

MY BROKEN LANGUAGE

Written and Directed
by Quiara Alegría Hudes



STUDY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

My Broken Language

A Theater Jawn

Blending monologue, literary reading, live music, and movement, *My Broken Language* is an author's recollection of life growing up in en el barrio in Philadelphia during the 90s, in a Puerto Rican family held together by women: recalling the uplift, the grief, the spirits, the dance. Navigating the margins of many communities, they forge a language all their own. Premiere Residency Playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes adapts and directs her acclaimed memoir for the stage.

Jawn

/Jôn/. Slang. Noun.

“...an all-purpose noun, a stand-in for inanimate objects, abstract concepts, events, places, individual people, and groups of people. It is a completely acceptable statement in Philadelphia to ask someone to “remember to bring that jawn to the jawn.” – Atlas Obscura

A CLOSER LOOK

↪ An Interview with Quiara Alegría Hudes

***My Broken Language* began as a memoir. What was the original impetus for writing your memoir, and what has the process been of adapting *My Broken Language* into a play?**

The impetus for writing my memoir, ironically, was that I needed a break from the theatre, and I wanted to be in a different artistic space for some time.

The first idea in the book came from a memory, which was all my cousins dancing at my abuela's house in North Philly on the 4th of July, 1991. I had that on VHS tape, and it's beautiful. We're all dancing to merengue. This really important album had come out — Juan Luis Guerra's *Bachata Rosa* — one of the most important albums of the decade.

I started remembering that 1991 was a really challenging time in my family. It was HIV time; it was war on drugs time. There was a lot of grief happening in those years and in my family, and that juxtaposition between the grief and the incredible joy I saw in this dance party excited me as a storyteller. I thought - there's tension there. There's narrative there. There's story; and I wanted to explore that intersection of the joy and the pain.

The book became a much more sprawling investigation, but with the play, I wanted



Quiara Alegría Hudes playwright photo by Gregory Costanzo

to return to an exploration of that joy, celebration and grief as it lives within our bodies. I want to get incredible actors on stage, and I want to explore the parts of this book that focus on our bodies at moments of transition and of real complexity.

This is your first time as a director. Why were you interested in directing this particular piece, and how did you balance the dual roles of playwright and director?

I can't say that I've ever dreamed of being a director, but it felt very natural for this particular project. I've worked with incredible directors throughout my

career, so I really could have taken this opportunity to collaborate. But I have some experience in collaborating, and with a director, just as with a songwriter when I'm writing a musical, you have to give them a lot of space to be their own artists. I could feel that it would be hard for me to give a director that much space in stories that were so personal, and stories that I've essentially lived and that continue to live in my memories.

So I thought, well, let me let me try this on for size. It's not that I want to replicate these memories as is, because memory is fuzzy. Memory is a feeling. Memory is a vibe. The exploration I want to do with the actors, the frank conversations I want to have with them — what does the Latina body mean in an intergenerational family? How do we make sounds together? How do we touch each other? How do we heal each other? How do we fight? — these are really personal conversations. I'm so glad that I'll get to be the one leading them in the room.

What excites you about working with the cast and this creative team on *My Broken Language*?

I grew up in a large and largely matriarchal family in North Philly. It was a lot of female and women's bodies around me at all times, from eight months to 88 years old. It was a wonderland, to see that diversity of bodies. We would say there were chicken legs and righteous thighs - diversity of hair textures and skin tones. This is an Afro-descended, Indigenous-descended, Philly-Rican family. We carried all that in our bodies. There were scars, there were tattoos. There were cigarettes, there were beer bellies, there were sober people.

When my elders came to Philadelphia from Puerto Rico, they had a suitcase of clothes, I suppose, but they really didn't bring a material life with them. They didn't bring wealth with them, because they didn't have wealth. What they brought with them was stories, and they brought their bodies. I actually feel that those bodies are my inheritance. Those stories are my

Quiara Alegría Hudes at First Rehearsal



inheritance, more than material items.

