**Rupert Reyes, *How We Write***

**September 2017**

**{Transcribed by Ansley Colclough and Ratnika Batra}**

[00:00:26] Hello, and welcome to *How We Write*, the podcast about how we write just about anything. I'm here today with Austin-based playwright Rupert Reyes, and we're talking about how to write plays; more specifically, bilingual plays. Hi Rupert!

[00:00:40] Reyes: Hi, thank you, Alice, for the invite. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

[00:00:43] Batt: I am too, I'm glad you could join us today. I know that this is a big change year for you, that you and your wife JoAnn Carreon Reyes just stepped down from your positions as artistic and executive producers at Teatro Vivo. You started that company here in 2000. I'm remembering that I think I was pregnant with my first child when I saw the first production. So we go back awhile.

[00:01:09] Reyes: I wonder if it influenced the pregnancy in any way.

[00:01:12] Batt: The kid is...he's not very dramatic.

[00:01:16] Reyes: He didn't take to theater. [Both laugh].

[00:01:23] Batt: It didn't take, no. But I’m wondering if you can talk to us a bit about what lead you to start Teatro Vivo?

[00:01:23] Reyes: Well, JoAnn and I have been involved doing theater since our University of Texas days and, specifically, bilingual theater. And, at the time we were doing political theater, various agitprop sketches, dealing with the Vietnam War initially, and with the farm worker struggles, then racism. And so we have always been involved in, I would say, political, socially relevant theater. After we graduated, we went to Houston. We were teachers there, in Houston. Then we got recruited to a theater company in California, which was also a bilingual theater company. We stayed there for about five years, had two children while we were there, then we decided come back to Texas, and kind of went on hiatus. For about 12 years we didn't do any theater. We volunteered in a lot of productions but were not actively involved with any one specific group. Then I was approached in about 1994 to write a script for the old company that we had worked with in California, which was now based in San Francisco. It came at a time when I was really looking for an outlet of getting back involved in theater. We had three kids, or two kids at that time, two small kids. No, take it back, we did have three kids. Anya was born in 1989, s o that was the third child. And I had decided that writing was probably the only way that I could get actively involved in theater at that time. I couldn't do acting just because it would take too much time. We didn't want to produce because we hadn't really produced in a long time. I'm not a set designer or lighting designer. So again, writing was something I could do at home, and then start doing submissions. And at that time, Rodrigo called and asked me to submit a script for Teatro Esperanza.

[00:03:16] Batt: Rodrigo? [What is his] last name?

Reyes: Rodrigo Duarte Clark.

Batt: OK. Yes.

Reyes: So, it was really exciting, because he was very complimentary. He told me things I never heard before, because we did very collective writing back in California. It was a really great process. And he said he had remembered my contributions to the scripts during that five years I was there, and really wanted to encourage and see what it would look like for me to produce a full play on my own, based on the idea of "What would the Virgen de Guadalupe say to us if she were to appear at present day?" And that's how *Petra's Pecado* came about. So that was great. That was when we started writing. And so, that play was picked up by a group in San Antonio. And then another group that was just starting out here in Austin heard about the success that it had in San Antonio. They were looking for a script to sort of launch their group with. And so they asked to do that play, and then they asked me to be in it. So I ended up also acting in that show. Then, we saw the organization wasn't very good. So JoAnn and I both started working with the artistic director at that time and helped form the company, and make it a little bit more solid. So we ended up on the board, eventually of the theater company, which very rapidly grew. In the six years that we were involved with it, it went from doing very small shows like *Petra's Pecado*, to actually doing shows on a national level. They were booking the Paramount, filling up the Paramount, with... what is it? Twelve hundred seat theaters? And that was not where we wanted to be. JoAnn and I wanted to stay...we loved the little small theaters. At the time, we had The Salvage Vanguard Theater, we had The Vortex, we had The Off Center. Things that were like 110 seat theaters, small theaters. And, again, having the children and knowing the amount of energy that it would take to produce on that level on a regular basis, we parted company. We said we would step down and try to focus on small theater companies, small productions. So that's what Teatro Vivo came to be. We decided to form a small group and stay small. And we did. We stayed small for 17 years. We got a lot of recognition for the quality of the work that we did. But we were not in it for the money. We weren’t in it for the profit, not even for the for the recognition as theater artists, as much as we just wanted to do good plays, and bring good stories to our audiences. And we didn't have that pressure. We both had full time jobs. I worked at the post office. JoAnn was working for the university. So we both had healthcare. Our children were getting older and going off to college. So, it was the right time to start a theater company. But we did it for 17 years, and then we just stepped down, like you said, in February and passed it on to younger people; partially to see what new generations of theater artists are going to do. We feel we've done our contribution and we are backing them and we're supporting them. So we'll see what happens.

