



# SWIMMING WHILE DROWNING

## Study Guide







# Swimming While Drowning

by Emilio Rodriguez

directed by Francisco Garcia

Milagro is proud to present the world premiere of *Swimming While Drowning* by Emilio Rodriguez. A timely piece about LGBTIQQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, and Questioning) youth and homelessness, the play not only explores the reality of their situation, it also shows how art can help cope with tough situations.

*Swimming While Drowning* first came to our attention during the Latino Theatre Commons Carnaval in Chicago in 2015. From there, as part of the El Fuego Initiative, Milagro committed to not only produce the play but also to host Emilio in residence as he wrote Teatro Milagro's *El Payaso*, which premiered in January 2017.

This study guide provides information and statistics on LGBTIQQ youth homelessness, as well as resources that can help you assist those in need. We also provide discussion questions for your own research, as well as information on the production itself a note from the playwright on the nature of the play.



# LGBTIQQ Teens At Significant Risk of Homelessness

by Ariadne Wolf

Homeless youth are disproportionately LGBTIQQ. This acronym identifies those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, or questioning. These teenagers often cannot count on receiving effective support from their families. Sometimes, their parents reject them or kick them out; just as often, these teens face a domestic atmosphere that is harshly critical of what some parents view as “antisocial behavior” that their children have “chosen” to participate in. A recent Huffington Post article entitled “Christianity and the Parental Rejection of LGBT Youth” written by Carl Sicillano of the Ali Forney Center, linked the conservative Christian battles against equal rights and recognition for LGBT partnerships with severe risk factors that LGBT teens experience. The Ali Forney Center is just one of many such organizations nationwide which attempt to fill the gaps in resources that specifically LGBT homeless teens need, and often do not find from federal or

state-funded programs. In the Huffington Post article, Sicillano recounts stories of parents forcing exorcisms upon their children, abandoning them in the middle of nowhere, or beating them upon learning of their LGBT identity, passed on to Sicillano via word of mouth from the teens that his center treats. Statistics support Sicillano’s assertion that LGBT teens face a host of challenges which render them uniquely vulnerable to experiencing homelessness at a young age.

- 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT, or gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender [2012 Williams Institute Study]
- Contributing Factors: social stigma, discrimination, rejection from their families [National Coalition for the Homeless]
- Greater risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation [National Coalition for the Homeless]

- Difficulty finding shelters that will accept them, especially if they are transgender [National Coalition for the Homeless]
- Increased vulnerability to alcoholism and drug abuse
- Vulnerability to factors often associated with low self-esteem and/or financial need, including prostitution or other sexual exploitation
- LGBT homeless youth needs, self-identified: housing, emotional support, employment, health care, and education, in this order [True Colors Fund]
- Top factor homeless LGBT youth cite as the reason they are homeless: a feeling of family rejection and generalized lack of support and sense of emotional abandonment due to sexual orientation or gender identification [2012 Williams Institute Study]
- Second major contributing factor LGBT youth cite as the reason they are homeless: parents kicking them out after they come out [2012 Williams Institute Study]
- LGBT students are twice as likely to drop out or choose not to pursue a college education [National Coalition for the Homeless]
- 86% of LGBT students reported verbal harassment at school due to their sexual orientation in 2007 [National Coalition for the Homeless]
- 44% of LGBT students reported physical harassment at school due to their sexual orientation in 2007 [National Coalition for the Homeless]
- 22% of LGBT students reported being physically attacked at school due to their sexual orientation in 2007; of these students, 60% did not report the incident because they feared no one would care [National Coalition for the Homeless]
- 31% of LGBT students who report incidents of harassment to school staff receive zero response [National Coalition for the Homeless]
- Homeless youth face widespread discrimination when seeking housing through federally funded institutions [National Coalition for the Homeless]
- No federal programs are designed to meet the needs of homeless LGBT youth specifically, nor are there specific protections for LGBT youth who seek services offered to the homeless [National Coalition for the Homeless]

### The Importance of Art

Art has been shown to be instrumental in supporting the healing of those experiencing oppression and marginalization, as well as those experiencing mental and emotional problems. LGBT youth are highly at risk for mental illness as a result of the stress that facing homophobic oppression elicits. Art Therapy, the Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, ran a 2008 article entitled Coming Out Through Art which substantiated the positive impact that art had on LGBT clients. The article asserts that art can aid such individuals in improving self-esteem, developing a capacity for creative problem-solving, and healing. Moreover, the article suggests that art can help LGBT clients integrate their sexual and gender identities with the rest of their lives via this technique.





