



Reading Audiences, Reading Materials: Reception in Tanya Saracho's *El Nogalar*

Ler audiências, ler materiais: a recepção em *El Nogalar* de Tanya Saracho

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Abstract: Tanya Saracho's *El Nogalar* (2011), adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, recreates the Russian's play social context in 21st century Mexican society, going through the awakening of the violence that dominates the U.S./Mexico border. The focus of this study is the audience's response to *El Nogalar* premier at the Goodman's theater. Such analysis is conducted by reading the paratextual elements, such as the program and related material found online. By analyzing the script, playbill, reviews, and the study guide, this study calls for an increased use of supplemental material in order to critically think about audience reception. The complexity of the play, as an adaptation alone, is enough to justify the need for more knowledge of non-traditional methods to approach the text and the surrounding material, including reviews, playbills and educational guides. These elements not only provide new insight into interpreting the performance and dramatic text, but they also offer ways to approach audience reception beyond the review.

Keywords: Tanya Saracho; horizon of expectations; paratexts; performance reviews; reception.

Resumo: *El nogalar* (2011), adaptação de Tanya Saracho de *O jardim das cerejeiras*, de Anton Tchekhov, recria o contexto social da obra russa na sociedade mexicana do século XXI – na esteira da violência que domina a fronteira entre os Estados Unidos e o México. O foco do presente estudo é a reação do público à *première* do espetáculo no teatro Goodman, através da leitura de seus elementos paratextuais, como o programa e materiais publicados *on-line*. De certo modo, ao analisar o roteiro, o cartaz da peça,

as críticas e o guia de estudo, o presente artigo reivindica um maior uso de material suplementar para se pensar criticamente a recepção do público. A complexidade mesma da peça, por se tratar de uma adaptação, basta para justificar o maior conhecimento de métodos não tradicionais para se aproximar do texto e do material que o circunda, incluindo resenhas, cartazes teatrais e guias pedagógicos. Esses elementos não só possibilitam interpretar a *performance* e o texto dramático com mais clareza, como também oferecem maneiras de abordar a recepção do público, além da crítica.

Palavras-chave: público; Tanya Saracho; horizonte de expectativas; paratexto; crítica teatral; recepção.

Demands for a critical spectator shape the audience's experience in Tanya Saracho's *El Nogalar* (*The Pecan Orchard*, 2011).¹ The play forces spectators to question perception; living the cultural milieu as much as viewing it. In this article, I examine *El Nogalar* and various paratextual elements, such as the playbill, education guide and reviews as factors influencing the reception of Saracho's work. Saracho is one of the leading 21st century Latina playwrights and she has become a prolific screenwriter for ABC, HBO and Starz.² Her work features multigenerational, strong, yet fragile, female characters. By presenting a complex story, multilayered characters, along with paratextual materials, Saracho's work allows the spectator to consider how power circulates around the axes of not just race, but gender, class and language.

The content of Saracho's plays strongly reflects the importance of perception and perspective. For example, she is interested in a feminist point of view as well as a class-based perspective. In her interview with Tanya Palmer, Saracho says that *El Nogalar* is "about a family that came from privilege, but it's also about the maid and the former servant. The crime element is the great equalizer."³ Saracho's role as co-founder of Teatro Luna, an all-Latina ensemble in Chicago, IL, helped establish

¹ The quotes from *El Nogalar* stem from *American Theatre Magazine*. The play premiered at the Goodman Theatre (Chicago, IL) in 2011 (dir. Cecilie Keegan). (SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p. 70-87).

² Saracho's most recent work is as creator and writer for *Vida* (Starz). The series centers on two Mexican-American sisters from Los Angeles. The women return to their Los Angeles home after learning of their mother's death.

³ PALMER. *Inside the Violence*, p. 70.

her work as a playwright and there she staged several of her early plays, including *Kita y Fernanda*.⁴ Teatro Luna's work is known for devised plays stemming from Latina lived-experiences that employ humor, movement and nontraditional structures, such as vignettes.⁵ Similarly, Teatro Vista, one of the theater companies that produced *El Nogalar*, frequently places emphasis on working with and staging Latinx stories with Latinx artists.⁶ It becomes necessary to view and analyze audience positionality and not categorize a singular perspective as the most or least important when viewing performances.

