



Photo by Russell J. Young

# Lydia



## Study Guide



Original artwork by William Hernandez



Northwest Premiere

# Lydia

by Octavio Solis

directed by Kinan Valdez

**Winner! 2008 Denver Post Ovation Award,  
Best Production**

**Winner! 2008 Henry Award,  
Outstanding New Play**

**Nominee! 2010 GLAAD Award for  
Outstanding Los Angeles Theater**

Set in the 1970s on the Texas border separating the United States and Mexico, *Lydia* is an intense, lyrical, and magical play. The Flores family welcomes Lydia, an undocumented maid, into their El Paso home to care for their daughter Ceci, who was tragically disabled in a car accident on the eve of her Quinceañera, her fifteenth birthday. Lydia's immediate and seemingly miraculous bond with the girl sets the entire family on a mysterious and shocking journey of discovery. *Lydia* is an unflinching and deeply emotional portrait of a family caught in a web of dark secrets. Contains strong adult language and nudity.

"An astonishing, expertly crafted tragedy that seduces and tempts you with its pulsing rhythms and evocative language until it has you fully under its spell."—Denver Post

"Fresh, penetrating, often blissful."  
—The New York Times

"[Octavio Solis] demands attention with his jazzy mix of Spanglish, poetry, pop lyrics, magical realism and emotional insight."—Variety



# Border Culture

by Ariadne Wolf

The culture on the border between the United States and Mexico offers a unique slice of American life. The huge prevalence of Latino families offers a close-knit culture and the opportunity to integrate Latino culture with a new life in the United States. For example, the language common to many popular and widely read Latino and Latina writers is punctuated with Spanish words in the style of language common to this area. This combined and hybridized language reflects the attempts to combine Mexican culture with an American lifestyle. At the same time, these towns display tremendous racism towards Latino families. Many important Latino and Latina writers, including Gloria Anzualda, have focused on the border as a site of both growth and repression. Thus the border offers a site of both challenges to and strengthening influences for Latino/Latina identity.

# Undocumented workers/ “illegal” immigration

While President Trump discusses the increase in immigration from Mexico to the United States as a “crisis,” this rhetoric excludes the reality of life for many individuals living along the Mexican side of this border. Those who attempt to emigrate to the U.S. are driven by extreme poverty, state corruption, and violence. Although often termed “illegal immigrants” by Western media and conservative politicians, the correct and respectful term for those who cross the border without waiting for legal permission is “undocumented workers” or, more simply, “undocumented people.” In fact, many of these people are children. The New York Times reported in a 2014 article entitled “Children At the Border” that 68,000 children were caught crossing the border into the United States, 1/4 of those from Mexico. Although children in this situation from Central America cannot be deported immediately due to an anti-trafficking statutes, those from Mexico can be and often are. The poverty and other factors which make these individuals desperate enough to risk extreme abuse, rape, and even murder in order to seek a life in the United States has partly been produced by U.S. policies of exploitation towards the Global South. Consequently, the United States is partially, perhaps largely, responsible for the growing economic despair which fuels “illegal” immigration. NBC reported in their 2016 article “Separated By the Border, These Families Waited Years For A Hug” that the United States has deported 2.8 million people since 2008.

Once in the United States, those who have successfully emigrated face constant uncertainty and terror. They must attempt to build a life while lacking driver’s licenses, passports, and other paperwork necessary to accept most jobs, take out a loan, or even open a bank account. The jobs these individuals have access to often lack health insurance, job security, or on-the-job protections. Many of those who emigrate to the U.S. are parents seeking to be able to provide their families with financial security. Thus these additional hazards come at a heavy price, not just for themselves but for their children.

However, one of the most personal aspects of being an undocumented worker is being unable to communicate face-to-face with one’s family members for years, even decades. The Border Network of Human Rights has responded with the #HugsNotWalls campaign, which in 2016 successfully allowed these families to reunite along the border. Thanks to this organization, family members in Mexico and the United States were permitted to stand on either side of the Rio Grande and see one another, some for the first time in decades. Residents of the United States wore blue, and residents of Mexico wore white. Over one thousand people came to this event. They were then permitted three minutes to hug their family members in the riverbed.