Photo by Carlin Childs

# Ways to Fight for the Resources Homeless LGBT Teens Need

by Ariadne Wolf

Many wonderful organizations are doing the work necessary to make certain LGBTIQQ teens have access to resources once they are homeless. Several, including PFLAG also reach out to parents to try to decrease the possibility of domestic violence or rejection towards LGBT teens driving them to run away or be kicked out of their homes. However, these organizations face a momentous task and need your help. You can take steps within your personal relationships, and take action within your professional workspace, to make this country a safer place for LGBTIQQ individuals. Initiating conversations you're your friends and relatives is, for some of us, a reasonable place to start; for others, declaring your office or home a "safe space" where others can come for support without fear of hostility or marginalization is the right choice. I've outlined a few suggestions for things you can do

to try to ease the burdens that so many LGBTIQQ teens face. This is by no means a complete list.

- **Make schools safe spaces for LGBT teens.** This includes a discussion at the administrative level of safe spaces, and of the need to protect marginalized students via these regulations. It also includes educating school officials to properly address concerns that LGBT students bring forth and to address reports of harassment.
- **Learn proper pronoun usage.** LGBTIQQ people do not necessarily identify with the gender assigned to them at birth. Practice asking people when you are introduced to them what "gender pronoun" they would like to be called by. Sometimes that means broadening your mind to recognize that people might like to

be called by “zhee” or other “gender-neutral pronouns.” Treat this process with respect.

- **Do some research into the differences between “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” “queer,” “questioning,” and “intersex” identities.** The widespread societal confusion regarding the proper use of these terms contributes to the difficulty that LGBTIQ individuals, particularly transgender individuals, face when interacting with state and federal resources for homeless people. In educating yourself and being certain to correct those who misuse these terms, you help build a society that does not dehumanize or discriminate against these individuals.
- **Recognize LGBT youth as a population who face discrimination when seeking housing.** The difficulties this vulnerable population face constitute one facet of heterosexist oppression. These issues need to be addressed on a federal level to institute the necessary protective mechanisms and ensure LGBT youth have access to fair opportunities to seek housing.
- **Demand accountability from homeless shelters.** The National Center for Transgender Equality indicates that 1 in 5 transgender individuals experience homelessness during their lives. The NCTE also states that many homeless shelters do not provide adequate and culturally competent care for transgender people, sometimes denying them shelter based on their gender orientation. HUD, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, requires its grantees to follow state and federal guidelines regarding anti-discrimination practices. However, more oversight is certainly needed to prevent homeless shelters from perpetuating the cycle of homelessness for LGBT youth.
- **Demand further research into the reasons LGBT youth face street harassment and sexual exploitation at high percentages.**
- **Know the cost.** The constant bullying, verbal and sometimes physical assaults, and other degrading responses of their peers take a toll on LGBT youth. The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion cites

oppression and discrimination as major factors impacting the health of LGBT youth. As a result, LGBT youth are 2 to 3 times more likely to engage in suicidal behavior. This combined with the increased likelihood of homelessness reflects a major national health concern. Ask agencies like the National Institute of Mental Health to more fully cover this issue, and insist that the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) continue to draw the public’s attention to the ways oppression impacts the mental and emotional health of LGBT youth.

- **Hold mental health professionals accountable for their interactions with LGBT patients.** Psychiatry has historically participated in oppressing LGBT individuals by declaring homosexuality to be a mental illness in the DSM, or Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. LGBT individuals were treated with electroshock and aversion therapy, often against their will. Though the manual was officially changed 43 years ago, the impacts of this long and shameful history reverberate into the interactions many LGBT continue to have with mental health professionals. Youth are particularly vulnerable, and often particularly in need of guidance.
- **Demand films and television networks include LGBTIQ characters.** Although this situation has somewhat improved of late, shows specifically aimed at teenagers continue to primarily feature all-white casts playing heterosexual roles. Decades after shows like *My So-called Life* introduced complex, thought-provoking looks into the problems LGBTIQ teens so often face, network television aimed at this target demographic rarely introduce characters intended to represent LGBTIQ audiences. This sort of thoughtless discrimination can contribute to the sense of alienation and isolation that this community faces. Sign online petitions and speak up about the absence of effective representation.
- **Participate in advocacy organizations.** Organizations like the True Colors Fund are doing the work to end homelessness among LGBT youth. These organizations host events

to launch days devoted to increasing national awareness of this issue. Promote these organizations on social media and, of course, consider donating if you can financially manage.