I wanted to find a group of amazing, fascinating, strong, energized, ferocious bodies, and the spirits that come with them. We created an ensemble of Latinas that are kinda, sorta my age, we have some a little bit older, we have some a little bit younger, and theirs are going to be those bodies that were around me swirling dancing, healing, cursing, grieving, laughing. They're going to bring their life experience and their vibes to my own story.

What is the visual world you're creating on stage?

Our visual world reminds me so much of my youth in Philly in the 80s and 90s, because it's a mess. It's just a messy, filthy home full of a lot of stuff. I've become kind of allergic to neat, clean art. Growing up, there was a lot of stuff around. I like that. I like living in the mess. I like art that makes a mess. It was graffiti times; it was breakdancing times in Philly. I want to harness those aesthetics visually. We have a lot of bathtubs on stage, we have a shower on stage, we have a lot of books, and a lot of plants. Our props are all on stage. I'm not sure Marie Kondo would totally vibe on our aesthetic, but I'm vibing on it.

You mention Philadelphia, which is also a central character in this story. How did Philadelphia, particularly North Philadelphia, shape your experiences and your upbringing?

Philadelphia is one of the most diverse cities in this nation, and it's also the fourth

most segregated city in this nation. I grew up between [West Philly and North Philly], seeing that North Philly was a closed system. It bothered me. I saw there wasn't trash pickup in the same way that there was in Center City. They didn't even have trash cans on the corner in North Philly, so there's litter on the ground. It really bothered me that the kids were out playing with that.

The flip side of that coin, though, was that those sort of segregated communities preserved a lot of culture and were places that cultural innovation continued.

In the play *My Broken Language*, I'm grappling with loving these elements of the culture but also being furious with the implications of segregation. For instance, there's a scene where I'm dealing with educational inequality in the city. I got to go to a magnet school that brought in kids from all over the city, which is part of the public school system. My cousin was one of many who went to the local school, and [I was] witnessing the discrepancies in our education. There's a scene about that: how do I reconcile the different opportunities that my more integrated education afforded me versus my cousin, whose segregated education was compromised?

***My Broken Language* is such an incredible love letter to your family and your elders, particularly the women in your community. Can you tell us more about the influence these women had on you, and how you've brought them into your work?**

Back in in Puerto Rico, our family had a farm. We were an agrarian family. There

were a lot of daughters, there were fewer sons. It was a poor, rural, agrarian life. When the women left and came to Philadelphia, it was a whole new world. There was not a huge Puerto Rican community to welcome them, there was a small and developing Puerto Rican community to welcome them. There weren't services to help them find their way, they had to create those services. There weren't community centers that were bilingual, where they could go and meet other people. They had to build these spaces themselves. When I say that my elders, the generation above me, built Philadelphia, I mean [that] quite literally. My generation inherited the Philadelphia that they built.

I had more time to tell the story of what they had done. They didn't have time to tell the story because they were living the story. But if those stories didn't get told, they wouldn't become part of the written record. That's why I write about elders in the community. It's why I write about people like Titi Ginny, who started an amazing gardening project. She found abandoned lots in North Philly and bought them from the city for \$1. They made community gardens. It was really urgent work. A lot of them were displaced farmers, so this created a way that their bodies could find connection with the earth, even in a largely concrete, new setting.

There was Tía Rosa, who was leading protests against racial profiling. The federation of police would do roundups and sweeps of entire communities of men because of one street crime.

My mother created something called Casa Comadre. She was working in maternal healthcare, because our infant mortality rates were very poor. Our access to bilingual healthcare and culturally sensitive healthcare did not exist. My mom — on a high school education, she wasn't college educated, didn't have time for that — she had to get to work and advocate for these services because she saw her niece, she saw her cousin, she saw her neighbor, pregnant without even prenatal vitamins. These were the kinds of services and community care work that I saw the elders in my family doing.

What are some of the languages, literal or otherwise, that are explored in the play?

There's English and Spanish - the warring languages in my life. Spanglish, which actually has its own syntax rules. It's a very playful amalgamation, so we use it creatively. Oftentimes, we try to one up each other on our silly Spanglish.

