

COMMUNITY AND CALM

Production manager powers the
performance of three world premieres

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Community and Calm

Production manager powers the performance of three world premieres

By Bridgette M. Redman

LA Downtown News Contributor

The magic of live theater depends on countless behind-the-scenes professionals. This is especially true when a company, such as the Latino Theater Company, produces three world premieres simultaneously.

At the heart of such effort is May Congxiao Fei, a production manager whose invisible hand, boundless positivity and creative problem-solving keeps the wheel turning for all their shows.

This fall, the Latino Theater Company will be producing:

- **'The Little King of Norwalk' by Israel López Reyes, Sept. 25-Nov. 2**, a nod to Gogol's *The Inspector General* set in Norwalk, where the playwright grew up. The show was commissioned by the company as part of their Circle of Imaginistas.

- **'Mascogos' by Miranda González, Oct. 2-Nov. 9**, a historical sci-fi exploring the untold stories of the Underground Railroad to Mexico. The show was commissioned by the company as part of their Circle of Imaginistas.

- **'Reh & Neel' by Ankita Raturi, Oct. 9-Nov. 16**, about a mother trying to instill her Indian culture in her American-born teenage son. The show is a collaboration between the Latino Theater Company and the Asian American theater collective Artists at Play.

With each show opening back-to-back, one week apart, Fei produces them with an artistic flair that keeps her running from the moment she wakes up until she goes to bed at night.

The Alhambra resident reads the rehearsal report just before she goes to bed so her subconscious can wrestle with any problems and she'll wake ready to form a plan. On a given day, she might have one production starting their tech at two, one starting at four and another starting at six.

She starts her day getting questions answered and then turns to setting up the hospitality table, which she describes as a ritual. Lining up snacks in alternating colors is, for her, both meditation and a way to keep actors hydrated and energized.

"It's super enjoyable," Fei said. "Imagine if you have three productions with one in tech, the other one in dress, the other one is doing the preview rehears-

al. And I have to walk around three rooms. How are they doing? Is everybody in a good vibe?"

Fei said it is important that she has an intensely positive attitude while remaining virtually unseen. Creating art, she points out, is often challenging and when problems arrive, it is natural for people to become frustrated.

"They need someone to be really positive to bring the good spirit to the group," Fei said. "You have to be the anchor of the space but you also have to be super invisible. The anchor is below the sea level, right? You have to be super stable and calm when questions and problems come to you."

Fei's goal is to reassure her co-workers, designers and actors that they'll figure out a solution.

"To describe my job, first, it has to be a planner," Fei said. "Second, it has to be problem solver. And third, you are going to support the whole team. You have to have a super big heart."

After rehearsals are finished and the actors leave, Fei stays for the post-rehearsal meetings so that she can hear what people's concerns are.

"Sometimes it's different when you read the report versus when you're listening to the group," Fei said. "You feel what they really need, so I always try to stay for those meetings. When (actors) tech, that's their working time. After tech, when everybody goes home, that's my working time."

Given that Fei grew up in China and studied both Eastern and Western directing methods, she's a good fit for a company committed to diversity and intersectionality in its storytelling.

"I work for multiple cultures, so I know that each culture has its way to tell the story," Fei said. "Each culture has its signature. As a production manager, you are serving three groups and what they need from me is support and understanding. Some designers are from a different culture and might request a different thing that you might not be able to understand at the starting point, but I can be more flexible because I understand and want to support this diversity."

Fei first began her career at the Latino Theater Company as a director. However, she became fascinated with the process of putting up three shows at once.

"It's just so cool the way they pulled out a season and not many theaters can do it because it's crazy," Fei said. "All the technical and scheduling problems happen at the same time. I was very curious how they figured it all out."

She expressed that curiosity to the artistic director, José Luis Valenzuela, who was happy to hand her the reins.

Fei points out that in addition to the three world premieres she is shepherding, that she is supporting the company's educational programs.

