

**ONE MAN'S
DETERMINATION TO
REUNITE HIS FAMILY
AFTER SURVIVING
CIVIL WAR IN EL
SALVADOR,
IMMIGRATION,
DEPORTATION,
PRISON AND STREET
VIOLENCE**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Purpose & Process (p.2)

- Community Healing
- Documentary Theater

History & Background (p.3)

- From Violence to Violence
- Gang Prevention and Tattoo Removal
- The Civil War in El Salvador

Themes of PLACAS (p.4)

- Family
- Violence
- Redemption
- Culture
- Masks
- Responsibility

Playwright's Corner (p.5)

- Character Arcs
- The Purpose of Place
- Repetition
- Duality at Play

Activities (p.6)

- Theme Study
- Talking Circle
- Playwriting
- Investigative Journalism



PLACAS: THE MOST DANGEROUS TATTOO

A play by Paul S. Flores

Developed with & Directed by Michael John Garcés

Starring Ric Salinas of Culture Clash

PLACAS (*barrio slang: a code word for graffiti tags, a nickname or body tattoos*) is a stage drama about family, transformation and redemption that focuses on a Salvadoran former gang member in the barrio trying to reclaim his family while letting go of his past. Set in today's San Francisco, it explores the benefits and risks of tattoo removal for gang members through one man's determination to reunite his family after surviving civil war in El Salvador, immigration, deportation, prison and street violence.

PLACAS stars Ric Salinas as Salvadoran immigrant Fausto Carbajal, a now middle-aged ex-gang member recently released after nine years in prison. As a requirement of his parole Fausto must remove the tattoos that mark him as a member of his gang. Wearing by what has been a lifetime of violence, he accepts the terms. He is determined to reunite his family, traumatized by three decades of war, forced migrations and street crime. He returns to San Francisco to live with his mother, a war refugee, and hopes to re-unite with his ex-partner, Claudia and their now teenaged son, Edgar. Fausto visits Claudia and Edgar. But Edgar, who has not seen his father for most of his life, resents Fausto and displays disturbing character traits that remind Fausto of himself in his youth.

PLACAS focuses on inter-generational relationships between young men and their fathers and uses the metaphor of tattoo removal as a way of moving forward and as a path to a possible solution.

PLACAS: The Most Dangerous Tattoo was originally commissioned by The Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and The San Francisco International Arts Festival. Four nationally respected Latino arts organizations (MACLA, Su Teatro, Pregones Theatre Company and GALA Theatre) then co-commissioned the play through the National Performance Network. Funding for the creation of PLACAS was also received from National Endowment for the Arts, San Francisco Arts Commission, Columbia Foundation, Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation, San Francisco Foundation, California Arts Council, Bernard Osher Foundation, Puffin Foundation and the Creative Work Fund: A program of the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, supported by ArtPlace, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The James Irvine Foundation. These performances are supported by the California Arts Council, the Zellerbach Family Foundation, the Alameda County Arts Commission, and the California Endowment.



**Facilitating
Power**

Interactive Study Guide by
Rosa González
www.facilitatingpower.com

NOTE: This study guide is designed to provide educators, organizers, and anyone bringing groups to see the play, with background information and activities to make the most out of the experience. Please review the table of contents and pick and choose the sections that are right for you and your group!

2. PURPOSE AND PROCESS OF PLACAS



PURPOSE: *COMMUNITY HEALING*

PLACAS was developed as a pro-active community response to the issue of transnational* gang violence, presenting positive elements of Central American culture in the context of a hostile anti-immigrant political environment.

PROCESS: *DOCUMENTARY THEATER*

Paul Flores began researching PLACAS in 2009, interviewing 100 gang members, parents and intervention workers in the Bay Area, Los Angeles and in El Salvador. Ric Salinas, a founding member of the critically acclaimed performance group Culture Clash, was approached to play Fausto, a role loosely based on a real person named Alex Sanchez. Now in his 40s, Sanchez is an ex-gang member who founded the non-profit Homies Unidos and who worked closely with Flores to set up interviews with gang members during his research. With Michael John Garcés directing, PLACAS features some of the country's leading exponents of Latino theatre.

* **Transnational:** consistent human travel/traffic (immigration and deportation) between countries causes common experiences and happenings in those countries.

WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY THEATER?

Documentary theatre is theatre that wholly or in part uses pre-existing documentary material (such as newspapers, government reports, interviews, etc.) as source material for the script, ideally without altering its wording.

.....WHY DOCUMENTARY THEATER?

Documentary theater can be used as a way to promote understanding and dialogue between people with differing points of views and deeply ingrained histories of conflict. It is used to get the entire picture of what has occurred in a specific event through the process of interviewing people involved. Its purpose is to adhere to the emotional aspect of a specific situation and portray all sides of an event. The value of theater lies in its ability to emphasize the differences between people and begin building bridges between those distinctions. Documentary theater sits at the intersection of art and politics and can be seen as a catalyst for social change.

