race among themes. This highly limited data might suggest that the race of audience members was slightly important in their connection with ethnicity in the play, but not strongly so. At the same time plenty of others, both of minority affiliations and not, cited “oppression,” “class,” and “social change” among their themes, meaning that themes related to but not inherent in ethnicity were conveyed more strongly. These things likely would not have stood out by themselves; rather they were inherently tied to Marisol’s journey of ethnicity.
**Economics**

*Marisol* is in many ways a political play. Rivera sets up and criticizes the problems of the world in the first act, destroys them and the world itself in the second act, and at the end of the play challenges the audience to take action in their own world. Among its many other themes, politics so stands out to many that it has been included in several anthologies of political plays, most notably Allan Havis’ 90s-centered *American Political Plays: An Anthology*. In Havis’ introduction to that volume, his perspective on the political issues in the play is clear: *Marisol* is a play about the issues of New York in the 1990s. He writes, “it is clear that Rivera maintains very critical, unbending views of an American society that cannot function honorably and of an American society that refuses to protect its oldest metropolis from a death sentence.”

Indeed, New York was in dire straits at the time Rivera wrote the play, but what does this mean for an audience today? A *Washington Post* reviewer of the 2009 Forum Theatre production observed, “When "Marisol" appeared a decade ago, it seemed a dire prophecy for Gotham and our society in general. Now that the economy is up and crime down, the play [...] speaks to a specific historical moment that has passed.” New York has largely cleaned up its act, if through controversial policies like Stop-and-Frisk. Especially for college students and residents of Williamsburg, the issues of street crime and underdeveloped neighborhoods hold little immediate political sway. If several of the central messages of the play focus only on a time that has passed, how could the play possibly be relevant to a contemporary audience?

Luckily, a related strain that Rivera discusses, the impact of class and economics, is particularly relevant today. Following the recession of 2008, slow economic recovery in the

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22 Pressley.
years following, and the exposure of class fault lines in American society—coupled with agitation about inequality and corruption from protest movements like Occupy Wall Street—economic discourse is likely very familiar to the Williamsburg audience. If the political focus of Rivera’s play could be shifted away from urban politics towards class and economics while remaining faithful to the script’s overall intentions, this production could more successfully engage in political dialogue with today’s audience.

The economic theme is certainly present in the text, though it would not have been as pronounced before 2008. Corporations like Citibank, which clearly suffer from distaste in the eyes of Rivera’s characters, are even more detestable to a contemporary audience after their behavior during the recession. The Woman in Furs’ plight of being captured, beaten, and tortured for going over her credit card limit has metaphorical truth for college students who might feel as if their future economic opportunities have taken a swift beating. Even more relevant, perhaps, is the Man with Ice Cream’s desperate attempt to collect back pay from Taxi Driver: “Christ, I have bills! I have rent! I have a toddler in a Catholic preschool! I have an agent screaming for his ten percent! And how the fuck am I supposed to pay for this ice cream cone?” (23). The inability for life to continue as it had before economic hard times added to fears of current and future unemployment speak surprisingly directly to post-recession America.

Many of the issues that might originally be seen as part of Rivera’s criticism of the condition of New York City also strongly involve economics and are relevant to discussions of class today. The issue of homelessness, which in the original interpretation of the play’s political message illustrates the struggle of people on the street to live in a fulfilling way, now is more related to the consequences of the downturn and how far people can fall. Marisol’s own vein of economic assimilation, in which she leaves the unsafe Bronx each day to become a dispassionate
business woman in Manhattan, might previously have been interpreted as a comment on housing costs but today can be seen as a lack of opportunity anywhere: would she choose to work this bleak job editing low-quality science copy if she could find something else?

In this way the contemporary political message that this production attempted to convey is not outside of the text, it merely requires different emphasis. The chaos of the street in the second act, for instance, is highly politicized if you read the play as being related to New York’s condition. Without this point of reference however, the political message of the street itself fades and the issues that the individual characters raise—privilege and debt for the Woman in Furs, homelessness for the Man with Scar Tissue—become more important. As with the example of the street, much of this happens naturally. To further this, I pushed my design team and cast to take several steps towards engaging with the economic themes of the play.

Boroughs and Streets

The first act of Marisol takes place primarily in three different locations: Marisol’s apartment, the publishing office where she works, and June’s apartment. The locations are also spread out across three boroughs of New York City, with Marisol’s apartment in the Bronx, the office in Manhattan, and June’s apartment in Brooklyn. If our production had wanted to stress the danger of New York in the 90s, we might have focused on varied levels of safety in each of these locations with objects like barred windows and safety alarms. Instead, I encouraged the design team to look at the levels of affluence in each of the areas to stress the class divisions inherent in the boroughs.

The first step in doing so was to create physical differences between the objects representing the different spaces. With the platforms that we used to delineate the two
apartments, we decided to cover the ones in June’s apartment in matte brown plywood and leave the ones in Marisol’s apartment uncovered, showing off black and grey paint stains and rips in their canvas shells. A color scheme was thus set for each apartment, to which we added different furniture pieces and set dressings that would evoke a certain level of affluence. On the one hand, Marisol’s bed with plain grey sheets, small black trunk for clothes storage, and cheap plastic trash can led to a feeling that she had little care or affection for the place she lives and no resources to change it. On the other hand, June’s apartment with warm brown rug, bronze coat rack accentuated with a dream catcher, and brown-gold patterned waste bin seemed to have more care and money put into it, even when covered with Lenny’s “mutant trash” (30).

Some attempts continued to make this delineation in the office as well, in order to create a more corporate feeling there. These were largely thwarted, however, by the type of desks that we could get for the office. Our budget was unfortunately not large enough to allow for the purchase of furniture, which was usually not a problem because of the Studio’s rehearsal pieces. To get appropriately sized desks, however, we had to borrow from Residence Life. The only desks we could get from them had a faux wood grain pattern and looked very distinctly like they had come from a dorm. Coupled with the fact that they matched the bed in Marisol’s apartment, this made it quite hard to make the office feel as corporate as I would have liked. We did our best with set dressings and had some success. By covering the desks with official-looking papers, manuscripts, telephones, and other office supplies, we were able to get some of this fast-paced, busy feeling to the desks, though they never ended up as corporate as I might have liked.

To further the economic comparisons between the different boroughs, specific projections on the above-audience banner projection screen were also associated with each of

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23 See photo 1, Appendix A.
these settings. For the Bronx, a rundown apartment building was projected that placed Marisol’s living situation solidly in the projects. In Brooklyn, a street scene with smaller apartment buildings and more businesses helped June feel much more middle class. Finally the projected skyscrapers surrounding the office helped reinforce the crisp, wealthy business sense. In addition, each of the apartments had its own projected painting of an angel: Marisol’s cheap-looking white angel watching over little white child—which the Angel transformed upon her entrance—and June’s copy of Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus.

The projections also allowed us to distance the street further from reality. Whereas all of the slides of the different boroughs used photo-realistic images, the slides representing the street did not. The first time we see the street, in Lenny’s monologue after he has been kicked out of June’s, we are still in the first act and thus have not moved to an entirely surreal street. Lenny seems to bring some fragments of surrealism off the street with text, however, so our image combined these aesthetics by containing photo-realistic portions covered in long swoops of light. Later on in the second act, the images of the street changed to more surreal, color-shifted, fog-covered buildings to move us distinctly away from the expanded realism of the first act into chaotic surrealism of act two.

In selecting the photos for the street, especially act one, special care was taken not to select images that would be evocative of the hardship of the street as this would land us solidly in a dialogue about New York in the 90s. Instead, the street scenes evoked an empty mood that

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24 See photo 2, Appendix A.
25 See photo 3, Appendix A.
26 See photo 4, Appendix A.
27 See photo 5, Appendix A. Angelus Novus was chosen both because our actress playing June felt like the character would probably be a Paul Klee devotee and because that painting in particular was the inspiration for Walter Benjamin’s Theses on the Philosophy of History, which in turn inspired Tony Kushner’s Angels in America.
28 See photo 6, Appendix A.
29 See photo 7, Appendix A.
could be filled by characters from the script. No matter what you do with *Marisol*, the street will remain a daunting and terrifying place to the characters, but that terror can come more from a sense of the unknown and poorly understood as opposed to the degraded, violent, physically dangerous street that would more evoke social issues of a time gone by.

*Setting*

To further shift the discussion towards issues of class and inequality and away from any time period, we chose not to follow closely the fashions and trends of the early 90s. By doing so, we both avoided the kitsch of costuming actors in the exact style of a recent time period, which so often can become comical, and helped steer the economic considerations of the play to the issues of today. At the same time, however, many moments of action would seem very odd and inconsistent if the show were truly set in this day and age: why does Marisol not call the police on her cellphone at any of the many times she is threatened? Could she not use the GPS on her smartphone to find north?

Instead, our production was set in a vaguely modern aesthetic. Combining primarily contemporary styles of clothing and furniture with some outmoded ones kept us from being too specific in this respect. With most clothes and set dressings being drawn from the cast and crew’s own belongings, the large percentage of the items were contemporary. Other items, like the phone and clock radio in the office, Marisol’s alarm clock, and dream catcher in June’s apartment were specifically purchased to feel older. The production was thus generally pushed towards a modern feeling while keeping some remnants of the 90s, which was helpful in making the economic themes relevant without going fully towards a modern adaptation. We were thus
also able to avoid retrofitting specific technologies, keeping the action of the story as it was written.30

**Homelessness**

One issue brought up in the script in particular really helped to transform the economic dialogue: homelessness. In the stage directions at the top of the act two, Rivera describes, “*several large mounds of rags onstage; underneath each mound is a sleeping homeless person*” (41). The homeless characters are written to do relatively little: one is chased by June in her skinhead getup twice and then set aflame and another is the first human to join the angelic revolution by throwing rocks into the sky (49, 53, 68). The extent of their use in different productions varies widely: the world premiere production at the Actors Theatre of Louisville listed one actor as playing a homeless person while the New York Shakespeare Festival production featured six, though they doubled as the voices in Marisol’s apartment building and two of them played other minor characters (2, 3).

With multiple homeless people hiding under piles of rags, the message of the play regarding the street is fairly clear: New York cannot take care of its people and thus they have to sleep outside. As many as six homeless people in a small block of the street would seem to portray the problem as a veritable epidemic that Marisol was somehow able to ignore until the Angel dropped her wings and made her see the problems of the world. Marisol would hardly have been able to move without running into a pile of rags with a homeless person under it.

