



# EL MUERTO VAGABUNDO

Study Guide

Photo © Russell J Young



Photo © J Ronald Lee

# El Muerto Vagabundo

This devised production, our 20th, deals with homeless muertos. The original inspiration for this production came from Irving R. Porras' obituary in *The Oregonian* in 2015. The basis for our program centers on the dead returning to the land of the living to visit loved ones. In this instance we ask: What happens when there's no one there to visit—no loved ones, no home?

We also looked at the story of veteran Andrew Moore in the *Washington Post*. When the 89-year-old World War II veteran died, he left no will and had no next of kin. His body went unclaimed, "destined for a nameless pauper's grave."

Thanks to his neighbors, some of whom were veterans themselves, he instead was given a full military funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. They came together, lobbied their local agencies, and ensured he received the recognition he so much deserved.

You can read the complete story on [The Washington Post](#).

This study guide provides background information on the Day of the Dead celebration and addresses the issue of homelessness in America. We also provide discussion questions for your own research, as well as information on the production itself and what is devised theatre.

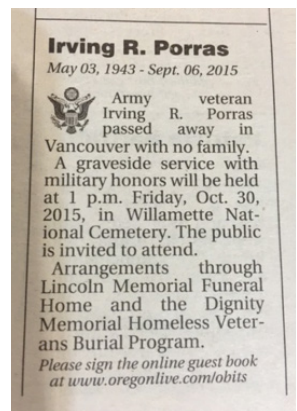




Photo © N Marritz

# Day of the Dead

by Ricardo J. Salvador

This is an ancient festivity that has been much transformed through the years, but which was intended in pre-Hispanic Mexico to celebrate children and the dead. Hence, the best way to describe this Mexican holiday is to say that it is a time when Mexican families remember their dead, and the continuity of life.

Two important things to know about the Mexican Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) are: It is a holiday with a complex history, and therefore its observance varies quite a bit by region and by degree of urbanization. It is not a morbid occasion, but rather a festive time.

The original celebration can be traced to many Mesoamerican native traditions, such as the festivities held during the Aztec month of Mictcaihuitontli, ritually presided by the “Lady of the Dead” (Mictēcacihuatl), and dedicated to children and the dead. In the Aztec calendar, this ritual fell roughly at the end of the Gregorian month of July and the beginning of August, but in the post-conquest era it was moved by Spanish priests so that it coincided with the Christian holiday of All Hallows Eve (in Spanish: “Día de Todos Santos.”) This was a vain effort to transform the observance

from a profane to a Christian celebration. The result is that Mexicans now celebrate the day of the dead during the first two days of November, rather than at the beginning of summer. But remember the dead they still do, and the modern festivity is characterized by the traditional Mexican blend of ancient aboriginal and introduced Christian features.

Generalizing broadly, the holiday’s activities consist of families (1) welcoming their dead back into their homes, and (2) visiting the graves of their close kin. At the cemetery, family members engage in sprucing up the grave site, decorating it with flowers, setting out and enjoying a picnic, and interacting socially with other family and community members who gather there. In both cases, celebrants believe that the souls of the dead return and are all around them. Families remember



the departed by telling stories about them. The meals prepared for these picnics are sumptuous, usually featuring meat dishes in spicy sauces, chocolate beverages, cookies, sugary confections in a variety of animal or skull shapes, and a special egg-batter bread ("pan de muerto," or bread of the dead). Grave sites and family altars are profusely decorated with flowers (primarily large, bright flowers such as marigolds and chrysanthemums), and adorned with religious amulets and with offerings of food, cigarettes and alcoholic beverages. Because of this warm social environment, the colorful setting, and the abundance of food, drink and good company, this commemoration of the dead has pleasant overtones for the observers, in spite of the open fatalism exhibited by all participants, whose festive interaction with both the living and the dead in an important social ritual is a way

of recognizing the cycle of life and death that is human existence.

In homes, observant families create an altar and decorate it with items that they believe are beautiful and attractive to the souls of their departed ones. Such items include offerings of flowers and food, but also things that will remind the living of the departed (such as their photographs, a diploma, or an article of clothing), and the things that the dead prized and enjoyed while they lived. This is done to entice the dead and assure that their souls actually return to take part in the remembrance.

