

DISCOVERY GUIDE

WORLD PREMIERE

ALMA

BY
BENJAMIN BENNE

DIRECTED BY
JULIETTE CARRILLO

**CENTER
THEATRE
GROUP**

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**“ACKNOWLEDGEMENT IS A SIMPLE,
POWERFUL WAY OF SHOWING
RESPECT AND AS A STEP TOWARD
CORRECTING THE STORIES AND
PRACTICES THAT ERASE INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES’ HISTORY AND CULTURE
AND TOWARD INVITING AND
HONORING THE TRUTH”**

—US Department of Arts and Culture

The setting of the play *Alma* by Benjamin Benne, is La Puente, California – home to the Kizh (pronounced Keech) and Tongva peoples. Center Theatre Group’s production of *Alma* will take place at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City, California – home to the Kizh, Tongva and Chumash peoples. Center Theatre Group acknowledges, with deep respect, their memories, their lives, their descendents, and their continued and ancestral stewardship of this land.

**BY NATURE THEY LIVED HERE
BY WILL THEY TRAVELED HERE
AND BY FORCE THEY WERE
BROUGHT HERE**

—Alma

SYNOPSIS

“...THIS PLAY IS
FOR MY MOM...”

—Benjamin Benne

procrastinate

On the eve of Angel’s SAT test, Alma comes home from work early to help her daughter study. For Alma, who is undocumented, the pressure is high on Angel, who is a U.S. citizen, to do well on this test so she can go to college and make a better life for herself. Alma’s future in the United States rests, in part, on Angel’s ability to succeed and sponsor her own mother for U.S. citizenship. For Angel, who has dreams of her own, college is not a priority. With a new uncertain reality about to take shape after the election of the 45th president of the United States, Donald J. Trump, Alma and Angel are forced to balance their hopes and dreams with what is going on in the world around them. Will Alma and Angel get to stay together and realize their “American Dream” or will this new American chapter lead to their separation?

jubilant

rancorous

TIME

Early December 2016.
Post-election and pre-
inauguration of Trump.

The world feels different.
Scarier.

It's around 11pm.

PLACE

La Puente, California.
The living space of ALMA
& ANGEL's one-bedroom
apartment.

On the 2nd floor of an
apartment complex, where
you kinda know who your
neighbors are but not really...
really, you just know what
they look like.

CHARACTERS

ALMA

SHE/HER, AGE 34

an undocumented immigrant
from Mexico living in the
United States mother (but also
kind of a sister)

to

ANGEL

SHE/HER, AGE 17

a United States citizen
a high school senior with
acute anxiety



ARTISTS

Center Theatre Group is proud to bring together this group of Los Angeles-based artists to tell a very local story. *Alma* is set in the Southern California community of La Puente, California.



**CHERYL
UMAÑA**

Alma

CHERYL UMAÑA (Alma, she/her/hers) is a graduate of the UCLA School of Theatre Film and Television and of the LACC Theatre Academy. She is an L.A. native with strong roots in Guatemala. She has had the pleasure of working with various theatre companies throughout L.A. and first worked with CTG in the wonderful Library Play Reading Series in Boyle Heights as well as the Community Stories program. She is very honored to be part of *Alma*, helping to tell our stories and lifting up the Latino experience in our country.



**SABRINA
FEST**

Angel

SABRINA FEST (Angel, she/her/hers) is a 25-year-old triple threat. Along with four years of formal training at the University of Southern California's School of Dramatic Arts, she has studied classical piano for 12 years, and has also been dancing for 20 years with 12 years of ballet training, 10 years of traditional Chinese dance, and five years of competitive Latin Salsa. She has been featured in multiple voice-over ventures, including commercials for McDonald's, guest starring as Meli Ramos on Nickelodeon's *The Loud House*, Neonlicious in the OMG Dolls franchise *LOL Surprise*, and more.