Tanya Saracho's *El Nogalar* concerns the socio-economic effects of the contemporary drug violence on the U.S./Mexico border on women from different socio-economic backgrounds. The play centers on the Galván women whose land and home are now under threat by new cartels moving into the northern region of Mexico. *El Nogalar* (dir. Cecilie Keegan) is loosely based on Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and it emphasizes how class, racial privilege, and language purity continue to uphold contemporary Mexican and U.S. society. *El Nogalar* features significant and poignant sound, light and language/linguistic changes. The show created environments for audiences to come together on equal terms, where self-reflexive ways of seeing and being could be proposed and explored. Reading and interpreting paratexts, such as the program, performance, script and reviews, carry significant weight in the varying degrees of audience interpretation and reception of the play.

Gérard Genette proposed the term paratext to understand and frame textual and extra-textual elements that shape the reading and interpretation of texts, and in his case, novels.⁷ Genette's paratexts are

⁴ Saracho's work with Teatro Luna and beyond highlights the complexities of being Latinx in the 21st century, specifically, she tackles class, race, sexuality, religion and gender. In her ten years with Teatro Luna, the group created over 10 plays and became an incubator for Latinx playwrights, directors and actors.

⁵ Throughout the article, I will use the terms Latina or Latinx, though not interchangeably. I take the former term to mean a person who self-identifies as such because of a geographical connection to Latin America through family migration, or generationally in regions of the U.S. Southwest. The latter term, I understand it as a more inclusive identifier given the shifting borders of Latino Studies and (self)-identification in the 21st century.

⁶ TEATRO VISTA. *History and Mission*.

⁷ GENETTE. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, p.1

elements such as the title, chapter titles, interviews with the author(s), reviews, etc. Genette divides paratexts into two sub-categories: peritexts and epitexts. The former found inside or attached to the book and the latter surrounds the text, such as author interviews or reviews. Jean-Marie Thomasseau proposed the term paratexts specifically to speak to dramatic texts, but the term distinguished between the main dramatic text and side texts, such as stage directions or list of characters.⁸ In what follows, I expand on Genette's and Thomasseau's foundational work with a broader conceptualization of paratexts for dramatic texts and performances. These paratexts include materials such as interviews with the playwright and dramaturg, the playbill and reviews from other performances, just to name a few. Many of these paratextual elements have a profound relationship in shaping reception and perception of the play, its performance and the legacy of the playwright. As Genette argues, the paratextual message is influenced by space, time, substance and function.⁹ In the case of theatrical texts and subsequent performances, every item serves as paratext and the messages emitted offer the readers and viewers the possibility of a varied and multilayered reception and understanding of the texts.

The focus of this study is the possibility of reading audience's response to the 2011 premiere of *El Nogalar*. As such, it is fundamental to speak to both the dramatic text and performance, including paratextual elements such as the program and online materials.¹⁰ For this analysis, I build on Genette's and Thomasseau's work, as well as Susan Bennett's and Helen Freshwater's work on theater audiences and reception. Bennett offers a thorough analysis of audiences as a cultural phenomenon, analyzing the script, performances and reviews. Freshwater argues for more empirical audience research to further understand the cultural phenomenon of spectatorship at the theater. This analysis is modeled in Bennett's work – *Theatre Audiences* – analyzing two frames in theater and audience reception. One frame looks at all the cultural elements that create and inform the theatrical event. The second analyzes the inner workings of the staged production. For Bennett, “it is in the interactive

⁸ PAVIS. *Paratext*, p. 249.

⁹ GENETTE. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, p. 5.

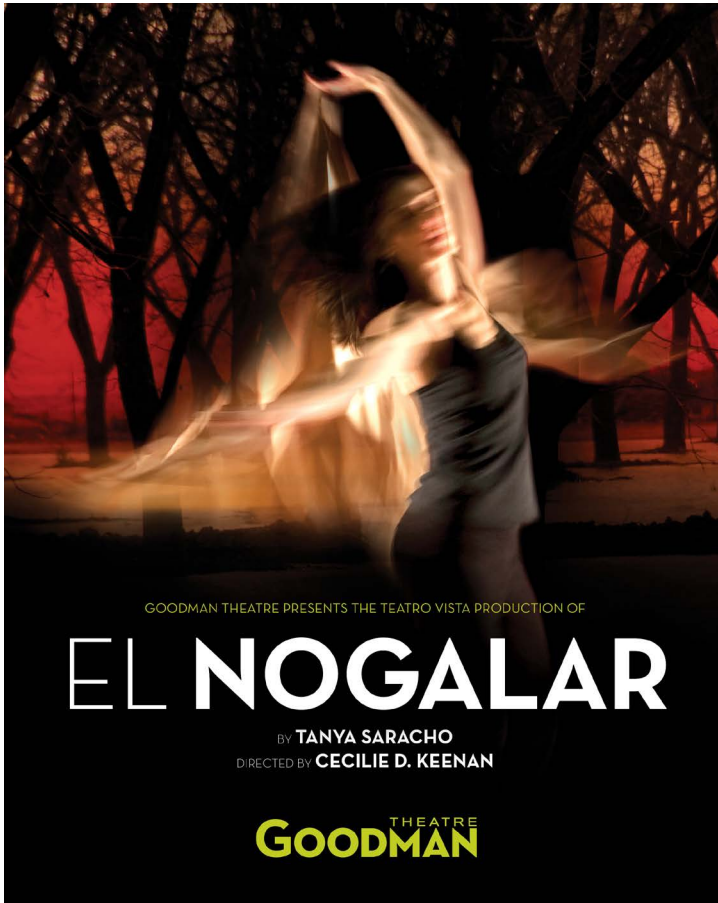
¹⁰ I use the playbill and education guide accessed by attending the 2011 Goodman Theatre run in Chicago, IL.

