

**Legal Name**

Two River Theatre Company

**Project Title**

To host playwright Tanya Saracho and director Jerry Ruiz at Two River Theater to support their work as theater artists, and imagine and explore new approaches to demand-building for theater among Latino audiences

**DDCF Grant Number**

2013239

**Project Progress and Successes**

Playwright Tanya Saracho and director Jerry Ruiz made excellent progress during their 30 days in Red Bank, NJ, carrying out the project that Two River Theater eventually dubbed "Nosotros" ("Us"). Nosotros, an artistic outreach program dedicated to engaging Red Bank's Latino community in a dialogue where they feel their stories are heard, grew out of the Crossing Borders festival and is now an ongoing initiative supported by Two River's Artistic, Education, and Marketing departments. Our objective was to reach out to the large Latino community in Red Bank, a community that historically has not had a significant presence in the theater's audiences. Using artists as ambassadors who would bridge the theater and the community, we wanted to go to their spaces, while also inviting them into the theater. We began by arranging for Tanya and Jerry to meet with important civic leaders who could connect them with the Latino community--business leaders, heads of non-profit organizations, church leaders, daycare providers, medical professionals, teachers, and others who work with and advocate for Latinos and Latinas living and working in Monmouth County. Fostering these relationships over time proved invaluable to the success of the Nosotros project.

In addition to one-on-one relationships that developed between Tanya /Jerry and Nosotros participants, two of their most important relationships during this project were with The Source Latina Girls' Group, a support group at the local high school in Red Bank, and Casa Freehold, a non-profit that advocates for and works with day laborers in the local area. Often these day laborers are recent, undocumented immigrants.

Tanya met with and worked with the Latina Girls Group for two separate workshops during the residency period. She was able to build a strong, mentoring relationship with the teenagers in this group. During her conversations with these students, she was able to learn a great deal about their experiences growing up in the United States, often as children of undocumented immigrants. She was able to talk to them about their experiences mediating and translating for their own parents, who often have a significant language barrier and greater difficulty navigating their new country.

Tanya and Jerry also worked with Casa Freehold on two separate occasions, and perhaps the highlight of the project was the visit to the theater by a group of participants from Casa Freehold consisting largely of about 15 or so day laborers and their families. Tanya and Jerry led them in a sharing and storytelling session where many of them related their experiences crossing into the US and making their way to New Jersey. This session culminated with our sharing a meal with the participants and with the theater's artistic leadership. After that visit, our partner at Casa Freehold wrote: "As you know, many Latino

immigrants have a very hard existence here in America. Respectful treatment, not to mention exposure to the arts, is a rarity for them. With your help, we look forward to being able to provide our members with more wonderful experiences like these."

In exchange for their participation in the Nosotros project, participants were given free tickets to performances at Two River Theater. Additionally, Two River created very specific new opportunities for its Latino community to attend the theater, including Spanish-captioned performances of the musical Camelot and two world-premiere plays: Guadalupe in the Guest Room by Tony Meneses and Your Blues Ain't Sweet Like Mine by Ruben Santiago-Hudson. We also offered a free Spanish-language performance of our holiday show for young people, The Very Hungry Caterpillar and Other Eric Carle Favorites. We hope that our work with the participants will only be the beginning of an ongoing conversation, and that they will continue to attend performances and readings at the theater in the coming months and years.

### **Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project**

We envisioned that Tanya and Jerry would be ambassadors for the theater, constantly sharing with people what art does and how it can impact their lives. During the residency period, however, Tanya was engaged as a writer on two television programs, *Girls* and *Looking*, and had limited time away from Los Angeles (where she works) and Chicago (where she is based). Although we addressed this challenge by restructuring the format of her site visits [see Section B], planning additional opportunities for the community to engage directly with Two River's staff, and by having Jerry make more visits to Red Bank on his own, Tanya's schedule made it more difficult for them to create sustained relationships over the full course of the residency period.

Additionally, we learned that many Latinos are inhibited by a perceived class or cultural barrier toward attending the theater; it is simply not something they grew up with. Others (particularly undocumented immigrants) wish to stay under the radar and remain invisible. It was, at times, challenging to organize community groups of more than a few people for the workshops; ultimately, Tanya and Jerry only came into direct contact with 50 or 60 people from the Latino community in Red Bank. It was also difficult, given the sensitivities of the participants, to obtain their contact information (particularly for the undocumented immigrants). And, on occasion, it was difficult to get participants to engage in follow-up conversations.

### **What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?**

Tanya/Jerry and Two River Theater took several steps to make Nosotros participants feel safe. Whenever possible, Tanya conducted meetings and workshops in Spanish rather than English. And Two River provided food and childcare at workshops that were open to the public and special events, including performances at the theater. Once people knew they were truly welcomed into the theater space, Tanya and Jerry were amazed at how easy it was to get project participants to open up to them, and how willing they seemed to continue to attend and participate in events at the theater.

Two River is committed to developing its Latino audience and building a long-term dialogue with them. We would encourage any theater or arts organization to make this invitation. The challenge for the theater is how to continue this work on an ongoing basis without a bilingual staff member. We were very successful at setting up special events--but for those

people for whom language is a barrier, we do not have the capacity to make the Latino community feel welcome every day.

**Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.**

See attachments.

**If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N**

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Yes, John Dias, Artistic Director, [jdias@trtc.org](mailto:jdias@trtc.org)