BENJAMIN BENNE

Playwright

BENJAMIN BENNE (Playwright, he/him/his) is a playwright and puppeteer born and raised in Los Angeles County and, as an adult, has lived in the Pacific Northwest, Midwest, and now resides on the East Coast, where he is a David Geffen/Yale School of Drama M.F.A. Candidate in Playwriting and represented by Paradigm Talent Agency. His artistic journey began by doodling renderings of Noah's Ark in church and when he wrote (and illustrated) his prize-winning little book *The Tale of the Adventurous Penguins* in 5th grade. benjaminbenne.com



JULIETTE CARRILLO

Director

JULIETTE CARRILLO (Director, she/her/hers) is a nationally recognized theatre director, writer and award-winning filmmaker from Los Angeles, CA. She has directed critically acclaimed premiere and revival productions in theatres across the country. As a member of the Cornerstone Theater ensemble, she has developed work for and with various communities such as the East Salinas farm working community, the Hindu community and seniors and their caregivers. She is a Yale School of Drama graduate and on faculty at University of California, Irvine. juliettecarrillo.com



LONNIE RAFAEL ALCARAZ

Lighting Designer

LONNIE RAFAEL ALCARAZ (Lighting Designer, he/him/his) is a professor at the University of California, Irvine, where he is the head of the lighting program. He has designed for various regional theatres around the country. He is also a producer with an emphasis in Latinx productions and community-engaged theatre. In addition to his theatrical experience, he designed for Universal's Islands of Adventure for Universal Studios, Japan. His complete design portfolio can be found at Iradesigns.com.



**CAROLYN
MAZUCA**
Costume Designer

CAROLYN MAZUCA (Costume Designer, she/her/hers) is a Texas born and Los Angeles-based costume designer for stage and screen. Her theatrical designs have decorated productions at various theatre across the country. In Carolyn's screen career—she is an active member of the IATSE Costume Designers Guild 892. Carolyn earned her B.F.A. in Costume Design from Carnegie Mellon University. Carolyn can't wait to see what amazing future projects await her!
carolynmazuca.com @carolynmazuca



**TANYA
ORELLANA**
Scenic Designer

TANYA ORELLANA (Scenic Designer, she/her/hers) designs performance spaces for theatre, opera and immersive experiences. Originally from San Francisco's Mission District, she has been a core member of the award-winning ensemble Campo Santo since 2008. She is a member of Wingspace Theatrical Design and an organizing member of La Gente: The Latinx Theatre Design Network. Tanya received her M.F.A. in Scenic Design from CalArts and is the 2016 recipient of the Princess Grace Fabergé Theatre Award.



**DANIEL
CORRAL**
Sound Design & Original Music

DANIEL CORRAL (Sound Design & Original Music, he/him/his) is a mixed heritage Filipino-American sound artist born and raised in Eagle River, Alaska. In Los Angeles since 2005, his work includes accordion orchestras, microtonal electronics, video, handmade music boxes, sound installations, chamber music, puppet operas, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Corral taught at CalArts from 2016 to 2020 and the Los Angeles DCA declared him a 2019–2020 Cultural Trailblazer.



EDGAR LANDA

Fight Director

EDGAR LANDA (Fight Director, he/him/his) is an actor/director and creates fights and violence for theatres large and small. Fight credits include: Geffen Playhouse, San Diego Rep, South Coast Repertory, The Wallis, Mark Taper Forum, and Tennessee Shakespeare Company. Edgar serves on the faculty of the USC School of Dramatic Arts and is a long-time collaborator of Son of Semele Ensemble. He is an SDC and AEA member and supporter of intimate theatre in Los Angeles. edgarlanda.com

MORALES/O'CON CASTING

Casting

MORALES/O'CON CASTING (Casting) Rosalinda Morales and Pauline O'con, CSA have been collaborating for over 14 years. Their meeting was fated when Pauline was the Industry/ Talent Relations Manager at the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival (LALIFF) where Rosalinda had several short films being showcased. Upon discussing their casting knowledge from the theatre, independent film, network television and studios, they band together to begin crafting new, unique, and fun casting experiences.



MIRIAM MENDOZA

Production Stage Manager

MIRIAM MENDOZA (Production Stage Manager, she/her/hers) is an El Paso, Texas native who graduated from University of Texas at El Paso with her B.F.A. in Stage Management (2016). Miriam then moved to Southern California where she received her M.F.A. in Stage Management from University of California, Irvine. She continues to work as an educator and stage manager in the greater Los Angeles area as well as a Guest Talent Coordinator for Disney's Imagination Campus at the Disneyland Resort.

BORDERS

“NEW LINES GOT PAINTED ON THIS LAND
IMAGINARY LINES MADE WITH BLOOD
PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT THESE LINES

AND THEY SAY

“WHAT’S ON THAT SIDE IS YOURS
AND WHAT’S ON THIS SIDE IS MINE”

BUT THEY DON’T ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT
THE HISTORY OF THOSE LINES”

—Alma

In 1821, when Mexico gained its independence from Spain, the U.S. and Mexico shared a border for the first time, though it amounted to little more than a “collective act of imagination,” Rachel St. John writes in *Line in the Sand*. Mexico still held what would one day become Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Texas, parts of Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming and a sliver of Oklahoma.





