

## ARTS &amp; CULTURE



Actor and poet Jesús I. Valles performs “(Un)Documents,” which runs at the Latino Theatre Company until Sunday, Nov. 20.

*Erich Petersen/Submitted*

## Latino Theater Company show calls out dehumanization of immigration policies

**By Bridgette M. Redman**

**LA Downtown News Contributing Writer**

If you are an immigrant in this country, or even a naturalized citizen, your whole world can revolve around paperwork. Your safety and the ways you can participate in life depend on the documents you carry.

Jesús I. Valles, themselves a naturalized citizen, was intimately familiar with this existence and when their brother was deported, they wrote a series of 20 poems that, with the help of director Rudy Ramirez, was turned into a lyric one-person stage show.

“(Un)Documents,” which runs at the Latino Theater Company from Friday, Oct. 14, through Sunday, Nov. 20, explores their life as a queer theater maker who has journeyed across both sides of a river, moved between languages and found their place in the United States.

It is, the theater explains on its website, a work in which “they create a new kind of documentation written with anger, fierce love and the knowledge that what makes us human can never be captured on a government questionnaire.”

Valles originally performed the poems in front of friends, collaborators and theater makers in Austin, Texas. They asked the audience, “Can these poems live as a show?”

“The impulse to do that was largely due

to the fact that people who have a close relationship to immigration policy in this country, so much of our life is dictated by paper,” Valles said. “How we can report our lives and every single movement on paper, which ultimately flattens our experience. It flattens our aliveness, the richness of our lives. There was something that felt really important about performance as the antidote to the flattening of the bureaucracy of immigration. The instinct to perform it and have these poems live in a more embodied way was very much a direct response to the stifling ways that paperwork can make us feel in this country.”

They credit Ramirez with helping to transform the piece, calling him the doula of this show. Ramirez invited them to finish a full draft so that it could be the headline show for a Latinx performance festival’s inaugural event in Austin. Valles had worked many times with Ramirez and they described him as really understanding how they work onstage, what their impulses are as an actor.

“Rudy was able to fine-tune and have a conversation with my instincts and rhythms as a writer,” Valles said. “A lot of the writing that happened in later iterations of documents was really the result of Rudy gently nudging and asking questions and asking for clarification about certain story bits and

asking for ways to make the story a little bit clearer and a little bit more unified for audience members, while also respecting those things that felt private or specific to community.”

For example, parts of the show have lines or dialogue that are delivered entirely in Spanish. For the most part, they don’t translate them. It won’t make audiences who don’t know Spanish miss any part of the story, but it also invites in Spanish-speaking audience members and lets them know there is something just for them.

“That simultaneous invitation and creation of spaces that are just for us inside the scripts, that’s really important,” Valles described.

Valles said that every time they have performed “(Un)Documents,” they feel they have been accompanied by their family. There are moments in the show where they perform as their mother, father, brother or sister.

“I never feel alone when I’m performing it,” Valles said. “I feel as if, when I voiced them, when I become them in body, I can bring them up there with me. For somebody like my brother, who was deported more than 10 years ago now, it feels like a magical way of challenging immigration policy. I’m able to bring my brother back here for a few

moments onstage.”

Their brother’s deportation was the catalyst to this show in part because his experience was such a deep contrast to their own way of attaining citizenship even though the circumstances of their arrival in this country weren’t very different.

“Both of us were here undocumented,” Valles said. “But through accidents of luck and bureaucracy and time and geography, one of us was able to become a citizen, then the other one was deported. There’s something that feels really cruel about the way that these destinies get doled out. Much of the show was born out of my need to wrestle with that cruelty and understand it and respond to it.”

The second event that led urgency to the creation of this show was the 2016 election and seeing how volatile immigration policy is and how it can change with the whims of any given administration. During the show Valles talks about how as a naturalized citizen, they are safe. Yet, during the Trump administration, they started to hear about cases where people were being denaturalized or about the detention of citizens who couldn’t immediately provide identification.

“I kept thinking about how volatile citizenship actually is and that in this country, citizenship actually means personhood,”

## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

DT

Valles said. "Depending on the whims of any given administration, your personhood could be called into question at any moment."

They said they didn't want the only thing they left behind to be bills, a Social Security card and their past-due notices from the library. This performance feels to them the closest thing to archiving a history that they believe is worth preserving.

As Valles has performed this around the country, they've engaged in conversations with audiences after the show, audiences who are always eager to share stories around immigration. It's brought home to Valles how many people in this country have an actual, palpable, visceral connection to the immigration system either because they are undocumented, formerly undocumented or have family who immigrated to this country.

"Yet, one of the contracts that we signed with the country and the immigration system here is a contract of silence because to talk about these things openly would be to give away information that would be dangerous, that would put us at risk or that will hurt too much," Valles said. "There's something that happens inside the theater space, inside the performance space, when people are able to talk about these things openly or hear them openly. That feels like an invitation to breathe, to acknowledge these histories."

Despite being very explicit about their stance on queerness, immigration and migration, Valles said they haven't experienced any pushback.

Developing the show led them to wrestle with their relationships to their brother, their father and their masculinity.

"That definitely was not part of the plan," Valles said. "Writing the show, I was realizing the sort of strange exclusion or difference that I felt from them, that I always felt different from them. I felt like I was doing boyhood wrong because I wasn't interested in the things they were interested in. This is strange, but I'll make the analogy. It's the first time I started to notice borders, that there are certain checkpoints in life and in our behavior that we sometimes have to meet or be able to pass. The inability to pass these checkpoints gets us in trouble."

They noticed their differences in such things as a disinterest in sports and a love for Bea Arthur, "The Golden Girls" and "Designing Women." They described themselves as being a markedly queer child in a family of otherwise very masculine men.

Yet, their pop culture interests and queer sensibility are something they believe allowed them to acclimate to the United States more quickly. They learned U.S. history and pop culture watching shows from the late '80s and early '90s. Those things helped them pass as an American even before they were naturalized.

In the show, they talk about formative experiences they had as a teenager hooking up with older men at Barnes & Noble and how that influenced what they thought about doing "good" things and "bad" things.

"You could do a thing that was deemed bad as long as nobody knew about it or saw it or perceived you as such," Valles said. "If you could keep a good front — and I was a really, really solid student in high school; I had to be good on paper. If I was good on paper, then I could get away with some semblance of 'behaving badly' because no one was going to talk about that. At a citizenship interview, nobody was going to ask about my queerness; they were going to ask me about my grades. That felt for me like such a strange permission to move inside my being queer."

Valles expressed deep gratitude to the Latino Theater Company for staging a full run of their show. When they were growing up in Texas, they did a lot of theater, speech and debate. Many of the Latino artists that they read about back then and those with last names they recognized were making theater at the Latino Theater Company.

"There's a sense of lineage and a sense of pride for me being in this space," Valles said. "Because of the company's history, because of how much the particular artists and how much the Latino Theater Company has meant for so many Latino artists working in the U.S. today. LA is not my home, and yet something about this feels like a kind of homecoming. It just feels really lovely and wonderful."

They describe Los Angeles as being an incredibly special place that is home to a wide network of people from all over the world. Anyone, they said, who lives in Los Angeles has already been touched by immigration policies. It's why they feel that "(Un)Documents" is a story worth sharing here.

**"(Un)documents" at the Los Angeles Theatre Center**

**WHERE:** 514 S. Spring Street, Los Angeles

**WHEN:** Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, Oct. 14 to Nov. 20.

**COST:** Tickets are between \$10 and \$48

**INFO:** [latinotheaterco.org](http://latinotheaterco.org)