

PLAY GUIDE



LA ESQUINITA, USA

by RUBÉN C. GONZÁLEZ

2016



2017



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La Esquinita, USA Play Guide written by Katherine Monberg, ATC Literary Manager, with contributions from ATC Learning & Education staff.

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ABOUT ATC

Arizona Theatre Company is a professional, not-for-profit theatre company. This means that all of our artists, administrators and production staff are paid professionals, and the income we receive from ticket sales and contributions goes right back into our budget to create our work, rather than to any particular person as a profit.

Each season, ATC employs hundreds of actors, directors and designers from all over the country to create the work you see on stage. In addition, ATC currently employs approximately 50 staff members in our production shops and administrative offices in Tucson and Phoenix during our season. Among these people are carpenters, painters, marketing professionals, fundraisers, stage directors, sound and light board operators, tailors, costume designers, box office agents, stage crew - the list is endless - representing an amazing range of talents and skills.

We are also supported by a Board of Trustees, a group of business and community leaders who volunteer their time and expertise to assist the theatre in financial and legal matters, advise in marketing and fundraising, and help represent the theatre in our community.

Roughly 150,000 people attend our shows every year, and several thousand of those people support us with charitable contributions in addition to purchasing their tickets. Businesses large and small, private foundations and the city and state governments also support our work financially.

All of this is in support of our vision and mission:

The mission of Arizona Theatre Company is to inspire, engage and entertain - one moment, one production and one audience at a time.

Our mission is to create professional theatre that continually strives to reach new levels of artistic excellence that resonates locally, in the state of Arizona and throughout the nation. In order to fulfill our mission, the theatre produces a broad repertoire ranging from classics to new works, engages artists of the highest caliber, and is committed to assuring access to the broadest spectrum of citizens.



The Temple of Music and Art, the home of ATC shows in downtown Tucson.



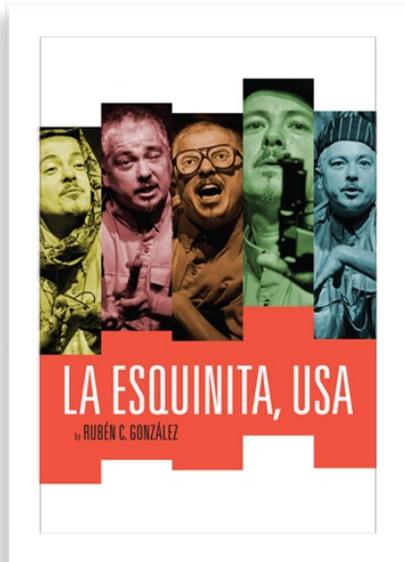
The Herberger Theater Center, ATC's performance venue in downtown Phoenix.



INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

La Esquinita, USA

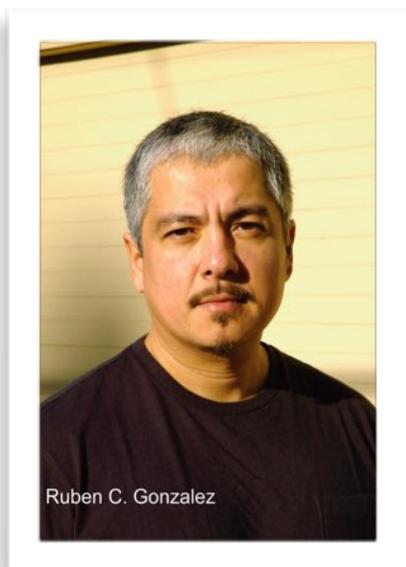
By Rubén C. González



Design by Richard Giuliani; photo by Poch01.