relations between audience and stage, spectator and spectator which constitute production and reception, and which cause the inner and outer frames to converge for the creation of a particular experience.”¹¹ Like every community, audiences come to the theater with socio-cultural baggage and expectations. For example, some theater-goers may know the playwright personally, while others are in the audience for the first time. The audience member that knows the playwright understands the perspective and vision of the writer, while the first-timers are there for just the entertainment experience.¹² It is at the intersection of visual and aural signs that the audience finds itself understanding or misunderstanding the theatrical world and beyond it.

What is the audience’s initial experience with *El Nogalar*? Some spectators read the production against their knowledge of the European text, whereas other spectators will read Saracho’s adaptation against their knowledge of her previous work with Teatro Luna. The spectator’s perspective inevitably comes down to all the paratextual elements coming into play before, during and after the performance. The actor’s skill, props, light, sound and music, along with textual analysis can only represent a part of the complexity in understanding varying degrees of interpretation and perception by audiences, such as avid theater-goers, Saracho followers, critics and new audiences. The audience’s understanding of the stage world and beyond is subject to their perception of what they view before and during the performance. One of the paratexts is the program. Just like the dramatic text, the program provides important information about background information on the play, the playwright and actors. The choices involved in the information provided, such as the color scheme and the cover image, all provide useful context to understand the performance. Serving as a peritext, the program forces the audience to contemplate what the performance will be. For the Goodman production, the program cover shows a blurry image of one of the characters twirling in front of shadowed trees highlighted in a red hue. This image may evoke a sense of mystery, it can signify family problems, or a sense of joy. The cover helps set up the story for the viewer in terms of perception and understanding of the performance. The visual elements include the set and the costume worn by the Galván matriarch.

¹¹ BENNETT. *Theatre Audiences*, p. 139.

¹² As an audience member, I was familiar with Saracho’s work as well as the current socio-political situation affecting the U.S./Mexico border at that time.

FIGURE 1 – *El Nogalar* Program Cover.

Source: Courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

The playbill also includes a short interview with Saracho by Tanya Palmer on her adaptation and provides the audience specifics on the adaptation; seeing Saracho’s approach to the play, and her perspective on what it means to set this play in conflict-ridden U.S/Mexico border. She tells Tanya Palmer in a pre-show interview, “[...] I realized that [drug violence] is why I was writing this now – this violence is happening to people I know.”¹³ Readers are presented with several elements that aid and

¹³ PALMER. *Notes*.

perhaps influence the reception of the performance. The audience responds to the performance based on cultural values and expectations carried by the program. Peritexts, such as the program point to the audience thoughts and questions as well as their response to their horizon of expectations, which for Bennett, “determine the nature and satisfaction of the interpreting process.”¹⁴ Even though the program may be written with the intention of allowing a wide swath of audiences to interpret, it is important to understand that the spectator more so than not accepts his/her role as a passive audience member and enters into contract to accept, as a given, the paratextual elements. The program can activate diverse responses and interpretations, but it is the audience which gives it meaning.

Saracho’s stage directions describe a detailed space: “estate of Los Nogales...and its adjacent nogalar...takes place in México.”¹⁵ This specificity warrants attention because it places the story squarely in northern Mexico, a region that traditionally grows pecans. It also aids in understanding the socio-political climate as soon as the action commences. Just like the program, the script provides another element that can influence reception beyond its premiere. The opening of the play is followed by the detailed description of the master bedroom. It is a typical room of the naturalist play, however the maid, Dunia, is notably acting differently from what one would expect a maid to do because she removes jewelry from her pocket and returns it to its place in the master bedroom. By opening with Dunia, Saracho’s script pays homage to Chekhov since the Galván household as well as the country is inverted.

