INTRODUCTION—ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

(Radio.) Immigrants have taken to the city streets in mass. They demand respect and equality. Throughout the country there are reports of demonstrations in support of immigrant rights. Thousands of them declare that they are neither a hindrance nor an expense to the country. On the contrary, they are hard working individuals who contribute to the country’s economy. They demand recognition and...

(There’s a strange sound. The watchman gets up and turns off the radio.)

Thus begins the one–man children’s theater piece, ¡Viva Pinocho! A Mexican Pinocchio, a new adaptation of the famous classic story, The Adventures of Pinocchio, (1883) by Carlo Collodi (1826–1890). Narrated from the perspective of a young boy from Mexico who enters the United States illegally, this play addresses such immigration to the U.S.,
a subject ever more relevant in that country. This situation demands urgent attention to the plight of young children who accompany their parents as family, abandoning their native countries in search of better living prospects. Following their parents, children face an arduous and unsettling process of change and profound transculturation. This population pays a high price, as they are uprooted from their mother culture. This is one of the social consequences of the worldwide immigration phenomenon, a theme not often broached with our children and youth. That is why I decided it was necessary to bring it onstage in children’s theater. 

The majority of the 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. come from Latin America. While illegal immigration traumatizes the immigrants and creates grave disruptions to the U.S., this is a worldwide phenomenon. In terms of the U.S. Latino community, it constitutes news of the utmost relevance, frequently invoked in political debate. Illegal immigrants, undocumented, foreigners, undocumented workers, criminals, invaders and wetbacks are a minuscule number of the plethora of adjectives employed to describe people that, oppressed by diverse pressing situations in their native country, cross the border between Mexico and the U.S. All of these terms reflect the concept of an alien invader, a characterization that could stick for life.

I do most of my theater and education work in New York City. New York is an archetype of a city made up by immigrants and one of the cardinal points of Latin American immigration, experiencing a growing Mexican
presence. Sadly, even though it is considered one of the theatre capitals of the world, New York offers little by way of children’s theater, apart from Disney film adaptations of classic European stories presented on Broadway stages\(^3\). Broadway’s huge performances, based on Disney’s successful animated films, have overwhelmed the few theaters that stage children’s theater, neglecting the reality and the social, familial, and personal needs of New York’s children. Specifically regarding Hispanic children and their families in contemporary society, it is urgent to stage children’s theater pieces that address the topic of immigration. How does one stage such a complex and controversial theme in the face of such diverse and opposed opinions in a way that does not exclude either those for or against? How does one justify the “injustice of the immigration laws”?

This paper will examine the creative process and the research that went into the formation of my new play, ¡Viva Pinocho! A Mexican Pinocchio, which recently opened in 2009 at Teatro SEA\(^4\) in New York. Special attention will be given to immigration, identity politics, cultural preservation, transculturation, and assimilation.

**Immigration Now**

After the tortuous and historic approval of the health reform proposed by U.S. President Barack Obama (2009, *Title I. Quality, Affordable Health Care for All Americans*), the immigrant community anticipated an official step towards the long awaited Immigration Reform, something not attempted since the Presidency of Ronald Reagan\(^5\). To
date, no concrete steps have been taken at the federal level, and many groups for and against immigrant rights speculate about the current government’s reticence to assume a well-defined posture. Many feel that President Obama has not followed through with his campaign promises and urge him to take a decisive stand.

The U.S. Census amplifies these concerns. Its pervasive publicity invites “all” to “be counted”\(^\text{6}\). According to the United States Census Bureau, the number of Latinos or Hispanics in the U.S. has grown to 50 million people, making it the largest minority in the country. This effectively turns the U.S. into a country with the third largest population of Hispanics in the world, already giving rise to the term “Estadounihispano”. Many U.S. citizens feel threatened by this and now pay special attention to topics related to border control, deportations and illegal immigration in general.

The approval of Law SB1070 in the State of Arizona has ratcheted up the intensity\(^\text{7}\). In April 2010, the Governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer, signed the toughest anti-immigration law in the U.S. This law authorizes police to detain any undocumented person that is an illegal immigrant, or that looks “reasonably suspicious” according to his/her race or origin. Many advocacy groups, along with President Obama, have denounced the law as unjust, emphasizing it goes against liberty and democracy. Even with citizenship status, some individuals and entire families in Arizona refuse to leave their homes out of fear. This dramatic situation continues to fuel popular demands for solutions to a problem that affects 12 million illegal
Immigrants in the United States. 