What happens to a small border town when big business breaks its promise? At a bus stop on the 40A Red Line, in cross-cultural hip-hop-fueled language at once poetic and powerful, one of the Southwest's premier Mexican-American writer/performers, Ruben C. Gonzalez, presents a tour-de-force of interlocking stories: ten characters on a passage through a once-booming town, now forgotten. The main source of employment, Thompson Tire Factory, has gone overseas, leaving the town's infrastructure in disarray. Told by the wise, omniscient custodian, Lencho, and experienced through the eyes of 18-year-old Daniel, *La Esquinita, USA* connects the disparate stories of those left behind – of the people we, as a society, systematically choose to avoid – into a captivating new American narrative of self-identity, unity, and peace. Much like the works of John Leguizamo, Anna Deavere Smith, and Danny Hoch, *La Esquinita, USA* is a virtuoso solo performance – a gorgeous, brave story of love, forgiveness, and ultimate redemption. An Arizona premiere from the famed El Teatro Campesino.

MEET THE CREATOR



Ruben C. Gonzalez

Playwright and performer, Ruben C. Gonzalez.

Rubén C. González (Playwright and Performer) is one of five children of Mexican immigrants. He is a critically acclaimed solo performer, actor, writer and director who hails from Los Angeles via Colima, Mexico. He is a 25-year veteran actor of the prestigious El Teatro Campesino. He received his training at The London Academy for the Performing Arts, Circle in the Square Theatre School (NYC), El Teatro Campesino and holds an MFA in Dramatic Arts from the University of California, Davis. *La Esquinita, USA* has toured off-Broadway at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, Aurora Theatre, Su Teatro Denver, CaraMia Dallas, The Guadalupe Cultural Center San Antonio, Teatro Bilingue de Houston, La Pena Cultural Center and at The Los Angeles Theatre Center as part of the inaugural Encuentro 2014, the largest Latino Theatre Festival in the U.S. in over 40 years. His previous solo works, *Diary of a Mad Mexican* and *The Messiah Complex* have garnered him much critical and audience praise and



have toured all over the U.S. and Poland. He has graced the stages in various productions at The Mark Taper Forum, South Coast Repertory, Pasadena Playhouse, The Kennedy Center, The Lincoln Center Institute, Intar, HB Studios, New Dramatist (NYC) and Primary Stages, among others. He has performed his solo works at countless universities: Brown, Stanford, Oregon, Oregon State, Washington, UC Riverside, UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz, UCLA, Vassar, Cornell, Northern Illinois, St. Mary's and Loyola, Chicago, to name a few. For the stage, Ruben has directed *Pilgrimage* by Joe Quintero; Monica Sanchez's *The Chronicles of Odisia Sanchez*; *Aliso in Workerland*, *Mi Abuelo Fue un Bracero*, and *Iya* by Luis Juarez; and *The Throwdown* by Theatre Troupe Headrush. His television credits include *Veronica Mars*, *Medium*, *Air America*, and *The Minor Accomplishments of Jackie Woodman*. Some of his silver screen credits include *Selena* starring Jennifer Lopez, *The Master* starring Jet Li, 2009 Sundance darling *La Mission* starring Benjamin Bratt, *Barrio Murders*, *Food Stamps*, *Suckers*, and *The Perfect Game* starring Ed Asner. Mr. González is currently he is seeking distribution for the film *Oscar*, that he wrote, directed, and in which he starred.

MEET THE CHARACTERS



Actor Ruben C. Gonzalez, who plays all the characters in ATC's production of *La Esquinita, USA*.

Lencho: A custodian, a presence in the juncture between the past and the present, a neighbor who helps when he can, a shape-shifting time traveler.

Ravi: Friend and guide to Daniel.

Daniel: A young man in search of understanding and relief from the world.

Animal: Daniel's classmate, large and forceful, projects his own experience by pouncing on others.

Wilo: Tecato, formerly incarcerated, sells jumper cables and is perpetually afraid.

Sleepy: Cross-eyed leader of social revolution.

Skinny Black: Former convict and friend of Wilo's. a chameleon. a master of invisibility.



Tweaker: A drug dealer, a delusion.

Sunshine: Always happy, a timeless illusion, possibility.

Mr. Jefferson: The neighborhood barber, an injured veteran.

Yolanda: Lencho's lover; love, unity, loss.

Grace: A young black woman, Daniel's lover; love, unity, hope.

CULTURAL CONTEXT: AMERICAN ECONOMICS AND THE 40A RED LINE



Ruben C. Gonzalez in ATC's *La Esquinita, USA*.