[00:06:14] Batt: So *Petra's Pecado* was the play I saw when I was expecting Owen. Can you say a few things about that [play]? That's been through so many so many productions and permutations. I remember you did a version of it a couple of years ago that involved a lot of screens and pre-recorded video.

Reyes: And music, singing…

Batt: Yeah, I mean what does that play...first give a little summary for people who haven't seen it?

[00:06:39] Reyes: *Petra's Pecado* was, once again, was written from the prompt of "What would the Virgen de Guadalupe say to us if she were to appear to us now?” And at that time that I started writing this play, I started a very serious drama. I started this play about a prostitute that wanted to reform her ways, because her daughter was getting old enough to know what her mom did. And so she goes to a priest to confess and to look for guidance, and the priest takes advantage of her and ends up in bed with her.

Batt: Oh!

Reyes: She gets real distraught, runs into the church, and is praying quietly when two drunks come into the church, start vandalizing the church, looking for gold. And she hides behind a statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe. And as they're moving closer and closer to her, she realizes that she's trapped, and is afraid of what they're going to do to her if they find her. So she calls out in a voice: "Stop it! Stop it! What you're doing is wrong!" And the men are sort of drunk, so they think the statue is talking to them. [Batt laughs.] So they run out and they go to the town and talk about this wonderful miracle that just happened. And anyway, she ends up being able to sneak behind the statue when people come by themselves to talk, and then starts giving advice to people as the voice of the statue. And pretty soon, it's the old phenomena of the…of Jesus on a tortilla.

[00:07:55] Batt: I don't know Jesus on a tortilla.

Reyes: Well, "seeing Jesus in the clouds."

Batt: Oh, okay, "I see him everywhere."

Reyes: So the whole idea is that this church becomes a sacred place that starts attracting all these visitors. The economy of the town is turned around by the large number of visitors and tourists that are coming. The restaurants...everything is making a lot more money. Well, the woman realizes that she has to tell the truth. And so she tries to tell the truth, and she ends up being killed. Because they don't want to lose that financial gain, or the tourists that are coming down to see this miracle.

[00:08:29] Batt: I haven't seen this play! This is not *Petra*!

[00:08:32] Reyes: Well, I have a friend, a good friend, that I read the play to. And he looked at me and he said "This is so depressing. [Batt laughs.] This is awful.” He said "We don't..."

[00:08:42] Batt: "We don't need this."

[00:08:42] Reyes: He said, “Teatro Vivo doesn't need more depressing plays. They need some comedy, they need some reason to laugh.” And so I was going "Oh man, I thought this was a pretty good play." So, my dad fell off of a ladder during this time. He was trying, again, doing stuff he shouldn't be doing at his age. But he ended up falling off the ladder, hurting his back pretty bad. And I started thinking about how I really don't think about my dad in terms of the contributions he's made in my life. And honestly, I don't think that I had honored him in any form or fashion. And so, I started thinking about our elders, and thinking about how, in our culture, for the longest time, they were very reverend. And los hijos (the children), everybody takes care of the elders. We didn't even put our parents in... what do you call them? Retirement homes?

[00:09:36] Batt: Nursing homes.

[00:09:36] Reyes: Nursing homes, yeah. And so, I started thinking about that, and I started thinking about my own little town, and all the older people that lived in my town. And so a story started coming up about a little restaurant, a little cafe, that an owner was going to lose business to a newly arrived kind of corporate entity that was really just undermining her business, and she was about to lose it. And so, she makes one last attempt to give to her employees and takes advantage of free cable TV for 30 days. So she takes up the offer of the local cable company, puts cable on TV, and the local installer does not block the Playboy Channel.

[00:10:16] Batt: I'm sorry, the what?

[00:10:16] Reyes: The Playboy Channel. [Batt laughs] So, everybody takes off to church to go to confess, because that same morning that he's installing cable is the day the priest does confessions at the local church. Petra is alone with the TV and started fiddling with the remote control, and lo and behold, she finds the Playboy Channel. Not knowing what to do, and not having been to church in a long time, she feels she's committed a big sin. She runs the church to go to confess, something that she hasn't done, again, in a long time. She's actually been estranged from the church, mostly because the same entity that is driving her out of business has sort of also co-opted the church. All the big money is in the church and they hire her company to do everything, and so she really hasn't had any opportunity, economically, to have a relationship with the church. And, second, is that she sees that as a big hypocrisy of the church, right. That they're really are there for the money. They're not there for spiritual growth. So she confesses, she goes to confess. Well, it just so happens that church has a young new priest, who is trying to get more people involved. His whole mission is not to do things the way they were always done at this church, because he sees that also as corruption in the church. So he wants to change things. And so when Petra comes, he realizes that he's got somebody that is exactly the kind of person that he's trying to bring back into the church. So her penance for her sin of watching – which he never even hears! –

Batt: Right.