The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) was an armed conflict between the United States and Mexico under the administration of James K. Polk, the 11th President of the United States. Polk believed the U.S. had a “manifest destiny” to spread across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. After his election in 1844, the border between the two countries changed drastically.

In 1845, Polk ordered U.S. troops to enter a disputed territory in present-day south Texas, leading to armed conflict between the United States and Mexico and the official declaration of war in 1846. A series of U.S. victories led to the defeat of the Mexican army and the fall of Mexico City. The Mexican government surrendered in 1847.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) officially ended the two-year war between the two countries. Mexico ceded 55 percent of its territory, adding an additional 525,000 square miles to United States territory, including the land that makes up all or parts of present-day Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.



Mexico also gave up all claims to Texas and recognized the Rio Grande as America's southern boundary. In return, the United States paid Mexico \$15 million and agreed to settle all claims of U.S. citizens against Mexico.

"We Didn't Cross the Border, the Border Crossed Us!"
- a rallying cry of the Mexican/Chicanx immigrant rights movements in the United States.

Throughout the play, there are several references to borders and boundary lines. Whether it's the geographical border between the U.S. and Mexico or the boundary line between Angel and Alma's personal space, borders/lines are there for a reason: to keep in and to keep out.



**"THAT'S A LINE
YOU SEE IT?
YOU DON'T CROSS
THAT LINE"**

—Alma

***WHAT IS YOUR OWN HISTORY WITH CROSSING BORDERS? HOW MANY "BORDERS" HAD TO BE CROSSED FOR YOU TO BE WHERE YOU ARE RIGHT NOW? (STATE LINES, NATIONAL LINES, COUNTY LINES, CITY LINES, PROPERTY LINES, ETC.)**

WHAT PERSONAL BOUNDARY LINES DO YOU KEEP IN YOUR WORLD? WHO IS AND WHO ISN'T ALLOWED TO CROSS THEM?

LA PUENTE. THE BRIDGE.

WHEN WE MOVED HERE
TO LA PUENTE

I WAS THINKING THE NAME
IS A SIGN

THIS IS THE BRIDGE
CONNECTING US

LETTING US GO BACK TO
THE PAST

—Alma

Located 20 miles east of downtown Los Angeles in the San Gabriel Valley, the City of La Puente is home to approximately 40,000 people.

The original inhabitants of the area now known as La Puente were the Kizh and the Tongva who lived in a village called Awingna, which linguists translate as “abiding place.”

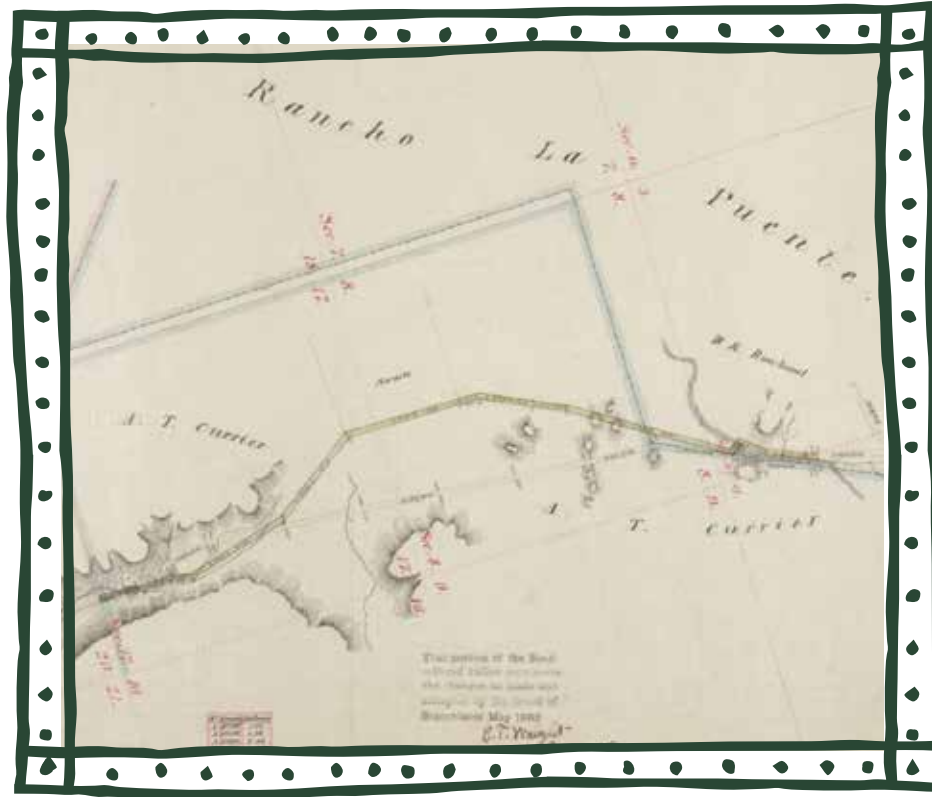
In 1769, the Portolá-Serra expedition from Spain (which consisted of ten Spanish soldiers and two Franciscan priests) became the first Europeans to see inland portions of Alta California. After camping on the east side of the San Gabriel River, Father Juan Crespi wrote in his diary that they had to build a bridge (“puente” in Spanish) to cross the river.