Immigration and our kids
The younger children of the immigrants present us with a diverse panorama. Those born in the U.S. automatically obtain U.S. citizenship, even if their parents and siblings remain illegal. Those who arrive at a young age, even when predominantly raised in the U.S., retain their illegal status. Both scenarios limit the child’s ability to fully develop in U.S. society. In the first instance, the child citizen lives under the menace of losing any or all of his relatives, while the non–citizen children constantly risk being deported along with their families.

According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Department, there are around 1.5 million K–12 students that lack legal status. It is also estimated that there are approximately 2 million U.S. born students with undocumented parents. The greatest number of undocumented students can be found in the following states: California, Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Nevada, Texas, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, New Jersey, New México, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, and Washington.

Even though the laws do not prohibit these children’s access to public education, their status as “undocumented” or “illegal” continues, undermining their academic achievement. In a study by the American Sociological Association, sociologists Mark Levels, Jaap Dronkers and Gerbert Kraaykamp discovered that the education of immigrant children is affected by influences from their
native country, their host country and the immigrant community to which they belong. This study, which surveyed more than 7,000 15–year–old immigrants from 35 different countries, showed how these often undermined the academic achievement of immigrant children. The study was carried out in 13 Western countries.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{The creative process}

Whether directly or indirectly, all artistic genres help sharpen the senses. Frequently, artists harness sensorial stimuli to communicate with audiences, as in theater audiences. Education is part of my focus, as I consider myself an artist educator in children’s theater. I sought to create a theater performance that would address illegal Mexican immigrants in the U.S. It is a taboo theme when it comes to children’s theater. Paradoxically, regardless of my artistic stance on illegal immigration, I fore grounded my duty as an educator so as to present a plurality of perceptions and opinions. In essence: How do I maintain objectivity while developing a controversial socio–political topic? My audience consists of diverse elements, including documented and undocumented immigrants, as well as the general New York public. Furthermore, it was of vital importance to choose a story, adapt it to the theater, establish the setting, imbuing all with a personal style. It was then that I faced the same dilemma as whenever I initiate a new project. How to present the theme effectively with an artistic/educational intention, while making it fun and engaging? Some educational theater models seek to highlight
a moral lesson. In the worst cases, they become pamphleteering; every element becomes over worked and all subtlety is lost. Another model privileges the capacity for analysis of a younger public, inviting them to develop critical thinking by affecting each spectator in a unique manner. This second model can occasionally constitute a transforming aesthetic experience, one that will accompany the young spectator beyond the show itself. In ¡Viva Pinocho! A Mexican Pinocchio, I chose to work with the second model.

In order to narrate and effectively dramatize the predicament of the illegal Mexican immigrant in the U.S., I decided to update Pinocchio. Originally written by the Italian Carlo Lorenzini (Collodi), the Pinocchio character was immortalized by Disney in its 1940 animated film, Pinocchio. Since childhood, I have always been attached to this classic story about a boy puppet that wanted to become human. So much so, that in 1983, I interpreted the title role for the school theater in my town in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico.

Pinocchio’s story is both similar and has many analogies to the immigrant experience, where external identification weighs heavily on the subject. Pinocchio was a wooden puppet that aspired to be more; he wanted to be a boy of flesh and blood. He was in search of his roots as well as looking for a place where “dreams come true.” Such original traits led me to “Latinize” the story, relating it to current themes and contextualizing it in the new environment of the Hispano–American immigrant. ¡Viva Pinocho! A Mexican Pinocchio is about a puppet boy’s journey, about his own understanding of himself while
struggling to maintain his Latino heritage and find his home in a new land: the United States.

The inspiration for the stage setting comes from a photograph of a sculpture made out of old suitcases. What better object to evoke an immigrant than a suitcase? As one of the characters in the play states:

**Vigilante**

Suitcases are like people, different, with lots of things inside... right?¹²

This story takes place in an abandoned train station, lost somewhere in the desert between the U.S. and Mexico. A “Vigilante”/“Watchman” watches over hundreds of suitcases and lost belongings waiting in vain, as in Becket, since no one ever arrives to reclaim the baggage.

**The analogies**

In the original Pinocchio story, a cat and a wolf (a coyote in some versions) trick the puppet as he makes his way to school, promising him a better life in the theater. That is how they arrive at “Pleasure Island,” a place where everything appears to be fun. In my version, a coyote named Lobo tricks the puppet “Pino Nacho,” building up his expectations that at “Al Otro Lado” (the other side) he can make fast money to help his father:

**Coyote**

Sure, that’s what they tell us, but school is not for
me. I don’t need any of that. At school you have to work and do revolting homework. And what I need is to make some quick bucks. I know how to do it and where to find them.