Reyes: – because before Petra even gets a chance to say what her sin was, he just gives her a penance of doing a play of the Virgen de Guadalupe. So, the celebration on December the 12th of the Virgen de Guadalupe. So Petra has been given charge of directing the play, something that she's never done, so she's totally outside of her realm. So she decides to recruit her friends. And so, the older people all get involved in this project: her husband and Tacha, Clara, and Chano, to produce this play. The play actually takes a look at other issues, it takes a look at abuse, spousal abuse, within our culture. There's also a -- Chano's problem – and that's Clara, being abused by her husband, but refuses to say anything. And the community knows it. They all know it, but nobody knows how to deal with it. Chano's son was lost in... in the original play, he was lost in the war in Vietnam, and never came back. He was a M.I.A. And so he [Chano] is still waiting for his son to come home. And it's driven him just a little bit crazy. He's not...he doesn't relate to the rest of the people, because he doesn't want to hear people tell him the truth.

Batt: Yeah.

Reyes: And then Petra's whole thing of feeling like she's a failure, and losing her very low-self-concept. [She] doesn't feel like she has any value or anything to offer to the community anymore. And so, those are the kind of issues that are looked upon in the play, and in a comedic fashion, because they go through all sorts of trials and tribulations. They don't know...they end up mad at each other. And so the statue at the church disappears. Everyone thinks somebody has stolen it. But what's happened is the statue’s come to life as a young girl. Not as the Virgen de Guadalupe, but as a young girl, who then starts having conversations with the people. And one of the things I wanted the play to be sure to do it was it didn't cure things with a magic touch. There was no magic. The Virgen spoke to people, and got them to...more like a counselor. Asked them questions, and guided them through the process, to where they kind of solve their own problems, and created their own miracles. And that was one of the premises is that miracles...I believe in miracles. I personally believe in miracles. And I believe that we can create wonderful things if we believe in things hard enough. And it's the whole thing of doubt. If you can remove doubt from a situation, then I think everything is possible.

[00:14:08] Batt: Does that go for writing?

[00:14:11] Reyes: Well, you know that's the thing about… about writing, is that when you first write... I don't know that doubt is ever a part of my writing in the sense that everybody sees your writing differently. And sometimes people find things and compliment you on stuff that you didn't even know you did. And that was not your intention at all. And sometimes even your what he did intend, somebody takes it a whole different way that it just totally blows your mind. Because I thought "I didn't think about that. That didn't even cross my thinking, or anything, and that is just so much better than what I had in mind."

[00:14:49] Batt: "I'll take it! It sounds good!

[00:14:49] Reyes: "I'll take that! I'll take that!" So yeah, I don't know that doubt is anything that affects my writing, because once I sit down to write, I feel that's the story that I'm going to tell. It's not good or bad or right or wrong. And I think that's what doubt would influence things: "Is this good?" "Are people going to like this?" It's more important for me to…to tell a good story. At the same time, the theater, for me, that's where the theater to me, it's important that theater has an educational aspect to it. It's got to be entertaining if it's going to teach a lesson, I think. And so, with a good story about -- say like Petra's -- we injected the idea of abuse and how to confront it. We introduced the notion of letting go of the past and accepting your life and moving on. Petra learned value in her small things that she did in her community, that they were important and vital for what made her community special. And it was love, it was really the love that she provided to all the people. Because she would give away a lot of things to people that came to her store in terms of credit, in terms of "Pay me later. Don't worry about it now." So, she really had practiced unconditional love and had forgotten it. And so maybe she can go back we can recapture it in the play.

[00:16:11] Batt: So I'm thinking that for a playwright, writing bilingually has got to be a tricky audience issue, right? Because you've got some people who speak English and Spanish in your audience, and you've got some people who speak only English. So, what kind of challenges does that present for you?

[00:16:29] Reyes: Well, it's…one thing is that... I don't know if you know that people that ...have two languages, they grow up in one language and then learn another language... they become capable of code switching. And not just Spanish-English, but if you learn any bilingual language, you say some parts of the sentence in English, and some part in Spanish. Well, I think that there's patterns of that code switching that exist in Spanish and English. I guess the same would be true for any two languages... but, that, we naturally do, we naturally switch certain words into English, or certain words we always say in Spanish. So for my audiences, that's a real natural kind of thing to write. Because I'm just writing the way people speak. And I listen to conversations whenever I'm places where I hear people speaking Spanish, and you know, you hear things like...I remember at a little store coming back from Alpine, Texas. I stopped in Fort Stockton to get some burritos at this famous place that I love getting burritos at. But the cook was talking to a regular customer, and she said something like [00:17:36] "Porque tienes un silenciador de automóvil".And, he says, "Yes, yes, a new muffler. But that old muffler," he said, [00:17:43] "Tuve el silenciador del coche durante diez años".So, you know, they're just switching back and forth. But you get, just from that little bit, you get that they're talking about some kind of car repair.