For the 21st century audience it may seem like a strange space to view, but for a knowing 21st century spectator, the location and Dunia’s actions make sense because the state of upheaval on the border upended rigid social hierarchies in Mexico. The playwright’s note on language specifies the play should be in Spanish while some characters speak in English, because “the text can’t just exist in English because the hybridity of the tongue is important on the border.”¹⁶ Saracho specifies that the scenes give insight into the linguistic and cultural lives of the characters and represent a “real world” and a “translated world.” By constructing her characters by means of language and culture, Saracho supports the

¹⁴ BENNETT. *Theatre Audiences*, p. 166-167.

¹⁵ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p. 72.

¹⁶ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p. 72.

complex representation of their lives in Mexico and in the U.S. As Carla Jonsson notes on her work on Chicana playwright Cherríe Moraga, the use of language mixing serves as a means to represent a voice that feels genuine for the playwright and that the audience can identify.¹⁷ The audience's initial experience of the play is one of intersecting U.S. and Mexican realms, two realities that merge into one, entering into a constant negotiation between the real and the translated.

The different realms provide the audience signs that fall into two categories, those that are part of the actor/performer and those external to the performance, such as props, lighting, sound.¹⁸ For example, the actor's performance includes movement, language, voice and physical appearance. The audience is confronted with these two types of signs every time they enter the theater. For Bennett, "the audience is likely at the outset of the performance to read the stage as a macrocosm."¹⁹ For viewers of *El Nogalar*, these elements form the Galván family, living in a violence-ridden world in the heart of the U.S./Mexico border.²⁰ Once the audience is confronted with new signs, both from the actor and non-verbal/bodily elements, the experience may indicate their need to read the signs with open minds or disbelief. In the case of *El Nogalar*, the shifts in language and light may stray too much from the Chekhovian version and that will prompt too much of a change for a more traditional spectator.²¹ Furthermore, in the performance, the changes in language and light, along with the inclusion of Latino actors playing Latino characters heralds the possibility of viewing a different world and experiencing another's plight, as well as seeing a shared universal experience.

Initially, the audience may hypothesize about the play based on the opening scene or the information in the program. Bennett calls this a "horizon of expectations". For Bennett, the audience's expectations are "held collectively and individually,[the expectations] would be

¹⁷ JONSSON. *Power and Resistance: Language mixing in three Chicano plays*, p. 125.

¹⁸ BENNETT. *Theatre Audiences*, p. 149.

¹⁹ BENNETT. *Theatre Audiences*, p. 149.

²⁰ The education guide provides its readers with some background information about the violence on the border, including the missing women of Ciudad Juárez and the impact maquiladoras have on the region.

²¹ It is interesting to note that the Chekhovian text's original language was Russian, and in the U.S., more than likely we read and view the performance through a translated perspective.

affirmed, revised, disavowed and so on, in light of the performance the audience saw in the theatre”.²² In the opening of *El Nogalar*, the obvious assumption is that the house staff is crossing social boundaries, “[Dunia] *she is about to leave when she remembers to take Maité’s earrings and bracelets out of her pocket and very carefully put them back in their proper place [...]*”.²³ These movements signal a disruption in the traditional understanding of the Chekhovian play. Chekhov’s stage directions read: “*A room still called a nursery [...]* Dunyasha comes in with a candle [...]”.²⁴ In this first act, Dunyasha and Lopakhin prepare for the family’s return. In these examples, Chekhov’s play emphasizes the stark differences in gender and class, especially between Dunyasha and Lopakhin. It is evident that the perspective Chekhov wanted to present resulted in the viewers perhaps distancing themselves from Dunyasha or Lopakhin’s character.

The first non-verbal interaction in *El Nogalar* offered before Dunia and López’s interaction, such as the set and their gestures, provide an opportunity for the audience to settle in and develop ideas or opinions about the play. For example, there is a big ornate bed, closed drapes and fancy dresses.²⁵ By the time Dunia and López interact, the audience has read the stage and program and has made a connection to the outside world and the world of a Chekhovian adaptation. López’s entrance (carrying a book) and opening lines provide more information and indicate that they are in their real world. “¿Qué haces Dunia? [what are you doing Dunia?] [...] ¿Qué tanto esculcas? [what is it that you’re looking for?]”²⁶ It becomes clear that López commands the space and exerts power over Dunia, who responds: “(Quickly startled) Ay, Chihuahuas. Me espantaste! [Oh, Jesus! You spooked me.]”²⁷ The initial understanding, just like the Chekhovian version, is that there is a power difference. However, as soon as the lights turn on (*translated world*), the audience perceives a disruption in their power dynamic. Dunia and López interact like brother and sister, mostly talking about the violence on the U.S./Mexico border

²² BENNETT. *The Peripatetic Audience*, p. 8.