In very traditional settings, typically found only in native communities, the path from the street to the altar is actually strewn with petals to guide the returning soul to its altar and the bosom of the family. The traditional observance calls for departed children to be remembered during the first day of the festivity (the Day of the Little Angels, El día de los Angelitos), and for adults to be remembered on the second day. Traditionally, this is accompanied by a feast during the early morning hours of November the 2nd, the Day of the Dead proper, though modern urban Mexican families usually observe the Day of the Dead with only a special family supper featuring the bread of the dead. In southern Mexico, for example in the city of Puebla, it is good luck to be the one who bites into the plastic toy skeleton hidden by the baker in each rounded loaf. Friends and family members give one another gifts consisting of sugar skeletons or other items with a death motif, and the gift is more prized if the skull or skeleton is embossed with one's own name.

Another variation found in the state of Oaxaca is for the bread to be molded into the shape of a body or burial wrap, and for a face to be embedded on one end of the loaf. During the days leading up to and following the festivity, some bakeries in heavily aboriginal communities cease producing the wide range of breads that they typically sell so that they can focus on satisfying the demand for bread of the dead.

The Day of the Dead can range from being a very important cultural event, with defined social and economic responsibilities for participants (exhibiting

the socially equalizing behavior that social anthropologists would call re-distributive feasting, e.g. on the island of Janitzio in Michoacan state), to being a religious observance featuring actual worship of the dead (e.g., as in Cuilapan, Oaxaca, an ancient capital of the Zapotec people, who venerated their ancestors and whose descendants do so to this day, an example of many traditional practices that Spanish priests pretend not to notice), to simply being a uniquely Mexican holiday characterized by special foods and confections (the case in all large Mexican cities.) In general, the more urban the setting within Mexico the less religious and cultural importance is retained by observants, while the more rural and Indian the locality the greater the religious and economic import of the holiday. Because of this, this observance is usually of greater social importance in southern Mexico than in the northern part of the country.

### Further reading

- "On the Road: Hispanic Theatre outside its Major Centers" *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940*. Nicolás Kanellos.
- Article by Salvador, R. J. (2003). "What Do Mexicans Celebrate On The Day Of The Dead?" Pp. 75-76, in *Death and Bereavement In The Americas. Death, Value and Meaning Series, Vol. II*. Morgan, J. D. and P. Laungani (Eds.) Baywood Publishing Co., Amityville, New York. Photography by Lourdes Grobet.



Photo A F Litt ©2011

# Homeless in Portland

by Ariadne Wolf

Four thousand people will spend tonight on the streets of Portland, or in one of its shelters, rather than in a home. This will include families with children, single adults, and some teenagers. Some people move in and out of having a **permanent residence** to call their own, while others never raise the money nor gain the resources necessary to have a home for any length of time. Some people experience this situation because they have untreated medical conditions, including emotional and psychological problems. Many of these people suffer from trauma and the various chronic disorders that can stem from a condition that trauma causes called **PTSD**. Other people who find themselves in this situation have drug or alcohol **addictions**, and that makes it difficult for them to find and keep jobs to pay for a place to live. The economy has recently gone through an **economic depression**, which means there are not as many jobs around as there used to be.

The depression also means that employers are not able to pay their employees as much as they used to. Sometimes employers even have to fire some of their employees, even people who have worked there for a really long time. Employers sometimes hire people part-time so the employers won't have to give them health care and other benefits. This means that some people are only able to work fifteen hours a week. That means no matter how hard they work or how well they do their jobs, they probably won't make enough money to afford a house, food, clothing, and other expenses.

People have a lot more expenses than you might think! People have to pay for gas, car insurance, **health insurance** if their employer won't pay for it, and they have to pay their heating bill. If people get sick or injured, they have to pay the hospital or their doctor to take care of them. Then, they have to pay for their medicine! Meanwhile, people can't work if they're sick or hurt for long periods of time.

No matter how good of an employee they are, they might still get fired.