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30 This is not to say that the context of the 90s is not important for the play overall. In separating the script from a specific time period, it became crucial to keep the cast members informed on how the script did originally relate to the 90s so that they could extrapolate the situation to today. For instance, only when aware of the conditions of the Bronx in the 90s was Brittany able to find Marisol’s terror on the subway and her need to relate to god in that moment. The meaning of the few terms specific only to the 90s, like the Nazi who works for “TRW,” could be conveyed through the actors’ understanding of the terms. Armed with a glossary from our dramaturg Rebecca Turner, we were able to make most everything relatable to a modern audience.
Such a continuous reminder of peoples’ peril would certainly help push Marisol towards revolution, if only to help those six on the street.

In this production, homelessness was still very relevant but in a different way. Homelessness is related to the 2008 recession, but more in the idea that once employed people fell so far so fast that they had nowhere to turn but the streets. Homelessness is not so much an epidemic as a great fear of the unemployed. By decreasing the number of additional homeless characters down to one or two, the story would be more about their individual plight and downfall at the hands of greedy bankers than a lack of societal responsibility on the part of the city. Additionally, by double-casting the homeless characters in relevant ways, a comparison between the two characters that an actor plays could be made.

Because of this, the decision was made to add only one unnamed homeless character, to be played by the same actor playing the Woman in Furs. With a couple of quick changes in the second act, this one actor could play the Woman in Furs scene with Marisol, be chased offstage and burnt alive by skinhead June, return as the Woman in Furs to kill Marisol, and then throw the first rock of the revolution up at the sky. By doing so, the Woman in Furs’ downfall from wealth and the homeless person’s current state would be inherently linked. The Woman in Furs’ fear of never being able to recover from her economic troubles is then realized in the homelessness of the other character that the actor plays. Additionally, no homeless characters would be living on the street when Marisol arrives, disconnecting their struggle from the city and allowing the individual narratives expressed by the Man with Scar Tissue and Woman in Furs to take focus.

In the end, the economic themes of the play were relatively noticeable to many of the audience members in their post-show surveys. Ten theme responses were specifically related to
economic issues and several others were more tangentially related. This might seem like a small number, but as the overall responses featured many outliers and a strong focus on the more universal and idealistic themes brought up at the very end of the play, it is relatively significant as far as concrete themes go. Furthermore, no answers regarding themes related specifically to the problems facing New York in the 90s.

The talkbacks had less focus on the economic themes of the play. No questions were asked about specific economic or class issues in the play or our interpretation of Rivera’s political message. One person did raise a question about the precise setting of the play, but did not seem wholly confused or set back by a lack of a definite timeframe, but instead curious as to exactly what she was seeing. One astute observer brought up the cycles of violence in the play:

The sort of almost cyclical nature of all the characters and how for example we start off with the guy on the train…maybe beats Marisol with a club…nobody knows. We turn around, Marisol then beats Larry (sic) with the club, maybe he dies, no one knows. And then in the end we’ve got Lady in Furs (sic) who turns around and Marisol is then shot dead again, but not with a club this time.

When originally reviewing this question, I thought she might be getting at the violence of the street and the need to commit violence to stay alive. In some ways, this relates to the conditions of New York in the 90s, but I think it is more related to the ideas of morality in the play: the

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31 The main responses related to economics were “inequality,” “socio-economic differences,” “Neoliberalism sucks,” “hatred of capitalism,” “the destructive nature of materialism,” “class + apathy,” “We are materialistic and self-centered. Fuck the establishment,” and three who cited “corruption” as all or part of their answer. For a full list, see Appendix C.
32 Audience talkback, Thursday (2/13) evening.
33 Audience talkback, Saturday (2/15) matinee.
Angel’s revolution is a way to break all the cycles of violence, oppression, and privilege that our society has created. Furthermore, as another audience member commented, the end of the play does not necessarily change this.\textsuperscript{34} The Angel’s revolution is a violent coup that could quickly turn into another tyrannical regime in heaven.

\textsuperscript{34} Audience talkback, Saturday (2/15) evening.
Gender and Sexuality

An issue that Rivera raises in the text that has particular relevance on a college campus is the role of sexuality and gender in Marisol. Marisol’s journey towards revolution involves a huge change in her level of power relative to men in her society. After Lenny’s assault nearly deprives her of all of her power in scene eight, she is forced to react to the world around her as it really is and to rely on herself to make change in the world. Additionally, Rivera brings up questions of gender and sexuality in Lenny’s pregnancy, June and the Angel’s potentially romantic feelings for Marisol, and the reversal of gendered violence in the second act. In this way, Rivera thematically establishes a new world in which women have power equal to if not greater than that of men.

At the same time, gender is only one of a number of themes that Rivera deals with in the play. After looking for a way to tie the themes together, a Los Angeles Times reviewer decided:

It may be safer not to search for deeper meaning and simply stick to the more obvious and delectable ironies of the immediate exchanges. Rivera uses his caustic dialogue to […] talk about the effects of cultural dispossession and attack whatever bugs him. The list is long, but start with homophobia, censorship and the church.35

The themes of gender and sexuality follow much the same pattern, in which Rivera has a tendency to raise large statements and questions and then leave inadequate time with which to deal with them. Though the statements and questions are usually insightful or at least interesting, this could lead to a feeling of lip service towards issues of gender and sexuality,

35 Drake.
especially in a college context where they are so prevalent. To deal with issues of sexual
discrimination, sexual assault, and sexual identity adequately, the play would have to focus much
more specifically on those issues and not just brush by them. Furthermore, as the reviewer
suggests, it might well lead to an audience so overwhelmed with individual issues that they
cannot see the forest through the trees. Therefore, in this production I tried to tread the line
between accentuating the real discussions of gender that Rivera uses in the creation of his new
mythologies and overplaying the moments dealing with gender to the point that they took over
the story.

*Marisol’s Gender Limitations*

In addition to overcoming the limitations that her ethnicity and socio-economic condition
have put on her, Marisol’s journey to revolution contains a significant element of overcoming
gender-related restrictions, both self-imposed and externally-imposed. It takes Marisol quite
some time to realize that she has been chosen not to mother the next savior, but to play the role
of martyr herself. She faces violent acts from a plethora of men who impose themselves on her
in a variety of different ways, culminating in Lenny attacking her in her apartment at the end of
the first act. In the second act, much of the external threat has gone, but Marisol still cannot
bring herself to understand her destiny and her active role in the new world order, and some of
this is due to her perceptions of gender.

From the moment that Marisol first encounters the Angel, she perceives her role in the
new millennium in a very different way than her heavenly guardian. Almost immediately after
the Angel has made her introduction, Marisol voluntarily places herself in a solely maternal role.
She could have interpreted the Angel’s visitation as the sign that she was a prophet or savior
herself. With her ability to quote from the Bible demonstrated later in the scene, she must also know the stories of Daniel and Ezekiel being visited by angels and might well have placed herself in their footsteps. Instead, without being provoked or lead in any particular way, she assumes that she will play the role of Mary and bear the next messiah: “This is amazing—billions of women on earth, and I get knocked up by God!” (13).

As the scene progresses, it becomes more and more clear that Marisol cannot comprehend the Angel’s rejection of god or the patriarchal system of the world. The Angel sets up her revolution as the overthrow of an overtly patriarchal god, using male pronouns to describe him, placing emphasis on all the different stratified ranks of angels that she had to convince to revolt, and calling him by the epithet “King of Heaven” (15-16). Marisol cannot abide by the Angel’s talk whatsoever, responding with comically childish prayers to a benevolent god, “GOD IS GREAT! GOD IS GOOD! THANK YOU FOR OUR NEIGHBORHOOD!” (16). Not only does she reject the idea that revolution is possible, but she rejects the need for the patriarchal system to be overthrown.

The system keeps attacking, despite Marisol’s professed ignorance. In the very next scene, Marisol learns she could well have been beaten to death by a man with a golf club the night before. June tries to shake her out of her “Roman Catholic bullshit,” but to no avail (21). Then the Man with Ice Cream enters and imposes his will on Marisol (23). The fact that it is ice cream that he uses in an attempt to demean her does provide for a strange sense of lightness, but

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37 The latter is particularly striking because “King of Heaven” is used sparingly in most modern translations of the Bible, oftentimes only in the old testament stories of Daniel and Tobit, thus the Angel is not just referring to him in a respectful way but instead making a point about his rule. See Tobit 1:18, Tobit 13:7, Tobit 13:11, Tobit 13:16, and Daniel 4:37.
overall his character is among the most frightening in the show and his shoving the ice cream in
her face an act of domination and control nearly as troublesome as Lenny’s later attacks.

Once Marisol and June retreat from the world to June’s apartment, they are faced with yet
another dangerous man in Lenny. After a brief interaction, Lenny attacks them both with a
knife, and together they must fend him off. Lenny’s attitude, however, is quite different than the
other men: his entitled obsession with Marisol is more direct and more personal than the male
characters we have seen. Lenny wants to possess Marisol, and in many ways thinks he already
does. After June throws him out of the apartment, he laments the loss of her: “I almost had
Marisol married to me June. We practically had babies!” (30).

Marisol is forced to confront her own conceptions of gender and sexuality when Lenny’s
obsession rears its ugly head in her apartment two scenes later. He bursts in with a bloodied golf
club, his talk full of ideas about how he’ll do everything for her and protect her (36). Instead of
running away, Marisol uses her sexuality in an attempt to distract and divert Lenny. Ultimately
her attempts fail when he realizes the deception, but her kisses and sultry dialogue in that
moment represent the first time that she takes real action on her own to save herself from the
horrors of the world. Marisol is fully aware of her role as a woman in that moment, and instead
of shrinking to a man’s dominance as she had earlier in the play, she embraces her sexuality as a
tool. Later on in this chapter, I will more fully discuss the assault that follows, but in that
moment of control a new, active sexual aspect of Marisol emerges. She will use this sexuality in
the second act with to save other characters, like Scar Tissue, on her road towards revolution.

The second act sees much of the first act’s gender structure completely reversed. At the
same time that Marisol’s power is growing, we see the power of all women in play growing and
the power of the men diminishing. Whereas in the first act of the play all acts of violence are committed by men, in the second act all acts of violence are committed by women. Lenny even steps into a woman’s role in being pregnant and giving birth to a baby. As significant to the story as these changes seem because of how drastic they are, I believe that their effect is more to confuse and disrupt Marisol’s own understanding of gender and gender roles than to make any particular statement about gender at the end of the world.

Because the journey related to Marisol’s gender and sexuality does not really drive us through the entirety of the play, I decided early in the process that it does not particularly need to be emphasized by the production as a whole through the use of projections or the like. So much is already being emphasized in the production that such emphasis simply would not stand out. Instead, tracking the journey became highly useful for the actress playing Marisol in understanding her development and her state of mind throughout the first act and into the beginning of the second. Marisol at first behaves in a restricted way most contemporary people, especially those in a collegiate environment, would not expect from a woman, and thus it is important to find that hesitance and sense of constraint to develop Marisol’s character. Our actress, Brittany, was able to do this very effectively and brought enough of the journey into her character that I felt we did not need to stress it further.