- **Host a film night that includes planned discussion time.** You can volunteer to screen a film intended to elicit reactions around issues facing LGBT youth today. Come prepared with a few discussion questions and some Kleenex. It's up to you to increase awareness.

### Learn more:

Christianity and the Parental Rejection of LGBT Youth [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carl-siciliano/christianity-and-the-parental-rejection-of-lgbt-youth\\_b\\_2966849.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carl-siciliano/christianity-and-the-parental-rejection-of-lgbt-youth_b_2966849.html)

LGBT Homelessness

<http://nationalhomeless.org/issues/lgbt/>

True Colors Fund <https://truecolorsfund.org/>

40% of Homeless Youth Are LGBT Kids <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/americas-shame-40-of-homeless-youth-are-lgbt-kids/>

Coming Out Through Art: A Review of Art Therapy With LGBT Clients <http://www.plumeriacounseling.com/coming-out-through-art-a-review-of-art-therapy-with-lgbt-clients/>

National Center for Transgender Equality <http://www.transequality.org/>

## Discussion Questions (12–18 years old)

1. Why do you think LGBT teens still face so much institutional discrimination?
2. What do you think are the most important things you can do to help homeless LGBT youth?
3. Do you think parents who kick out their LGBT children should be punished? How?
4. Do you think LGBT students are safe in your school? Why or why not?
5. What can you do to make your school more LGBT-friendly?
6. Do you think safe spaces are important? Do you want your school to be a safe space? What does "safe space" mean to you?
7. Do you know how to report incidents of bias or harassment at your school? If not, who can you ask to find out?
8. If you saw someone being harassed or attacked at your school, what would you do?
9. If you needed to talk to someone about something serious happening in your life, who would you talk to?
10. How can you educate yourself to support the LGBT friends and fellow students in your life the best you can?





# Swimming While Drowning

## in Our World by Emilio Rodriguez

"Symbolism is no mere idle fancy or corrupt degeneration; it is inherent in the very texture of human life. Language itself is a symbolism." Though these words were said by English Mathematician and philosopher, Alfred Whitehead—who died in 1947—they more accurately describe the world of the 2017 play *Swimming While Drowning* than any quotes from today could. The play is set in the present day, real world. A world that looks, feels, and sounds just like our world. There are no wizards in training nor teenagers volunteering for tributes. Instead, the protagonist is a teenager living in a homeless shelter for LGBT youth and because the National Coalition for the Homeless reports "Of the 1.6 million homeless American youth, up to 42 percent identify as LGBT" and "26 percent of gay teens who came out to their parents/guardians were told they must leave home" his story is far from a fantasy. Though the play stems from actual experiences of LGBT youth, the human lives depicted in the world

of the play *Swimming While Drowning* are full of their own intricate symbolism.

The first example of symbolism is the home. The teenagers in *Swimming While Drowning*, Mila and Angelo, both live in a homeless shelter for LGBT youth. Their residence in the shelter implies that there is no physical presence of a house on stage which creates a complexity to the symbolism. In the early twentieth century, plays like Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* used the house as a symbol for the manifestation of the American Dream. The idea that a house implied security, success, and a sense of belonging still rings true today. Unfortunately for Mila and Angelo, the lack of a physical house of their own implies a lack of security, lack of success and a lack of a sense of belonging. Mila experiences a lack of security when he is physically attacked in the second act of the play. Angelo copes with his lack of success in his inability to write a poem that can leave



audiences in awe. And both boys struggle with a lack of a sense of belonging through their cultural identities in which neither feel “Latino enough”. Angelo’s constant feedback that he “talks white” and is “Puerto Rican” but doesn’t have an “Accent” reveals his feeling of cultural incompetency. Mila also experiences the same feeling of displacement in his heritage but his feelings manifest from not being able to speak Spanish and being labeled as “just Black” though he is technically both Black and Mexican. Ultimately both Mila and Angelo’s absence of a home is both literal and metaphorical.