The local officials know that not everyone who is homeless desires to be, and in fact, most people really want to have a place to live. Even people who don't want to live in a home are usually just scared. Some of these people got hurt really bad, and now they're afraid of other people. Some of the people who are homeless in Portland are kids just like you, whose parents hit them or hurt them in other ways. These kids ran away because they needed to be safe. For some people, being homeless is better than being with their parents.

Luckily, Portland has resources available to help people in this situation. Nonprofit organizations and private agencies run shelters and other programs to help these people get back on their feet. Women and children each have their own shelters, so that they don't have to worry about being safe while they're trying to figure out what to do next. These organizations receive funding from the government so they can operate these services and still pay their own employees enough. Charities and churches also work to try to help the homeless population of Portland the best they can. People who work for these places all try to make sure homeless people have access to food, clothing, and even work training, to support them in getting off the street. Unfortunately, there just are not as many beds available in shelters as there are people who need them. Still, these people are trying really hard. If you ever have a chance to meet them, be sure to thank them for the kindness and compassion they show towards other people.

Portland's homeless situation has gotten so bad that Mayor Hales declared an official State of Emergency in September of 2015. This was really good timing, because Portland's winter season in 2015 was very, very cold, even for Portland. Portland even got some snow! That was probably really exciting for you, but remember that there are people out there who had to sleep in that weather. That must have been really cold, don't you think?

After the State of Emergency, the city of Portland as well as Multnomah County pushed millions more dollars towards creating more beds and shelters for homeless people. That led to 283 new beds, and 290 more beds being open all year instead of just in certain seasons. I know that might not sound like much, but for those almost three hundred people, it was probably huge. In fact, it might have meant the difference between life and death!

Unfortunately, some of the policies from the State of Emergency have only created more conflict. The mayor said homeless people could camp on certain sidewalks, but now local businesses and private homeowners are not happy. In fact, some of them even sued the mayor! After that, the mayor had to ban homeless people from camping on sidewalks.

There has also been some violence between homeless people and other people, and between homeless people and other homeless people. That is true with almost any group of people, but there are a lot of people in Portland who really don't like homeless people already. These crimes have just made things worse.

The most important thing to remember about homelessness is that people are people, whether or not they have a place to live. You still have to be nice to them and treat them with respect, just the way you would want to be treated if you were in their position.

## References

6 reasons why Portland's homeless crisis is at a breaking point

<http://www.kgw.com/news/investigations/6-reasons-why-portlands-homeless-crisis-is-at-a-breaking-point/156737977>

Homeless Toolkit—City of Portland

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/toolkit/article/562207>

# Causes for Homelessness

by Brandi Tuck, Executive Director,  
Portland Homeless Family Solutions (PHFS)

I have been the Executive Director at Portland Homeless Family Solutions for the last 9 years, and I have been in the homeless services field for 13 years. Over my time, I have really seen a few primary root causes of homelessness.

The first two go hand in hand—lack of affordable housing and lack of a living wage.

- A living wage is defined as “a wage sufficient to provide the necessities and comforts essential to an acceptable standard of living, and provides one with some ability to deal with emergencies without resorting to welfare or other public assistance.”
- In the City of Portland, a living wage for one adult is \$11.25 per hour.
- When you add one child into the mix, a living wage for one adult and one child goes up to \$23.11 per hour.
- One adult and two kids is \$27 .64 per hour.
- Our minimum wage here in Oregon is \$9.25. Even when it goes up to \$13.50, it won’t be close to the amount of money a single parent needs to raise their children.
- At our current minimum wage, A minimum wage earner working 40 hours per week brings home about \$1,200 after taxes each month. It will be about \$1,900 after taxes each month with our new minimum wage.
- When we look at the cost of housing in our community, we know that the average

1-bedroom apartment in Portland these days costs about \$1,000-\$1,200 per month.

- A home is considered “affordable” if the cost of the unit is no more than 30% of a person or family’s income.
- For a minimum wage earner making \$1,200 a month, they would have to find a home for \$400 per month in order for it to be “affordable.”
- This is not a reality in our current community.
- Nationally, there are only 42 units of affordable housing available for every 100 low-income renters. This represents a deficit of 4.9 million units nationwide.
- In order to end homelessness, we will need to create more housing, or else make the current stock of housing more affordable to our low-income residents.