There's body language, dance, touch, the recipe for white rice (you don't measure a cup of rice, you measure by palmfuls). My abuela, when she taught me how to make white rice, she was like, "give me your hand." She taught me how to make white rice by touching me.

There's also Lukumí and spiritual languages: the languages of the ancestors. My mother is a priest. She's a Santera, in what's commonly known as Santería, more respectfully known as Lukumí. Part of that was learning Yoruba language, because

the roots [of Lukumí] are from Yoruba land in Nigeria. It's also learning the visual language, which has a really rich, symbolic and meaningful code to it. Far more complicated than I understand.

There's the visual language. I used to go to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. There's a scene where I'm looking at Marcel Duchamp, and I'm thinking about the visual language of Marcel Duchamp; then I'm going home and I'm looking at Mom's altars in this Afro-descended, syncretic pathway. And I'm like, how do I see these two different modalities? Is there a place in my life where they can live side by side?

We have shaming language and slurs. One of the fun things about becoming a writer was I could take words that had been weaponized against myself and my loved ones. Words like "fat," "bitch," "witch," which was used a lot because people misunderstood my mom's religious and spiritual practices. I could take these words, and, it's like in the cartoon where someone catches all the bullets in their mouth and then spits them out right back at the shooter. I could use these words now, reclaim them, and take control of the narrative.

Music is another central language in this play, and you have a background as a musician yourself. How has music been woven through *My Broken Language*, and why was it important to you to include music in this piece?

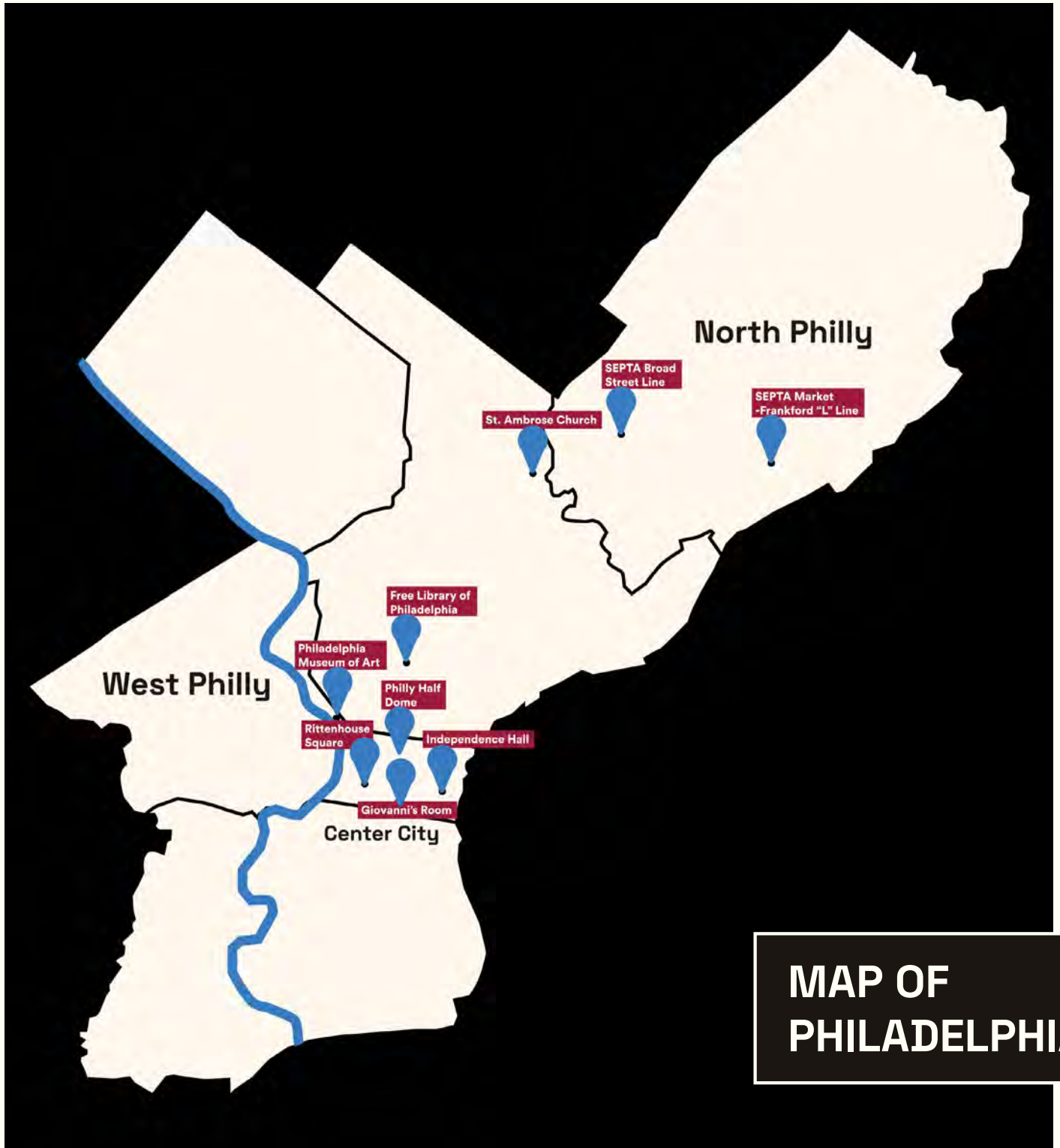
One of the things the play looks at, and one of the reasons why it's called *My Broken Language*, is that we were often at a loss for words. My mother's