"We have multiple initiatives like this," Fei said. "It's a really supportive, super-generous ambition to serve the community. We really want to bring a good season to the community."

Helping produce three world premieres requires an especially good mindset, Fei said, because the scripts are constantly changing. She considers it her job to help set the tone.

"We're going to face a lot of challenges and a lot of things we don't know how to answer, but everybody should be on this same page that we are discovering, exploring and creating something really cool. There is no right or wrong. Once the whole group gets in a good mindset, then things are going to go super smooth."

The breadth and diversity of the shows contribute to the fun of Fei's job.

"I like the feeling that when you travel between three rehearsal rooms. You feel like you are doing a world travel," Fei said. "In the morning, I was in 1860 Mexico. In the afternoon, I am in today's Chicago. Then, I moved to Norfolk city and into another world that is a South Asian play. Then I'm traveling with this mom and her son as they go to DC. It's fascinating for me to work on three productions that are different in culture and period."

Fei also stresses that while each play takes place in a specific community and tells the story of a particular culture, the stories, themes and topics are universal. It's why she hopes audiences will return to see all three shows at the Latino Theater Company's complex.

While doing three productions at the same time has its challenges, it also has its rewards. Fei said that one day during rehearsals, she ended up with two of her designers from different productions sharing ideas and trading fabrics for costumes.



May Fei poses for a portrait on a stage at the Latino Theater Company in Downtown Los Angeles.

(Chris Mortenson/Staff)

"I'm building the connections between my co-workers and they get to know each other and they find their own friends and their own family," Fei said. "This is super meaningful."

Fei said her favorite part of her work is during those crazy weeks where the shows are opening and they're launching each production. However, she has learned to appreciate the parts of her job that she first found tedious, such as budgeting and spreadsheets.

Putting together a team of designers felt similar to casting a show. Fei said there are many good designers to choose from, but she tries to find the one that's specifically perfect for each story and make up a team that works well together.

"People should love their co-workers and we know not everyone can work along with everyone," Fei said. "I may need 15 designers. How are we going to match them and make sure this team is the best team, not just that the individual is the best individual."

Fei said last year the company hosted a festival in which 19 theater companies with more than 130 artists put on 119 performances in three weeks. The artistic director told Fei that he wanted her to schedule the performances so each artist could see the plays that the other groups put on. She said she went

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through 26 versions of the schedule before she was able to make that work.

"I look back now and I feel like—you're actually pretty cool," Fei said. "I felt a sense of achievement. I think that's my most creative moment."

In a city that revolves around the cinema, Fei points out that live theater is not the same as a movie. It is an art form that matters and has more urgency than ever before. She wants people to come and see the upcoming shows at the Latino Theater Company because they have such compelling stories — but she encourages people to attend any theater.

When working on the company's ed-

ucational program, she said she learned that many of the young people in the program had never seen a live theatrical production before.

"I get it, it's a super-fast world," Fei said. "People have so many things to do and they all have their problems and their to-do list. It's getting more difficult for everyone to take two hours just sitting in the theater watching a performance. But try it and you're going to love it."

Fei said she loves her behind-the-scene job and the opportunity to help create theater that makes the community a better place.

Fei insists she's just "one very normal human that super luckily got to work in

theater, but to her colleagues, she's the invisible anchor that steadies three productions at once — proof that theater's

magic depends as much on those behind the curtain as those in the spotlight."

LATINO THEATER COMPANY FALL SEASON

"The Little King of Norwalk," Theater 1, Oct 4-Nov. 2, previews begin Sept. 25

"Mascogos," Theater 3, Oct. 11-Nov 9, previews begin Oct. 2

"बेह & Neel," Theater 2, Oct. 18-Nov. 16, previews begin Oct. 9

WHERE: 514 S. Spring Street, Downtown Los Angeles

TICKETS: \$10 previews and Thursdays, \$51.50 adults, \$27.50

students, veterans, seniors and LAUSD employees,

latinotheaterco@thelatc.org, 213-489-0994,

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