The other causes of homelessness that I have observed include:

- First: a Lack of affordable healthcare, and affordable mental health care. Even now that we have the Affordable Care Act, families and individuals still face high deductibles, expensive prescriptions, and large co-pays.



- These expensive costs can push a person over the edge—deciding whether to pay \$1,500 for your deductible when you break your leg versus paying \$1,200 in rent that you owe is a hard decision to make.
- Many parents that I know choose the medical care, and they get evicted from their housing.
- For Veterans, this is a particularly challenging issue especially when it comes to mental healthcare. VA Healthcare is lacking in accessibility for many people. If you have a dishonorable discharge, you are not eligible for many of the VA programs.
  - But you still live with PTSD and the trauma that comes along with experiencing war and violence.
- Second: lack of affordable childcare for families.
  - The average cost of childcare for one child in Portland is \$932 per month. This is far too expensive for families who are living on low incomes.
  - This is often a catch-22 for families: they need childcare to get a job interview and get a job, but need income from a job to be able to afford childcare in the first place.
- Third: the Persistent oppression and discrimination of people of color and people living with disabilities.
  - It was illegal for African American people to own property until 1975 here in Portland.

## Stereotypes and Myths: DISPELLED

### All people experiencing homelessness are mentally ill.

- Actually **only about 25%** of all people experiencing homelessness are mentally ill.

### Homeless people are all too lazy to work.

- Over half of people experiencing homelessness work. In our current economy, **75% of the families PHFS works with have full time jobs.**

### People choose to be homeless because it's a life of freedom and leisure.

- Every year, **less than 10%** of the homeless population say they are choosing to be homeless.
- Unfortunately, these are the folks that we see on the news and hear about on the radio. They are the visible homeless.
- Most of the population experiencing homelessness is invisible, hiding so that no one knows they are homeless.
- In fact, **the average age of a homeless person in the US is 9 years old.** They are certainly not choosing to be homeless.

### People move to Portland because our services are good here.

### We are attracting homeless people.

- Every year, 90% of all people experiencing homelessness in Portland report that they have lived in Portland for at least 2 years and did not move here while homeless.

**Mission:** Our mission is to empower homeless families with children to get back into housing—and stay there.

**Vision:** To provide support to any families experiencing homelessness, with the ultimate goal of alleviating long-term family homelessness in the community.

Learn more about PHFS at [pdxhfs.org](http://pdxhfs.org)



# Homelessness in America

## 1930s—The Great Depression

The 1930s were the first time in American History that regular individuals and families with children suffered extreme poverty and homelessness.

## The New Deal

Roosevelt enacted legislation that set up protections for people living in poverty:

- **GI Bill**—sent people to get better education, obtain property, etc.
- **Housing**—developed millions of units of affordable housing. Funded the creation of affordable housing every year at about \$89 billion a year.

Homelessness and extreme poverty were essentially nonexistent from the 1940s-1980s.

- There was always some level of homelessness—think people that ride trains and live a life off the grid. But we really didn't have homelessness as we know it today.
- During this time, there was a great deal of oppression and discrimination against communities of color in the US, particularly African Americans.

## 1980 - Ronald Reagan elected president

Reagan cut the housing budget down from \$89 billion a year to a mere \$20 billion a year.

- Many publicly funded affordable housing units were closed down.
- Many buildings were torn down or left abandoned in inner cities. Inpatient mental health hospitals were shut down. Hundreds of thousands of people experiencing mental health challenges were released back to the street, most without any housing to return to.

## The country experienced a homeless epidemic for the first time since the 1930s

Without housing resources from the federal government, people and families couldn't find housing they could afford. For the first time since the 1930s, people and families were living on the streets. Persistent oppression and discrimination, especially in the financial lending world, created generations of poor people of color without any accumulation and transfer of wealth between generations.

- Black people in Portland were not allowed to own property until 1975 which left parents without the ability to pass on resources to their children, so their children continued to experience poverty.

## Their Solution was Shelter

Whereas the federal government invested billions of dollars in affordable housing units in the past, in the 1980-90s, the federal government started funding shelters to house all of the people who were living on the streets.

- Billions of dollars were spent building up shelters, social service nonprofit agencies, and other emergency responses for families and people who experience homelessness.
- There is still no additional investment in housing units in America.

