

Down the Yellow Brick Road to Querencia

By Kristin Leahey, Dramaturg

Residing near the shoreline of Lake Michigan, south of Holland, Michigan, in Castle Park, is an old brick structure that resembles a castle. The castle was built in 1894 by German immigrant and Chicago business venturer Georg Michael Schwarz. Schwarz and his family, including six daughters, lived in the dwelling for about a year but then moved to the suburban city of Holland, abandoning the stone anomaly forever. But local children continued to visit the park and the stone structure for years. One of those children was L. Frank Baum. The legend is that the impressionable Baum, who visited Holland during the summers, was inspired by the conspicuous castle, which became the inspiration for his Oz and the Emerald City in his 1900 American classic *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

For *Somewhere Over the Border's* writer, composer, and librettist Brian Quijada, the Oz and the Emerald City for protagonist Reina, is represented by the dream of finding a home in the United States complete with earning a green card. Reina is inspired by Quijada's mother and her actual ten-day journey from Central America to the U.S. She traveled from her home in Chanmico, El Salvador to Guatemala City, Guatemala to Guadalajara, Mexico to Tijuana, Mexico through the desert and across the border to San Diego. To express this arduous and unfathomable journey the seventeen-year-old young woman makes, Brian Quijada relies on the classic American children's story of *the Wizard of Oz*, with references to the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, the yellow brick road, and, of course, the Wicked Witch but through his own lens. Both the original and Quijada's adaptation are parables for finding a better life in a utopia, realizing that all utopias are a mix of dreams and nightmares but only imagined versus realities, as are all utopias. And it holds true that in both Baum's and Quijada's stories there truly is "no place like home." It's ironic to consider that the inspiration for the original story was an Emerald City built by an immigrant attempting to build a fortified home for his family. Schwarz shared a similar vision with both the fictional and the real Reina.

Reina is not alone in her experience: since 1980, the U.S. population of Central American-born immigrants has grown more than ten times since 1980, and by 24% since 2010. As reported by the Migration Policy Institute, "3.8 million Central American immigrants present in 2019 accounted for 8% of the U.S. foreign-born population of 44.9 million." And "immigration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has contributed the most to the growth of Central American immigrant population since 1980. Roughly 86 percent of Central Americans in the United States in 2019 were born in these three countries."¹ The character of Reina shares many similarities with real-life Dorothy and the playwright's mother—Reina Quijada, including her optimism, desire to find herself, and knowledge that home is always in one's heart.

This is the world premiere production of *Somewhere Over the Border*. Brian Quijada has been working on the musical for over two years now, and primarily through the pandemic, in Syracuse, Rochester, Arizona, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and via screen from throughout the country and wherever the company members resided. Much of the development, which I participated in, as the dramaturg, took place over Zoom. Mrs. Quijada has yet to see the

musical and is eagerly anticipating the next production, by Teatro Vista in her U.S. hometown of Chicago, where the writer and his brother Marvin and half-brother Fernando grew-up.

In a recent interview I conducted with Mrs. Quijada, her delight and enthusiasm for the show was palpable. She spoke about how proud she is that so many people love her children because of the traits that she has passed onto them: an incredible work ethic, and the love, respect, and affection she and her children have for everyone, no matter how challenging and bitter the world can be. I asked her what it was like to grow up in El Salvador, with her strict mother and four brothers. As a child, Mrs. Quijada awoke at 5 AM every day, worked in the fields, did the cleaning in the house, and the daily washing. That upbringing continues to impact her daily life: she still washes and dries many clothes by hand, as she likes providing that attention and detailed care. The family in El Salvador may have lacked a refrigerator and more modern appliances like a microwave but they did have fresh milk, cream, and cheese, as they owned a cow. She ultimately decided to immigrate to the U.S. to provide a better life for her family, in particular her infant son, Fernando. She planned to get a job in the U.S. and send her earnings back home.

In the 1970s, when she was in her early twenties, when she was a bit older than our parable's protagonist, she set out on an extensive journey across different countries and cities and towns on buses, trains, and by foot to cross Mexico through the desert into the U.S. Traveling through the desert was the most harrowing part of her journey. She traveled with a coyote (a paid guide), 4 women, and 21 men, with half a sandwich, poor footwear, and very little water. They traveled mostly at night to avoid the sun and heat, and she became very sick and feverish on the three-day trek in the desert and had to be carried most of the way. Mrs. Quijada remains thankful for the great care she was luckily provided by her fellow travelers, who made sure that she safely crossed as she was the youngest and quite frail.

When she arrived in the U.S., she started working two days later and immediately began sending money back to El Salvador. She described coming to the U.S. as, "The happiest day of my life, because I could provide for my family. And I cried every day, because I was away from them." Some of the happiest times she's had with her two children born in the U.S. (Brian and his older brother Marvin, also an actor and writer) when they were little were the times that she would spread a blanket on the floor in their family room. They then would watch movies during weekend evenings, and she fondly remembered watching *The Wizard of Oz* with them. When I asked what Mrs. Quijada hopes for *Somewhere Over the Border*, she said that she dreamed of it going to Hollywood to be made into a movie, just like the ones she and her boys watched together.

Mrs. Quijada hopes that *Somewhere Over the Border* helps more people understand and relate to her and the fictional Reina's journey, which is similar to the journey and sacrifices of many immigrants then and now. Valeria Luiselli, the award-winning author of *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*, reports that more than 120,000 unaccompanied children from Mexico and Central America were detained at the U.S. – Mexico border in 2015. This became known as the U.S. immigration crisis.² According to an article in *AP News*, "Over the course of 2019, the federal government held nearly 70,000 children in a system of contracted shelters, mass detention camps and foster parents. This year those numbers are expected to be even higher."³ Quijada shares a musical tale reflecting on our

humanity as we navigate to the Emerald City in search of our own *querencia*—a search and ardent desire to find home. Reina Quijada and Brian Quijada hope the work takes you on your own journey for your *querencia*.

Kristin Leahey (she/her/hers) is an Assistant Professor at Boston University. She has dramaturged with the O'Neill Theater Center, Trinity Repertory Theatre, Primary Stages, Classical Stage Company, Playwrights' Center, Dallas Theater Center, Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Guthrie Theater, Steppenwolf Theatre, The Goodman Theatre, The Kennedy Center, The Old Globe, the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Cleveland Play House, Ireland's Galway Arts Festival, Teatro Vista (artistic associate), Steep Theatre (ensemble member), among others. She served as the Literary Manager of Wolly Mammoth Theatre, Literary Director of Seattle Rep, and was a producer with the WP 2020-22 Lab. She is a recipient of a Fulbright and will be in collaboration with the Abbey Theatre.

¹ Babich, Erin and Jeanne Batalova. "Central American Immigrants in the United States." Migration Policy Institute (August 11, 2021).
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states>

² Luiselli, Valeria. *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Coffee House Press, 2017.

³ Burke, Garance, Juliet Linderman, and Martha Mendoza. "Migrant children held in mass shelters with little oversight." *AP News* (May 11, 2021).
<https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-immigration-health-coronavirus-pandemic-government-and-politics-3b4e480c9021e6a8e02313f4c73a497e>