

# Community Perspectives: Riffing with John Clinton Eisner

Monday, February 2, 2009

## February 2009 - Andrea Thome

INTRO BY JOHN CLINTON EISNER...

This month's essay is by Andrea Thome, the director of Lark's annual U.S.-Mexico "Word Exchange" and a translator, actor and playwright in her own right. She came to the Lark eight years ago as a fellow in our Playwrights' Workshop program, and quickly became an integral part of our community. Her vision of inclusiveness in theater, her artistry and intelligence, her good judgment, and her passionate connection to the people with whom she works are qualities that have contributed to the Lark's ethos and the way we function as a culture. Equally, her bilingualism, her comfort traveling in and among cultural enclaves in New York City and elsewhere, and her open heart and mind have given her a unique perspective on what it means to be an American—and to define America for future generations.

Her belief in theater's limitless possibilities to bring people together from many different backgrounds is such a match for the Lark's mission and vision, that it was very important to me to ask Andrea to share some of her thoughts with us this month.

John Clinton Eisner  
Producing Director

### HAIL TO THE MUTT!

Essay by **Andrea Thome**



"Writing in two languages at once cannot be literature," a respected and veteran Cuban novelist once told me in Havana. We had asked him if he considered the writing of Cubans living in the U.S. to be Cuban literature. "Literature," he insisted "is the highest, purest expression of a language. When you mix languages, the result is mediocrity." To him, bilingual writers like me had to follow one narrow path to its greatest heights, keeping the road clear of linguistic litter.

But what if the language you think in and speak doesn't spring from one clear source but, like a river, flows from different streams? Even my supposed "first language," Spanish, mixes Costa Rican, Chilean and Spanglish waters. Learning English and Spanish almost simultaneously made me aware—even as a kid—that no language is pure and no language alone carries the whole truth.

Growing up bilingual in the Midwest, communication was a daily challenge that required not just choosing the right words, but attuning myself to gestures, tones of voice, and the invisible webs of habit and history that made people behave differently in Wisconsin than they did in Chile. Even choosing which language to use in describing an experience affected the meaning of that experience. Saying "Me gustas" to someone you had a crush on meant admitting that they had an effect on you, but telling him "I like you" made you the active, confident one. Being restricted to one language frustrated me. For instance, there's no good English translation for "ubicarse." To find a place for yourself? To understand where you are, enough to fit in? Maybe gringos had no need for that word.

So I told the Cuban novelist: my words are born from two parents, English and Spanish. Each has sculpted and structured my perceptions, but neither one alone can chart my mental geography. Their interaction has created a third, multi-voiced language that shapes my thoughts and carries them out into the world. Wouldn't the utmost expression of this language count as "literature?" And wouldn't this literature, then, be multilingual too?

The writer wasn't convinced. Did he, like an anachronistic believer in the myth of racial purity, believe that mixing two "pure" languages degraded both (and, soon enough, the whole culture)? It seemed that in his eyes, my linguistically mixed-breed, mongrel form of writing had no more chance of attaining the status of "literature" than a street dog had of winning a purebred dog show

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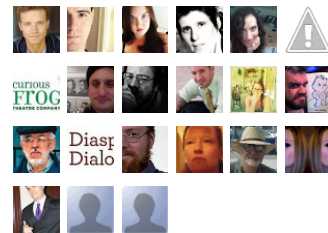
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#### Lark Play Development Center

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A laboratory for new voices and new ideas, the Lark provides playwrights with indispensable resources to develop their work. The Lark brings together actors, directors, playwrights and the community to allow writers to learn about their own work by seeing and hearing it, and by receiving feedback from a dedicated and supportive community.

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—or than a mutt had of becoming president.

Perhaps it's just another generation speaking. One which thinks that purity—of language, of culture, of this idea of “race”—actually exists.

My family and I watch Obama on the television. “Why would you want to call yourself a mutt?” asks my aunt, a 76-year old Austrian woman who married into my Dad's multilicious family of Costa Ricans mixed with Germans, Mexicans, and Ecuadorans. “Mutt is offensive.”

Is it? I think it's playful, candid, strong. To her generation, a mutt is someone who doesn't know who her parents are. A bastard street dog. But, it seems to me, the mutt herself knows where she comes from. Perhaps the only ones uncomfortable with the mutt's blurred parentage are those obsessed with classifying her—people who believe, perhaps, that a dog (or a piece of writing, or a playwright herself) whose breed can't be classified has no value. How do you sell it, for instance, when you don't know what kind of dog it is? And how do you sell a play when it's so...crossbred? Multiethnic? What do you even call it? Is it American, or hyphenated-American? Should you slot it into your season's one ethnic slot? And what if it speaks (oh no) in an “other” language? At what point do we feel comfortable enough to accept multiple languages, cultural references, the simultaneous existence of differing experiences of reality as...us?