## Housing Shortage

These days, we simply just don't have enough units for every family and person who needs one.

- Multnomah County is short 23,000 units alone.
- The government continues to invest billions of dollars in emergency services for people experiencing homelessness, but they don't meaningfully invest in housing units.

Information by:





# Homeless Veterans of War

by Ariadne Wolf

It might seem really strange to you to find out that one of the biggest groups of people who are homeless or likely to become homeless are veterans from wars. You probably think that most vets get access to plenty of resources once they come back home from war, and to some extent, you're right. The United States government does try to give vets the services these people need to recover from what can sometimes be a very painful, frightening, and horrifying experience. However, the United States government just does not give enough money to the Department of Veteran Affairs for the agency to give vets everything these people need. The Department also cannot do much to help vets who struggle to find jobs because they have been physically incapacitated by something

that happened to them during the war. Many vets also come back with PTSD because they are so overwhelmed and scared by everything they saw during war. War can be a really horrible time for some people, and it can be really hard to leave that violence behind and return to normal life.

According to a study conducted in 2014, 50,000 vets were homeless across America. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 91% of the vets who are homeless are men. Nine percent are female. This makes up about 11% of the total group of people who are homeless. That's a lot, especially considering 50% of homeless vets are under the age of 30. In fact, about 10% of homeless vets are between 18 and 30 years old. That's a time when

most people in this country are planning their futures, trying out different jobs, and finishing college. Because of their experiences at war, possible addictions from trying to cope with that, or other physical problems from war, this group of vets have to spend what should be the most exciting period of their lives starving, isolated, and alone.

It's important to remember that homeless does not impact every person equally, and not every person is equally at risk. Approximately 40% of all families in shelters are African-American, whereas they only make up about 12% of the families of the United States. It's important to remember that being a member of a group who experiences racism and who might not have as much money as members of other groups, can really make a difference in someone's life. That's especially true when someone is already at risk of suffering from something really awful like homelessness just because of that person's life experiences.

Now, it's really important also not to generalize. Plenty of African-Americans in this country are very wealthy, successful professionally, and can pay for their kids and even their grandkids to attend expensive colleges! That's true for Latinx people, too. Just because when we turn on the television, we probably see more African-Americans and Latinx people who are poor and suffering than we do successful ones, does not mean this is true. It also does not mean that some people naturally do better than others, or that you can't succeed at anything you put your whole mind and heart into.

Still, on a mass scale, certain people are more at risk. That's important to remember when you think about government agencies choosing who to give resources to. It's also important when you remember that 1.4 million veterans are at risk of becoming homeless, which means that even a tiny change in their circumstances means they might wind up without a home. Since the economy is still recovering and there still aren't enough jobs for all the people who need them, that's really important to remember.

Veteran's Affairs does provide care to 150,000 veterans yearly in order to prevent these people from becoming homeless, and help them if they already are. About 40,000 homeless vets also

receive some kind of veterans' benefits each month, which means they will hopefully have enough money to feed themselves and maybe even have someplace safe to stay at least some of the time. There are even groups by veterans for veterans, which is one of the kinds of services proven most effective. Still, there are many more people in need than there is care available. Plus, many vets need mental health counseling and substance abuse treatment as well as getting their basic needs met. That's especially true if they're going to stay off the streets. That kind of care costs money and takes a lot of employees and a lot of time, and it's just not available to the vets who need it right now.

One day you will get older and get a job, and you will have to pay taxes to the government so that programs like Veteran's Affairs can be available. Your money will go all sorts of places, based on what the government believes is best for you. Don't forget about homeless people and what they need, when the time comes and it's your money that's going to provide these services. You get to decide in all kinds of ways where your money goes—by voting, like your parents will in November, as well as through reaching out to the people you elect to represent you. When you tell them what you want them to do, they will listen and they might start to care more about what you care about.

Don't forget that you have more power than you think. You can call or email your local representatives and tell them what you think they should do about homelessness. You can talk to your friends and your parents and encourage them to speak up about this issue. You can even write to your local newspaper to tell them what you think! You are somebody worth listening to.