The poetry and prose of *La Esquinita, USA*, unfolds at a bus stop on the 40A Red Line: a generic yet specific place that is both familiar and unique to the contemporary United States. *La esquinita*, which translates into English as “the little corner,” represents both the unique stories of the play’s characters, and their experiences as shared by many over the country’s transitive socio-economic history.

The image of the equally-attainable American Dream, fueled by the capitalist achievements of the post-Industrial Revolution era, is firmly cemented in a generalized American cultural identity. Throughout the social history of the United States, immigrant and minority communities have long been the target of the idealized dream that promises success and financial stability in exchange for hard work and commitment that is theoretically accessible to all, but in practice proves less accessible to certain socio-economic divisions.

The American Dream experienced a period of great allure during the economic boom of post-World War II America, which introduced a period of intense and unprecedented economic prosperity. This Golden Age of Capitalism expanded the spending power and the membership of the middle and working class, and propelled the U.S. to achieve the highest mass standard of living in the world by the early 1960s. This economic growth continued until the early 1970s, and paralleled numerous social reforms designed to address the social and economic drivers of poverty, often related to constructs of race and economic class. Mediation of income disparity was attempted through social security reform, civil rights legislation, the expansion of women’s rights, the introduction of Medicare and the Food Stamp program, education reform, and the Johnson Administration’s “War on Poverty.”

The expanded social welfare introduced during the prosperous post-war years ground to a halt with the economic “stagflation” of the 1970s, bringing about a period of economic stagnation, high inflation, and high unemployment sparked by numerous domestic and global complications. The 1973 oil crisis and the growing U.S. debt partly incurred by expanded

social programs led to the overvaluation of the U.S. dollar. This prompted President Nixon to effectively render the global gold-backed economic system (known as the Bretton Woods system) inoperable by eliminating the convertibility of the U.S. dollar to gold. This event, known as the “Nixon Shock,” combined with a world steel crisis and the 1973-74 stock market crash to establish a major economic recession.

The 1970s recession rapidly increased the costs of living and doing business in the United States, leading to massive outsourcing of U.S. businesses and a return to more conservative social and fiscal policies. Such policies included deindustrialization, the decline of union protections and social welfare support, rising unemployment, and a burgeoning prison-industrial complex. All of this greatly increased economic and occupational insecurity, particularly for the middle and working class, and widened the income disparity that increasingly favored the traditionally white, elitist, upper class.



Official portrait of President Ronald Reagan.

To combat the continuing economic challenges, the Reagan Administration introduced supply-side economic policies informally known as “Reaganomics” designed to reduce taxes for the upper class, encouraging spending that would “trickle down” through the reinvigorated economy to lower-income Americans. Inflation and unemployment fell in the early 1980s, but the tax cuts combined with increased military spending during the Cold War to triple the national debt, thus sparking national economic growth at a high price to future generations.

Government debt and GDP continued to increase throughout the 1990s, as the “new economy” of the U.S. completed its transition from a manufacturing to a service-based economy, solidified by the dot-com boom. This resulted in a “bubble” of stock evaluations that popped in the early 2000s, prompting a mini-recession furthered by uncertainty following the September 11th attacks and complicated foreign relations.

The early 2000s saw a rapidly expanding housing market that created a global housing bubble until 2008. When the housing bubble burst, millions of mortgages went into default, forcing the collapse of major banks in the U.S. and Europe. Government bailouts salvaged some of the major U.S. banks, but the plunge in the stock market and housing prices created lasting financial distress that trickles into present day economic and social policy.

THEMES IN THE PLAY



Ruben C. Gonzalez in ATC's *La Esquinita, USA*.

La Esquinita, USA touches upon complex themes that weave throughout the play and connect to our broader understanding of history and culture. Below are brief descriptions of some important themes within the play.

Creation Narratives and Supercontinents

Many world religions and cultures throughout time have speculated about how and why the human race came into being. Human existence is often described by creation narratives that explain how humans came to inhabit the world. Creation narratives vary throughout time and throughout the world; they are often culturally or religiously specific, and generally regarded as truth within their cultures of origin.

