

PRODUCING COUNTERNARRATIVES

An Ethnographic Study of Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in New York City



Photo by Michael Palma Mir

What is the issue?

As arts organizations evolve from makeshift startups to cultural pillars in their communities, founding values can serve as a “north star” for navigating succession planning and organizational growth. This study documents the aspirations of a Puerto Rican theater company’s leadership, the artistic vision they developed, and their socio-political values—all of which help guide the organization’s future directions.

What is the research context?

Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater formed in 2014, cementing the union of two distinct theater companies founded in New York, in 1979 and 1967 respectively. The companies joined forces around a common mission to provide a platform for sharing Puerto Rican/Latinx history and culture and to broaden professional pathways for Puerto Rican/Latinx artists. Today, Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater stewards permanent spaces in the South Bronx and Manhattan’s Theater District.

What are the research findings?

The research documents the personal trajectories of longtime artistic leaders and the socio-political context

Research Approach

Drawing on interviews, artifact analysis, and observations of the company’s artistic and organizational processes, researcher Raquel Jimenez examined Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater’s art-making practices. Jimenez documents the company’s distinct historical development and charts the goals, methods, mechanisms, and assessment practices that support their work.

All quotes here come from Jimenez’s study.

surrounding the founding and merger of the two theater companies over the span of five decades. The company’s three leaders, all of whom moved to New York from Puerto Rico in their early 20s, were part of an activist generation who turned to cultural production as a force for change. In the States, their goal was to build a company where they didn’t have to check their identity at the door and could feel at home, and where they could also engage genuinely with multiple generations of the Puerto Rican diaspora in NYC and the U.S.

Brief based on *Organizing for Culturally Specific Art: A Case Study of the Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater* by Raquel Jimenez, Ph.D.

Ensemble-based musical theater and storytelling are the main methods the theater company uses to challenge disparaging narratives about Puerto Ricans and their history and to centralize perspectives that are missing in the public discourse. Jimenez notes that, in their work with the company, the artists continually ask the questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? What possibilities and choices are available to us? Guided by these questions, the company explores issues of place and identity, often interrogating the connection between the two.

Leaders at Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater see the creation of counter-narratives as a central mechanism for engaging audiences. Beyond storytelling, counternarratives might shine new light on the causes and consequences of social inequities. They can also serve as a principal “culture forging activity” to help people see how their own experiences are shared with their communities. Counternarratives used in this way can build a sense of collective identity and guide collective action.

The artists are aware that counternarratives can cause cognitive dissonance precisely because they challenge mainstream narratives and longheld beliefs. However, they position this cognitive dissonance and wield it productively, making counter-narratives emotionally stirring.

In assessing their work, they describe how they find different entry points into the counter-narratives, speaking to and with audiences through compelling characters and avoiding didacticism.

Suggested Brief Citation

The Wallace Foundation. (2025). *Producing Counter-narratives*. A research brief describing an ethnographic study of the Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in New York City by Raquel Jimenez. The Wallace Foundation, New York. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-AO7893.001>

Why does this matter?

Culturally specific, community-based arts organizations often leverage art to promote authentic and dignified representations of communities of color. Research and documentation can catalog an organization’s goals, methods, mechanisms, and ways of assessing their impact and can provide vital tools to inform succession planning and future development.

Funders and supporters of these organizations might consider:

- Providing resources to support archival efforts and analyses of organizational goals and approaches.
- Supporting arts organizations rooted in communities of color to provide vital counter-narratives to support community well-being and connection.

This study was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The views summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.