[00:17:52] Batt: Right. And me with, you know, one semester of ACC Spanish, I was able to pick that much up.

[00:17:58] Reyes: Right. And so in the theater, if you have people that are talking about mechanics, but then you're actually watching their emotions, and how that conversation is influencing... Are they upset about the mechanic and the job that was done? Are they happy about the repair? Are they confused? So actually watching while the actors are talking solved that problem about "oh they're happy with this repair, whatever it was, they're happy with it." And my job now becomes to make sure that my audience was entertained by the language, the very natural language. But the non-Spanish speaking audiences have to be fed another word in English somewhere else, so that eventually they go "Oh, that's what they were talking about!" So the word "mechanic" probably would be translated somewhere later on. Usually, when I write the script, I go back and I don't worry about it the first time I'm writing. So a lot of the Spanish words will pop in naturally. So the script will come out heavy in English. And then I go back, and I actually start looking for where to put stuff in Spanish. And then I go back and look at it a third time and figure out "Did we communicate this message to everybody either in Spanish, or do we communicate to everybody in English?" So, it becomes an editing thing after it's finished to make sure there's that balance of language of English and Spanish. And I've had mixed reviews. I've been told by people that have actually no experience with Spanish...There was a tourist that was here from Tennessee that said, "I just came to play because I looked in the paper to see what was happening while I was here, and I wanted to see something that I know I wouldn't see back home." And he said, "I really enjoyed the play." He said, "I feel like I could speak Spanish, even though I never heard it -- you know, experienced before." But then the other side is I had a friend that I invited to see one of my plays that came to see the play. And later on, after I asked her what she thought, she told me she hated it. She said there was just too much Spanish, that she couldn't follow what was going on, that it was a terrible experience, and that she only went because I invited her and probably would never come back again. But to me, I think that it comes from the fact that the man was open minded, didn't have any expectations, didn't have any personal feelings about Mexicans or Spanish. And I think my friend being from Texas, I think you definitely have some sort of opinion one way or another about Mexicans or Spanish.

[00:20:18] And I think that kind of revealed a little bit about her, more than it did make me worry about whether or not my scripts are working or not, because I think they do work. But I think that's something that when I tell people now, that my play is bilingual, I don't tell them that "It's got a lot of Spanish words," or "50/50 Spanish-English." I'd say "There's enough English in there for you to understand the play." And I let them come see the Spanish on its own.

[00:20:51] Batt: What's your process like?

[00:20:54] Reyes: You know, I have...I don't know if it's a good process or bad process here. I have doubt. The doubt about the process...

[00:21:00] Batt: Here's the doubt!

[00:21:00] Reyes: Ah, dammit [both laugh]. But I have to really be alone. I have to be by myself. I'm constantly writing in my mind, constantly writing. If I wasn't a theater artist, I'd be a social studies teacher, because I love history, I love politics.

[00:21:20] Batt: It's all stories.

[00:21:20] Reyes: Lots of story, lots of drama, and lots of complicated twists and turns. Unexpected. [laughs] Some expected. So I'm always reading newspapers. I'm constantly looking at stories and saying "There's a play there, there's a play there, there's a play there," and then kind of working it out in my mind. But I don't ever sit down and actually write anything or take notes. Sometimes I will make down a jot on my phone now, which is really cool, on your phone you can put little notes and stuff. So I'll put a note: "Yeah the story about this woman that does blah blah blah blah blah."

[00:21:54] But the stories in my head just form and continue to live. And I'll latch on to one story and then rewrite, keep writing in my head over and over and over again. And then I have to just go somewhere. I have to get out. I cannot write in the house, I cannot write in libraries. I have to go somewhere [like] Airbnb or hotels.

[00:22:14] Batt: Really? So, like, just shut yourself away for a couple of days?

[00:22:16] Reyes: Totally, totally. Three days, probably. And I can really just fly, just like the story comes out really fast. It's usually short. It's not the full-length, completed play. I would say that most of my plays average about 60 to 80 pages. There's just a lot of action and stuff, a lot of stage directions. So they do last an hour and a half, even though they're not 90 pages long. But the first drafts usually come in around 40 or 50 pages. And that's like...I accomplish that in three days.

[00:22:45] Batt: Wow.

[00:22:46] Reyes: I can do that in three days.

[00:22:46] Batts: How?

[00:22:46] Reyes: It's because the story's already been so clear in my head. And it really is just a matter of sitting there, and then it's like visiting with the characters too. It's like they finally invited them to someplace that I can be with them, and nobody's going to bother us. And I'm not going to worry about the phone ringing. I'm not worrying about the doorbell going off or deliveries. I'm not worried about looking out the back yard and realizing that I haven't fed the chickens, or knowing that…having something on my calendar that I can only have three hours to write. Now I've got to go pick up my granddaughter from school or do something. Because when I take off, and I go for those three or four days, it's my time. I'm not coming home. I can take long walks. I go out to eat local restaurants. One of my favorite things to do -- and it's probably an awful thing -- but I love to make sandwiches and eat potato chips. So that's… I'll go to the local grocery store and just get some bread and cold cuts... but I take a bag of chips, and lots of times that will be my meal for like the whole break.