Pinocho
Bucks, money? You know where to find money? I have to help Papa, because we have no money.

Coyote
Of course, I know, but not here. There’s not even a place where you can drop dead here.

Pinocho
That’s what I’ve heard. Papa hasn’t been able to sell anything at his store...

Coyote
Without a job there’s no money, without money there’s no food. You poor thing. It’s going to be rough for you and your dad.

Pinocho
But that’s why I’m going to school.

Coyote
It will take you years! But not me! I’ll make it fast. There are many who have gone to the Other Side and made money fast. They live well, and they
even help their families.

**Pinocho**

The Other Side? Where’s that place?

**Coyote**

It’s a beautiful and fun place. There’s always entertainment there and the best thing is that all your dreams come true.¹³

Like so many immigrants who abandon their home country to improve their economic situation, Pino Nacho agrees. According to the U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization, this is the reason why the majority of immigrants come to the U.S. Many of them are able to do it by hiring someone who helps them cross the border. Coincidentally, this person is often referred to as “pollero” or “coyote.”

After Pino Nacho decides to go “Al Otro Lado” or “to the United States”, he begins to have fun. In Karen Smith’s review, writer and current President of UNIMA–USA (Union Internationale de la Marionnette- United States Chapter) she states:

In the original tale, the Land of Toys (Paese dei Palocchi) mixes the aspects of a morality tale with those of social critique. And so, too, is this the case in the Teatro SEA’s version of the tale. In the Disney version of Carlo Collodi’s The Adventures of Pinocchio
had changed the Land of Toys (the setting in the original novel) to Pleasure Island (ostensibly, an amusement park) in the animated US version, Teatro SEA's version is similar in more ways to the Pleasure Island-amusement park concept. Both places are cursed. It is implied in the Disney version (perhaps even more a morality tale than the Collodi original) that Pleasure Island has some sort of bad reputation.¹⁴

Having forgotten his duties, the new stage lit surroundings soon blinded our small lead, who was then warned by constricted puppets that had lost their freedom:

**Marioneta 1**

*(In secret but desperately.)* Get out while you can, get out! Don’t be fooled. At least you are not controlled by strings.

**Pinocho**

What?

**Marioneta 2**

We used to think that we had no freedom, but we were able to move around and do what we wanted. But now all we do is work.

**Marioneta 1**

Not everything is the way it seems. We came here full of hope, and look how we ended up.¹⁵
Pinocchio chooses to continue having fun so as to avoid thinking about what he had left behind in his past. This situation dwells on the initial process of being uprooted, when hope still lingers. This is often the experience of many Latin American immigrants upon arrival to their host country, which in this case, is the U.S. This new and more technologically saturated environment, fast paced life, and an altogether different lifestyle, not only shocks, but also captivates the recent arrival. This illusion of personal progress and the ultimate arrival at the famous home of what is commonly invoked as “the American Dream,” soon becomes their focus. But, like in the original story, Pinocchio soon becomes a donkey, something common among all children who refused to study. I associate this image with immigrants, because their biggest complaint is that they must work ceaselessly in order to survive in the U.S.

Carni(a)valero

Freedom is not free. You have to pay for everything I’ve given you. You came here looking for what I had. Right? Well, now you have to pay for it. What’s that? You have no money? Then you must work to pay off your debt, and by my calculations, you’ll be working forever! So stop your whining and get to work.¹⁶

In Hispanic culture, the donkey evokes negative stereotypes such as illiteracy and ignorance. However, the
counterpoint is an association with strength, even diligence. Both readings of the donkey highlight the perspective of ¡Viva Pinocho! On one hand, the excessive workload is addressed. It is the only means of survival in an extremely materialistic world that not only imposes the necessity to work hard and make money, but also forces him or her to send money back to family members still living at home. Alternately, the donkey serves to highlight negative immigrant stereotypes based on their race, their native Spanish language, or their accents as they try to speak English, something that undermines the speaker:

Pinocho
Oh Virgencita, I have done everything wrong. (Cries.) I came here thinking that this would be the solution to all our problems and now just look at me. I’m turning into a donkey... Here they look at us and they treat us like mules. But I’m not a donkey. (Cries.) I should have listened to you and to Papá.¹⁷

¡Viva Pinocho! employs familiar images, stereotyped visions of Mexicans as well as of North Americans: Uncle Sam and a Mexican “charro” with a mariachi hat and poncho. The adult public has reacted adversely to such portrayals, which I insist on in order to stress their ridiculous nature. They serve as “hooks” to call attention and to stress the contrast between both.