*The Role of Men in Marisol*

Rivera’s position on gender is very much oversimplified in regards to the male characters. The quadruple casting of all four speaking male roles—Golf Club, Ice Cream, Lenny, and Scar Tissue—is noted in the script and done in most of the early productions (4). The effect of this is to create an incredibly dangerous outside world for Marisol where she
continues to be attacked by men who seem eerily similar, and to focus the play’s interactions primarily on women. While Rivera’s ability to write a play that passes the Bechdel Test with flying colors is appreciated, his amalgamation of all the male characters turns them into a monolith. When all played by the same actor, it seems that they all act the same way towards Marisol. Indeed the similarity of the actions of all the men in the first act is striking, but the issue is more complex than that. Lenny in particular has a much more developed and personal relationship that becomes all the more scary when he is violent and assaultive towards her.

Therefore the decision was made to divide the male parts between two actors: one to play Lenny and another to play Golf Club, Ice Cream, and Scar Tissue. This allowed for the characters defined primarily by their given props and costumes to still feel menacing and similar in their actions towards Marisol while setting Lenny and his relationship with her apart. In addition, the decision made casting the male roles significantly easier as we did not need to find one actor who could handle all four roles but instead one actor who was comfortable with switching roles and another who could really get inside Lenny’s headspace.

Staging Sexual Assault

Of special concern to me in staging this production was the issue of sexual assault. With the amount of attention this issue has deservedly received in recent years, especially on college campuses, I needed to be both careful and specific with all of my choices for Lenny’s attack on Marisol. This moment of assault is easy to glide over in the script—very few words are spoken

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38 “The Bechdel test was invented in 1985 by cartoonist Alison Bechdel, as a way of measuring gender equality in film-making: to pass, movies must feature at least two named women having a conversation with each other about something or somebody other than a man.” Ben Child, “Films that Pass the Bechdel Test Perform just as Well at the Box Office as those that Fail,” The Guardian, 3 February 2014.

39 In the end, neither of the actors we selected would have been ideal for playing all four roles: Joey Ernst had the vocal and physical capacity to switch between the three and Jack Reibstein had the manic energy and commitment to play Lenny strongly even in the moment of assault, but each was lacking in the other’s skills.
about it and the graphic yet brief stage directions are tucked away at the bottom of the page. In
the story’s trajectory, however, it is hugely important. Not only is it one of the first times that we
see Marisol take any real action by herself, but it also is a defining moment for Lenny’s
character, for whom we must continue to feel some sympathy in the second act.

The way Rivera describes it in the text, Lenny attacks Marisol in a frenzy of hurt, sexual
frustration, and need for power. Marisol almost gets Lenny out the door through playing into his
will and seducing him, but at the last minute, Lenny realizes the deception: “You don’t love me.
You’re just fucking with me. That’s not okay! WELL, I’M GLAD I HIT HER!” (37). The
stage directions then indicate that he grabs Marisol, holds her tightly, and tries to kiss her. He
then “throws her to the floor. He rips at her clothes, trying to tear them off” (37). Marisol
struggles until she breaks free and grabs the golf club to keep Lenny back. At the end of the
scene, she strikes him with that same golf club when he lunges at her again (38). This is clearly
a dramatic and tension-filled way to end the first act, but potentially not the most worthwhile for
telling the story on a college campus.

First off, Rivera does not fully deal with the issue of sexual assault but instead uses it as a
way to catapult Marisol’s character forward in the story. Though Marisol clearly includes some
feminist themes, it is by no estimation a play that deals adequately with sexual assault or other
issues facing women. After Marisol is assaulted and strikes back, she never talks about the effect
that it has on her psyche or her identity, nor does any of this seem to inform her behavior
throughout the next act. Instead, the assault is completely forgotten amid the chaos of the
angelic revolution. Without more time to deal with the implications of sexual assault on the
characters, staging one seems less than useful.
The use of sexual assault in this play falls more in line with the idea of rape as plot device. Rape as plot device is common trope of media and performance in which sexual assault is either used only to further the actions of a character, usually male, or as a brief half-hearted attempt to deal with the social issues surrounding it. The characters who suffer the assault often recover from the attack quickly, failing to portray its long-lasting and often dire effects on its victims amid tidier plot lines. Even more relevant to *Marisol* is the use of rape as the most awful “something bad” that can be thought of for a female character, a trope that is used constantly and thus is not only fatiguing to the audience but also significantly responsible for America’s desensitization to sexual violence.

Secondly, if the stage directions surrounding this moment were fulfilled as written, Lenny’s character would never be able to recover in the eyes of a collegiate audience. Lenny is a troubled character—braining his sister with a golf club does not particularly endear him to the audience—but seeing him attempt to rape Marisol in a graphic way would break very strong taboos for most if not all of the audience. This is particularly true for students watching who are constantly exposed to terrible real-life stories of sexual assault in their day to day lives. Many of

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40 One might argue that Rivera’s use of assault is similar to Sarah Kane’s in her polarizing play *Blasted*, in which the rape of a woman is equated with a bomb being set off. As David Greig argues in his introduction to the anthology of Kane’s plays, “It is as though the act of rape, which blasts the inner world of both victim and perpetrator, has also destroyed the world outside the room.” Could it be that the last straw for the world is Lenny attacking Marisol? The key difference between the plays comes from the relation of the text after the assault to what happened in the room. In *Blasted*, rape, personal destruction, and other unforgivable acts are constantly brought up throughout the rest of the play and comment on the first instance of assault. In *Marisol*, even when the attacker surprises his intended victim later in the play, absolutely no discussion or hint of the assault is brought up. *Marisol* may have a somewhat disconnected episodic form, but each significant episode is generally carried into the next one through Marisol’s character, but this is not the case with Lenny’s assault. See Sarah Kane, ed. David Greig, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001) ix-x.

41 Esther Breger, “Downton Abbey’s Cheap Embrace of Rape As Plot Device,” *New Republic*, 12 January 2014. There is unfortunately a paucity of scholarly writing on the subject at the moment, and thus online feminist reactions to contemporary television are among the best examples.

them would find it challenging, if not impossible, to sympathize with his more benign character in the second act.

With these things in mind, it became important to me to change the staging of the assault from how Rivera describes it in the stage directions. My first instinct was to remove the sexual nature of the assault. If Lenny simply attacked her in a way more analogous to his attack on June, the strong moment of physical action to end the first act could still be included, Marisol’s fears of being attacked could be validated, and Lenny’s character could remain scary but not overwhelmingly so. Furthermore, we could simplify the play’s discourse and streamline its message substantially by not broaching the subject and trying to justify the inclusion of a rape scenario in the telling of Marisol’s story.

A more careful examination of the text, however, reveals the immense problem with this strategy: Marisol’s dialogue indicates that she perceives this attack as a rape. Immediately following the stage directions in which Lenny attacks her and she frees herself, Marisol responds:

Because you’re the enemy, Lenny. I will always be your enemy, because you will always find a way to be out there, hiding in stairwells, behind doors, under the blankets in my bed, in the cracks of every bad dream I’ve ever had since I’ve known there were savage differences between girls and boys! And I know you’ll always be hunting for me. And I’ll never be able to relax, or stop to look at the sky, or smile at something beautiful on the street— (38)
Because she has suffered violent scares and attacks from the hands of men throughout the show, the first part of the line about the places she is afraid of people hiding is not necessarily sexual in its nature. Considering her later characterization of relations between genders as “savage,” however, it is hard not to see her perception of the assault as sexualized in the second half of the speech. The idea of “hunting” and never being able to enjoy the normalcy of life further describe feelings associated with sexual assault in popular culture. Marisol sees Lenny’s attack as a sexual assault.

By not validating her perception, the production would unintentionally further a rape culture in which survivors are oftentimes perceived as lying about their attacks. This problem is particularly acute when considering Marisol because women from minority groups are more often perceived as alleging rape falsely.43 Not only is this a morally repugnant statement to make, but by trying to smooth over the play’s clumsy addition of sexual assault, we might also be raising more issues that the play does not adequately discuss.

Therefore a middle ground needed to be found in which Lenny would not break the taboo of committing sexual assault but Marisol would also be seen as correctly interpreting his actions towards her. From many different options, we chose a path in which Lenny’s original motivations in attacking Marisol would be childish—namely, to stop her from continuing to talk—and then turn violent and sexual in his attempts to subdue her. This solution shifts the onus of the assault slightly away from Lenny by making it seem that he truly does not understand what he is doing, but remains violent and sexualized enough for Marisol and the audience to very clearly understand the danger of the moment. To add to this, we developed additional childish

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moments for Lenny’s character earlier in the play, including a temper tantrum during the scene in June’s apartment that allowed this childish action to feel well within his character’s temperament.

After Lenny spoke his line “WELL, I’M GLAD I HIT HER!” the actor playing Marisol began to ad-lib the first sounds of an inconsequential line, at which point Lenny was so frustrated at hearing her talk that he covered her mouth and spoke his line, “You’re lying to me!” (37). Then, his single hand covering her mouth morphed into a grabbing moment, where Lenny stood behind her with one hand still covering her mouth and a second grabbing her by the waist. He then pulled her back onto the platforms that signified her room and up next to the bed. There, she delivered an elbow hit to his rib cage, which only served to anger him more. He then pulled her back onto the bed, at which point she was able to struggle out, slap him in the face, and then grab the golf club.

Overall, this approach was successful in telling the story. Lenny’s clumsy yet menacing movement allowed the moment to feel both childish and threatening; Marisol’s panicked response was clearly in reaction to what had happened the moment before; and the play stayed more anchored on issues actually written in the text. The audience did not really respond to sexual assault in either the themes listed in the survey responses or in any questions or responses during the talkback. To me, this seems generally positive in that the sexual assault was de-emphasized in the play while not furthering a problematic message about rape culture.

Sexual Identity

Another strain of the play related to gender in the play is that of sexual identity. Though overt language is never used to describe sexual identity, multiple kisses and relationships occur
that seem to fall outside of strict heterosexuality. Early in the process, I was very interested in both the Angel’s and June’s sexuality, as they both seemed to fall for Marisol in a way that was more than just protective or friendly. Additionally, both have kisses with Marisol written into the stage directions, but Rivera provides no guidelines for how passionate or otherwise those kisses should be.

Upon further study, however, I realized that the lack of specification in those moments might be intentional. The unspoken-yet-clear sexual tension that the script creates between the Angel and Marisol and June and Marisol is more interesting than warping the text to be more overt in its homosexuality. Their feelings towards Marisol can continue to define the Angel and June, but not be played so strongly as to become a major theme in the show. By having these characters simply play both their motivations towards and obstacles between each other, the script will not be pushed too far in any direction and homosexuality can be accorded the normalcy it deserves.