Creation narratives may or may not be related to geological concepts that explain the distribution of peoples throughout the world. One prominent theory describes the former existence of supercontinents, which were huge landmasses consisting of numerous individual continents that we recognize today. Pangea is thought to be the most recent supercontinent, having formed nearly 300 million years ago and broken apart into isolated continents nearly 175 million years ago. The theory is supported by dated fossil evidence that identifies similar plant and animal species on continents that are currently separated by massive distances, but may once have been part of a single landmass: Pangea.

Greek Influence: Athens and Sparta

Many traditions and practices of ancient Greece have continuing influence on modern American culture, including the education, political, and social systems of the U.S. The geography of ancient Greece led to the development of the independent polis, or city-state. Separated by high mountains that prohibited communication and travel, each polis developed an independent cultural identity.

Among the ancient Greek city-states, Athens was known as the intellectual polis that placed emphasis on the arts, architecture, literature, and the study of science, history, and philosophy. They also practiced a form of democracy in which power was shared among designated participants. Alternatively, Sparta was known for its military might that was ruled by an oligarchy, or a small group in which political control was concentrated.

Athens and Sparta are largely remembered for their conflict during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). Though Athens eventually surrendered, the economic impact of decades of famine, plague, and war were felt throughout all of Greece, introducing widespread poverty and frequent civil wars in the Greek world, and introducing warfare of unprecedented scale and brutality.



The 13th British colonies in North America.

Imperialism and Exceptionalism

Imperialism, in its many forms, has long been a component of American history, from the European imperialism that first claimed the lands of indigenous peoples of North America as their own in the late 15th century, to the establishment of the 13 British colonies in the 1770s, through the “manifest destiny” that drove westward expansion of the American frontier across North America in the 19th century.

Social scientists identify a connection between the deeply-ingrained concept of imperialism in American cultural history and the related concept of American exceptionalism, a theory that the history, origins, and institutions of the United States designate it as special and unique among world nations. This concept of exceptionalism also serves a type of intra-cultural imperialism by advancing the assertion of a mainstream “American” identity while marginalizing the “other,” or any social or cultural deviation from the idealized, generalized American identity.



Daniel's Answer to the King (1890) by Briton Riviera depicting Daniel in the lions' den, currently on display at the Manchester City Art Gallery.

Daniel in the Lions' Den

Chapter Six of the Book of Daniel, found in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, details the story of Daniel, who was condemned to death by a decree of his master, who was tricked into issuing the decree by Daniel's jealous rivals. He is cast into a pit of lions, but saved from death by an angel, who was sent by God in recognition of Daniel's innocence. Those who conspired against Daniel, as well as their wives and children, are thrown to the lions in Daniel's place. The story is generally used to represent the triumph of truth, victory achieved by integrity or in the face of insurmountable odds or circumstances, and the power of faith.

REFERENCES IN THE PLAY



Iconic logo of the bar from the *Cheers* television series.

Cheers: An American television sitcom produced 1982-1993 that takes place in a Boston bar named Cheers, where a group of locals meet to socialize, best known for its famous tagline, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name,” derived from the show’s theme song by Gary Portnoy.

Crystal: Reference to crystal meth, or methamphetamine.

Desert Storm: American military operation during the first Gulf War, in which the U.S. led a coalition force of 34 nations in response to Iraq’s invasion and annexation of Kuwait.



Cesar Millan, star of *Leader of the Pack*.

Leader of the Pack: American documentary television series starring Cesar Millan that finds homes for shelter dogs and takes place at Millan’s Dog Psychology Center in Spain.

Doomsday: The last day of the world’s existence or a time or event of crisis or danger; the day of the Last Judgment in Christian belief.

Emo: A style of music that resembles punk but with more complex arrangements and lyrics addressing emotional subjects, as well as its related subculture.



James Cameron, director, producer, screenwriter, and filmmaker.