[00:23:52] Batt: The whole time you're gone?

[00:23:52] Reyes: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Yes. So if I'm writing, I don't want to have to leave to go to the restaurant. But sometimes, I want to take a break, so I will go to the restaurant. That's the way most of my plays have been created. And then, after I get back with that, then I can take moments to go to the library and I like the libraries. I actually like the libraries, put headsets on in the library, and write.

[00:24:11] Batt: But you need to have the initial draft.

[00:24:15] Reyes: I need that initial draft. I need to get the first big part of it down. And that's been the case for almost every one of my plays. *Petra's Pecado* was the only one that I did write at home. And then the way *Petra's Pecado* was written was different than any other play, because Rodrigo was interested in mentoring me. And so I would -- this was before email and internet -- so I was actually putting copies in the mail, to him, and then he would mail them back. So we were doing pages that way. And it was ok, it worked. You know, it was a good process because I was getting feedback on the bits and pieces of what I was writing.

[00:24:51] But I found that I really, really like it when I isolate myself, and not just myself, but with my characters, with the story, because then we can talk, and we do not have to worry about being interrupted. They have a story they want to tell. Then I could do it. That's part of my writing process: I don't feel like I'm creating anything new. I feel that I'm just dictating what other people are telling me, their stories, like Petra.

[00:25:18] Batt: What's the biggest surprise a character has had for you?

[00:25:19] Reyes: The biggest surprise? I think that some of the language that Petra uses was really, really distinct in her speech. A line that came out at the end of the play, which was, she talks about, where she tells Rafał what her sin is, and she says "I thought I saw a man hitting a lady on the head with a palo,” and that... I mean that just flowed out of her mouth. And I thought "Oh my god, Petra, is she..."

[00:25:53] Batt: That's one of the funniest lines in the whole play.

[00:25:58] Reyes: That was one of the funniest lines that had come out. But I think that it's really surprising to me how solid some of the characters are, when I sit down and actually start writing. The people... I don't think "Well, how did had you create that character?” I said, "I didn't create it. They came to me, they came and spoke to me and said, 'I want to tell you my story and my story involves this person that person.'" And one of the things about, about writing is... I'm also influenced a little bit by economics, having been a producer of the plays, and that is that…JoAnn is the one that challenged me to write plays with only four characters. Because when I first started writing, I didn't think about that. I would just, you know, they would be a character that I want to bring a cup of coffee into the...

[00:26:39] Batt: Right, and “You’re the character.”

[00:26:40] Reyes: Right, that was it. I would just have them come in and they would say, "Hi, how are you? Would you like some coffee?" "Yes, OK.” And then they go, and that would be it. And so, you think about that character and when people want to produce your play, they're gonna say “Well, that I gotta pay this waitress, I've got to costume her. I've got to rehearse her.” And so, you find ways of rewriting that so there isn't that one character just walks in and walks off, in a whole an hour and a half they have two lines. And, but, um, I found that I can include characters without having to be present. You can do a...there's a play that I'm working on right now that has a young girl that falls in love with a guy on a bus and he ends up getting her pregnant. But it turns out, he's married. But she's fallen totally in love with him, and is totally devastated when his wife calls her on her cell phone because she finds her number and we hear that whole story without that character being there and we hate that guy. We never see him. And so, it's really... I found that I can keep as many characters in the play as I want to. I can just not make them present, and not have to actually walk on stage.

[00:27:51] Batt: That's really cool. You're making it sound kind of like it's always really easy once you find the time to write. Are there things about it that you find hard?

[00:28:02] Reyes: The hardest thing is when you read it out loud. Because plays have to be read out. Once I have the first draft, or I'm ready for it to be handed to actors and for me to sit and hear it. It's...um, I get emotional. I tear up every time and I don't know why because it's not uh... I know exactly everything that's in the script, and I know what I'm trying to say with it. But I think it's because I hear the voices. I hear the people, and they're real, they become real to me. So, these are no longer people on the page or in my imagination. That's the hardest part is to hear it and to then go back and hear their suggestions on how to change it, is being open to that. And it's important that you are, because it may not be something that is really going to change your writing, but it may open up something that is there that you had to discover. Like I said, earlier, when you write a line and you think this is what you're saying, and somebody said, "Oh, I thought this is what you were saying!" Those little processes are important. And again, playwrights have to take that leap. You know when you have to operate without a net before it goes up on stage, I don't know... if people have their own processes. I know some people have sent a draft before they even think about putting it on stage. And usually I only go through about 3, 3 drafts, 3 readings and not to the script that I have right now that I'm working on, I've had two readings, and the second reading... both readings had the same comments and criticisms about the script. And it's a structural thing, it's not a story thing, it's a structural thing. Because I'm always playing with monologues... which, you know, in a way, I don't like it, but I'm always trying to...