CONNECT: WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. How do you think the process of creating and presenting the play, "PLACAS: The Most Dangerous Tattoo," contributes to community healing within Latino immigrant communities?
2. In his interviews, Flores found gang members most wanted to see a play about trust, honor, and love. Does this surprise you? Why do you think these themes are so important to young men and women who get caught up in gang life?

ACT: APPLY THE KNOWLEDGE

1. If you were going to conduct your own documentary theater project, what topic would you research? Who would you interview? Who would you want on your team? Read about Paul Flores' process above for some inspiration.
2. Once you are ready, begin your own documentary theater process. Start with writing just one scene inspired by your own research on a topic you are passionate about.

3. HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

FROM VIOLENCE TO VIOLENCE

PLACAS portrays the stark reality of Fausto, an ex-gang member, originally from El Salvador, striving to redeem himself and become a father to his son. It's important to understand the historical context of this leading character.

In the course of El Salvador's Civil War, kids were trained in guerrilla warfare, witnessed gruesome deaths in their own neighborhoods, and were even tortured. The war devastated the small nation and displaced approximately one million Salvadorians, most of whom came to the United States. Many of the youth who came to America had received military training in El Salvador, including training in explosives, booby traps, small arms, and hand-to-hand combat. El Salvadorian youth were not accepted by many of the Hispanic groups in Los Angeles and other American cities. As the youth became marginalized, they banded together for protection and formed what is now known as Mara Salvatrucha, which would later become known as MS 13.

Increased anti-immigrant laws and deportation of gang members back to their home countries such as El Salvador, were devastating to many young people who had migrated as very young children, and only worked to strengthen MS 13 and expand their dominance in both Central America and the US.



GANG PREVENTION STRATEGY: TATTOO REMOVAL

PLACAS: The Most Dangerous Tattoo centers on a time in Fausto's life when he is participating in a community-based tattoo removal program that helps ex-gang members and their families reclaim their lives. Flores worked with three organizations that offer tattoo removal services to do interviews, including CARECEN-Mission District of SF, Homies Unidos Los Angeles, and Homies Unidos-El Salvador.



Removing these tattoos is both a practical and spiritual expression of a person's desire to change their lives. Once an individual has made that choice to change their lives with internal transformations, it is important that their physical bodies reflect this new life, which can include removing a gang tattoo or the name an abusive ex-boyfriend.

Unfortunately, Tattoo removal is costly and there are few programs set-up to help ex-gang members erase gang signs from their bodies.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR

In the 1970s, discontent with societal inequalities, a poor economy, and the repressive measures of dictatorship led to civil war between the government, ruled since 1961 by the right-wing National Conciliation Party (PCN), and leftist antigovernment guerrilla units, whose leading group was the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The U.S. intervened on the side of the military dictatorship, despite its scores of human rights violations. Between 1979 and 1981, about 30,000 people were killed by right-wing death squads backed by the military. The US began funding the right wing military government in El Salvador in 1981. By the time the civil war ended in 1992, the United States has spent millions of dollars that translated into over 75,000 deaths.



4. THE THEMES OF PLACAS

NOTE: all of the murals below are in the Mission District of San Francisco where PLACAS takes place. They each illustrate a different theme.



FAMILY – Those to whom one is related

BEFORE: How do you define family? Has your definition changed over time? If so, how?

AFTER: How is family represented in PLACAS? What lessons about family does PLACAS have to teach us? What all does Fausto do to reunite his family?

WRITE: What has your family taught you about what it means to be a man? -- about what it means to be a woman? Which of these lessons will you keep? Which will you leave behind? Why?

VIOLENCE – Causing harm to others or oneself

BEFORE: What are the different forms violence takes? List as many as you can.

AFTER: Where does violence show up in PLACAS? How do the characters relate to violence? Are any characters able to overcome violence? How? What lessons does PLACAS have for us about violence?

WRITE: Describe a moment in your life when you experienced violence. How did you respond? Would you do anything differently now? How can we interrupt the cycle of violence?



REDEMPTION– making things right after wrongdoing; saving oneself from evil or past errors

BEFORE: What stories do you know that portray some sort of redemption?

AFTER: Which characters in PLACAS achieve redemption? How?

WRITE: Describe a time in your own life when you have sought redemption. What struggles did you face.. What has helped you to make things right?

CULTURE – the characteristics of a group of people including language, spiritual practices, food, social habit, arts and music, etc.

BEFORE: What culture groups do you belong to? How do your culture groups influence the choices you make in life?

AFTER: What culture groups does Shorty belong to? How do they influence him? What is Mama Nieves trying to teach Shorty about his culture? How are Shorty's parents trying to break the social habits of gang culture in their family?

WRITE: Why is it important to be connected to one's culture? How can we have more of a say over what influences us? What role does culture play in healing?



MASKS – The attitudes we project in order to protect ourselves from feeling vulnerable

BEFORE: What does the saying, "Smile Now, Cry Later" mean to you?

AFTER: What masks does Shorty, his mom, and his dad, Fausto, have to wear to survive? What steps does each of them take to remove their masks so they can be there for each other?