²³ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p.72.

²⁴ CHEKHOV. *The Cherry Orchard*, translated by Marina BRODSKAYA, p. 226.

²⁵ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p. 72.

²⁶ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p.72.

²⁷ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p. 72.

and the financial instability in the Galván home. For those with some knowledge of the Chekhovian version, however, the interaction between Dunia and López, accompanied by their conversation topics, indicate a shift in understanding the outside world. As Natalie Alvarez notes on her analysis of *El Nogalar*: “[Saracho] transposes Chekhov’s circumstances into the context of the criminal cartel activity; positioned as a neocolonial force that is overhauling traditional social systems and the rule of law and seizing land in a tyranny of criminality”.²⁸ In Saracho’s version, Dunia and López are candid about their lived-experiences as innocent bystanders of the drug cartel violence as well as beneficiaries of it.

As readers of *El Nogalar*, we learn that López is skilled at technology, saved his money and made a name for himself by maneuvering between the Galván women and the cartel. In the performance, López carries around his BlackBerry, uses the internet to find information or to show Dunia the news, and understands the importance of technology for the cartel. Where some in the audience may read López’s accessories as a sign of the times, others may see it as representative of capitalism and the role of that within the cartels. Patricia Ybarra’s work on neoliberalism and Latinx theater observes that Saracho’s play “shows the trenchant links between the dominance of drug trafficking and the deep history of neoliberalism, including its inducement of the everyday performance of the self.”²⁹ In Ybarra’s analysis, Saracho’s focus on the Galván women as the only ones there “makes the gendered terror of narco-rule all the clearer.”³⁰ Male power is made evident in Steven Oxman’s review of *El Nogalar*, where he notes the importance of López’s status via his accessories: “[...] has a handle on the valuable forward-looking technologies craved even by the drug lords.”³¹ Some audience members may question the need to use these accessories while other spectators, like Oxman, understand the importance of them in relation to the power dynamic exerted in the outside world of the play. For the knowledgeable audience, the latter reading more likely prevails.

In *El Nogalar*, Saracho uses light and sound to familiarize her audience with the complexity of the characters. This signals to the audience

²⁸ ALVAREZ. *Transcultural Dramaturgies: Latina theatre’s Third Wave*, p. 89.

²⁹ YBARRA. *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism*, p. 149.

³⁰ YBARRA. *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism*, p. 163.

³¹ OXMAN. *El Nogalar*, p. 3.

a need to reformulate their expectations of the adaptation or their opinions about the world of the play. To illustrate, take an interview with Saracho where she notes that for her the play addresses the complexities of being Mexican and Mexican-American in the 21st century,

[on identity markers] [t]hey used to be religion and language – Catholicism and Spanish. I feel like we need to complicate that. And I became a little obsessed with class because I did grow up privileged in Mexico. So when I came here I wanted that experience counted too, because Mexico is a complex place [...].³²

The familiarity with Saracho's approach to theater-making and her candid responses to her interview in the playbill signal to the audience that content is as important as the way in which it is presented. This is evident in the following early exchange between Valeria and Dunia:

(Real world: Spanish/English) Valeria: CUANTAS [sic] VECES LES TENGO QUE DECIR QUE NO PRENDAN LA LUZ.../Dunia: ¡Ay, oiga! ¡Ay, no se asuste! [...]
(Makes a big gesture of turning off the light [translated world]) There, light off.³³

What this shows is the importance of the use of light as it relates to language shift. Once the language shifts to English, there is a change in formality between Valeria and Dunia. In the real world, both understand English and Spanish respectively, and they will communicate strictly in Spanish in the real world. Clearly, Valeria talks down at Dunia and criticizes her, which the audience can perceive as another sign of maintaining her control. The audience's perception of this interaction is that Valeria and Dunia have survived in a violent space while, at the same time, understanding that there are class and racial differences between the two women. In this respect, by using light and sound shifts to indicate language change, it requires audience awareness of the socio-cultural elements that shape the communities involved, such as border communities, Latinos in Chicago, and across the U.S.

³² PALMER. *Tanya Saracho*, p. 10.

³³ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p. 74.