first language is Spanish, her second language was English. My first language was English, and my second language was Spanish. Even just with our spoken languages, I often felt like I didn't have the proper vocabulary to describe my reality and my experiences.

Because everyone in the family had a different relationship with Spanish and English, we found other languages that didn't get lost in translation. There's a lot of body language. There's a lot of healing language. For me, one of the saving graces of my childhood was learning music. I loved Chopin because I was a depressed kid, and I could live that depression out on those 88 keys, get it out of my system, and express myself in a way that language failed me.

After I gave up music in my 20s I thought, "okay, well, I'm moving on to writing. That was a nice part of my life." But when I started to tell intergenerational stories, I remembered the Bach preludes and fugues again and how they look on the page. One iteration of the melody here, the inverse of the melody here, a slower version of the melody here. They're stacked up on top of each other, almost like a family tree. It was like a visual representation of different narrative threads happening at the same time.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY



What's in Quiara's Library?

“We must be our own librarians because we alone are literate in our bodies. By naming our pain and voicing our imperfections, we declare our tremendous survival. Our archive is in us and of us. The hum of our bodies together is the book of our genius.”

- Quiara Alegria Hudes

PABLO NERUDA

Nobel prize-winning Chilean poet and diplomat



SPIRITUALITY

Lukumí

Religion practiced across the African diaspora. Also known as Santería and La Regla Lukumí

Olodumare

The supreme creator in Lukumí

Santero

Priest or priestess in Lukumí who is crowned with a specific Orisha

Orishas

Spirits or deities that are worshipped in the Lukumí religion

Limpieza

Ritualistic and intentional bath adorned with herbs, flowers, and incense, typically for healing or revitalization

Santo

Painted or carved image of a Saint

Botánica

Shop that sells herbs, charms, candles, and other items used associated with the Lukumí religion

WHEEL OF FORTUNE



LA MEGA

Leading Spanish Language Radio Station in Philadelphia



ANDY WARHOL

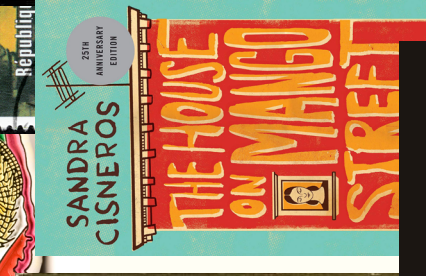
Death of a Salesman

Written by Arthur Miller

JOSÉ RIVERA

Playwright, screenwriter, and first Puerto Rican writer to be nominated for an Academy Award