[00:29:42] Batt: You're trying to put them in there.

[00:29:43] Reyes: But I'm always trying to put one in that maybe it'll have made me... make me like monologues.

[00:29:47] Batt: Now, is this a breaking the fourth wall, kind of?

[00:29:49] Reyes: No. No. It's the characters. Not necessarily...Well, in one case, I did. I actually have a play that used monologues, and they worked pretty well. But they're more like narration than monologues. I don't know that I've ever written...I have written one big monologue. But it was it was kind of funny. So, it was kind of a comedy routine. So that was OK. But this one, had a lot of monologues to try to move the story and to try to get the character's inner thoughts and feelings and it just was really was disruptive to the story. But I kept trying to make it work. And I kept it in there twice now. Now I've actually gone back and just totally deleted them out of my new script. I'm going to start working on the third version. So, I've just pulled them out, so now I have to figure out how to do that without that narration in there.

[00:30:38] Batt: So, you've turned Teatro Vivo over to new directors. What's that like? Because it was part of your life on a daily basis for so long...

[00:30:50] Reyes: For 17 years.

[00:30:51] Batt: Yeah.

[00:30:51] Reyes: It took a little bit of, um, meditation. You know we walked the Camino de Portugues, and we're...

[00:31:00] Batt: You and JoAnn did?

[00:31:00] Reyes: JoAnn and I did, in August of this year. And that was one of the things I wrote down, that I wanted to think about while we were doing our walking, ‘cause you have lots of time to think.

Batt: Yeah, seriously.

Reyes: I wanted to really come to terms on letting the Teatro go, because I... JoAnn is the one that pointed out, she says "You know, you really haven't let the Teatro go. I was, again, maybe it goes back to knowing all the things that I know. It was sort of like "I know there's going to be X play done on this day. I haven't seen audition notices go out yet."

[00:31:36] Batt: [laughs] “I'm getting nervous.”

[00:31:37] Reyes: I said, "I'm getting nervous!" And then the other day would pass and said "I haven't seen any publicity.

[00:31:43] Batt: [laughs] I'm getting a picture of what retiring is going to look like. I'm sorry!

[00:31:46] Reyes: So, during the Camino, we talked -- JoAnn and I talked a little bit about what that looks like, letting it go., really let it go. And I came back and they were in a production, and we went and volunteered one night, and I left it. And you know, I mean, I've really have not felt any anxiety, any thoughts about whether or not the run is going great. I haven't even called to ask, I mean, “How many...what do your audiences look like? At this point, you should be having pretty full houses, by now.” And so, my thinking right now is that if they call me and they ask me for help, I'm there. But otherwise, it's Mario’s show and I wish him luck. And again, if he needs my help, I'm happy to help.

[00:32:32] Batt: Yeah.

[00:32:33] Reyes: And so I'm really comfortable with it now, and JoAnn and I both... every now and then we go "How do you feel right now? How are you feeling about the theater company?" She says "I haven't thought about it." Or "Yeah, I feel great. It was the right decision. It was the right time." And I think that was the big thing. And it was a process it took three years to go.

[00:32:51] Batt: Really?

[00:32:51] Reyes. Right. It wasn't something we did like just in February. It was we knew we wanted to transition out of it just because we really are watching all the young people around the country, or younger audience...um, producers doing some really good work. And we thought we want to turn this over.

[00:33:09] Batt: Create a space?

[00:33:09] Reyes: Yeah, create some space for people locally, young people. Plus, they come into this wonderful space. We have we have an established history. We've got really strong supporters. We have audiences that like our work. You know, we have a venue, we have rehearsal space. A lot of the major obstacles that theater companies have, have already been beat. So, they're not an obstacle anymore. And so, we knew that somebody coming into this would have a real advantage in terms of being successful. And so, we started a process, three years, ago where we recruited people to do individual projects. We call them creative collaborations, where we had the money, but we had them submit mini-grants to us and proposals to produce a specific play.

[00:33:55] Batt: Neat.

[00:33:55] Reyes: With the idea that—and they knew this—the whole purpose was for them to possibly become the producers and take over the company.

[00:34:03] Batt: OK.