Photo by Chris Vreeland

# Quinceañera Explained

by Ariadne Wolf

In its simplest terms, this event is the recognition that a girl has become a young woman. Though traditionally this ritual was rooted in preparing a young woman to either take on the duties of a wife or of a nun, it has taken on a variety of forms in Latin American societies of today. Many Latino people retain their ties to their culture after emigrating, and celebrating a Quinceañera is one such way to embrace this cultural heritage. Thus today, the celebration itself rather than the individual young woman is referred to as “Quinceañera.”

In traditional Mexican Quinceañeras, young women and men dance in specific traditional ways alongside the celebrated young woman. She is escorted by a young man, and the community presents her with gifts. Sometimes this celebration brings with it specific privileges afforded young women, which vary depending on the cultural tradition but sometimes include wearing makeup or high heels. Although elaborate events were originally associated only with wealthy families, the tradition has expanded. Families with ties to the Catholic church incorporate specific religious

elements as well. The young woman wears a fancy gown, and her godparents present her with jewelry. The family attends a ceremonial mass, and then the celebrated young woman leaves a bouquet of flowers for the Virgen de Guadalupe.

More than anything, however, the Quinceañera is a means to celebrate and express honor for a young girl and her family. The godparents and parents all have significant roles to play in this event. It is a passing on of the responsibilities of adulthood as well as a way to recognize the accomplishment of transitioning into womanhood with grace and dignity. It includes a gorgeous cake designed to match the honoree’s gown, and traditionally lasts for six hours. The event incorporates a formal dinner party as well as grand toasts and similar gestures. It is an occasion for happiness, as well as a powerful reminder of both a young woman’s accomplishments in achieving adolescence with both spirit and grace. Moreover, it is an occasion in which an entire community can come together to be joyful, honor their rich heritage, and connect with one another and with their cultural ties.



## Loteria

Loteria is the quintessential Mexican game, also known as Mexican Bingo. Loteria uses images on a deck of cards, and the caller uses an improvised short poem, riddle, or phrase instead of the card name. Chips (often corn kernels or beans) are placed on the board (tabla), and the first player to fill out the specified pattern wins. Traditionally, there are 54 Loteria cards with their corresponding numbers.

## Magic realism

Magical realism is a form of storytelling typically linked to Latin-American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende. It is typically applied to fiction and storytelling. Specifically, this method of writing links the ordinary world with the spiritual in immediate and strongly felt ways. Unlike fantasy, magical realism brings the strange and fantastical into the everyday world rather than changing the rules of the world in order to incorporate magical elements. The presence of this element in Latinx storytelling points to the profound influence that folk tales and mythology have on the development of Latinx cultural beliefs and practices. Typically, magical realism is used to expose magical or spiritual elements in the real world. It points to a willingness to recognize the interconnections between reality and abnormality, to refuse to disconnect from a mythological perspective in pursuit of a typically Western worldview, which is limited by the pursuit of the banal and scientific rationality.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Solis incorporates elements of magical realism?
2. How do you think Solis' Mexican-American background impacts his writing?
3. What perspective of Latinx culture is expressed in this play?
4. What role does Lydia have in the play? Is she the central character? What does she provide to the other characters that they have been lacking? Why is she the best person to provide this?
5. Do you think that experiencing tragedy makes a person more open to accepting, even welcoming, the possibility of magic?
6. What are some struggles immigrants from Mexico and Latin America face when entering the United States?
7. What motivates people to try to cross the border, in spite of all these difficulties?
8. Why do you think Latinx immigrants fight so hard to maintain their cultural ties?
9. What are some attitudes that citizens of the United States have towards undocumented immigrants? Where do some of these prejudices stem from?
10. Do you believe that concerns about the border constitute a "crisis"? If not, why do you think politicians and members of the media refer to it in this way? If so, what solution would you propose?