A modernized version of the bridge can be seen on the official seal of the City of La Puente.

Photograph of a Tongva woman (whom the Spanish referred to as “Gabrieleño”) filling a granary with acorns, c.1898





In 1771, the Mission San Gabriel was established by members of the Portolá-Serra expedition after engaging in armed conflict with the local Tongva people, who the Spanish referred to as “Gabrieleno.” After the establishment of the Mission San Gabriel, the area encompassing Avingna and what is now the city of La Puente became part of Rancho La Puente, established as a mission outpost and ranch.

The mission was built and run using what has been described as “slave labor” from nearby Tongva villages. Nearly 6,000 Tongva lie buried in the grounds of the San Gabriel Mission.

The modern community of La Puente began in 1841 when European settlers John Rowland and William Workman arrived by wagon train from New Mexico and obtained the title to the large 48,000 acre Rancho La Puente.

During the 1930s, the area was famous for its fruit and walnut groves. The largest walnut packing plant in the world was once located in La Puente.

La Puente was officially incorporated as a city in 1956. Today, the area is approximately 3.48 square miles and can be accessed from the I-10 and CA-60 Freeways.



DO YOU KNOW THE HISTORY OF YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD OR HOMETOWN? WHO ARE THE ORIGINAL INHABITANTS OF THE LAND?

WHAT IS SOMETHING OR SOMEONE THAT BRIDGES YOU TO YOUR PAST? DOES CONNECTING TO THE PAST HELP YOU IN THE PRESENT OR IN YOUR FUTURE? HOW?

IMMIGRATION

**“WHEN THESE IMMIGRATION STORIES
BECOME HEADLINES, WE DON’T GET TO
FEEL THE HEARTBEAT AND THE PULSE
OF WHAT IT MEANS FOR TWO PEOPLE
WHO LOVE EACH OTHER SO INTENSELY
TO BE SEPARATED.”**

—Benjamin Benne

Every single U.S. President since Dwight D. Eisenhower, regardless of political party, has used administrative action to shape immigration policy.

By the numbers, President Barack Obama has deported more people than any other U.S. President. Under the Obama administration, between 2009 and 2015, more than 2.5 million people are estimated to have been deported, which is more than the sum of deportees under all the U.S. presidents in the 20th century. This led to Obama being labeled the “deporter-in-chief” by critics in the immigrant rights community.

President Donald Trump used “illegal immigration” (the process of migrating into the United States in violation of federal immigration laws) as his signature platform during his presidential campaign in 2016. He repeatedly referred to immigrants without legal status as criminals stealing jobs from U.S. citizens. During his campaign, Trump called for the construction of a border wall to be built along the United States-Mexico border. He said, if elected, he would “build the wall and make Mexico pay for it.”

The Trump administration enacted a “zero tolerance” policy on unauthorized immigration. Under that policy, every migrant attempting to cross the U.S. border anywhere other than at an official port of entry was to be detained and criminally prosecuted. This policy included asylum seekers and led to the systematic separation of newly arriving adult migrants from their children who had accompanied them if they were crossing into the U.S. without authorization. Under Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy, it is estimated that 5,500 children were separated from parents at the southern border, mainly in the spring of 2018.



Under current U.S. President Joe Biden, the administration is seeking to offer financial compensation to families for the damage inflicted on them under Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy. Some families could receive as much as \$450,000 for each member who was directly affected.