According to this rationale, I began shaping the moments to find what the kisses would become. The first attempted kiss, which the Angel tries to give Marisol in the fourth scene was troublesome for a while because it did not feel like a natural extension of the Angel’s line it fell on, “I don’t know” (17). The key came when we shifted the line and stage direction so that the Angel tried to leave Marisol’s apartment on “I don’t know,” but then was so overcome with emotion that she had to turn back and attempt to deliver the kiss. In this manner, the kiss was a natural extension of the Angel’s motivation but its romantic value was not outright.

The next kiss, between June and Marisol after they decide to move in together, felt distinctly less sexual throughout the rehearsal process. June does have feelings for Marisol, but
they are held too deeply inside to be released in a kiss. The actress playing June and I therefore decided that a lingering hug would be more successful in telling her story at that moment, and it well sufficed in performance.

The last kiss is in many ways the most important, happening at the end of the show after all the dialogue has already been spoken. With our different interpretation of the crown at that moment, to be described in a later chapter, we kept this kiss simple: a light prolonged kiss on the lips that was at once romantic and priestly. It was necessary to keep much in that final moment open to interpretation, a decision I will also discuss in more detail later, and thus this open-to-interpretation kiss allowed the audience to think either that Marisol and the Angel had begun a sexual relationship in heaven or that they were simply grateful for each other’s work in the revolution.

In the end, issues of sexual identity, sexual assault, and gender seemed to be outside the audience’s primary interpretation of the show: only two people overtly cited “gender” as a central theme of the play in their surveys, not coincidentally one of them the same person who cited “race.” To me, this seems largely useful for this production as it allowed other related yet more general themes of the play like “intimacy,” “inequality,” and “survival” to shine. Furthermore, audience members seemed to involve discussions of gender and sexuality in their questions about the play: several among them had questions, both technical and thematic, about Lenny’s pregnancy while others remarked on the changing context of the play with the shift in attitudes towards women in the 20 years since it was first produced.

44 For full audience survey data see Appendix C. One other respondent cited “sex” in the context of two other themes: “death” and “tension.” This may be a comment on gender but I read it in context more as related to sexual activity, though that in turn raises questions about what message this audience member took away from the play.
Some might argue that this overall approach to gender and sexuality was to functionally defang Rivera’s more confrontational elements and replace them with watered-down versions. Though it is true that the intensity of discussion on the front of gender and sexuality was decreased, the effect was not to simply make the play’s message easier or nicer but instead to pull back on criticism that could not be followed through without pulling the narrative far off focus. *Marisol* is an inherently messy play with many elements, but none of them need be overly-played to the point of unnecessarily confusing, overwhelming, or offending the audience.
Working with Actors

The other major component to staging *Marisol* on a college campus was that all the actors working in the production were students. This was a major advantage in many ways: it led to a highly collaborative environment of equals where anyone could and did share his or her opinions about the production; meant that everyone had lots of outside ideas to relate to the play; and that everyone was willing experiment in a broad sense. The other side, however, was that many of the actors did not have experience working on a play with characters as simply sketched as these and thus had to be lead through, pushed forward, and pulled back in a lot of the experimentation and extrapolation being done.

“Odd lines are funny but the play travels in several directions, never fleshing out its characters or the hellish story it wants to tell,” writes an Associated Press reviewer about the first New York production of *Marisol* in a comment that is emblematic of the script’s characterization troubles for the minor roles. Many of the reviews even used language of actors doing valiant work despite limited characterizations given in the script. Actors must find fullness elsewhere and bring it into *Marisol*.

As a director, I worked hard to balance the need to fill out the lives of these often-underwritten characters with the script’s inability to hold any more detail or distraction. Because so many themes, ideas, and visuals were already present in the text, adding any additional

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45 Kuchwara.
46 Some are certainly better than others: Marisol and Lenny are particularly fleshed out in this play, and the reviews more consistently comment upon those actors’ ability to create full characters.
moments that might have helped to develop character would only have created further distraction and made the performance more overwhelming. At times this meant bringing in outside materials for rehearsal purposes to help the actors jump to the places that the script demands while at others I had to cut away any excess interpretation on the part of the actors to let the complexity of the text stand on its own.

*Individual Arcs*

An advantage of structuring the talkbacks in the way that we did was that the actors also responded directly to questions from the audience. Largely we were all on the same page—I certainly heard some of my own phrases being reused to explain a particular moment or motivation to the audience—but the moments we were not were intriguing. One moment in particular came when an audience member asked all of the actors what they thought the most prominent theme in the play was. Without hesitation, four of them responded with wildly different answers that fit with their own characters’ journey in the play: Bria talked extensively about the Angel as a crusader for social justice; Maddy compared June’s empathy and apathy between the first and second acts; Joey explained the through-line of homelessness in his three different characters; and Emily delved into the Woman in Furs’ privilege.⁴⁷

This was not entirely surprising to me, as I had worked individually with each of them to find their individual characters’ arc in their journey. Much of what that turned into was picking a theme they saw in their character that fit our production and running with it. This was especially true for the actors in supporting roles who, unlike Marisol, do not have nearly as fleshed out

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⁴⁷ Audience talkback, Friday (2/14) evening.
characters or complete arcs written for them. Some of these came immediately—from our first read-through Bria was interested in the social justice themes of the play, and found ways to explore the Angel’s journey through that lens. Together, we began to conceive of the Angel as an underappreciated heavenly social worker who was finally fed up with the system she had been working in for so long. We also began to imagine the different people—civil rights leaders, abolitionists, religious reformers—that she had been the guardian of before and how those past experiences informed her work with Marisol.

For others this process of creating an arc was less easy. Maddy and I both struggled with June’s role in the play for quite some time. Despite having more text than many other characters, the direction to go with June was not as clear as many of the smaller roles. Part of the problem is that she is in a good number of scenes, but is usually a secondary character, reacting to Marisol’s bad day or the antics of her brother. Not until the second act when she appears in skinhead uniform does she take over a scene, dictating her own view of the world and taking action to make it real. Working back from that extreme we found a strong sense of apathy in June’s character in the first act—she confesses to being “the last true practicing communist in New York” but nothing could lead you to that conclusion except her saying it (26). She verbally rages against the press and the conditions in the city to Marisol in the office, but by the end of the scene she is excited to retreat from the world and not deal with any problems in it.

Using this arc, from uninvolved to involved in the completely wrong way, Maddy was able to create a through-line for June where a strong one was not evident in the script. She created a June that was all talk and no action in the first act, and then all action and very little

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48 In this instance, I define an arc as the gradual but continual change in a character from one viewpoint, situation, or attitude to another over the course of a story.
talk in the second act. As a point of comparison, her speech to Lenny when she throws him out at the end of the fifth scene became a huge, fantastical rant that painted a poetically bleak picture of their relationship, but then she immediately regretted saying any of it and wished he would return so things would be the same as always. In act two, when she forwards her skinhead ideology, Maddy instead played into the simplicity of the text, and finished with the strong action of trying to burn Marisol alive.

An approach like this does not add to the already cluttered script because we simply filled in the lines already present in the play and never actually added anything to it. At a couple points, actors wanted to add other moments that might help them on their journey, and I nearly always found a way to incorporate their ideas without adding anything. For instance, towards the end of the process Brittany became interested in the idea that the child in the cemetery named “Delfina Perez” was actually her little sister (62). She felt that this family connection to one of the children in the cemetery would make that scene even more powerful, and that she could take an especially long moment when saying that name. As much as I liked Brittany’s line of reasoning, it was clear to me that this moment would not only be largely incomprehensible to the audience but also add another plot twist to an already complex and drawn-out scene. Marisol rarely refers to her family, so adding the idea that a family member of hers happens to be among this group of deceased infants would bring further complication that the script could not handle at that moment. Instead, I encouraged Brittany to have Marisol recognize the last name as her own and imagine that Delfina could be the little sister she never had. This was ultimately effective at keeping the tenderness of the moment without allowing it to overtake the rest of the scene.
Though she had the entirety of her arc already written for her, Brittany and I spent a lot of time filling out Marisol’s arc to tell the story in the most powerful and efficient way possible. Because she was onstage for the entirety of the show, excepting two costume quick-changes, Brittany could not expend too much emotional energy too early. If she did, she not only would become tired but the audience would be desensitized to her emotional journey by the time the really powerful moments came around. It became important to detail the varied and complex emotional experiences of Marisol so that she was never doing the same thing for too long, which would become exhausting both for her and for the audience.\textsuperscript{49}

To further this, I implemented a once or twice weekly one-on-one rehearsal with Brittany that I entitled “Marisol Work/Play.” I called them that because they were more than just table work and were certainly not just sessions to work monologues, though monologues were certainly rehearsed. We often sat on the floor, explored the text, and then jumped up to try an idea once we got one. If we tried it and it did not work, we simply threw it out and tried something else. In that time, we would also work through the play scene by scene to make connections between moments that change Marisol. For instance, when Lenny returns pregnant in the second act, the shock is not only that he is with child, but also that Marisol thought she had killed him after he had tried to attack. In one of our work/play times, Brittany and I realized that this would be a nightmare come true for the survivor of an attack, though the script gives basically no text for that reaction to happen.

\textsuperscript{49} Part of the problem in the rehearsal process was the out of order blocking of scenes; Brittany was in nearly every rehearsal, but since we had to work around other cast members’ schedules we rehearsed scenes almost exclusively out of order. It became hard for her to remember what had just happened to Marisol before the scene and to find a way to get where she needed to be for the next scene. Furthermore because Brittany is an actor with a strong ability to find the truth of her character, she sometimes made safer choices which she knew would be truthful to Marisol no matter the moment.
Improvised Relationships

Work/play sessions were so successful and productive in developing Marisol’s character and arc that I began using them with other actors, though Brittany and I kept our once weekly session to keep her character development on track. With other actors, work/play became a time for reflection, exploration, and improvisation. Because relatively little time is given in the text to develop the relationships that are seemingly intended to have long histories, a significant amount of time in the work/play sessions was used to improvise through these relationships. The two most significant and long-lasting relationships in the play, those of June and Lenny and June and Marisol, are quite complex, and thus really needed this dedicated time. The vast majority of the other relationships in the show are brand new: Marisol meets all of the supporting characters and Lenny for the first time during the course of the play. The only exception is the Angel, who has been watching Marisol for her entire life but has never before revealed herself. Therefore we did a good amount of work on the Angel’s previous relationship with Marisol, but none vice versa.