When I discovered theater, I found a language that felt whole because words were just one form of translating a moment. And when I moved to the Bay Area, with its polyglot, multilingual theater community, including a remarkable variety of Latino-founded groups, I finally felt free to start writing, in all my languages.

Theater is inherently multilingual. So many different vocabularies coexist onstage and must work together to create one integrated experience. This, to me, is life. In theater, every act of language—verbal, physical, musical or visual—structures reality in different ways (just like English structures my thoughts differently than Spanish). Not only are we allowed to communicate using more than just one language—we're required to. Theater acknowledges that reality is multidimensional, and that only by seeing through many sides of this prism do we even approach the experience of living.

So why do we still hang on to limited ideas and classifications? Each time a play by a Latino/a writer is not considered within the categories of All-American plays or “plays for a general audience,” we regress to living within a paradigm that values “purity.” Living not only with the delusion that Latinos aren't American, but that American-ness doesn't contain some *Latinidad*, that English contains no Spanish and Spanish no English, and that American culture hasn't been shaped and affected by Latinos (and Native Americans, Africans, Asians, and more...) since before this nation officially became a nation. Thousands of words in the English language are derived (or imported unchanged) from Spanish. And I would like to ask that old Cuban writer if, in his quest for linguistic purity, he plans to expunge from his vocabulary over 6,000 Arabic words that help make up the Spanish language—including words as “Spanish” as “guitarra” and “Hola” (which probably comes from “Allah,” like the classic “Olé!”). Many roots come together to create a language, and no language—or culture, or art form—stays the same as it grows despite the best efforts of La Real Academia Española or Arizona lawmakers.

So, can we honor the messy integration of our brains, minds and languages as they are? Can we open spaces where people can engage their whole selves in the joyful, difficult work of making theater—our necessarily multidisciplinary and wonderfully polluted form? Ironically, my colleagues and I have often found it necessary to create spaces specially focused on Latinos not only to produce our work (the 2008-09 Off-Broadway season includes ZERO plays by Latinos) but also to make theater in an environment where we don't have to fit someone else's exotic (or limited) idea of a Latino writer. No one at INTAR has called a scene I write “magical realism” just because it contains Spanish, nor do they use words like “hot,” “urban” or “rhythms” in advertising a play. These spaces are necessary and nurturing, but they shouldn't be the only place we're free to be artists in all our complexity.

For that reason, I love working on the Lark's annual U.S.-México Playwright Exchange because it creates that rare theatrical space where I can exist in all my languages. I love watching and listening to the Mexican and U.S. playwrights' messy attempts to negotiate each others' language, their gestures, the rediscovery of certain words and the creation of others, the way a third language emerges out of the interplay between their different national and mental vocabularies. Bonds of alliance are born this way, when we have to fill in the gaps of understanding by creating our own shared, intimate language. And isn't it this what makes us write plays? This striving to find forms, to communicate verbally or nonverbally with all the tools of language we have at our disposal, trying like madwomen to achieve the almost impossible task of bringing the wordless to life on stage?

It's a challenge to be responsible to our multiplicity. Not only the multiplicity in ourselves, but also the multiplicity of the larger planet we inhabit. Maybe that means not just looking at the seemingly disparate parts and connections within us, but also examining the ways in which no culture, nation or society lives fully independent of another. Or humbly learning and writing about people completely unlike us, or seeing a play in a language we don't understand—even without super-titles. It might mean stepping out of ourselves and embracing the artistic freedom that brings. Or, simply, taking the responsibility to think and write about the world. These worlds.

In Latin America, there is a word to describe the cultural, ethnic and linguistic mixing—of indigenous, African, European, and, more recently, Asian and Middle Eastern migrations—that produced modern Latin Americans: “mestizaje.” Somos todos mestizos. In this America, then, at this time, let’s embrace what my friend Marlene Ramírez Cancio calls our “Muttizaje.” Let’s acknowledge the linguistic/artistic/ethnic/cultural/spiritual miscegenation within us, so that no one is asked to emphasize certain characteristics or deny others in order to be classifiable. Let’s change the paradigms that established the categories. Or, maybe, let’s just stop trying to classify. Hail to the Mutt in all of us.

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