### Learn more:

The Quinceañera Tradition <http://www.quinceanera-boutique.com/quinceaneratradition.htm>

The Quinceañera Celebration <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/chngmexico/218>

History of La Lotería <http://www.teresavillegas.com/history-of-la-loteria/>

Octavio Solis <http://www.octaviosolis.net/>



# Octavio Solis

Octavio Solis is a well-known Latino playwright and director who has created over 25 plays. He has earned a variety of awards and grants, and his work has been shown widely. Though initially considering an acting career, Solis was inspired to shift gears while acting in *Native Speech* in Dallas, TX. Solis blends his experience of Latino culture in the United States with a keen awareness of issues concerning Latino life at the border based on the years he spent living near the Mexico-Texas border. Solis explores boundaries and borders in his work, focusing on families in crisis and the impact of alienation from one's cultural ties and homeland. Yet Solis' work also makes clear the links between the sacred and the everyday, using lyrical language to evoke a sense of magic, longing, mystery, and sadness. Though Solis' work often incorporates dark and heavily serious themes, his characters and his work are always layered with love.

## A few questions for Octavio Solis

by Cambria Herrera

### What was going on in your life in 2008 that made you write this play?

It was commissioned by The Denver Center in 2007. I was connected with several theatres at the time and I was actually working on *Lydia* and an adaptation of *Don Quixote* at the exact same time.

I started writing *Lydia* in December 2007 and I gave myself a deadline of five pages a day. It couldn't be more, couldn't be less. If I wrote seven on one day, I couldn't cheat and write only three the next day. In two weeks I had 70+ pages. I gave myself a Christmas holiday but on the 26th I was back to work. And it was finished shortly after the New Year. In February I hand delivered *Lydia* to Bruce Sevy at the Denver Center and they loved it. They gave me a workshop of the play that summer in Steamboat Springs Colorado. It was an easy decision to choose Juliette Carrillo to direct the workshop and the original production at the Denver Center. It

was there that a lot of the actors for the production were cemented. It was a wonderful, tight cast.

### Why set *Lydia* in the 1970s?

Because that is when I came of age. Our first important works are often a reflection of when we came of age. The years between the age of 14 and 16 are when we are learning how the world works.

### How much of the story is drawn from your own experience in El Paso?

It's not about my family but it's about elements of my life growing up. Elements in my life that are common in a lot of Latino families. I recently went to El Paso and they were doing a performance of *Lydia* at a local school. They did a reading for me and some friends of mine that came said they felt like, "You were telling our stories." The themes became immediate to them and it brought it all back for them. I thought to myself that's good, it really is universal. And of course, the only way to make a play universal is to make it specific.





**Do you have any comment on the place of this play as it deals with immigration in regards to today's political climate?**

Today there is a lot of national talk about immigration. In El Paso it's always been like that; it's only now a part of a national conversation. We always had to deal with the fact that the border patrol was going to be walking around every couple hours. There was always going to be someone trying to find their way here. It has always been part of my consciousness.

**In your words, how does Ceci capture the life of a young woman with brain damage?**

I saw a documentary on severe head trauma, especially about the caregivers and the people treating them in the hospitals and the people that care for them: parents, brothers, and sisters. It captured how hard it is and the adjustments families have to make. Victims often insist on things being done their way because they still are independent people with needs, but without a way to communicate. And as soon as I saw that, I knew I needed to tell this story.

*Lydia* was originally going to be my first kitchen sink drama with pure realism. Then I realized I couldn't get into this girl's head. I got my cue from Faulkner in one of his novels; there's this girl who can barely bring two thoughts together, but in her head she's as eloquent as any poet in the world. In our consciousness we all have access to all the words for the fullest expression that we need. So I thought, what if she can't express herself to anyone in her family, but she can express herself to us? Then the world of the play changed and it couldn't be that kitchen sink drama world anymore. Something tremendous was breached and it was never the same.

**Anything else you'd like to say about the play?**

It's still talking to me. Any good work will always speak to its author. When a cast rehearses a play and learns it, they also naturally memorize the invisible script. When I see it, that's the script that continually says things to me. And it's transporting; it's still living.



Photo by Russell J. Young

# Lydia

by Octavio Solis  
directed by Kinán Valdez

**March 16-April 8, 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, March 16 at 7:30 PM

Opening night: Friday, March 17 at 7:30 PM



The Northwest's premier Latino arts and culture organization  
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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.