June and Lenny’s relationship is a long one, stemming all the way from their childhood, about which the script gives us a tantalizingly few details. Armed with what information we could glean from the text, the actors and I began to piece together the facts of their history from our imaginations. Jack decided that Lenny’s line about being “a shrieking experiment in army medicine” on a base in Nevada was not strictly the truth, but instead something he had made himself believe and now was using to try and garner sympathy with Marisol (35). Instead, we imagined that he was a largely regular kid until the age of five when he started having angelic
visions. The visions themselves were not that bad, but the reluctance of anyone around him to believe what he was saying led him down a destructive path in which he was mislabeled as being mentally ill. In many ways he began playing the part of psychologically disturbed child, despite June’s best efforts to get back the brother she once knew.

With these basic facts in hand, we then spent an entire session improvising through their relationship. To guide the actors through the exercise, I created a series of scenarios tracking through their lives together, like the time they made a birthday card for their mother, June’s first boyfriend coming home, and the first day that Lenny moved into June’s apartment. In each scenario, June had a goal to achieve that involved Lenny: to get the card made on time, to get Lenny not to tell their parents about her boyfriend, or to teach Lenny all the rules of their apartment complex. From there, I gave them a few pieces of rehearsal furniture and let them go into the scene. Once June either achieved her objective with Lenny or gave up because there was simply no way to achieve it, I moved them on to the next scenario.

The exercise was not only highly entertaining, in part because both Maddy and Jack are experienced improvisers, but also deeply revealing. Maddy discovered in June a fierce protectiveness over and sense of responsibility for her younger brother. In one scenario in particular, a juvenile June bartered with Lenny to let her sneak out to a party by lying to their mother about him not taking his antipsychotic medication. In every scenario afterwards, Maddy said that she felt as if June had in part caused Lenny’s inability to stay on his medication by helping him skip it as a child. This helped her stay more grounded and able to weather the storm of Lenny’s chaos as he moved into her apartment and she became his primary caretaker.

50 The idea of visions came from an interest in Lenny’s role as a prophet of what the world will be like after the Angel’s drops her wings. Many of the seemingly crazy things that he says to June and Marisol come to fruition in that world, and thus we imagined that his mental torture was not psychological but instead spiritual.
As for Jack, he was able to find a strong downward spiral in Lenny’s behavior throughout the exercise. From the first scenario where he had not yet received any visions to the last where he had been getting them for over twenty years, desperation had set in on Lenny. Over the course of time, he had realized more and more that it was his responsibility to make other people, and especially his sister, see what was going to happen to the world if they did not change their ways. His temper tantrums, legions of weird projects, and inability to relate to other people all stemmed from this inability to stop seeing the future of the world. The love for his sister is certainly there, he just cannot express it in a way she can understand.

After completing the improvisation, the results were apparent in the very next rehearsal. Maddy and Jack were both able to find a richness and a subtlety to their characters’ interactions with each other that had not been there before. They had been able to capture the moments of high tension well before the exercise, but armed with their history they found were able to find the love in the bombastic, hate-filled fight scene. Whether it was in the little ways that June tried to calm Lenny down or in the way Lenny desperately needed June and Marisol to understand what he was saying, the relationship really began to live in the text and on the stage.51

Improvisation was also able to help develop Marisol and June’s relationship, though they have known each other for considerably less time and in a considerably less personal way than June and Lenny. All the same, the two of them have worked side by side for several years in an otherwise empty office, and clearly feel comfortable enough with each other to share at least some parts of their personal lives. I therefore designed the set of scenarios to track their professional relationship’s transition into a burgeoning friendship. We improvised through their

51 The improvisations did not lead to wholly additional texts or moments in the play that could have become distracting. Instead, the improvised scenes added richness and specificity to the text and physical moments we had already created between Lenny and June.
first interview, the first time June had to do a performance report for Marisol, and the morning after their first office Christmas party, among others. Though not quite as revealing as the June and Lenny work, the improvisation helped to find what Marisol and June were comfortable with sharing with each other and what they were not, in addition to hammering out many of the specifics of their work environment. In further rehearsals, it particularly helped the moment where Marisol decides to share her angelic encounter with June by giving Brittany a definite sense of how much information they usually share with one another and how far out of the ordinary this day is.

Outside Narratives

*Marisol* presents an interesting challenge in that so many of the things that Rivera writes in the play most people have very little experience with in real life. For things with which no member of the production team had any real personal experience—for example, male pregnancy, PTSD, and angelic visions—we turned to outside narratives that the actors could read, make their own, and remember in performance. My assistant director Joseph and I stumbled onto this method when we were trying to guide Emily through the Woman in Furs’ mental state when she first enters at the top of the second act. We all thought that the character was behaving in a way similar to portrayals of post-traumatic stress disorder that we had seen in television and film, but none of us knew how to go about really embodying that state of mind on stage.

To get a more accurate picture, I had Joseph pull some narratives from actual PTSD patients and survivors. In a work/play session with Emily, we read these narratives aloud and pulled phrases that would help her embody the Woman in Furs’ condition. One that particularly stuck out to her was the image of a delicate, yet ugly porcelain figure that the patient imagined
having to keep safe in a cabinet at all times or the world would utterly fall apart. Emily connected this to the Woman in Furs’ time locked up for going over her credit card limit, and the torture and beating she received while there. A fear follows her every minute that if everything falls apart, she might be pulled back to that place again.

Using this, Emily leapt into the Woman in Furs’ character full force. The first time she did the scene with Brittany, she found a paralyzing stillness in her walk that transitioned to violent shaking as Marisol tried to talk to her. By the time she made it to her “there is no protection” speech, she had been completely overcome with terror and lashed out violently at Marisol (44). The whole performance was shocking to us, as Emily had been reserved throughout the rehearsal process to that point. When we finished the scene, she was still shaking. After a moment to recover, we pushed on to figure out what from the narrative had made the scene work so well and how we could recapture that in the future.

With Emily’s success, we brought narratives into other moments, especially Lenny’s pregnancy scene and Marisol’s first encounter with the Angel. Both moments required the characters to quickly snap to an extreme state, and the stories we found were helpful in getting the actors to jump into those emotions while remaining truthful in their acting. In the birthing moment, narratives of mothers giving birth helped us find where would hurt Lenny when, how he would have to push to get the baby out, and how we could condense a somewhat realistic birth into a stage-ready amount of time. We then choreographed a three-contraction birth scene with that information, and Jack filled it with specific and horrific reactions to the pain.

In the Angel’s first appearance to Marisol, we wanted to capture the overwhelming experience of a heavenly visitation described both by Rivera and in much of the Bible, so our
dramaturg Rebecca pulled both passages from the Bible where angels are described by humans and modern stories of alleged angelic visits. From these we found some commonalities, like the first effect of fear, pallor, and emotional overload slowly fading into a feeling of peace. I used this as I choreographed a movement section where Marisol ran from the Angel but was initially calmed by her touch. Many of the narratives also described the bronze color and immense light that radiated from the angels’ presence, which we used in some design choices to be discussed in the following chapters. Brittany used the narratives to help construct moments in which the Angel would approach her from behind and Marisol would feel the overwhelming energy before she knew the Angel was there. By filling out that important scene, we were able to shape the Angel and Marisol’s relationship across the play, and push Marisol forward on her journey.

Watching the final product, I was not struck by anything in particular that the actors added to the play that created excess complications; rather, I felt a fullness to the relationships and the characters that was not outside the world of the text but was not necessarily motivated by the text alone. The moments that used outside narratives felt more grounded and expressive even in their emotional heights. I believe the exercises that we used in rehearsal allowed the actors both to find those supporting details but also gave them permission to explore in other ways that added countless rich, character-driven moments to the telling of the story.
Projections

One of the greatest differences in performing *Marisol* today is the larger availability of simple technology with which to create a projections design. Neither the original production at La Jolla Playhouse nor the subsequent Off-Broadway production at the New York Shakespeare Festival’s Public Theatre utilized projections to any great degree. In this production, projections allowed us to inexpensively bring in the visual imagery of the script and also to simplify the visual metaphors that might otherwise overburden the performance. Projections can be dangerous on their own for they too can easily draw focus away from the action of the play, but if done correctly they can accentuate the themes that Rivera has already written, making them both clearer in their intent and more striking in their beauty.

*Marisol* is filled with vast visual images from the first moments to the last: a graffiti poem on brick wall begins the show, and a new moon rising ends the play. These images help to create the world that has been so oppressive to Marisol and that has forced the Angel to lead the revolution. Without the problems that the world creates for Marisol, the Angel, and others, the characters in the script have little impetus to do the things they do. Rivera’s dismal world of poetic malaise has to be illustrated visually in some way for the script to make sense.

At the same time, however, overselling this world has been a fatal flaw to several of the previous productions of *Marisol*. Denver Center Theater’s 1995 production, which used street graffiti on nearly every set piece, was seen as overwhelmingly visual to the point of dampening the poetry of the text. One reviewer of the production wrote that:

An unnecessarily complex set was so busy with painted graffiti and hidden faces, that it was a constant distraction from the action […] The actors,
However, gave a hint of the potential power and poetry in the script, which might be realized in a simpler and more effectively conceived production.\textsuperscript{52}

With a script whose lyric poetry is already filled to the gills with massive metaphors and flowering images, too much visual stimulus distracts from everything taking place in the text. Images that serve the text are then necessary and can be useful in a simpler production, but images that take focus away will overwhelm and distract.

Projections helped with our production by allowing the majority of the visual storytelling to enter and leave gracefully and quickly. The more of Rivera’s world we were able to capture through projected images, the less of it that had to have around for long periods of time or be hauled off in some fashion, pulling the audience’s focus from the text. Furthermore, projections will naturally simplify many of the ambitious visual moments of Rivera’s text. For instance, without projections it would be really challenging to see snow fall on Marisol at several instances in the show. At the very least it would require someone sprinkling white confetti down on her from the balcony, but that would cause distractions from the audience looking for the source of the snow and seeing white confetti littered on the stage for the rest of the act.

At the same time, projections must be used with extra care because of the natural distractions that projected images can have in a live performance. With their high definition, artificiality, and brightness, projected images naturally draw attention away from actors on stage. If placed high above the actors or far to their sides, the images can force audience members to crane their necks in any number of directions, pulling their eyes away from the action. These

\textsuperscript{52} Fink.
pitfalls can be avoided by carefully placing and orchestrating the projections to avoid their negative interactions while enhancing their helpful qualities.

_Situating and Timing the Projections_

Wendall Harrington, a pioneering projections designer, warns about the dangers of scale when using projected images in live theatre:

> Video, in essence, has a kind of perfection that is dangerous; it makes the people on stage smaller and less interesting. The question needs to be asked: Are we competing with the people on stage? When we negate that, we're killing our future. We can't compete with Hollywood; they have more effects.  