In moving between linguistic registers, Saracho employs language identity to define culture and traditions. This can be used to call upon engaged spectators, or it explains what Carole-Ann Upton and Terry Hale note in *Moving Target*, “theatre mirrors the collective identity of its audience, it also created it by re-shaping perceptions.”³⁴ It is in the space of the staging and in the dramatic text that *El Nogalar* provides a place for not only the bilingual/bicultural spectator and reader to ‘hear’ themselves, but one where they can reconceive collective and individual identities. In this engaged viewing, the spectator actively views the linguistic interactions as imperative in understanding the power dynamic in the household. A possible reading and understanding of this is through staging: no subtitles, two languages – with an emphasis on the lighting choices. In performance, the use of lighting and sound to indicate changes in language reflects a natural movement between linguistic and cultural registers just like the ease of turning on and off a light. Some in the audience may read this as natural, others may read the shift quite differently. By presenting the dramatic text in both languages, Saracho successfully establishes the contemporariness of Chekhov’s work, and thus updates and localizes the European text, while at the same time disrupting the *status quo*.

The audience’s immediate reading of the shifts in language through light and sound is influenced by the expectations of a performance billed as an adaptation to Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. Where the original text is known to some or all audience members, attention to language and cultural identity will be read against their prior knowledge of the European text. For those audience members that are part of what Linda Hutcheon calls “knowing audience,”³⁵ their reading will be in line with both the actor and external elements. The enunciation of both languages on stage by the actors presents other ways of seeing and being for the characters. For example, language and class differences become visible upon the arrival of the Galván women, such as the minimal interaction between Dunia and López, and Dunia’s service to the family. To exemplify, Anita, the youngest daughter, interacts with Dunia in Spanish by saying “hola” as way to enter the bilingual/bicultural space. Dunia understands that Anita, as the youngest one, may not know or completely understand Spanish, to which Dunia practices her English, “Ah, don’t worry. Do not worry you. I have been practicing very much.

³⁴ HALE AND UPTON. *Moving Target*, p. 6.

³⁵ HUTCHEON. *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. xxvi.

(*Beat*)”.³⁶ In this exchange, Dunia and Anita speak in their “real world” language: Anita in English and Dunia as an English language learner. Both communicate, however the difference here is in the way Anita approaches her comfort with speaking Spanish, as a child who grew up in the U.S. and speaks English but understands and communicates at a certain level in Spanish. Frances R. Aparicio argues in “Sub-versive Signifiers,”

the bilingual and bicultural texture of many U.S. Latino/a works – in its subversive location- privileges the ideal bilingual/bicultural reader as it simultaneously achieves a balance negotiating between an Anglo monolingual audience and a Latino bilingual readership.³⁷

The changes in registers and the shifts in light are highly important. As such, the written text and the staging of the text serve to present the way language and the non-verbal elements transcend the words themselves, by pointing to the increasingly integrated nature of the global world.

Additionally, the spectator who can understand Spanish and English may have an advantage over monolingual English or Spanish speakers. To further explicate this, Saracho emphasized the fact that all her characters are questioning their identity and their relationship with the place they call home:

[on language use and identity] hopefully audiences will be able to see this through the way I play with language – the different usage of English, Spanish, Spanglish and Espanglés. [...] I’m using language as a way to note hybridity in this way.³⁸

For example, in the middle of scene eight, Dunia and Anita are left alone outside, watching the meat on the grill. Once the lights are turned on [described as “dreamy”], Dunia speaks Spanish and practices English, while Anita only speaks English. In the latter part of the conversation, Anita and her mother mix languages, emphasizing comprehension of both.

³⁶ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p. 76

³⁷ APARICIO. *Sub-versive Signifiers*, p. 206.

³⁸ PALMER. *Tanya Saracho*, p. 10.

Dunia: Everything hurts her elbow. No, that is not the manner how you say it in English. How do you say que es bien tacaña.

Anita: Stingy...

Dunia: [about Pedro] Yes, he twitches that's because se mete la mierda (*she pretends to sniff cocaine*) Neuronas are neurons? [...]

Maité: Memo will help us. El [sic] nos va a prestar una cantidad, ya me lo prometio [sic] [*He's going to lend us a sum, he's already promised.*]³⁹

In this case, the text and the presentation of the play has defined its own terms. It requires a bilingual audience, possibly bilingual actors, and a production team that will engage in actively learning about the current situation on the U.S./Mexico border, and about bicultural/bilingual identities. Even though this exchange does give bilingual and bicultural audience members an advantage in comprehending, a monolingual audience will still understand based on context.