MARCEL DUCHAMP

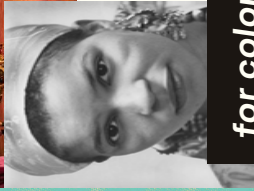


The House on Mango Street

Written by Sandra Cisneros



Photo by Joan Marcus



for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf

Written by Nitozake Shange

BEHIND THE SCENES

An Interview with Scenic Designer Arnulfo Maldonado



**How did you get your start in theatre?
What was your path towards a career in design?**

I started/discovered theatre in high school. I found myself helping to build and paint sets and was drawn to the performative aspect of theatre at first. I studied painting and went to art school shortly after graduating, but I kept finding myself drawn to theatre. I eventually changed majors and studied theatre primarily, earning a B.A. in Theater Arts (so there was not one set discipline...I was doing it all: working in the scene shop, the costume shop, acting, stage managing, directing, etc.). Eventually, I moved from Texas to NYC for graduate studies at NYU (where I graduated with an M.F.A in Set and Costume Design).

What drew you to working on *My Broken Language*? Were there any specific moments within the play that you were most excited to engage with through design?

I was drawn to Quiara's writing and the allure of her directing her own material. The play is based on her memoir of the same name. Having grown up in a Mexican household with family members coming and going, always surrounded by family, the play really reflected a lot of my own personal experience. It was nice for me



Arnulfo Maldonado photo by Michael Wiltbank

to find the similarities between Quiara's journey in Philly and mine in southern Texas.

As a designer, do you have a particular way of approaching a script? Are you reading with an eye towards certain details? Or are there questions you're taking note of for yourself as you read?

I always do a first read where I just read the script and take no notes. From that first cold read, something always stays with me. Eventually, I break the script down and study it in beats/scenes and begin to pair it with visuals. That first read for me solicited

Arnulfo Maldonado at first rehearsal



this notion that the space, whatever it would become, would need to feel like a communal, safe space that allowed for many forms of performance to take place.

How did you approach researching your design for *My Broken Language*? Was your research process influenced by the fact that this play is an adaptation of Quiara's memoir?

Given that this is based on Quiara's life, I took a ton of cues from what Quiara was providing. She shared many photographs and memories from her childhood/upbringing. One image was of her mother sitting on the side of a bathtub surrounded by gorgeous, luscious plants. This was part of a 'limpieza,' or cleansing. This image was a direct connection for me to that first impulse I had when I read the play for the first time. It was a space that felt calming and safe. This led me to begin researching other spaces that bridged the outdoor

and indoor and felt like a calm/cleansing space. The tub as a receptacle of cleansing also felt like a good anchor/element for the space.

The Linney Theatre is a flexible space, where the stage and seats can be positioned differently depending on the vision of the designer. Can you tell us about the process of deciding to design in a thrust configuration?

Having done a show in this space prior (Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*) in a different configuration, I knew the advantages and disadvantages of that [end stage] configuration. In *Fires in the Mirror*, there was a very clear divide between audience and performance (it was a proscenium configuration with audience on one side of space and the stage on the other). For *My Broken Language*, we were able to look at all three of Signature's theatre spaces as possibilities and landed back at the Linney, given its flexibility. The other two spaces at Signature (the Diamond and Griffin spaces) are more standard proscenium spaces. Allowing the audience to wrap themselves around the performance, as the Linney allows, was central to the design.

You've worked on so many incredible shows throughout New York City, both Off-Broadway and on. As you spend more time in the industry, are there certain areas of your design practice that you celebrate as your unique strengths? And while you're celebrating those strengths, are there areas of your practice that you continue to approach as a student?



Set Model for My Broken Language

I'm always *not learning*, so I'd say every production is a learning lesson. I primarily design new plays/work and luckily, I'm always able to tap into the writer's intent/drive/purpose in any particular scene because they're in the room as we are putting it on its feet. That relationship, not just between director and designer but between *writer* and designer, is key. Working a few summers at the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Center in Connecticut allowed me to engage writers about how design works as they are developing the work. It's my job to help the writer's work be front and center, never letting the design get in the way, but rather, supporting the spoken word. Part of my design practice is having writers understand how design works within their own writing — it almost always uncovers new discoveries within the play/musical itself.