Another symbolic device in the play is the use of rap. In the first act, Angelo performs a rap for Mila in their shelter bedroom. Later, Mila performs a private, soliloquy-like rap for the audience that explains his secret insecurities. Webster’s dictionary states that rap music relies on a “recurring beat pattern that provides a background”. By this definition, we can say that rap music represents stability in that the “recurring beat pattern” implies consistency and predictability. Since the Covenant House website reports that “more than 25% of former foster children become homeless within two to four years of leaving the system” there is an undeniable correlation between an unstable home life and homelessness. For Angelo and Mila, the tempo of rap music and its constant, repetitive beat provides a sense of stability that they can feel, a stability that is as physical as they are going to get in their ever-changing lives.

Similarly, *Swimming While Drowning* uses poetry as a literary device in the play to symbolize the careful choices that the boys must make each day

to extend their often-scarce resources. Former Poet Laureate, Rita Dove stated that “Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful”. The contrast between the naturalistic scenes—in which the teenagers communicate in an authentically colloquial manner—and the poetry—in which the teenagers communicate in a heightened and stylized selection of words—is used to demonstrate both the world around them and the survival techniques respectively. To navigate the terrain of the inner city, the boys must carefully plot out their actions, everything from where they hide their money to which side of the room one places their belongings is a deliberate reflection of their need for control. Through the poetry, the teenagers establish control of their words by “carefully choosing the messiest ones” they can find. Though they are literally demonstrating their power through selection of words, they are symbolically demonstrating their power to be in control of their own situation. And because their poetry stems from their own vocabulary and vernacular, they prove an ability to use their resources to their own advantage and elevate their own worlds despite the conflict and chaos that accompany them.

The symbolism of the lack of a home, rap music, and poetry in *Swimming While Drowning* culminate in a powerful play that is surprisingly metaphorical despite its realistic setting. Though the play is authentic and honest to the experiences of LGBT homeless youth of color, it is also a metaphor for the world we live in, which requires us all to cope with a feeling of not belonging, a need for stability, and the ability to make miracles with the few resources we are given at various points in our lives.

**February 9-25, 2017**

Thursday-Saturday at 7:30 PM | Sunday at 2:00 PM

**Milagro Theatre** | 525 SE Stark Street, Portland

Tickets start \$27

Student, senior, and veteran discounts available

For group sales, contact Cambria Herrera at

503-236-7253 x 117

Preview: Thursday, February 9 at 7:30 PM

Opening night: Friday, February 10 at 7:30 PM

followed by complimentary post-play reception by  
La Bonita

### **AFTER THE PLAY—FREE EVENTS**

#### **Art + Identity Showcase**

February 11, 2017 from 9:00 PM-10:15 PM

Hosted by Milagro and Latinx Pride

An evening of discussion and showcasing art.  
Content will be focused on the intersection of art  
and identity within the LGBTQ community and  
people of color but all are welcome.

#### **Poetry After Party/Open Mic**

February 16, 2017 at 9:00 PM

Join us after the performance of *Swimming While Drowning* for an evening of poetry.

Topic: Art + Identity

To sign up to be a featured poet  
email [marketing@milagro.org](mailto:marketing@milagro.org) or bring your poem  
and participate in the open mic session.

Poems in any language accepted!



The Northwest's premier Latino arts and culture organization

Mailing: 425 SE 6th Avenue, Portland OR 97214

503-236-7253 / [www.milagro.org](http://www.milagro.org)

The Miracle Theatre Group has been dedicated to bringing the vibrancy of Latino theatre to the Northwest community and beyond since 1985. In addition to its national tours, Miracle provides a home for Latino arts and culture at El Centro Milagro, where it enriches the local community with a variety of community outreach projects and educational programs designed to share the diversity of Latino culture. For more information about the Miracle, visit [www.milagro.org](http://www.milagro.org) or call 503-236-7253.