The Stromboli character and the children’s guide to
“Pleasure Island” in the original story are now merged unto “El Carnivalero”, modeled after Uncle Sam. Famous all over the world, Uncle Sam is the personified United States. As an icon, he has represented the United States since his creation in 1821, and since then, he has served as the U.S. Army’s chief recruiter. In an evident transition, his image has ceased to represent the U.S. people and become a caricature of the U.S. government, almost like a tarnished mirror of citizen duties. In this play, this character announces at the beginning that everything is fun, something Pinocho begins to experiment with. However, further on in the story, he discovers the harsh reality that not everything is in fact fun. According to Karen Smith:

[...] the play deals in two stereotyped images: the stereotypical poncho–sombrero–clad–dozing “Mexican”, i.e., the victim; and the Industrial–Military–Complex–and–Ugly American bigot–racist stereotype of the United States, i.e., the victimizer. While some adult audience members may have felt the portrayal was a little too simple in its stereotyping of Mexican immigrants and US persecution, for a 55–minute production the play succeeds in broaching immigration issues with children and presenting the complex nature of the issue. And in the light of Arizona passing its recent controversial state law targeting illegal immigrants, a law that would negatively profile the Latino community, perhaps Teatro SEA’s “simple” depiction of victim and
victimizer may not be too far off the mark. It is clear that intelligent and sensitive dialogue over such an important social issue is more needed than ever.

Ultimately, my purpose is not to present a discriminatory piece. With that in mind, no “side” is singled out, whereas a redemption of the stereotypes of both groups is attempted.

Another familiar icon, which turns up on stage, is the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the world of the Catholic religion and in all of Latin America, she is recognized as the patron lady of México. Notwithstanding such a powerful association, within the context of U.S. religious diversity integrating such a Mexican Catholic religious icon in a children’s show, always stirs controversy. In the U.S., religion tends to be an intensely private affair pertaining to the personal family sphere, and to the various cults to which the individuals belong. For us, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is immediately linked to the Mexican folklore and cultural tradition, thus becoming enormously compelling for our staging of ¡Viva Pinocho! She assumes the key role of the Blue Fairy in the original story. As in the original version, she is responsible for granting wishes and dreams, starting with that of Gepetto, Don G., in my version. It is she who grants him the life of his puppet. Guadalupe also acts as a saving conscience and teacher of important life lessons. Her appearance always evokes the memory of what has been left behind, or lost, a cultural memory.

After being arrested and incarcerated for his
undocumented status, Pino Nacho encounters solitude, finding solace in a profound connection with his origin. Many immigrants describe a similar period of regret over their migration, a nostalgia for their past and a desire to return. Such a way back tends to be impossible, as the new reality does not allow it. In one scene, various musician members of a Mariachi band unsuccessfully attempt to play regional Mexican music. When informed of Pino Nacho’s intentions to return, they say to him:

Mariachi 4

Look at me. I came for what I thought was going to be a short time, have a little bit of fun and then go back. It’s been 20 years now and I’m still here.

Mariachi 2

You get married, have children. When you want to go back, the children don’t want to. No... “Impossible” doesn’t even begin to describe it.¹⁸

These characters lead us to the phenomenon of transculturation. This transition of one’s own culture finds an opposite in assimilation, which represents the whole or partial loss of a person’s culture of origin. Both processes can be voluntary, as is generally the case among immigrants, or they can be imposed, as is the case among ethnic minorities in a foreign context. In this play, these processes are crystallized in a condition referred to as “the Forgetful Disease.” Those that suffer such a “fictitious sickness” undergo
memory loss or outright reject their native culture: language, traditions and customs. That is when I decided to include the well known “mariachis de calacas” or “skulls”, frequently associated with the Mexican “Day of the Dead” \(^{19}\) celebration.

During his journey to “The Other Side”, Pino Nacho meets with a Mariachi de Calaveras. They are skeleton puppets wearing mariachi hats that hold traditional musical instruments, attempting to play regional Mexican music to no avail. They sound out of tune, are uncoordinated and don’t seem to remember the best–known melodies or songs from the mariachi repertoire. Pino Nacho helps them to remember the songs and is taken by surprise at how these mariachi music specialists have forgotten their own tradition. The musicians are troubled by their involuntary, or voluntary, memory lapse. It is involuntary due to the overwhelming nature of their immersion in such an alien culture where they remain isolated from their mother culture; voluntary due to their rejection of the past and their place of origin.