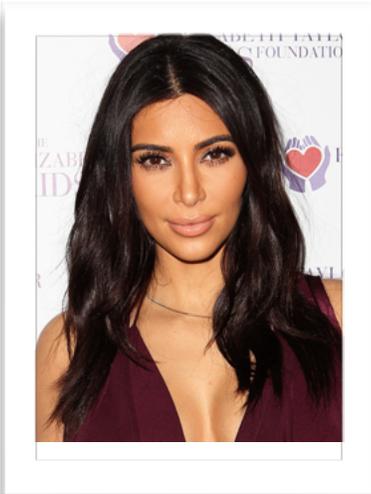
G: A gram.

Herb: Marijuana.

Hood: Neighborhood.

James Cameron: Canadian filmmaker, director, producer, and screenwriter best known for major motion pictures including *Terminator* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), and *Titanic* (1997), among many others.

“I’ll never let go Jack.”: A famous line from James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997) starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet.



Kim Kardashian.

Jedi: A member of the mystical knightly order in the Star Wars films, who ensure peace and justice in the universe.

Kardashians: A family of reality television personalities and socialites.

Kunta Kinte: A character in the novel *Roots* by Alex Haley.

National Geographic: The monthly magazine publication of the National Geographic Society, one of the largest nonprofit scientific and educational institutions in the world.

Obi-Wan Kenobi: Mentor to Luke Skywalker, whom he initiates into the Jedi tradition, in the Star Wars universe.

P.O.: Parole officer.



Paris Hilton, socialite and model.

Paris Hilton: American socialite and model, the great-granddaughter of the founder of Hilton Hotels, Conrad Hilton.

Pookie: Crystal meth.

Slumdog Millionaire: British drama film directed by Danny Boyle, recounting the history of the protagonist, Jamal Malik, a young man from the Juhu slums of Mumbai, explaining how he was able to answer every question correctly on the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

Speed: Street name for amphetamine sulphate, a Class B drug.

The cheddar: Cash money.



Common characterization of Uncle Sam.

The Cure: English rock band formed in the 1970s, part of the post-punk and new wave movements following the U.K.'s punk rock revolution, who also became a staple component of the punk rock genre.

Uncle Sam: Personification of America representing national patriotism.

Zombieland: A 2009 American comedy film that follows a geeky college kid making his way through the zombie apocalypse.

GLOSSARY

Ama: Master; owner; keeper.

Ama, esperando.: Mom, I'm waiting.

Ama, necesito mi dinero.: Mom, I need my money.

Amnesia: Loss of memory.

Arroz: Rice.

Ay, mira que pajarito tan lindo.: Oh, look at that pretty bird.

Ay va el flaquito.: There goes the skinny guy.

Barrio: Neighborhood.

Batos: Simpletons; fools.

Cabeza: Head.

Cafecito: Black coffee.

Cantones: Homies.

Caquita: Little crap.

Carga: Heroin.

Carnales: Carnal, of the flesh.

Chante: Dilapidated home.

Chavala: A sissy.

Chifle: Whistle or call.

Cielo: Sky.

Clapper: Sound-activated electrical switch

Clinica: Clinic.

Cochino: Pig.



Ruben C. Gonzalez in ATC's production of *La Esquinita, USA*.



Cochio cavevatos: Dirty cavemen.

Como el Mexicano con el maiz.: Like a Mexican with corn.

Como platano frito.: Like fried plantains.

Connoisseur: An expert judge in matters of taste.

Corazon: Heart.

Dedo: Finger.

Dinero: Money.

Encabronado: Angry.

Esperando: Waiting.

Espiritus: Spirits.

Esta bien quacha!: It's dirty.

Estan tan calientes que se me hacen tosones.: It's so hot they are going to turn into fried plantain chips.

Fade: Haircut with an aggressively tight taper, in which hair at the sides and back is cut as close as possible and fades or tapers to any longer length on top.

Familias: Families.

Feria: Money.

Fire marshal: Head of a fire-prevention or fire-investigation bureau.

Fritos, los tengo.: They're fried, I tell you.

Garrote: A stick or club.

Guete: Gun.

Indio: Indian.

Jainas: Spanish slang for girlfriend.

Jefito: Boss, can be used to refer to one's parent or spouse.

La Esquinita: The little corner.

Loco: Crazy.

Madraso: A sharp punch or blow.

