The Scholarship of Fine Arts: UA Playwright Stands Ready to 'Respond to the World'

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Elaine Romero has to laugh when she reflects on her life. She laughs because her childhood stories include one about skipping a high school math test to go to Disneyland with the king of Zululand. Or there was that time she answered the door for one of her father's business associates, a man who immediately proclaimed, "I am the orator. This is the first time you will be in the presence of complete genius."

But she also recalls the poverty that her grandparents lived through, and the difficult time her family had when her father was out of work.

As Romero, an assistant professor in the UA School of Theatre, Film and Television, takes stock of these experiences—some of them funny, others sad and difficult to relive—she realizes that, when considered together, they answer a key question for her: How do you make a playwright?

Romero’s upbringing has informed upwards of 90 plays—a body of work that includes separate stories about war, a boxer’s fight out of poverty, and life on the U.S.-Mexico border. Many of Romero’s plays have been commissioned by organizations, companies and institutions like the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Chicago’s Goodman Theatre, Cornell University, Arizona Theatre Company, Arkansas Repertory Theatre and others.

Romero, who was raised in Southern California and holds dear her Latina roots, says her upbringing is at the core of each piece.

So, how do you make a playwright?

"You give them this complex history of all these things," she says.

Becoming a writer

Romero’s complex history began in San Juan Capistrano and Laguna Niguel, California.

Her mother was an educator. Her father worked in finance. His career, combined with his charisma, brought interesting people into the early lives of Romero and her three brothers. Those interesting people included the king of Zululand, the self-proclaimed complete genius...
and even John Goddard, the renowned American explorer, who were all connected to Romero's father through business associates.

Meeting such diverse people at such a young age meant that Romero had opinions about politics and religion from the time she was 3 years old. Where other parents might steer clear of those topics at the dinner table, her parents welcomed them.

"It was really those conversations that we had growing up that shaped my thinking as a person, and my ideas about the world and my sense of moral responsibility to the world," Romero says. They also gave form to "the idea that I wasn't just here to eat and sleep, but I was here to participate and make the world a better place for others."

Romero began writing as a child but didn't tell her family about it until she was 15. Her oldest brother, also a writer, had already claimed that passion, Romero says, and she didn't feel like she could, too. Instead, she secretly handed off her short stories to her high school English teacher, who encouraged her to write more.

Romero eventually found herself at a writer's conference in Laguna Beach sponsored by PEN International, a writers' organization. There, Romero met older female writers who further inspired her.

She kept writing.

Thinking in dialogue

Romero attended Linfield College, a liberal arts school in McMinnville, Oregon, as an undergradute. As an English student at a college where all the English professors loved theater, she learned how to write through plays.

Romero's first chance to write a play came in a course on fiction writing during her freshman year. Romero went to her professor with concerns about an assignment. She'd been a writer her whole life, she told him, but she could only think in dialogue.

"He said, 'Well, why don't you just write a play?'" Romero recalled. So she did, and she dove further into theater by attending the college's productions and dissecting each one. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in creative writing after switching from English.

A full-ride scholarship took Romero to the University of California, Davis, where she completed a Master of Fine Arts in playwriting.

In the decades since, Romero's plays have explored the Vietnam War, the struggles faced by a young Mexican-American boxer and a drone pilot dropping bombs in the Middle East from his seat in Nevada. A forthcoming final play for a war trilogy Romero has been writing will be about the atomic bombs dropped on Japan during World War II.

It's not lost on Romero that many of her plays center on death. Her family's Mexican heritage and the way Mexican culture views and grapples with death, Romero says, influenced those themes. Her urge to write war stories, she added, was influenced by the death of her uncle, who died in the Vietnam War and left behind a pregnant wife and two other children, when Romero was 5.

"I feel like it has given me a different perspective on war because I've watched what familial
cost looks like, even if at a distance," Romero says. "I think when I was a kid I understood it was a tragedy that had happened to my family. And as an adult, I understand that it's a tragedy that happens to many families."

**The scholarship of playwriting**

Romero boils down scholarship in the art of playwriting to one sentence: "Being a playwright," she says, "is maintaining the readiness to respond to the world."

For Romero, that means keeping a watchful eye on changes happening in society and following her gut reactions to write stories that tackle those subjects, especially the difficult ones.

And while good playwrights respond to society's latest conversation with stories that move the discussion, the best ones, Romero says, use their work to speak the first word, addressing a topic long before it becomes mainstream. To illustrate this, Romero refers to another trilogy she wrote, which is set on the U.S.-Mexico border. Each play explores ideas related to social justice, and the scripts touch on issues that became hot topics years after Romero wrote about them, she said.

"I think a good playwright will sometimes seem prophetic," Romero says. "I would say writers will often find themselves weeks, months, years ahead of their time."

But the scholarship doesn't end once a playwright figures out what he or she wants to say, Romero says. Though her plays are fictional, they're grounded in real places and time periods, and require research to depict accurately. Romero says she has refined her research process over her career, and no longer spends years researching a topic, period or location before writing about it. Instead, she says, she does enough research to feed the script and stay true to the characters' messages.

"No idea or political point or historical point should be more important than the truth of the characters in the moment," Romero added. "And I always have to bring myself back to that?what is true for them onstage in front of this audience?"

Once the play has been written and gone through a lengthy revision and editing process to become ready for the stage, Romero relies on directors and actors to convey her scholarship to an audience. The time she spends discussing playwriting with others in the field is also a form of scholarship, she says, but it's not the same as putting on a performance.

"The true scholarship, I believe, is the creative activity itself," she says. "Everything else feels secondary to me."

Indeed, the scientific research being done on campus, says Tannis Gibson, interim dean of the College of Fine Arts, should be viewed as parallel to its creative activity.

"Behind that is our hours and hours, endless hours, of preparation, and that preparation might be practice, it might be honing a skill, developing a craft," Gibson says.

**Following the call**
While Romero is eager to tell stories from the eclectic childhood that made her a playwright, the opportunities that have come with being one have left their own mark.

Romero's productions have indeed taken her to flashy cities with well-established and highly regarded theater communities, like New York City and Chicago. But the stories of trips off the beaten path are the ones Romero likes to tell — trips to places like Texas, Connecticut, Florida, Arkansas and Kansas.

"I can say I've seen this country and sometimes it's because I've just been willing to be its playwright," Romero says. "Wherever the places were, I followed the call for the artist. I thought if they want my work and they want me, who am I to judge them?"

"That decision has transformed my life."

Watch Molly Lyons, a professional stage actor, read from a scene in Romero's forthcoming play "Revolutions" in the video below.

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