This question of who is competing with whom is essential to any director trying to incorporate projections into a production, and was my guiding principle in navigating the dangers that projections may present.

In order to avoid competition with the actors, I asked my projections designer to find ways to incorporate projections into the same visual field as the actors and to time projections so that any movement or change happened in moments when attention could be pulled away. By combining the panoramic versatility of a large banner projection elevated above the actors with two smaller projections located in the same visual field as the action, projections would be able to be used throughout the script without becoming overly distracting.

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The PBK Studio Theatre, with its fly system and raised balcony, is an unusual and inspiring space for *Marisol*, especially where projections are concerned. The balcony area sets up a natural space for the Angel’s heavenly domain and allows for ample activity far above the audience. By stretching a large piece of muslin cloth across the three center sections of the balcony, we formed a banner that served as a projections surface and gave us space to project larger items like the opening poem, a subway station sign, and the snow that starts falling. These items were revealed at moments all their own—the opening poem is there at the beginning of the show, Marisol looks up to see the snow start falling—and thus should not be distracting to any action on the ground level.

In addition, when the Angel is ready to reveal her wings of war at the end of the first act, the actress could pull down the banner and have a pair of wings projected directly above her body so that they appeared to be coming out of her body. This technique allowed us to avoid expensive costume wings, but also lent the Angel more power than any set of fake wings could. Using a simple dissolve effect, the Angel’s wings of peace transformed into wings of war and ended the first act on a high note. Then, in the reset time that intermission allowed, we would remount the banner so that more projections could continue throughout the second act. The specifics of the Angel’s wings will be discussed at greater length in the chapter to follow.

The other two areas for projection were put at the same level as the actors. This meant that they could be used in the midst of floor-level action that cannot be missed, giving us much more freedom in terms of when we projected. Portraits of romanticized guardian angels, surreal buildings, and a cemetery for street children were all projected in these spaces. They were also used at the same time as the banner projection in order to bring the overall focus of projected moments down from above, fleshing out the reality of the space and more fully integrating
projections with the show. One example came from the subway scene: the banner projection featured a station sign for 180th street while the smaller projection areas had subway tracks which worked with the flown-in batten-turned-handrail to establish the place of the subway car itself.

With the system of projectors placed, the question of timing then became the most important. Even with the low-line projectors, a poorly timed change in images would have pulled the audience’s attention away from any actors on stage. The visual interest that the brightness of a projector creates naturally draws the eyes of anyone watching. Therefore, transitions between images needed to come at moments when the story could afford their being the center of attention. The obvious choice comes during scene changes where a switch in image could have a positive function in distracting the audience from the movement of scenery and furniture. Changes needed to take place at other times however, to allow the narrative to flow forward. Instead of letting the images just change around them, however, characters could motivate changes the changes with a gesture. This helped to bring projections into the main telling of the story, not just as accents. For instance, when the Angel sees the romanticized portrait of a traditional guardian angel, she snapped in such a way for it to change to a graffiti painting of a powerful black angel more like her.54

We were also able to smooth out the transitions between images using PowerPoint software available on all Microsoft Office enabled computers. PowerPoint gave us a large amount of control over the movement of the images, allowing us to add in effects like fades and cuts, putting timers on the transitions so that projected and real scenery moved into place at the same time, and allowing for some slides to automatically follow others for complex sequences with many images. With the crispness and control that PowerPoint was able to give us over the

54 See photo 8, Appendix A.
transitions, we were largely able to keep them from causing too much distraction from other moments unless we intended it. Then, in moments we intended the projections to take over, like the new moon slowly rising at the end of the play, they could do so exactly how we wanted.

Sourcing Projectors and Images

In order to put these projection plans into action, we needed to find cheap sources for both projectors and the images that they project. While certainly less expensive than fully realized versions of these scenes, projectors can still have relatively high costs associated with them, both from the high-quality projectors needed to clearly display images and the copyright fees associated with using many images. These expenses could become prohibitive in other environments, but because of the educational nature and resources available to us at William and Mary, projectors from the Media Center and Swem Circulation Desk became viable and inexpensive options for our production. Though not specifically designed for theatrical use and thus fraught with some focus and restriction challenges, the projectors were more than powerful enough to make a big impact in our small space.

Another large concern initially was from the actual images being projected. We had much trepidation at the beginning of this process as to how we would amass the amount of imagery required for the show. Even with both a scenic and projections designer and an assistant projections designer, the task was still relatively massive considering the number of images and time involved with finding each one. By using cast and crew to crowd-source a database of
useable images related to the show, however, we were able to expedite the process significantly and involve the entire cast in the design process.\textsuperscript{55}

In the end, we used 64 different images throughout the show, many of them returning for several slots in the 58-slide sequence of each of the three projectors as we left and returned to different locales. Projections were very useful in replacing all the visuals we had originally thought they would, like the wings, the snow, the subway signs, and the graffiti. In addition, we used them in many ways I never conceived of at the beginning of the project, like the class differentiations in the buildings that I mentioned in the chapter on economics, the flames of the homeless people that June set on fire, and the comet that streaks by at the top of the second act.

Furthermore, we were able to replace more than just Rivera’s visuals in the script: when the sounds of angelic war did not fully convey the power and horror of the play’s climactic battle, we created a montage of photographs and artistic renderings of war both modern and ancient that played on all three projectors. The quick cycling of image after image was purposefully meant to overwhelm the audience in a useful way: not only did the battle become the most visually complex moment of the show, but it also conveyed the inability for us to understand the massive bloodshed and supreme horror that such a revolution would entail. We were also able to make direct comparisons to contemporary bloodshed across the world by using surreal photographs of the protests in Ukraine and civil war in Syria.\textsuperscript{56}

Ultimately I thought the projections played a strong role in the creation of the visual world of \textit{Marisol}. They added a technological sophistication to the production that helped us

\textsuperscript{55} Copyright issues are also a significant concern when using images found online. We were aided in this production by our fundamentally educational goals, which allowed us fair use on most images. Since we only took donations at the door instead of charging ticket prices, only used student actors, and have two thesis projects attached to the production, we made the decision that we fell into the fair use clause of US copyright law.

\textsuperscript{56} See photos 9-11, Appendix A.
better convey the intent and mood of the play. They also allowed the auditory feast of Rivera’s work to be equally visual in an appropriately distracting way. Most of all, they were key storytelling tools that we could not have done without.

This is not to say that they could not have been improved upon. Despite our best efforts to incorporate the projection screens into the visual field of the stage, the side and banner screens were far enough removed from the length and height of the Studio space that they at times felt a little small and outside the stage picture. Additionally, the projections ended up largely as substitutes for scenery, whereas I think there could have been more done with projections to convey Marisol’s perceptions of the events happening around her, especially in the second act.

One of the aspects of projections that I had trouble judging was just how distracting they really were. Because I had seen the show so many times and dealt so much with orchestrating the slides, I did not have a great feeling for how they might have distracted from the story as a whole. To find out more about this, I included a question about projections in the informal survey given to audience members after the show:

How did you feel about the use of projections in the play?

___They were essential in understanding the play.

___They were helpful in understanding the play, but sometimes distracting.

___They were usually distracting, but sometimes helpful.

___They were always distracting from the play.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{57} See full survey, Appendix B.
In evaluating the question, I scored the answers with a value of 1 to 4, with “They were essential in understanding the play,” receiving a 1 and “They were always distracting from the play,” receiving a 4. Responses in which two adjoining answers were checked received an average of the two scores circled.58

A simple average of all the respondents yields a score of 1.5227. The median value of the responses was 1.5. The mode was 1. Only two respondents selected option 3, “They were usually distracting, but sometimes helpful,” while all others selected either 1 or 2. To me this indicates that my own sense of the projections was largely correct: they were key storytelling tools that were mostly well implemented, but could have been better incorporated into the larger stage picture. Further supporting this analysis is the absence of any comments specifically about projections or projected moments in any of the talkbacks, despite the survey question on projections highlighting the issue in the audience members’ minds. To me, this says that the majority of the audience was by and large comfortable with the use of projections in the play and was rarely significantly distracted by the imagery we used to create Rivera’s visual world.

58 Therefore a response with both “They were essential in understanding the play” and “They were helpful in understanding the play, but sometimes distracting” received a 1.5 score. These values were included because several people verbally expressed indecision between the two options, saying that the projections were not essential but not distracting either.
Symbols

Along with the compression of Rivera’s vast visual world through the use of projections, more toning-down needed to be done with many of the symbols that Rivera brings up throughout the play. In addition to concerns of budget, space, and time, it would simply have been impossible and unwise to include all of these moments the way that Rivera wrote them because of their massive imposition on the crowded text. At least one dramatic symbol or provocative image would have been present at all times if the stage directions were followed exactly. Without some break or decline in the visual imagery, none of the images would seem particularly important in comparison; however, many of them are central to the audience’s understanding of the play. Aesthetically, simplified symbols would be more beneficial to our production: not only would they fit better with the studio space but they would also further help to simplify Rivera’s at times overwhelming visual language.

In a similar vein to the overuse of graffiti in the Denver Center production, the Associated Press reviewer of the New York Shakespeare Festival production found that, “Director Michael Greif has given the play a nervous, busy production. Strobe lights. Gun shots. An on-stage guitarist to play tuneless rock music. The grimmest of graffiti-covered sets that suggests Dante’s Inferno crossed with the world's scariest junkyard.”\(^{59}\) Individually, the ideas seem like interesting motifs and symbols that could add much to the play. Considering the amount of ideas that Rivera throws around, however, it would be all too easy to stage a busy production with symbols for every theme. With that in mind, I worked with my production team to cut, rearrange, and restyle the play’s symbols so that they played their role in telling the story without taking too much focus or becoming too important on their own.

\(^{59}\) Kuchwara.
My attitude towards Rivera’s symbols is analogous to my overall approach to his stage directions. Indeed, most of the visuals he writes are not in the text of the play but rather in his complex stage directions. Also included in the stage directions are very precise descriptions of silent action, specific instructions for sound and lighting, and long passages detailing character traits. Though these directions seem to be written by Rivera himself and not the stage manager on an early production, I realized that we would be doing ourselves no favors by trying specifically to follow them. They enforce upon the actors and designers a fairly rigid and specific adherence to the original staging of the play in a larger stage space Rivera seems to intend it to be performed in. Furthermore, they are so extensive that they give little room for personal interpretation. I thus communicated early on in the process to my designers and actors alike that we should acknowledge that something probably happens at moments where Rivera gives a stage direction but it need not necessarily occur in the way he describes it.