The skeletal image is used to represent the death of culture. Originally the musicians are unaware of how their time away from home has led them to forget their culture. Pino Nacho, still a recent arrival, has not yet lost contact with his immediate past, as he himself explains:

**Mariachi 1**

Look who’s talking. It’s happening to you too.
You’re already forgetting.
Pinocho

No, no. (To himself.) Oh no, this is what the marionettes were talking about. They all suffer from the “Forgetful disease”.

Mariachi 2

(Mocking.) Yes Sir... mister know-it-all Pinocchio is starting to forget things too.

Pinocho

It’s Nacho, ¡Nacho!

Mariachi 3

At least we don’t have those horrible donkey’s ears. (They laugh.)

Pinocho

Donkey’s ears?

Mariachi 1

You are turning into an ass! (They laugh.)

Mariachi 2

Into a working mule...²⁰

It is at that moment when all realize that they are losing their cultural essence. Even Pino Nacho has “fallen ill” with the “Forgetful Disease”. He discovers it all too late, after becoming bedazzled by his immersion in the new
and harsh reality. At this time, he begins to turn into a beast of burden. Like every illegal immigrant, he must face the music: survival becomes the epicenter of life; one must work and work in order to survive.

**Conclusion**
Rendering non–traditional and taboo themes in children’s theater is an act of courage and responsibility. It is courageous because we are confronted with often–adverse reactions from the public, especially the adult public. Even when the children enjoy the piece, some parents and teachers act as censors, questioning and strongly criticizing the show, especially if they differ from any of the postures sketched out. It has been interesting to observe how the staging provokes the spectators. This has been corroborated by the diverse reactions according to the different audiences: New York, Mexico City and San Juan. I’ve received responses ranging from “bravos” to a tense applause; from “congratulations” to “how dare you?” from “this is not for kids” to “all children should see this”. I respond by saying that we must take this and other socio–politically charged topics to stage, as it is every artist–educator’s responsibility to address our children’s realities.

With this adaptation I sought to achieve something different: not just a well crafted production, but also a foray into a thought provoking theme, one that would propitiate a parent/children, teacher/student or child/child dialogue. This is why I decided to give the play an open end. I did not want to specify the end or final road taken
by the main character, nor of the piece as a whole. I do not provide a final resolution, leaving the ending open so that the public can arrive at its own conclusion. The Vigilante character informs the public of what could have transpired at the end of the story, refraining from providing concrete details. The responsibility befalls on the public. It is a personal decision between the spectator, what lingers from the play, and their imagination. That is where the theater experience assumes the character of a total experience, since the spectator becomes a participant. The public exits the theater commenting, inquiring, weighing in, and the experience continues. That is my goal. Not just entertainment; this staging is designed to foster conversations and analysis about immigration both at home and in the schools.

Our children deserve a children’s theater that is fantastic, fun, but also profound, relevant and a total experience. We have had enough mindless children’s theater that underestimates their capacity. If as creators we treat our public with dignity, it will dignify us with a response. The public deserves good art and has a right to know and to understand the reality that surrounds it.

Manuel A. Morán Martínez, Ph.D.
Director of the Society of the Educational Arts
Teatro SEA “New York City’s Latino Children’s Theatre” and President of UNIMA’s North America Commission

2. In 2008, The Center for Immigration Studies estimated that there were 12.5 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. According to a Pew Hispanic Center report in 2005, 57% of illegal immigrants were from Mexico; 24% were from other Latin American countries, primarily from Central America; 9% were from Asia; 6% were from Europe; and 4% were from the rest of the world.

3. You can find more information about Disney Entertainment’s shows on their website at http://www.disneyonbroadway.com/


5. United States Health Reform. The White House: President Barack Obama. http://www.whitehouse.gov/health-care-meeting/proposal/whatsnew/overview (Title I. Quality, Affordable Health Care for All Americans) This Act puts individuals, families and small business owners in control of their health care. It reduces premium costs for millions of working families and small businesses by providing hundreds of billions of dollars in tax relief —the largest middle class tax cut for health care in history. It also reduces what families will have to pay for health care by capping out-of-pocket expenses.


11. More than 20 movies have been made about Pinocchio, and among those include Disney’s animated drawings in 1940, Luigi Comencini’s movie in 1972, and the not so successful film in 2002, directed by and starring, Roberto Benigni. Disney’s animated movie (which opened in February 7, 1940) was given the Oscar Award for Best Song. Even though it’s a vague adaptation from Collodi’s story, it’s considered a masterpiece within the animation world and has been deemed “culturally important” by the United States Congress Library and was also selected for preservation in the Registration of Movies.


19. A word often used in Mexico referring to skulls or skeletons (usually human) most commonly used as decoration during the annual Day of the Dead celebration on November 2.