Do you have any words to share with aspiring scenic designers?

Always be observing. I'm a big advocate of seeing as much performance as possible. It will help your practice. And I'm not just talking about sitting in a dark theatre. Pay attention to the lighting at that rock show. What are people wearing at the art gallery opening? Go to Film Forum. Get lost in the photography section of the Strand. So much of what I do finds its way on the stage just by being observant and taking notes.

BEHIND THE SCENES

An Interview with Actress Samora la Perdida



How did you come to this production of *My Broken Language*?

Oooo girl, when I saw the casting call for this show I told myself I had to be a part of it. The first audition side I received was about the Author getting her first period and seeking help from her cousin Cuca. Internalized transphobic thoughts began to creep in: “there’s no way they would cast me, a trans Latina, in this role.”

My self-doubt was silenced by the fierce support of my aunt, mother, and abuela. I practiced my audition countless times with all of them. They never questioned the legitimacy of a trans Latina talking about using pads for the first time, but instead lovingly shared stories of their first periods: the fear, the anxiety, the excitement. I carried their stories with me into the audition room, and two weeks later I booked the role.

Were there certain moments or themes that resonated with you when you first read the script?

Towards the end of the play, the Author says to her mother, cousins, and sister that, “we must be our own librarians because we alone are literate in our bodies...our archive is in us and of us. The hum of our bodies together is the book of our genius.” When my own doubts came in between me and the role of my dreams, the women



Samora la Perdida photo by Russell Hawkins

of my family came to my side and shared the book of their genius with me. They embraced me into womanhood through the sharing of wisdom, just as Cousin Cuca does to the Author in the first scene. *My Broken Language* is a testament to the power of the herstories and ancestral memories Latina women pass on through the generations, and necessity for these stories to be told.

***My Broken Language* is an adaptation of Quiara’s own personal story, and she’s also directing this production. What’s it been like working with Quiara?**

Quiara leads with love. As a member of the ensemble, you feel it as soon as you

walk into the rehearsal room. Together with Quiara, we built an altar to honor the memory of our ancestors. We adorned a corner wall with black-and-white portraits of great aunts from Panama, sepia eight-by-tens of grandmothers from Puerto Rico, developed film of cousins from Venezuela. We all take turns lighting a candle in front of it every morning with the utmost care and respect. It's a lovely rhythm that carries over into working with Quiara on *My Broken Language*. Her words and direction have crafted a theatrical experience that celebrates the beautifully imperfect legacy of the Latina women in her family... and my family, and Yani's family, and Zabryna's family, and Daphne's family, and Marilyn's family. So, when I'm

telling inappropriate jokes as cousin Red Headed Joe on the way to Six Flags in the first scene, I am also telling mischievous jokes the way my own cousin Selena did on the way to Dorney Park. When I'm the Author recalling my mother adjusting my training bra, I'm also recalling my own mother giving me one of her favorite skirts after I came out to her as Trans. Together as a cast, we all bring our own experiences and familial memories to Quiara's story, which she welcomes and embraces. We have created a mosaic of the Latina experience that represents so many different walks of life while foregrounding the resilience of the families that hold us together.



EXPANDING THE CURRICULUM



Classroom Exercises

EXERCISE 1

* Quiara calls on each of us to be our own librarians. What makes up your own personal library? Think not only in terms of written materials, but music, movement, people, foods, landmarks, and more. Collect the materials for your library. Now think: how would you share the materials in your library with others? What is the check-out system? Are there any suggestions you'd like to provide for how to engage?

EXERCISE 2

* *My Broken Language* is a memory play. Spend some time reflecting on important moments that shaped you, creating a list or jotting down notes as you go. Now pick one: what about this moment sticks in your memory? Which of your senses were engaged? Spend some time exploring this memory using your creative muscles, whether that be through writing, music, movement, visual art, design, or another modality of your choosing.

EXERCISE 3

* Quiara speaks about a series of rituals she and her elders engage in for healing, from the cleansing bath of a *limpieza* to spiritual practices with *Lukumí*. Spend some time thinking about the traditions and routines in your life that bring you presence and clarity. What is your ritual for restoration?