Manzana: Apple.

Masa: Take a crap.

Maseta: Head.

Mira: Look.

Mole: Sauce frequently used in Mexican dishes.

Nalgas: Buttocks.

Nano: Little one.



Negro: A black person.

Nina: Girl.

Nino: Boy.

Orale: Exclamation indicating agreement or surprise; “hey.”

Paisa: A countryman.

Panza: Stomach, belly, gut.

Pasteles: Plantain tamales.

Patos: A derogatory word for a gay man.

Pedo: Fart, crap, lies.

Pelon: Hairless; a bald gang member.

Pero: But.

Peludos: Furry; hairy.

Perra: Female dog.

Pesqueso: Neck.

Pinche: Mexican slang word indicating that something is negligible, of low quality or cost, or very poor.

Pinta: Spot or dot.

Placas: Police.

Platano frito: Fried sweet plantain.

Pobrecito: Poor.

Pos: In pursuit of.

Pueblito: Small village or town.

Pues: Well.

Puro: Pure.

Puto: Extremely offensive phrase, intended to insult.

Que gacho, no?: Pretty messed up, right?

Quincenera: A 15th birthday celebration for a young girl.

Quincenos: A fortnight, or two weeks.

Ranchonon: A big ranch.

Ranfla: A car.

Rico: Rich.

Roofie: Common name for rohyphenol, a drug used to render someone unconscious or incapacitated.

Ruca: Mexican slang for girlfriend.

Sabes: You know.



Sangwich: Slang for sandwich.

Scapegoat: A person or group made to bear blame for others.

Serio: For real.

Serio pedo: No joke.

Si dios queria, te lo juro.: God willing, I swear.

Tanga: Thong underwear.

Tecato: Hype or heroin junkie.

Tierra: Earth or ground.

Tilangudo: Lanky.

Tingshas: Two handmade bell cymbals used in meditation and healing.

Tita: Aunt.

Tostones: Fried plantain chips.

Trasquilado: Broken down.

Tripas: Tripe; guts.

Trucha: To be alert.

Tsunami: Long, high sea wave caused by an earthquake, submarine landslide, or other major topographic disturbance.

Vato: Slang for guy or dude.

Veracruz: Major port city on the Gulf of Mexico in the Mexican state of Veracruz.

Viejo: Old, or old man.

Voodoo: Religious cult practice most prevalent in the Caribbean and southern U.S. that combines elements of Roman Catholic ritual with traditional African magical and religious rites.

Ya sabes: You know.

Zapatos: Shoes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Discussion Questions

1. What happens to a town when promises from big businesses are broken? What happens to the people left behind? How does this hardship affect the individual? The community as a whole?
2. Which characters do you relate to the most? Why?



3. How does the actor transition from character to character? What are the different physical characteristics he portrays for each character?
4. Does this play remind you of other things you have experienced in your own life?
5. Does this play remind you of specific moments in history? Do you see any analogies or metaphors? How does the work relate to other ideas or events in the world?

Activities

Language Arts Activities

1. "La Esquinita" translates to little corner. Actor/playwright Ruben C. Gonzalez chose this name because he wanted the play to feel like it could have happened on any forgotten corner in the United States. What parallels do you see between the town in the play and your own hometown? Discuss these parallels with the class, then write a short story from the perspective of one of the characters in *La Esquinita, USA* as if they lived in your own hometown instead of the fictional town in the play.
2. Think of another time or place in history when the closing of a large company affected the community as greatly as it does in *La Esquinita, USA*. Can you write the opening scene to a play about that situation?

Theatre Arts Activities

1. In *La Esquinita, USA* one actor has to play multiple roles. Often actors change the way they walk, stand, or talk to show that the actor is now embodying a different character.
 - a. Come up with four different characters you could play, and write descriptions for each one.
 - b. Find poses, gestures, and a way of walking for each character.
 - c. Practice transitioning between each character and present your work to the class
2. The character of Daniel is based off of a boy that actor/playwright Ruben C. Gonzalez met while he was a substitute teacher. Think of someone that you've met that has intrigued you, Write and perform a monologue from that person's perspective.