Another paratextual element that also reaches a variety of spectators is the education guide. The online guide was provided by the Goodman Theatre's Education and Community Engagement Department. Much like the program, the guide provides background information on Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and the ongoing violence affecting that community on both sides of the border. The information demonstrates the importance of where the play takes place and highlights the history of it in relation to the current socio-political climate, especially about the impact the violence has on women on the border. It is common to view the education guide for school-aged children, such as high school students, however the guide would be useful for adults. Another section of the guide also provides information about Anton Chekhov and his work, connecting it to Saracho's adaptation. Michael Manocchio writes about his experience during pre-rehearsal drafts:

While the script was going through pre-rehearsal drafting, I was busy conducting production research for the director and actors. My work was aimed toward providing contextual information that would allow for a more realistic and thorough depiction of the world of the play.⁴⁰

³⁹ SARACHO. *El Nogalar*, p. 83-84.

⁴⁰ MANOCCHIO. *Reports from the Rehearsal Room*, p. 8.

The guide further describes how the dramaturgical team aided in adapting Chekhov's play to create *El Nogalar*, emphasizing that Saracho was both adapting and adding to the play, giving it a new and timely approach.⁴¹ The guide is key in understanding the world of the play before, during and after performance. The reader's interaction with the study guide concerning the performance, program, script, and reviews signal a more complete analysis of the paratextual elements that influence audience and reader interpretation of the play. Just like the performance, the program and education materials can activate a variety of responses, but it is critic reviews that may influence more audience participation and post-performance conversations.

The production history of *El Nogalar* includes the Goodman Theatre on March 2011, a West Coast run at the Fountain Theater (Los Angeles) in 2012, and a 2015 run at Teatro Vivo (Austin, TX). Some of the reviews stemming from these productions indicate the importance the play has those audiences within and outside the theater. After the Goodman premiere, the critical reception emphasized the connection to the Chekhovian text, even though the playbill indicates that *El Nogalar* is inspired by Chekhov and its contemporariness on the U.S./ Mexico border.⁴² The play failed to ignite the imagination and critical eye of the *Chicago Reader* audience and reviewers. According to an extensive review by Tony Adler, the *Reader* condemns *El Nogalar* for not recognizing to be different from *The Cherry Orchard*: "[...] Her adaptation comes across as an attempt at cross-cultural mimicry – and a failed one at that, since Saracho tries to finesse much of the detail and subtle coloration Chekhov built into his play."⁴³ As such, Adler's response to *El Nogalar* expected something new from Saracho's adaptation. He goes on to say that Saracho's inclusion of drug dealers "is one of the most interesting and original things Saracho has done here."⁴⁴ Similarly, Mary Shen Barnidge's review in the *Windy City Times* also compares *El Nogalar* to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, but it goes one step further to

⁴¹ Alvarez notes that Saracho's work strategically and selectively appropriates Chekhov to evince the process of transculturation. ALVAREZ. "Transcultural Dramaturgies: Latina theatre's Third Wave," p. 90.

⁴² PLAYBILL. *Notes*.

⁴³ ADLER. *The Goodman Theatre's Poor Imitation*.

⁴⁴ ADLER. *The Goodman Theatre's Poor Imitation*.

connect the Galván story to the contemporariness of the border situation, and its connection to capitalism. She notes, “if we pity the rich... are we being humane or simply reaffirming the reverence traditionally harbored by the humble toward their better?”⁴⁵ For Barnidge, *El Nogalar* is steeped in the contradictions we currently inhabit.

Los Angeles Times reviewer Margaret Gray admitted since she knew this was a Chekhov adaptation, she spent most of the evening tracing Chekhovian clues, but, “[Just] enjoy[ed] the sultry Mexican evenings... This is Chekhov picante.”⁴⁶ Whereas the two Chicago reviews highlighted a familiar relationship to the original, but also sought to critically hook the readers with their awareness of the potential of a reading of the performance, the *L.A. Times* review was undoubtedly skewed towards wanting the play to be Chekhov. In this respect, there are limits in the role of the audience in making social change, examining how, regardless of authors’ intentions, theater projects often reinforce audience members’ existing assumptions and values. The reviewer’s theatrical experience oscillated between seeing commonalities between Chekhov and Saracho’s adaptation and viewing it as a telenovela. Like Ric Knowles has argued, reviews should not be read as “‘evidence of what audiences in general felt and understood’ – and therefore what the performance ‘really meant’ but as evidence of meanings and responses that specific performances in particular locations made available.”⁴⁷ Gray’s review fell into simply interpreting the performance as a stereotypical Latina play where ‘spiciness’ runs rampant through the staging and in the perspective of the performers which perpetuates certain opinions about what Latinx plays should be or look like. Most recently, Teatro Vivo in Austin, TX opened to a knowing and sympathetic audience. The performance garnered a glowing review from Adam Roberts of the *Austin Chronicle*,

What’s especially striking about Teatro Vivo is the company’s consistent ability to deliver a repertoire so intrinsically tied to its mission, and productions that achieve the ability to communicate very specific cultural references across such a wide swath of audience demographics.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ BARNIDGE. “El Nogalar”, p. 24.

