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## Vancouver actors say city's theatre scene not nearly diverse enough



By Nadia Stewart Videojournalist  
Global News

**WATCH:** A new play opening this week in Vancouver has become part of a bigger issue about a lack of diversity in Canadian theatre. It's something that's not commonly discussed in mainstream media, but it's a subject Canadian actors know only too well. Nadia Stewart has more.

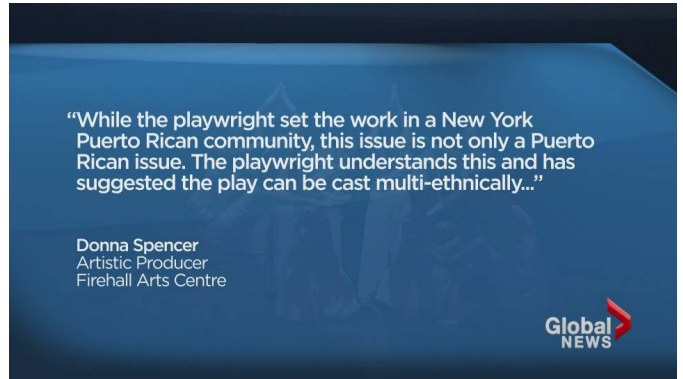


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A new play is opening this week in Vancouver, but it's become part of a bigger issue about a lack of diversity in Canadian theatre.

Vancouver-based theatre artists Carmen Aguirre and Pedro Chamale said they haven't always felt well represented on stage.

"When it comes to Latinos certainly across North America – this happens in the States as well – we tend to get erased," said Aguirre.



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They and others are voicing concerns over an upcoming play, *The Motherf\*\*ker with the Hat*, a co-production by Haberdashery Theatre and the Firehall Arts Centre. The play deals with drug addiction, recovery and relapse and is set in a New York Puerto Rican community.

In an open letter, Aguirre, Chamale and others are citing insensitive casting, saying some of the roles – specifically three romantic leads – should have been given to Latino performers. Instead, they said, Non-Latinos were cast.

"They had cast the show without holding open calls for Latinos," said Chamale, who is also the Co-Artistic Director of rice & beans theatre. "There had been a call at the Firehall for their generals, but it was never mentioned that they were seeking the Latina part or the Latino part."

Aguirre auditioned for one of the roles, but wasn't selected. Chamale chose not to audition, in light of the concerns he had with the casting process.

### Multi-ethnic cast chosen

In a statement, Donna Spencer, Firehall Arts Centre's Artistic Producer, said Latino actors were considered for the roles in question. In the end, Chilean, South Asian, Italian and Caucasian actors were chosen.

"The content of this particular play is universal to inner city areas of most major cities," said Spencer, in a statement. "While the playwright set the work in a New York Puerto Rican community, this issue is not only a Puerto Rican issue. The playwright understands this and has suggested that the play can be cast multi-ethnically as long as it is true to the intent of the work."

Spencer also reiterated that professional Latina/Latino actors were auditioned for two of the roles that were written to represent Puerto Ricans living in New York.

"As it is a policy within the Canadian Theatre Agreement that when casting auditions are held, potential engagers may not ask specific questions about ethnicity, I would be unable to verify if any specifically professional Puerto Rican actors auditioned," said Spencer.

### Playwright expresses support for cast selected

The play was written by Stephen Adly Guirgis, who lives in New York.

In a Facebook post on Saturday, Guirgis expressed his support for the play and the selected cast.

"There's definitely no Puerto Ricans in this production, but it sounds to me like it's a cast of multi-ethnic actors (mostly from NYC) who just wanted to do a play, spent 2 years trying to get it off the ground, and are now doing a 2 week run – in Vancouver," wrote Guirgis.

"Again, I'm willing to learn more. And especially if you're from Vancouver, please feel free to reach out to me...In the meantime: I SUPPORT THE ACTORS & THE PRODUCTION... AND I HOPE GOOD COMES OUT OF BOTH THE PRODUCTION & THE CONTROVERSY."

## Race and fair representation

Aguirre and Chamale say they're raising these concerns as part of a larger conversation in Canadian theatre about ethnicity and fair representation.

"This conversation has been happening in the theatre community in the abstract," said Aguirre. "We really wanted to have the conversation when it was actually happening in our face, in the city."

Last year, thousands of members of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association took part in a census – a first for the Association.

Of their 5700 members, more than 3000 participated. When asked about fair representation and diversity, many said Canadian theatre just isn't there yet.

"49 per cent of theatre artists did not feel that diversity was well represented on Canadian stage," said Arden Ryshpan, the Association's Executive Director. "46 per cent of all the theatre artists said that culturally specific content was not well represented. So, neither they as individuals nor work about them seems to be appearing on stages in Canada at the moment."

Ryshpan said many performers still feel as though they're being shut out based on age, race, ethnicity, gender and ability.

"Where we perhaps see some lag is on some of the mainstream stages in the industry, where some of the casting practices have not entirely caught up," said Ryshpan.

The Association is hopeful the results of the census, which will be released this year, will help advance the conversation surrounding inclusion in Canadian theatre, so that concerns about insensitive casting and an absence of diversity can be addressed. Ryshpan is worried young people might not be seeing enough of themselves on stage.

"We need to find a way to get to young people and make them believe that there is a career for them in live performance. If they don't see themselves on stage, if they don't see themselves represented, they won't be going into the field."

A public forum regarding ethnicity and fair representation will be held on January 11. It's being sponsored by The Vancouver Latin American Cultural Centre (VLACC), The Latin American Studies Program at SFU and The Latin American Studies Program at UBC. You can find more information about it here.

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Page 4 of 4