## Reference

Homeless Veterans

<http://www.portland.va.gov/services/homeless/index.asp>

Intergenerational Disparities Experienced by Homeless Black Families

<http://www.icphusa.org/index.asp?page=16&report=91>

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think that homelessness has risen over the past year?
2. Do you expect homelessness to continue to rise over the next year?
3. What actions could you take to decrease homelessness in Portland?
4. Why do you think public officials have not been successful in solving this problem?
5. Whose responsibility do you think it is to defeat homelessness?
6. What upsets you most about homelessness?
7. Do you think people who are homeless are to blame for their situation? Do you think anyone would choose this willingly?
8. Do you think members of some communities are more likely to become homeless than others? Why?
9. Do you think some people choose to be homeless? Why might they make that choice?
10. Do you believe there should be more resources available for homeless people?
11. What resources are available for homeless people?
12. What resources do you think homeless people might need?
13. If you could do one thing for a homeless person today, what would it be?

**211info**

<http://211info.org/>  
7535 NE Ambassador Pl, Portland 97220  
2-1-1

**A Home for Everyone**

<http://ahomeforeveryone.net/>  
501 SE Hawthorne Blvd, Suite 600, Portland 97214

**Camions of Care**

[camionsofcare.org](http://camionsofcare.org)  
Portland

**Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare**

<http://cascadiabhc.org/supportive-housing-and-homeless-services/>  
Portland  
(503) 238-0769

**Central City Concern**

<http://www.centralcityconcern.org/>  
232 NW 6th Ave, Portland 97209  
(503) 294-1681

**CityTeam**

<https://www.cityteam.org/portland/>  
526 SE Grand Ave, Portland 97214  
503-231-9334 x4130

**Community Action**

<http://caowash.org/>  
1001 SW BASELINE STREET, Hillsboro 97123-3822  
(503) 648-6646

**Council for the Homeless**

<http://www.councilforthehomeless.org/>  
2500 Main Street, Vancouver 98660  
360-993-9564

**Easter Seals Oregon**

<http://www.or.easterseals.com>  
5757 SW Macadam Ave., Suite 100, Portland 97239  
503-228-5108

**Homeless Veterans Community Resource and Referral Center**

<http://www.portland.va.gov/locations/crrc.asp>  
308 SW 1st Ave, Portland, 97204  
503-808-1256  
Or 800-949-1004 X 51256

**Human Solutions**

[www.humansolutions.org](http://www.humansolutions.org)  
12350 SE Powell Blvd., Portland, 97236  
(503) 548-0200

124 NE 181st Ave., Gresham, 97230  
(503) 405-7875

**Multnomah County Department of Human Services**

<https://multco.us/dchs-community-services-division/homelessness-and-housing>  
421 SW Oak St #620, Portland 97204  
503.988.3646

**Northwest Pilot Project**

<http://www.nwpilotproject.org/>  
1430 SW Broadway Suite #200, Portland 97201  
(503) 227-5605

**Outside In**

<http://www.outsidein.org/>  
1132 SW 13th Avenue, Portland 97205  
503.535.3800

**PEAR**

<http://pearmentor.org/>  
338 NW 6th Ave., Portland 97209  
503.228.6677

**Portland Homeless Family Solutions**

<http://pdxhfs.org/>  
1838 SW Jefferson St, Portland, 97201  
(503) 915-8306

**Portland Rescue Mission**

<http://www.portlandrescuemission.org/>  
P.O. Box 3713, Portland, 97208-3713  
503.746.9729

**Share**

<http://sharevancouver.org/>  
2306 NE Andresen Road, Vancouver 98661  
(360) 952-8227

**Street Roots**

<http://streetroots.org/>  
211 NW Davis St., Portland 97209-3922  
503-228-5657

**Transition Projects TPI**

<http://www.tprojects.org/>  
665 NW Hoyt Street, Portland, 97209  
503.280.4700

**United States Mission**

<http://usmission.org/>  
4545 N. E. Garfield P.O. BOX 11576, Portland 97211  
(503) 288-9294

**Veterans and Family Center/ Salvation Army**

[http://cascade.salvationarmy.org/cascade/veterans\\_and\\_family\\_center](http://cascade.salvationarmy.org/cascade/veterans_and_family_center)  
14825 SW Farmington Rd., Beaverton, 97007  
(503) 731-3951