WRITE: What masks do you wear? What does it take to remove your masks?

RESPONSIBILITY – trustworthiness, being accountable to your actions

BEFORE: What do you take responsibility for in your own life? What do you not take responsibility for?

AFTER: In what ways do the different characters in PLACAS take more and more responsibility for themselves and others? How does this impact their lives?

WRITE: Describe an experience in your own life when you took responsibility for something that you weren't required to.. How did this impact your life? How does responsibility make us more powerful?



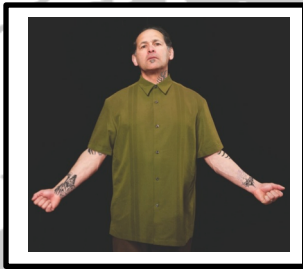
5. PLAYWRIGHT'S CORNER

The following are tools and techniques used by Paul Flores and Michael John Garcés in the creation of the play, **PLACAS: THE MOST DANGEROUS TATTOO**. Analyze how one or more of them contributes to the impact of the play. Next, apply some of these tools and techniques to your own playwriting.



THE PURPOSE OF PLACE – *PLACAS* takes place in the Mission District of San Francisco – the characters and plot are specific to SF and yet the themes are universal

What role does San Francisco play in *PLACAS*? How are the different characters impacted by the neighborhood and city in which they live? How does the playwright achieve a play that can be shown in other cities and still being relevant despite being so site-specific?



DUAL FORCES AT PLAY – Playwrights sometimes set up dichotomies, two opposing forces that are in conflict with one another. Often, a character will need to make peace with or move through one to achieve the other (ex: Love and Hate, War and Peace, Danger and Safety)

What opposing forces are at play in *PLACAS*? How do the characters navigate them? What do they learn in the process?

CHARACTER ARC – The transformation a character undergoes from the beginning to the end of a story

Choose one or more characters from the play and chart their arc. What changes do they undergo? What contributes to their transformations? How are their changes shown/expressed? How does each arc impact you as an audience member? What does the audience learn from each of these characters as a result of their arc?



REPETITION – The use of the same element multiple times throughout a story can help to emphasize a certain theme or achieve a desired impact

What elements do you see repeated throughout *PLACAS*? What impact does this have on you as an audience member? What themes is the playwright emphasizing? What impact do you believe he was seeking to achieve?



6. MORE ACTIVITIES

THEME STUDY

Choose one or more of the following exercises...

1. **POSTER WALK:** Write each of the themes up on separate pieces of butcher paper around the room. Invite everyone to write and/or draw what the theme means to him/her. Then, discuss!
2. **MIRRORING STORIES:** Sit in pairs. One person shares a personal story that reflects one of the themes. The other person performs his/her story back to him/her. Then, each reflects on the experience. Now, Switch.
3. **CREATIVE WRITING:** Choose one of the themes and write a letter, short story, or scene that reflects that theme. Use the prompts on the theme page for inspiration. Share your writing for feedback.
4. **PLAY ANALYSIS:** Choose one or more of the themes and write or discuss the questions on the theme page, before and after the play.

PLAYWRITING

Explore the playwright's corner on page 5 and then apply your favorite tools and techniques to a play of your own...

1. What is the topic of your play? Why is this topic important to you? What do you want to learn?
2. Where does your play take place? In what ways is place important to the plot?
3. Who are the characters? What techniques will you use to develop them? Map their relationships to each other and the emotions they have for each.
4. Experiment with repetition. What elements will you repeat throughout the play and why?
5. What imagery will you draw upon to help the characters and plot unfold?

TALKING CIRCLE

Plan to see the play as a group. Then, hold a talking circle to reflect on the lessons from the play for your own life...

1. Choose a theme that is relevant to your group. Ex: **family** messages about manhood and/or womanhood
2. Start by setting some guidelines. Ask the group what guidelines we should follow so everyone feels safe to express oneself. Write them up.
3. Use a talking stick so everyone respects the speaker.
4. Ask a series of prompts. For example:
 - What messages has your family passed on to you about man/womanhood that you will keep? And which will you leave behind? Why?
 - What messages about manhood had Shorty learned from his father in the play, PLACAS? How do those messages change over time throughout the play?
 - What kind of a man does Shorty choose to be at the end of the play?
 - What have you learned from the negative messages your family has taught you about woman/manhood?
5. Close the circle by asking everyone to go around a share one action they will take as a result of this talking circle.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM – Conduct your own research to inform your writing for the Internet

1. Choose one aspect of the History and Background of the play, PLACAS: a) The Push and pull factors that have contributed to Salvadoran gangs in the US and Central America; b) Gang prevention practices, including tattoo removal and community healing work; c) The Civil War in El Salvador and its impact on Salvadoran families.
2. Write down at least three critical questions about the topic you have chosen.
3. Use library, Internet, and/or interviews to research your topic, finding answers to your questions and seeing what new questions come up.
4. Write a blog post about your research on this topic and how it was sparked by the play, PLACAS