This is not to say that the insight that Rivera gives in the stage directions is not useful. He creates some beautiful unspoken moments such as the Man with the Scar Tissue offering Marisol his whiskey, Marisol helping the Woman in Furs back into her coat, and Marisol and the Angel kissing at the end of the play. The same goes for the symbols that he creates. The visual appeal of a floating crown above the stage representing God, an angel with limp wings, and a giant pile of woman-turned-salt is massive and central to understanding the world of the play. The appeal of those symbols, however, must not overshadow their usefulness in telling the story.

The two symbols that stood out as the most prominent in the overall story were the ones to which we made the largest changes in our production. The wings dropped by the Angel at the end of the first act, which symbolize the world’s movement from the scary but familiar New York that Marisol knew to the chaotic and unknown street of the second act, were done entirely
through projected images. The crown hanging above the audience, which symbolizes the god of the play, was brought down to the ground level and used to bookend the play instead of staying present the entire time. By altering the symbols in this way, we were able to retain and reinforce their power in a setting very different than Rivera seems to imagine in his stage directions.

The Angel’s Wings

Rivera intends the Angel’s wings to originate on her back, hanging “limply from the back of [her] diamond-studded black leather jacket” (5). The limpness of the wings then indicating the “something tired and lonely” about her that Rivera sees at the beginning of the play. Then, at the end of the first act, she drops these “wings of peace” which float down to the street for Marisol to pick up and then dissolve in her hands (39). This fulfills a promise that the Angel made to Marisol in their first encounter in the play: “Soon we’re going to take off our wings of peace, Marisol, and put on our wings of war. Then we’re going to spread blood and vigor across the sky and reawaken the dwindling stars!” (16). The descent of the wings brings both the chaos of the ensuing war and the hope that the war can change the pitiful state of the world.

Later, after Marisol’s death and in the midst of the angelic war, the Angel appears with “huge magnificent wings: her wings of war” (67). Otherwise she looks filthy and exhausted from the fighting, dressed in a tattered uniform with an Uzi submachine gun at her side. In that moment, she fires the Uzi into the air at the forces of angels loyal to god, her powerful wings a statement against oppression and deceit. But immediately following this “angelic vision,” Marisol, speaking from the wealth of knowledge that she has acquired in death, says, “Three hundred million million beautiful angels die in the first charge of the Final Battle” (67). The power of the Angel’s wings of war is quickly dampened by her assumed defeat.
The wings that Rivera writes in his stage directions are, for many reasons, much more than could be achieved with the resources available to Studio productions. Technically, creating two sets of physical wings for the actress playing the Angel to wear would have been expensive and time consuming for my costume and property designers. Given the resources available to us, whatever wings we were able to fashion would have not been as engaging or magnificent as Rivera specifies in the script. Furthermore, actual pairs of dubiously-constructed wings would have presented large obstacles to movement and interaction between the Angel and Marisol in scene four—where the movement sequence between the Angel and Marisol was key to unlocking the visceral nature of their relationship. With all this in mind, we decided early on in the process to use projections for the Angel’s wings.

Using projected imagery to create the wings was natural to me because we already had planned to use projections for several other effects in the show. If we were already going to set up and program projectors, we would be wise to create with them a set of wings more beautiful than we could physically render. The projected wings would swoop up from the Angel’s torso to reach massive heights and be truly impressive. After tearing down the projection screen hung in front of the Studio’s balcony, the actress playing the Angel would be hit with the image on her front. With the black background behind her and the wings offset to her sides, it would seem like she had chosen to reveal the wings to Marisol. This Angel would impose her world-changing doctrine and force Marisol into action through her enormous angelic power.

The major change this led to, however, was that the Angel could only be seen with the wings at very specific moments. Unlike in the text, where Rivera indicates that the Angel is always seen with some form of wings, our Angel would have to choose to reveal the wings a limited number of times. This solved the problems of moving and interacting with Marisol while
wearing wings but also meant that the audience would not see a winged Angel until the end of the first act. Would the audience understand that she was an Angel without some sort of wings? How would a wingless Angel change the dynamic of the first moments of the play?

Luckily for this production, the balcony of the Studio was able to solve much of the problem, along with some help from gestural movement and lighting. With the Angel starting in the balcony, the large height difference between her and the ground created the sense of a heavenly perch and distinguished her from the mortal characters below. Bathed in a bronze light reminiscent of biblical angels, she could look down and watch Marisol go about her day but remain separate from it visually. When she does have to intervene to save Marisol from the Man with the Golf Club and Sandy, the actress playing the Angel was able to implement formalized gestures to show that her supernatural power is the cause for the train stopping and Sandy turning to salt. When paired with thunder sound effects, the gestures easily displayed the Angel’s magnificent power.

When the Angel comes down from the balcony, the situation became a little more challenging in some respects. Thunder sound effects could still be used to punctuate some of her movements, but both the sense of height and the added effect of the bronze lights were lost. The costume was able to make up for some of this, mimicking the bronze color in the bleached speckles on the Angel’s black t-shirt and in the bronze makeup color used as a highlight on her face. In addition, much of what conveyed the Angel’s power came from how Marisol reacted to having a being of such overwhelming power near her. Rivera, in the stage directions, talks

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60 Both Daniel 10: 6 and Ezekiel 1: 7, among other verses, describe angelic visions as involving the gleam of burnished bronze.
extensively about the power of the Angel’s presence and touch. Using that as a starting point, Brittany was able to play the Angel’s imposing effect on earth without seeing any wings.

Without revealing the wings at an earlier time, the moment when the Angel chooses to reveal them then becomes hugely powerful. I made the decision to hold this until the very end of the first act to emphasize the drastic changes that the dropping of the wings creates in the world of the play, and to add a strong visual moment in the absence of seeing the wings actually fall down to Marisol. In addition, I combined the individual moments revealing the wings of peace and wings of war into two adjoined moments to help further illustrate this journey and to simplify the staging and projections at the end of the play.

The revelation of the wings happened as follows: after she struck back at Lenny, Marisol ran into the street, where in the script the Angel drops the wings to her. Once Marisol was in the street, the screen hung above her on the balcony was torn along with the sound of a thunder crack, turning Marisol around to face the newly-revealed Angel. Then the first set of wings, the wings of peace, faded up on the Angel.\(^{61}\) Seeing the Angel’s true form for the first time, Marisol was taken aback and stumbled a couple steps away from her. With a second crack of thunder and a clenching of fists of the angel, the wings of peace morphed to fiery wings of war.\(^{62}\) All light then faded on the Angel as the vision ceased, and Marisol turned out to the audience to look at the changed world. Seeing something in the air above her, she reached out her hand to grab something as the lights faded.\(^{63}\)

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\(^{61}\) See photos 12, Appendix A.
\(^{62}\) See photos 13, Appendix A.
\(^{63}\) To solve the problem of the wings dropping, at the very top of the second act, the lights rose on Marisol holding a bloodied white feather that looked like it came from the wings of peace.
Ultimately, our adaptation of the wing symbolism worked quite well. By having the most visually exciting moment of the first act come immediately before intermission, we sent the audience out wanting more and interested in what would happen next. More work might have been done on making up for the lack of wings on the Angel when she came down to earth, as this resulted in a slight secularization of the character in that context. This was a huge loss, however, because the Angel talks so much about the issues of the world and god that I think it would be hard to forget the power inherent in her divine being.

*The Crown*

The other major symbol that encountered even larger changes from Rivera’s original intention was the crown that he describes in the opening stage directions to the play as, “*floating in the sky [...] inside a clear glass box.*” Though Rivera never explicitly links it to god, the implication is relatively clear, especially because in the only moment in which it is acknowledged by a character in the stage directions, Marisol is talking directly to god (54-55). The crown is not mentioned at any other point in the text until the very end of the play, when in the stage directions Rivera writes: “*The Angel appears next to Marisol, wingless, unarmed, holding the gold crown in her hands. The Angel holds the crown out to the audience as Marisol looks at her*” (68). This dethroning of god and crowning of the audience forms the final moment of the play as Marisol speaks the last line—“Oh God. What light. What possibilities. What hope.”—and the “*wild light of the new millennium*” begins to shine in the audience’s eyes (68).

Because the crown is disconnected from the text for most of the play, I almost decided to cut it for the sake of simplification. In the process of doing so, however, I began thinking about what the crown represented for the play and soon realized how key its presence would be to this
production’s focus on economic and political themes in particular. More than any other symbol, the crown establishes an understanding of hierarchy in the play. From the first moments, Rivera intends the audience to see the crown floating above the set and to think that in its golden splendor it is somehow better than what is below it. Additionally, a crown adds to a modern idea of a politicized god—not the benevolent creator of much Christian belief, but instead a tyrannical ruler who governs just as much for his benefit as for that of his subjects. Finally, crowns are very easily gendered and thus with a male crown the idea of a patriarchal structure can be established for the Angel and Marisol to overthrow.

At the same time, hanging a crown above the audience simply would simply not be ideal in the Studio. There was already little space to spare on the battens for the lighting effects we needed, and even if we could give up a whole batten the only feasible way for the Angel and Marisol to hand the crown to the people was to motion for that batten to come in a Vanna-White-esque style. Furthermore, anywhere we placed the crown was either going to get in the way of the banner projection screen or be far outside the audience’s view. Hanging the crown simply was not going to work in the way we had set up the space.

I then realized that perhaps we did not need to see it for the whole show since its most important moments occur at the top of the show when it primes the audience’s understanding and at the end to demonstrate the fall of god’s regime. The only moment that would be lost was Marisol’s shouting at the crown in her monologue, but the actress could easily direct that line to god without a prop there to help her. The decision was then made to have the crown placed on the floor level on top of a black-satin-covered stool at the top of the show as the audience walked
in.\textsuperscript{64} This meant that they had to see and try to understand the crown on some level. Thematically, having both the crown and the projected graffiti poem worked quite well; the poem about souls being brought to god informed the crown and made it seem more relevant in that moment. By adding a three-pointed crown over the word “God” in the poem, we were able to visually link the crown and god before taking the crown away.\textsuperscript{65}

During the first scene change into the subway scene, the crown and its stool were both removed. The crown was then not seen again until the very end of the play when the Angel walked from her spotlight on the stage right side of the balcony behind the banner projection screen and entered Marisol’s spot stage left holding the crown. The intense bronze heavenly light made the rhinestones of the crown gleam and glitter as Marisol spoke her final line. The Angel then handed the glimmering crown out to Marisol, and as they both held the crown, they kissed as the script instructed. Then Marisol took the crown and held it out from her body in a gesture that could either be construed as giving the crown to the audience or the first portion of putting the crown on her own head.\textsuperscript{66}

The decision was made to give Marisol the crown to increase the ambiguity of the play’s final moments. For a play relatively dark and foreboding in tone, the final moments can seem overly hopeful and unattached to the rest of the story.\textsuperscript{67} With Marisol taking the crown and gesturing in this ambiguous way, the audience was allowed to understand the ending in whatever way they wished: they might have seen the hope of a new world order in Marisol giving the crown to the audience or the danger of utopian idealism in Marisol crowning herself.