⁴⁶ GRAY. *Nogalar’s rich harvest*, p. 20.

⁴⁷ KNOWLES. *Reading the Material Theatre*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ ROBERTS. Teatro Vivo’s bilingual Chekhov reboot provides a context for examining social class in contemporary Mexico.”

His review signaled a stark contrast to Gray's since Teatro Vivo's production mined Chekhov and Saracho's plays to examine class in contemporary Mexico and beyond.

The reviews show varying degrees of perception and spectatorship. The different reviews represented different horizons of expectations shaping the audience's interpretation of *El Nogalar*. On the one hand, the Chicago reviews highlighted the role of the original text in the evaluation of the performance. It could be said that since the play was billed as an adaptation, the traditional Goodman audiences wanted to see something close to the original text. Adler and Barnidge established a connection to the original text by comparing the storyline and characters. Where these two reviews differ is at the level of agreement in Saracho's fidelity to the original. Barnidge goes a step further to emphasize the connection to the potential of adapting Chekhov to the current socio-political situation in Mexico. A more traditional viewer of the text, like Adler, would reflect those spectators that traditionally attend Goodman Theatre productions. In the context of both reviews, the emphasis for the critical spectator was the fidelity or inaccuracy of the adaptation was central to their reviews. The onstage signs such as the design, costumes and cast combined with the reviewer's expectations and previous knowledge contributed to the reviews *El Nogalar* received. The review analysis is intended to illustrate likely processes of reception for audiences familiar with the Chicago theater landscape and Latino theater in general. Beyond these reviews and the supplemental material such as the program and the education packet, the audience is free to read the play based on their perception and horizon of expectations.

Certainly, interaction between audience and actor further influences reception. The audience interacts with the actors and vice versa, creating a space where the audience may react positively or negatively to the acting and those reactions may foster a variety of responses from the actors. The actors in the 2011 run at the Goodman Theatre consisted of all well-known Chicago-based performers. It is important to note that certain actors acquire a public persona, and this can affect what the audience expects to see or hear at the performance. In any case, the audience reads the actor's performance and the work on stage. As such, the recognition of the actors as well as the author is as important in the reception as the reviews. All the paratexts can activate

a plethora of responses, but as Bennett states, “it is the audience which finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product.”⁴⁹

Audience involvement and reception is complex. All paratexts such as the script, playbill, reviews, and education guide influence the reception of the performance at the time of the premiere and beyond. The traditional role of the audience, as passive and at times critical, is relative since every member belongs to an interpretive community. Furthermore, it is in this social event, the theatrical event, that spectators “accept a passive role and await the action which is to be interpreted.”⁵⁰ In the case of *El Nogalar*, audience members at the Goodman possibly saw a reality that reflected the experiences of the Mexican American community in Chicago. It may also be said that the adaptation did not meet the expectations of Chicago reviewers, but the play did move those in Austin. The paratexts such as the script, playbill and education guide seek to broaden the audience’s reception. These elements during the run of the performance strengthen the audience’s understanding of the world of the play, especially regarding the violent situation that impacts the U.S./Mexico border since 2001.⁵¹

In some ways, by analyzing the script, playbill, reviews, and the study guide, this study calls for an increased use of paratextual material to critically think about audience reception. The complexity of the play as an adaptation alone suffices an increased knowledge of non-traditional methods to approach the text and the surrounding material, including reviews, playbills and education guides. These paratexts not only provide new insight into interpreting the performance and dramatic text, but they also offer ways to approach audience understanding beyond the review. *El Nogalar* offers a space for knowing, passive and prescriptive spectators to co-exist. Further, it is imperative to begin to view audiences just like we want to view our theaters and performances: diverse and complex. In capturing a more nuanced understanding of how audiences may read a performance, it is imperative to ask how we can find better tools to measure audience perception pre and post-performance.

⁴⁹ BENNETT. *Theatre Audiences*, p. 167.

⁵⁰ BENNETT. *Theatre Audiences*, p. 177.

⁵¹ Even though the violence on the border and throughout Mexico continues to impact Mexican society, 2010 marked the peak of drug-related violence in Mexico, specifically its northern states such as Chihuahua, Coahuila and Nuevo León. Justice for Mexico researchers at the University of San Diego found that, by the end of 2011, there were over 50,000 organized crime murders in Mexico documented by Mexican government and media sources. (HEINLE, MOLZAHN, and SHIRK. *Drug Violence*, p.1).

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