**Yellow Brick Road Street Outreach (Janus Youth)**

[janusyouth.org](http://janusyouth.org)  
1635 SW Alder St., Portland 97205  
(503) 432-3986

**Veteran Agencies/Resources****Portland State University Veterans Resource Center**

<https://www.pdx.edu/veterans/about-us>  
1825 SW Broadway, Portland 97201  
503-725-9807 (Main)

**Returning Veterans Project**

<http://www.returningveterans.org/about-us>  
833 SE Main St # 122, Portland 97214  
(503) 954-2259

**U.S./ OR Department of Veterans Affairs**

<http://www.portland.va.gov/>  
<http://www.oregon.gov/ODVA/pages/index.aspx>  
2nd Floor, 100 SW Main St, Portland 97204  
503-273-5247

**Veterans' Services Multnomah County**

<https://multco.us/ads/veterans-services-office>  
421 SW Oak Street, Portland 97204-0000  
503-988-VETS (8387)

**Resource and Crisis Lines:****Active Heroes**

<https://activeheroes.org/get-help/>  
1-800-273-8255 press 1

**National Call Center for Homeless Veterans**

1-877-424-3838

**Vet2Vet Crisis Hotline**

<http://www.veteranscall.us/>  
1-800-vet-2vet (838-2838)

**Veterans Crisis Line**

[www.veteranscrisisline.net](http://www.veteranscrisisline.net)  
1-800-273-8255 Press 1



# Georgina Escobar: director, playwright, and deviser

They say that every story chooses its author. Or maybe I made that up, but it is something I truly believe in. As a playwright and visual artist, I find that the stories usually find a way to knock on my front door and announce that, whether I like it or not, they are moving in. And the restlessness begins, until the story is shaped.

I had the pleasure of meeting José at the Carnaval Festival of New Latino Plays in Chicago last summer, where my play *Sweep* was one of the selections for a reading. Soon after I heard from Milagro and their interest of bringing me on board to create a devised piece about Día De Los Muertos loosely inspired by the homeless and by an article

about a veteran who had no family to mourn him—and who was then offered honors by his neighbors.

And there it was. Bags packed, staring at me in the face: A new story. I knew I couldn't get away, even if I tried. I was inspired to take the show on because as a Mexicana born and raised in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and Zacatecas capital, I had a need to resurrect old folk songs that I grew up listening to, and that for some reason or another, are always reinvented. I wanted the challenge of merging that idea of resurrecting the classics in the same way that Día de Los Muertos is about resurrecting the memory of our ancestors—to invite them in, even if for a day, and to recall.





The idea of remembrance was my hook. From then I thought about the idea that what is remembered, never dies. And in this way, who are those people that are often forgotten, that live in the periphery of our day-to-day and yet they occupy the same space and breathe the same air we do? To me that rings true to the mentally ill, to the dispossessed, to the homeless, the addicts and the veterans.

In order to achieve telling a story that rang true on many levels and that still maintained a heightened and stylized entry point (I cannot re-create real life on stage, I am a firm believer in the re-enchantment of art and thus I seek the entry points that are folkloric, timeless and stylized) I started to create "book ends" for the story. Basically saying we start here and we end there. The middle is for the cast to devise together.

My devising process is very similar to the way I teach playwriting or the way I create music in a jam circle: it is the commons based approach that embraces individuality in service of the larger commons (or in this case the story.) The questions I ask of my cast are: what do you bring to the stage? What characters can you hope to possess that inspire you? What forms of story telling interest

you, keeping in mind my aesthetic of transforming the seemingly ordinary into sheer wonder.