\textsuperscript{64} See photo 14, Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{65} See photo 15, Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{66} See photo 16, Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{67} Fricker.
Overall, I thought that the crown was quite successful in our adapted use of it. The opening moment provided a striking way for the audience to enter the space and begin interacting with the play, and the connection with the poem allowed them to understand the crown as being connected to god. The final moment was also visually striking and the crown did a great job of focusing the complex story of the ending vista. The crown might have been incorporated more into the middle of the play as a symbol in the projections or costumes to bridge beginning and ending moments, but the bookending of the crown symbolism was not particularly detrimental to the audience’s understanding.

Indeed, the reactions that the audience in the talkback had to the crown were so strong that most must have understood its significance. In nearly every talkback, someone brought up a question about the final moment with the crown. One question in particular asked, “With the crowning at the end, was that sort of, I wasn’t sure if that was the crowning of Marisol as a new god or is it the crowning of everybody.” Instead of answering this question ourselves, Rebecca and I asked the audience for the talkback whether they thought Marisol was crowning herself or the audience. They were split roughly in half. Furthermore, this ambiguity generated lots of related thoughts and questions about the futility of violence, cycles of power, and the efficacy of utopia. I do not think that I could have asked for a better result than that.

**Other Symbols**

Rivera touches on many other minor symbols throughout the play, and for the large part we used them more or less how he wrote them. The golf clubs used for various threats and acts of violence presented the accoutrement of a leisurely, largely patriarchal activity in the midst of...

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68 Audience talkback, Friday (2/14) evening.
poverty and oppression. Uzi submachine guns demonstrated the savagery of heavenly war and its connection to modern warfare on earth. Various types of consumable food brought luxury and sustenance into a world devoid of both.

One minor motif that we accentuated in our production was that of salt. Salt is mentioned many times in the script in various different ways: Marisol asks God in the first scene to turn the Man with the Golf Club into salt; the manuscript that Marisol reads talks about the decomposed bodies of fallen angels salting the oceans; and the Angel turns Sandy into salt (7, 22, 11). For the Sandy moment, we added projected images of columns of salt, reminiscent of those in the story of Lot’s wife, in order to accentuate salt’s biblical connections. When the Angel gestured from her heavenly perch to vaporize Sandy, three projected images of salt columns flashed onto the screens and then disappeared as quickly as they came.

With the symbolic stomping of cockroaches that Rivera writes into several of the apartment scenes, we decided to go the opposite way by eliminating it entirely. Rivera’s intention both to lower the quality of Marisol and June’s apartments by having them infested with bugs and to hint at millennium and apocalypse through the great survival abilities of the cockroach is evident, but not necessarily helpful for the story. The stomping gesture could be rather confusing when the audience is so close that they can clearly see that no bugs are present. In addition, it could bring up incongruous moments of laughter at the beginning of scenes more serious in their nature.

Like any director must, I approached Jose Rivera’s stage directions and symbols in this play with a grain of salt. By trying to understand their larger purpose and then cutting them down to a more achievable size, our production was able to keep Rivera’s symbols without going
far over time and budget. More importantly, by adapting the symbols some of the problems of being overwhelmed that reviewers of previous productions have experienced could be avoided. These leaner and more specific symbolic moments still proved to be largely effective in the telling of the story and helped to create some beautiful visual moments.
In conclusion, our production of *Marisol* attempted to limit the play’s tendencies to overwhelm its audiences by focusing on the natural conditions opposed upon us by our location Williamsburg, use of collegiate resources, and Studio performance space. By uniting the play’s themes through Marisol’s journey of ethnicity, updating the political message to focus on economic concerns, downplaying Rivera’s overstated stances on gender and sexuality, filling out the characters’ arcs and relationships, and simplifying the plays visuals and symbols through the use of projections and a pared-down design aesthetic, we were able to play towards the strengths of our situation. In doing so, Rivera’s script lost much of its overwhelming quality and the universal themes of his work were allowed to shine.

In their thematic responses, audience members overwhelmingly focused on themes more universal and lofty that examined the human condition and the state of our society as a whole. Typical responses included “civic awareness/responsibility,” “the power humanity has, despite its flaws,” and “the nature of human suffering.” Of course these responses were completed and handed in immediately after the final moments of the play, which deal the most with abstract conceptions of our own condition. The fact, however, that 68 of the 111 returned surveys focused on such themes seems to indicate that a large portion of the audience was, at least for a moment, dealing with and thinking about big issues of the play which many reviewers of *Marisol* oftentimes did not see or feel connected to.

A large amount of selection bias exists in this pool: audience members who engaged with the play and had thoughts about it are almost certainly more likely to have taken a survey and answered the question about themes. Thus it cannot be assumed that a majority of the entire

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69 Audience survey responses, Appendix C.
70 Specifically Drake and Pressley in their reviews of the Los Angeles and D.C. productions, respectively.
audience engaged with the play’s universal themes, despite the responses to the survey. At the same time, however, something must be said for the long and specific thematic responses given by many in their surveys; their time spent creating those answers shows a strong level of engagement with the show.

When considering the negative response rate, the selection bias did not seem to bring in too many audience members with overly adverse reactions to the play. No one selected the extreme negative values when rating the usefulness of either the dramaturgical installation or the projections design, and only a few selected the second-most negative. There were only a couple blank responses to the theme question, but several other responses like “confusion,” “moaning,” and “I have no idea,” indicate a lack of connection with the play and its thematic content, even though the same surveys often scored the effectiveness of dramaturgy and projections highly.

Some negative response is natural, however, with a play as messy and challenging as *Marisol*, and more certainly took place in those who did not fill out the survey. Though much of my effort as a director was to rein in the unwieldiness of the play, I am glad that my efforts did not go so far as to make the script overly-tidy and easy to understand. *Marisol*, and Rivera’s work in general, should stick with you and make you think, not wrap up cleanly. The greatest praise I received did not come from someone saying that they enjoyed the performance but was rather from the people who told me that the play sparked extensive conversations for them. Not everyone is interested in or understanding of this function of theatre, as the few negative responses pointed out. A play that is messy and mostly engaging is for me greatly preferable to one that is universally liked but stale.
The balance between usefully and overwhelmingly messy can at times be hard to determine but is essential when working with Rivera’s text. His bold prose, inventive visuals, and stimulating messages can quickly turn into crushing burdens on a performance if too heavily loaded with excess stimuli. At the same time, perfectly crisp, clean characters and story lines are never going to emerge from his writing, and never should because their mere existence would go against the complicated, diverse, and perplexing lives that he is constantly drawn to writing about. As Rivera’s plays experience a reemergence on the national scene—Marisol is being given an educational production at a major university and a professional production at a small regional theatre in April 2014 alone—it is important that directors and designers approach his plays with a mix of excitement for the possibilities and caution for the potential potholes.71

As their use in this production has shown, I strongly believe that projections can be a way to stage Rivera’s most complicated and visual works in a way that is not only cost effective but also helpful in keeping the play usefully messy. Many of Rivera’s other plays like Cloud Tectonics, Each Day Dies With Sleep, and References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot could be more easily and successfully staged by smaller producing organizations through the use of projections. The clock that features so heavily Cloud Tectonics, the ever-growing orange tree of Each Day Dies With Sleep, and the omnipresent moon of References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot, among many other symbols and visuals, could be beautifully rendered in projected images.

By embracing projections, navigating eccentric themes, and balancing between messy and overwhelming, future productions of Rivera’s work can be highly successful and an under-produced playwright’s work can bring its poetic beauty and narrative charm to entirely new audiences.

71 Marisol is being performed April 3-13 at the University of Michigan and April 10- May 11 at Luna Stage.
Bibliography


Child, Ben. "Films that Pass the Bechdel Test Perform just as Well at the Box Office as those that Fail." *The Guardian*, sec. Film: 3 February 2014.


Appendix A: Production Stills & Slide Samples

#1: Marisol’s apartment, the street, June’s apartment

#2: Bronx apartment building projection
#3: Brooklyn exterior projection

#4: Manhattan office projection
#5: Angel Paintings: traditional Roman Catholic angel and *Angelus Novus* projections

#6: Lenny’s semi-surreal street scene projection
#7a: Surreal cityscape projection banner

#7b: Surreal cityscape projection SR  
#7c: Surreal cityscape projection SL
#8: Marisol, the Angel, and the projected graffiti angel

#9: Ukraine protest projection

#10: Ukraine protest projection
#11: Syrian Civil War projection

#12a: Wings of peace projection

#12b: Wings of peace on the Angel
#13: Wings of war projection

#14: Crown on stool in opening position
THE MOON CARRIES THE SOULS OF DEAD PEOPLE TO HEAVEN.
The new moon is dark and empty.
It fills up every month
with new glowing souls
then it carries its silent burden to God.

#15: Opening graffiti poem projection

#16: Marisol gesturing with crown
Appendix B: Audience Survey Form

*Marisol* Post-Show Survey

*The answers to these questions will be used anonymously by Kevin Place and Rebecca Turner in their respective Honors Thesis projects.*

What is your age? What is your gender?

____  ____

With which of the following ethnicities (if any) do you most identify?

___ Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American  
___ Latino or Hispanic  
___ East Asian or Asian  
___ South Asian  
___ White or Caucasian  
___ Other (please specify______________________________)

Did you find the dramaturgical materials (changing art installation, program notes) helpful in enhancing your understanding and enjoyment of the play?

Not at all  
1  2  3  4  5  6  Very

What, for you, was the most prominent theme in the play?

____________________________________________

How did you feel about the use of projections in the play?

___ They were essential in understanding the play.  
___ They were helpful in understanding the play, but sometimes distracting.  
___ They were usually distracting, but sometimes helpful.  
___ They were always distracting from the play.
Please feel free to write any further comments on the back of this page. Thank you for coming to see Marisol!
**Appendix C: Audience Survey Data**

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Examples of topics discussed:

- **Corrupt Functionings of Our Universe/ Beliefs**
- **Morality w/o God**
- **The Destructiveness of Organized Religion**
- **The Inevitability of an Apocalypse**
- **Human Nature**
- **Aloofness of Society to Social Problems**
- **The Power Humanity Has, Despite Its Flaws**
- **We Are Materialistic and Self Centered. Fuck the Establishment.**
- **The Nature of Human Suffering**
- **New Forms of War and Terror**
- **How Society Can Be Controlled by Fear of Punishment**
- **The Religious Themes--Angels, God, Death**
- **Rebuilding After Change**
- **Faith in Renewal**
- **Religion + Perspective**
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