

CHALLENGES

All three theatres agreed that the biggest challenges of the projects were time and resources, as well as integrating this mission-based work into the larger culture and ethos of the organization. Staff members across the companies—while simultaneously working on mainstage shows—had to carve out time and resources to support these additional projects. A typical play may be in development for years before it is mounted, then go onto a season schedule, then get a marketing plan, then go into rehearsal, and finally go into a tech process before at last reaching an audience. These projects were all two years from conception to completion—and changed a great deal in that time—which involved extremely truncated schedules for everyone involved. The budgets for the projects were generous enough that everyone could dream big, but ultimately there were still places where resources were unexpectedly required, or were stretched thin, requiring improvisation and scaling back.

It was also important to have organizational buy-in on these projects' importance—an agreement from staff members that this work had value, even if it was not necessarily developing new ticket buyers or paving the way for a mainstage production.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The Exploring Engagement grants were by nature experimental—designed to explore new models for engagement with community. That gave all three theatres opportunities and resources to step outside their comfort zones. But in the end, that also meant that none of the companies had a clear path forward in their communities.


Everyone expressed a desire to continue this work. One idea was to try to do similar work on a smaller scale and with a more sustainable budget that can be renewed yearly. Another was to focus even more deeply on serving one community.

The organizations also agreed that staff continuity and diversity is key to succeeding; when staff changes over, priorities inevitably change and relationships cannot be sustained. Further, having staff and partners that reflect community keeps the community at the table at all times.

For Center Theatre Group, next steps meant maintaining relationships with the community members who participated in *Popol Vuh: Heart of Heaven* and *Through the Looking Glass*—inviting them to shows, workshops, and readings.

Pasadena Playhouse moved forward on two main fronts. The first was Josefina Lopez's *Real Women Have Curves* in its 2016-2017 season, and working with the Latinx community to support and take ownership of the play, as well as subsequent programs and community engagement activities at the Playhouse and in surrounding neighborhoods. The Playhouse continues to maintain relationships with Mi Historia, Mi Manera participants. The second was using the lessons from Mi Historia, Mi Manera to create a new initiative to expand the Playhouse's audiences by focusing on Asian-Americans in the San Gabriel Valley.

At South Coast Repertory, community engagement remained part of the fabric of the organization thanks to the literary and marketing teams. They worked to continue to embrace the idea of "turning outward" toward the community.

 The James Irvine Foundation

The convening and this piece were funded in part by the James Irvine Foundation.

Center Theatre Group would like to express its gratitude to The James Irvine Foundation and staff for their partnership and generous support for these projects.

*Latinx is a gender neutral term often used in lieu of Latino or Latina that refers to individuals with cultural ties to Latin America and individuals with Latin American descent. The -x replaces the standard o/a ending of Latinx and is intended to be more gender inclusive.

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Gerlie Collado, Project Manager & Community Organizer, Pasadena Playhouse. Danny Feldman, Artistic Director, Pasadena Playhouse. Diane Ragsdale, Facilitator.

What Center Theatre Group, Pasadena Playhouse, and South Coast Repertory Learned from Projects Funded by Irvine Foundation Exploring Engagement Grants

From 2012–2016, three of Southern California's leading regional theatres programmed ambitious initiatives to engage local communities—primarily Latinx*—they felt were underrepresented as patrons at their theatres. With funding from the James Irvine Foundation's Exploring Engagement fund, all three companies experimented with partnerships between professional artists and community members, innovative methods of engagement, and forming new relationships with other local nonprofits.

After the projects concluded, staff members from Center Theatre Group, Pasadena Playhouse, and South Coast Repertory gathered at a one-day retreat to share their experiences and try to find common threads and themes that they—and other theatres around the country attempting similar work—might learn from in the future. Theatre scholar and arts consultant Diane Ragsdale facilitated the convening and provided a broader national and international context for the discussion.

The hope is that this document and an accompanying video series will inspire conversations about embarking on such work and sustaining it long-term.

Learn more in a series of videos at [YouTube.com/CTGLA](https://www.youtube.com/CTGLA)

Alejandra Cisneros, TCG Leadership U Fellow



Sara Guerrero, José Cruz González, Elizabeth Leonard, Victor Vasquez, Candice Cain & Diane Ragsdale.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECTS

PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS

All three theatres began their programming with preconceived notions about the communities they were trying to serve; the communities then turned these notions on their heads in many ways.

PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships were key to the success of all three projects; none of the theatres could have succeeded on their own. They needed organizations embedded in the communities to connect them with people and to establish credibility and trust. They needed artists experienced at working with nonprofessionals to collaborate and inspire. And they needed teaching artists, community liaisons, and individuals with stakes in the community to bring in participants and keep them engaged.

Popol Vuh: Heart of Heaven at Grand Park



Photo by Ryan Miller/CaptureImaging

CENTER THEATRE GROUP *Community as Creators*

Center Theatre Group's Community as Creators program consisted of two projects designed to engage Latinx and African-American communities in creating theatre. In Boyle Heights, they partnered with Chicano theatre company El Teatro Campesino on *Popol Vuh: Heart of Heaven*, an original, open-to-the-public performance created and performed with community members and the culmination of months of creative workshops and rehearsals. And in Leimert Park and Montebello, they partnered with artists Jerry Quickley and reg e gains on *Through the Looking Glass*, a series of writing workshops that culminated in readings of original work that asked members of two different communities to imagine the lives of each other.

Center Theatre Group discovered that Montebello, which was perceived as majority Latinx, also has well-represented Armenian, white, and Asian populations; all of these groups were eager to participate in *Through the Looking Glass*, which shifted the focus of that project.

CENTER THEATRE GROUP

ARTIST PARTNERS:

El Teatro Campesino • Jerry Quickley • reg e gains

COMMUNITY PARTNERS:

Self-Help Graphics • Circle Squared Collective
The World Stage

ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS:

Community Liaisons



Photo by M. Kobe Photography

PASADENA PLAYHOUSE *Mi Historia, Mi Manera*

Pasadena Playhouse's *Mi Historia, Mi Manera* program set out to increase arts participation of Latinxs in the San Gabriel Valley by using a unique model called Consensus Organizing for Theatre, a process where a theatre builds stake in multiple pockets of the community while those from the community also build a stake in the theatre. Thanks to the input of community members at town hall meetings, the project evolved—honing in on the small city of La Puente and on three Neighborhood Associations in the city of Pasadena—and changed from a playwriting contest into a series of improvisational and other workshops, devised performances, and staged, open-to-the-public readings.

After hosting a number of town hall meetings, and regular contact with various community leaders, The Pasadena Playhouse made three important discoveries which refined the direction of the project: 1) Latinx in the cities of La Puente and Pasadena had specific needs that could be met by the project; 2) the original project name, *Mi Historia, Mi Moda* did not resonate with its target population; and 3) the playwriting contest it had originally planned was not what community members wanted or needed. By actively listening and inviting Latinx in La Puente and Pasadena to participate in creative activities, the Playhouse cultivated strong ownership in its programs and services among its target population.

PASADENA PLAYHOUSE

ARTIST PARTNER: ImaginAction • Ozomatli

COMMUNITY PARTNERS:

City of Pasadena Councilmember Victor Gordo
La Puente Artwalk • Pasadena City College
Leadership for Urban Renewal Network (LURN)

ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS:

Hector Aristizabal • Brien Biery



Photo by David Lopez

SOUTH COAST REPERTORY *Dialogue/Diálogos*

South Coast Repertory's *Dialogue/Diálogos* was a two-year bilingual community-based theatre initiative with Santa Ana's Latinx community. *Diálogos* had three phases: story-gathering days, play-making workshops, and play development. The project captured the stories and memories of nearly 1,000 of the city's Latinx residents, which created the core of a new bilingual play, *The Long Road Today/El Largo Camino de Hoy*, written by José Cruz González. The project culminated in free public performances in Santa Ana with a cast and crew of nearly 100 community members.

South Coast Repertory began with the goal of upending stereotypes about Orange County as a place lacking in diversity (both racial and socioeconomic). They found that expanding their footprint in the community required more outside voices and participants than expected—10 teaching artists instead of three or four as planned, a key community partner, and a consulting theatre company specializing in community partnerships.

South Coast Repertory

ARTIST PARTNERS:

José Cruz González • Cornerstone Theatre Company
Armando Molina

COMMUNITY PARTNER:

Latino Health Access

ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS:

Sara Guerrero • Teaching Artists