[00:34:03] Reyes: So we were giving them a little bite of the pie, to see if they wanted the whole thing. We ended up with three really good productions, but we ended up with three directors or the producers that also found different paths in that year. One went to New York, one went back into the theater teacher job in another town, and somebody sorta—the other director—kinda dropped out of theater for a while and started focusing on educational arts. Um, and so, that didn't work. So the next year, we went to do a... we just kinda fell back to the second year, we fell back. And in third year, Mario kind of came forward and said "I really want to take over the company." So he worked side by side with us and then we let him run one show in a small show in November and pretty much just let him do it, and stepped our hands off. And then we did the show in December and then we had a collaboration that we already been working with Zach for the spring. And we, again, we were just supporters for him for that. And so then the summer show we produced--the last show that JoAnn and I produced--was in August of 2016, I think? No. Yeah, it was...what'd you call it? *EL* by Raul Garza. I don't know if you saw that.

[00:35:21] Batt: No, I didn't get to see it.

[00:35:22] Reyes: *EL* was the last show we produced and then Mario took over and produced *the Pastorella*, he did the New Play Festival, and then, again, we were volunteering for the theater for the production. And then in February, we actually had an official turnover of changing the guard. We had an event, a nice event. I think somebody had a councilman—it was a staff person from city council—who came and presented a certificate of appreciation.

[00:35:47] Batt: I think I saw coverage of that in the paper.

[00:35:49] Reyes: Yeah, we had a nice transition that night. So that was the official, official end. But again, it was a three-year process in the making so that... and then, the understanding was that if Mario, who is still young, something comes up for him enough to go to New York or California or if he wants to pursue other things, that JoAnn and I are happy to step back up and just start the process again.

[00:36:16] Batt: Since stepping down, what have you been working on? You mentioned a play that you're working on now?

[00:36:20] Reyes: I'm trying to focus on writing, but also, I'm working on trying to do more of my professional career as an actor. I have really gotten my agent a lot more active, telling them that I'm a lot more available. So I shot an episode of *Queen of the South* that aired in August. I did a commercial for Wells Fargo. You know I'm out there trying to revive that part of my life because I had pretty much put it on hold, because of the theater company just took up too many conflicts, and I did not want to be telling big producers or directors "Sorry, I'm not available.".

[00:36:57] Batt: Right.

[00:36:59] Reyes: So yeah, I'm now actively going to auditions and stuff, submitting taped auditions here in my living room.

[00:37:04] Batt: Oh terrific!

[00:37:04] Reyes: One I can't tell you anything about it, I've signed a non-disclosure, but it's a big feature film.

[00:37:12] Batt: Fun!

[00:37:12] Reyes: So I can't give you any detail, so those opportunities are there for me. I'm free to do other small production, theater productions. I just did the *Father-Son Project* with Jason Phelps.

[00:37:25] Batt: What was the…Did that have a title?

[00:37:27] Reyes: It was called the *Father-Son Project*.

[00:37:31] Batt: Ah, okay, great. We were talking about it earlier as “Fathers and Sons.”

[00:37:32] Reyes: Right. And, again, I don't know what the end of it is going to be, other than we may have another performance, a longer performance of it as a theater piece. I know that he's been videotaping everything that we've done: our conversations, the planning, the performances. So I think he may be looking at some sort of documentary in the future.

[00:37:54] Batt: I would love to see that.

[00:37:56] Reyes: That would be his thing. I’m not a film…That's what’s happened a lot. Also, um, my involvement with yoga. JoAnn has been a real driving force for community yoga in the elementary schools…

Batt: Yes!

Reyes:…teaching mindfulness, and we are making some inroads in Austin to different schools, and hoping to continue to expand. But I have become a certified yoga instructor and have been teaching mindfulness to pre-K, kindergarten through 10th graders.

[00:38:23] Batt: That sounds great. I've seen... I guess there'd been some coverage of that when JoAnn was first working with it, seeing the pictures of the kids sitting on their mats, looking very calm and centered.

[00:38:33] Reyes: Oh, you know it's, it's amazing the kind of pressure students are having in schools nowadays. And you can see the relief when they sit down to relax and to breathe, them really embracing that peacefulness and our hour-long class that we have. And we hear stories of them practicing at home and encouraging their grandparents to practice their breath in traffic. We have one a story of one the little children in the backseat, and her mom...I don't know what she was saying that made her...her daughter thought she was very stressed out about what was happening in the traffic. And said "Mom, just breathe, Mom. Just breathe.".

[00:39:15] Batt: You're creating a better world, Rupert.

[00:39:18] Reyes: Well, I mean the bilingual thing, too, is something that…I know we haven't talked about that whole concept of bilingual dialogue in both in plays, in TV, and film. I don't know why it hasn't caught on more. I think that there is a huge success of our theater company and the ability to really reach across a whole entire community to to audiences. I don't know why there's not more of that on television and in films. And other bilingual plays. I mean it's, it's hard to write. I've seen people try to do bilingual plays and it's obvious that they were just sort of inserting Spanish words. And then I've seen people that do bilingual plays where they just parrot, where they say one word in English, and then the exact same line in Spanish or vice versa. And to me, that becomes very tedious.

[00:40:12] Batt: Yeah, understanding both languages.