EXERCISE 4

* In her interview, Quiara mentions that her elders, "didn't have time to tell the story because they were living the story," and speaks to the urgency of telling the stories of our elders so that they are included in the written record. Think about an elder in your community whose story you would like to tell. Once you have that person in mind, start asking yourself: how does this person speak? Are there certain words or inflections they often use? Is their voice quiet? Loud? Do they speak slowly, or quickly? What stories do they return to most often? Now try to write a monologue in their voice where they share one of their stories. If you are able, think about interviewing your elder for research.

DEEPER DIVE

Read

By Quiara:

[I Owe An Apology to America's English Language Learners, Starting with My Mother](#)

[#OurMothersToo: Reckoning with My Abuela's Forced Sterilization](#)

[High Tide of Heartbreak](#)

Interviews:

[The Pen TEN: An Interview with Quiara Alegría Hudes](#)

[Building Community Through Art & Activism: An Interview with Quiara Alegría Hudes](#)

Watch

[My Broken Language Memoir – Quiara Alegría Hudes and Paula Vogel in Conversation \(Free Library of Philadelphia\) \(60-minute interview\)](#)

[My Broken Language Memoir - Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lynn Nottage in Conversation \(Politics & Prose\) \(60-minute interview\)](#)

[My Broken Language Memoir Interview with Quiara Alegría Hudes \(Washington Post\) \(30-minute interview\)](#)

[Women of Yale Lecture: Art and Disruption by Quiara Alegría Hudes \(60-minute lecture\)](#)

Listen

[Latina to Latina: In the Heights Playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes Writes So People Remember Us](#)

[Design Matters: Quiara Alegría Hudes](#)

DEEPER DIVE

Quiara's Body of Work

Quiara's Memoir

[*My Broken Language*](#) *

Other Plays by Quiara:

[*Miss You Like Hell*](#) *

[*Daphne's Dive*](#) *

The Good Peaches

Lulu's Golden Shoes

[*The Happiest Song Plays Last*](#) *

[*Water By the Spoonful*](#) *

[*In the Heights*](#) *

[*Barrio Grrrr!*](#) *

[*26 Miles*](#) *

[*Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue*](#) *

[*Yemaya's Belly*](#) *

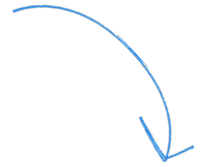
*Available at the New York Public Library

Other Projects:

[*Emancipated Stories*](#)

ABOUT SIGNATURE

A HOME FOR STORYTELLERS. A SPACE FOR ALL.



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto

Our Mission

Signature Theatre is an artistic home for storytellers. By producing several plays from each Resident Writer, we offer a deep dive into their bodies of work.

What We Do

Signature Theatre is a space for artists and audiences to call home. Signature creates opportunities through the spaces and support it offers the theater community. For playwrights, Signature's unique playwright-in-residence model offers the stability and support of home. For audiences, Signature offers access to all, offering a welcoming creative community and affordable ticketing programs. Only Signature Theatre offers an immersive journey through a playwright's body of work to theatergoers seeking intimate human connection and extraordinary cultural experiences.

Our History

Signature Theatre was founded in 1991 by James Houghton and its resident playwrights include: Edward Albee, Annie Baker, Lee Blessing, Martha Clarke, Will Eno, Horton Foote, María Irene Fornés, Athol Fugard, John Guare, Stephen Adly Guirgis, A.R. Gurney, Katori Hall, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Samuel D. Hunter, David Henry Hwang, Bill Irwin, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Adrienne Kennedy, Tony Kushner, Romulus Linney, Kenneth Lonergan, Dave Malloy, Charles Mee, Arthur Miller, Dominique Morisseau, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Sarah Ruhl, Sam Shepard, Anna Deavere Smith, Regina Taylor, Paula Vogel, Naomi Wallace, August Wilson, Lanford Wilson, Lauren Yee, The Mad Ones, and members of the historic Negro Ensemble Company: Charles Fuller, Leslie Lee, and Samm-Art Williams.

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