This story has many layers, but our sail (and our anchor) is the idea of remembrance and resurrection of old songs/beliefs/ideas and rituals. It takes place in a semi-askew version of "The City of Bridges," those parallel places that one can only visit in dreamscape or by embracing old rituals. Our central character is "The Kid" and borrowing from the simple aesthetic of Chaplin in that one can create pathos in a humorous way, he meets (or summons!) a Vagabundo character (The Tramp) in his wish to remember his recently deceased father, who was a veteran of the Iraq war of 2003. The Vagabundo, recently summoned, acts as the sort of enchanter that brings our Olvidados (the forgotten) homeless to life by having The Kid follow him there. The Kid reminds them that to remember is to live again, and therefore, by each Olvidado breaking into their stories of the past, and of the dead, the ritual is resurrected even amongst dispossessed individuals. The idea is then that a group of musicians get lost on their way to play for a Day of the Dead celebration and help supplement the storytelling with live drum-circle, Foley-type soundscape throughout the piece. You will see recognizable icons such as La Catrina, El Vagabundo, Los Muertos and also recognize some of the songs extracted from the classics like La Llorona, La Cigarra, El Gato Viudo and a special inter-active altar building process that pays a discrete homage to recently deceased singer songwriter Juan Gabriel with a rendition of the timeless Amor Eterno.

The story will engage some interesting forms of theatricality that include object manipulation/puppetry, world-building, a phantasmagoric glow-in-the-dark number a la visual artist Camille Rose Garcia all to hopefully capture a local fable that hinges its mythology on real events (veteranos and homelessness) by abstracting and using amplification through simplification. This form of wild storytelling will spark and speak to the child-mind in all of us and ultimately remind us that community in remembrance is a strengthening factor; no matter your status in society.

# What is devised theatre?

You might have heard about devised theatre before. Milagro's yearly Day of the Dead production is a piece of devised theatre. You might wonder, what exactly is devised theatre?

Devised theatre is a form of theatre where the final product is created during the rehearsal process with actors, director, playwright, and designers working in collaboration. Each director/group has their own approach, however they usually involve elements of improvisation, clowning, movement, and other play-making devices.

It can follow a strict structure or can be completely fluid. Sometimes they are based on real life people and their experience (such as *The Laramie Project*), inspired by real life events and situations (such as *El Muerto Vagabundo*), or even classic works.

Alison Oddey states in her book "Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook": Any definition of devised theatre must include process (finding the ways and means to share an artistic journey together), collaboration (working with others), multi-vision (integrating various views, beliefs, life experiences, and attitudes to changing world events), and the creation of an artistic product.

## Try it out

Devising a piece of theatre can be a stimulating and exciting journey towards the development of a performance which is a fusion of the unique talents and creativity of the group. The following exercise helps students learn to accept each others' ideas—a concept which is not only useful in improvisation, but essential in developing the dynamics of the group throughout the devising process.

### Pair Story-making

Divide into pairs. One person begins by making an "offer" (putting forward an idea) and the partner replies with a sentence that begins "Yes, and...". Try not to block your partner's ideas, which can so often happen in improvisation. Instead, build on each other's suggestions. As soon as confidence develops, you can add in actions. Use the space as much as possible.

A: It's raining

B: Yes, and I've got a large umbrella

A: Let's shelter under it

B: Yes, and the wind is blowing us into the air

A: We are flying over the sea

B: Yes, and we have landed on an island...

And so on. It can be a very liberating game, especially as we don't often get the chance to say "yes" to everything! A key concept is that participants should avoid trying to push their own idea at the expense of their partner's. You can also try the game with both of you saying "Yes, and...". The literal "Yes" can be dropped completely as soon as acceptance of each others' ideas begins to become more automatic. In contrast, it may also be worth briefly exploring what happens if one of the partners always says "No".

Source: <http://dramaresource.com/devising-theatre/>



PHOTO © RUSSELL J YOUNG

# EL MUERTO VAGABUNDO

October 13-November 6, 2016  
Thursday-Saturday at 7:30pm | Sunday at 2:00pm

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

Tickets start \$27

Student, senior, and veteran discounts available  
For group sales, contact Melissa Schmitz at 503-236-7253 x 117

Preview: Thursday, October 13 at 7:30pm  
Opening night: Friday, October 14 at 7:30pm  
followed by complimentary post-play reception by  
Tortilleria y Tienda De Leon's

## Special Events

Day of the Dead altars by Pepe Moscoso and paintings by William Hernandez,  
open one hour prior to showtime

!Viva Milagro! Fundraising dinner and party on  
November 1, 2016 from 6:30-9:00pm



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.