[00:40:16] Reyes: [00:40:16] Yeah, really, you’re gonna get it twice. And then it slows down the tempo, the rhythm of the action in the play, the dramatic action. And I still see it, and it still seems to surprise people. I've been doing this since 1976, writing bilingual works, and I still see it surprising people. Reviewers, theater viewers, in fact, the review for *La Enfrascada*, Teatro Vivo's production that they have running right now. That was one of the things the reviewer pointed out. She goes, "And it's easy to understand the mix of Spanish and English." And I thought, you know, it's amazing to me that it still surprises people, especially here locally. Because you would've think that they've seen the work. But there's another Latino theater company here in town that does work exclusively in Spanish.

[00:41:04] Batt: Oh, OK.

[00:41:05] Reyes: And so, I hope people don't get confused and go see their work thinking they're going to see a bilingual work [Alice laughs], because they're entirely in Spanish.

[00:41:11] Batt: Hopefully their publicity is too!

[00:41:15] Reyes: Right! Well, we had we had some qualms about our calling ourselves Teatro Vivo, because it's in Spanish, and so we thought people are automatically going to assume we're doing theater in Spanish. And so, I think that one time, we started tacking on Teatro Vivo from Austin, Texas. We started tagging that on, so it has like an English, but…I would like to see the bilingual nature. I don't understand why television and movies have not caught onto it, because I would think it would have greater appeal to audiences. And you see some of it in TV shows, you see, if you watch *Queen the South*, which uses Spanish and English a lot. But when they do the Spanish, they put subtitles, right? So you understood what they said in Spanish. And I don't know if they were writing it, if they took time to be more conscious of the writing, they wouldn't have to do that. And that audience is buying into that...

[00:42:10] Batt: And it might make the audience work a little bit more, and open them up, if they weren't already open to the idea of working a little more.

[00:42:16] Reyes: So I can understand it not working in print, by newspapers or literature, because if you don't speak Spanish and you run across Spanish literature or writing, and then you're lost, it's just like, like somebody took the magic marker, put a blank there. But when you're watching live presentations, you can see the emotion, you can see dramatic action. And maybe it doesn't work in film and television, because what you're seeing is what the director wants you to see.

[00:42:45] Batt: Yeah.

[00:42:46] Reyes: And in theater, even though you have a director, you're still capable of watching a bigger picture. And really, a good theater director is creating a picture with everybody on the stage. Everybody's saying something, and then you see all that, as opposed to film, where you're only watching the dialogue between two people but all that stuff going around you, is influencing that dialogue in some sense. Maybe.

[00:43:06] Batt: I'm remembering an article I read quoting JoAnn as saying your theater has always been about building bridges. Can you talk about that a little bit?

[00:43:17] Reyes: Well, one of the things that I feel in our community here in Austin, Texas, is that there is a lot of fear and anxiety about the growing Latino population in this town. And while, I think that we are a very progressive town, a very liberal town, open minded town, people still have a lot of apprehension. And so, what we wanted to do with our theater company is tell stories for our Latino community. We don't get... no one is telling our stories to the level they should be. You get bits and pieces, but we wanted to be a theater company that told our stories to our audiences. And, we wanted other people, though, to have access to those stories. We wanted other people to come and experience the story, and go away with a real positive experience of the community. Not that we don't deal with issues that are problems within our own community, like with racism within our own community. There's sexism, there's abuse, drugs and alcohol, that are some of the issues that come up in our plays. We don't shy away from issues. But at the same time, we feel that that providing an opportunity for non-Latino audiences to come in and experience one of our productions creates a little bit of understanding. It creates some empathy. And this is what I say: What people hopefully will find is that we're encountering the same things as human beings. We just say it in Spanish. And so, that's where we're hoping to build bridges. We're hoping that people are coming to our shows and are leaving with a little bit more understanding, a little bit more empathy, a little bit more sense that we're not threats. That we are looking forward to integrating into the community. And I think that we were successful, because our audiences were like 50 percent Anglo. And so, now consistently in some of our biggest supporters, financial supporters are Anglos. And I think that from that Anglo culture of the American culture, they know about contributing to the arts, and Latino cultures are still new that. They haven't quite figured out that, you know, it's OK to give me money to the artists, just as you give money to church, and you give money to your schools. Give money to the arts. It's OK!

[00:45:33] Batt: Well, that’s good! I’m always happy to end with a plea to give money to the arts. That's good. Rupert, thank you so much.

[00:45:39] Reyes: You're very welcome, you're very welcome. Very enjoyable, spending time with you and seeing you again after a long absence!

[00:45:46] Batt: I'm Alice Batt, and I've been speaking today with Rupert Reyes, founder of Austin- based bilingual theater company, Teatro Vivo. *How We Write* is a production of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Our theme music was created by Michelle Solberg. Until next time, keep writing.