This play takes place during the brief window of time between Trump’s election and his inauguration, when tensions were at an all-time high and a real fear was present about what would happen to those living in the U.S. who were undocumented. The characters of Alma and Ángel don’t know what Immigration policies the new administration will put in place or how those policies will impact their lives.



PLAYWRIGHTS' INSPIRATION.

[Excerpts from Summit Spotlight, courtesy of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts]

Benjamin Benne wrote his new play *Alma* about his mother. Or at least that's what he set out to do when he began writing his personal tale of a Mexican immigrant and her 17-year-old American daughter, Angel.

"My mother was an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala who came to the United States in the late '70s," said Benne, who was born and raised in Los Angeles County... "I was in elementary school, and one morning, my mother said to me, 'I can't drop you off at school today' – which is something she did every day," said Benne. "Instead, she said, 'My friend Maria is going to drop you off because I have something really important I have to do.' "... When Benne saw his mother again later that afternoon, she told him, "I'm a United States citizen now."

As he looks back on that memory today, Benne thought it was both remarkable and a bit arbitrary that his mother could have gone from not being a citizen in the morning to suddenly that afternoon – she was.

"That got me thinking about the history of immigration and immigration law in the United States and how it's been constantly shifting," said Benne, whose mother qualified for amnesty under President Reagan in the 1980s.

The playwright soon realized that his idea for a play, about a pregnant woman who crossed the border at 18 with the same dreams as Benne's mother, was no longer his mother's story. Not in 2016, anyway. "My mother's pathway to citizenship no longer exists for someone who is currently in the same situation my mother was then," he said. "That got me researching what the legal loopholes and Catch-22s are – and that research is what turned into *Alma*."

WHAT IS A STORY FROM YOUR FAMILY THAT NEEDS TO BE TOLD? WHO NEEDS TO HEAR IT?

WHAT IS THE BEST FORMAT FOR THIS STORY - A PLAY, A SONG, A TV SHOW, A PAINTING...?

DESEO/WISHES

WHEN I WAS 17

I PROMISED THAT EVERY DESEO OF
YOURS WOULD COME TRUE

(I WAS GONNA DO ANYTHING TO
MAKE SURE THEY'D COME TRUE)

—Alma

IS THERE SOMEONE IN YOUR
LIFE WHO WORKS TO MAKE
YOUR WISHES COME TRUE?
HOW?

DO YOU REMEMBER A WISH
YOU HAD WHEN YOU WERE 7
YEARS OLD? WHAT DO YOU
WISH FOR TODAY? WHAT IS
ONE SMALL STEP YOU CAN
TAKE TO MAKE THAT WISH
A REALITY?

AMERICAN DREAM

**"I GOTTA MAKE SURE
YOU'RE GONNA BE OK."**

—Alma

"The American Dream" is the idea that anyone in the United States, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain success and change their life circumstances for themselves and their children. The mother and daughter we meet in the play – Alma and Angel – have very different feelings about the American Dream, what it takes to achieve it and whether it is even possible.

Alma believes that the path forward for Angel is to get great grades on her SATs, go to UC Davis and become a veterinarian. She believes if all this happens her daughter will "be okay" no matter what happens with Alma's own citizenship status.

DO YOU HAVE AN
AMERICAN DREAM?
WHAT MAKE IT AN
AMERICAN DREAM?

WHAT IS YOUR FAMILY OR
COMMUNITY'S AMERICAN
DREAM? WHAT DO THEY
BELIEVE WILL HELP YOU
ACHIEVE THIS DREAM AND
"BE OKAY?"

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO
YOU TO "BE OKAY?"

STUDENT MATINEE PROJECT FACULTY

Debra Piver, Resident Teaching Artist

Ramy El-Etreby, Teaching Artist

Johnathon L. Jackson, Teaching Artist

Tara Ricasa, Teaching Artist

Deanna McClure, Graphic Designer

SOURCES

<https://www.usatoday.com/border-wall/>

<https://www.usatoday.com/border-wall/story/us-mexico-border-history/510833001/>

<https://www.history.com/topics/mexican-american-war/mexican-american-war>

<https://lapuente.org/about-us/city-facts/>

<http://www.allabouthh.org/history/rancho-la-puente>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mission_San_Gabriel_Arc%C3%A1ngel

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/28/us/politics/trump-family-separation-border.html>

<https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2018/7/31/trump-zero-tolerance-policy>

<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obamas-deportation-policy-numbers/story?id=41715661>

<https://usdac.us>