

SEASON 35

FANTASY
FAIRY TALES
and folklore



NATIONAL NEW PLAY NETWORK
ROLLING WORLD PREMIERE



WOLF AT THE DOOR

By Marisela Treviño Orta



Study Guide



Maya Malán-González as Yolot in *Wolf at the Door*. Photo © 2019 Russell J. Young.

Wolf at the Door is a “grim Latino fairy tale” that takes a myth and makes a new story out of it. The play weaves together Aztec myths, fairy tale elements, and themes of masculinity, power, and abuse to tell a compelling story.

In this study guide, we discuss the origins of fairy tales and the myth the play is based on, explore and think about themes of machismo and toxic masculinity, and look into another key theme in the play, domestic abuse.

We hope this information helps you enjoy the show, appreciate and analyze the situations and themes present, and lead to thought-provoking questions and conversations.

A National New Play Network Rolling World Premiere



WOLF AT THE DOOR

Written by **Marisela Treviño Orta**

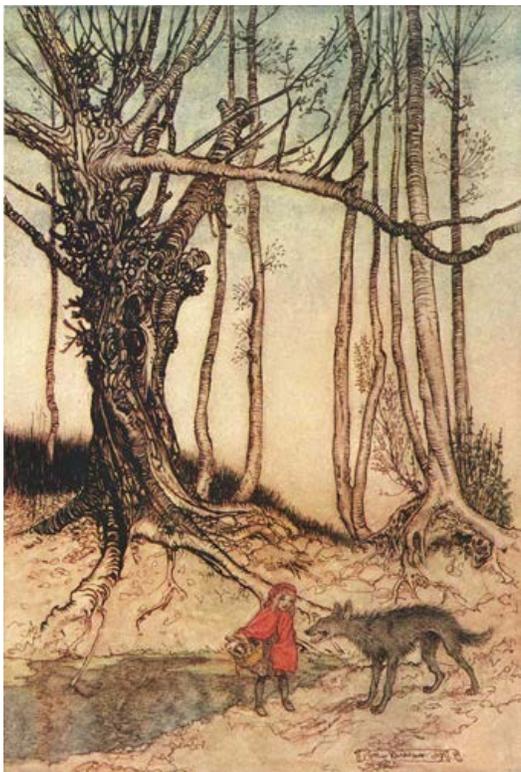
Directed by **Rebecca Martinez**

Study guide research and writing
by **Dora Totoian**



Pied Piper by Kate Greenaway

Fairy Tales: Literary Genre and its Origins



Little Red Riding Hood by Arthur Rackman

When you were growing up, did you listen to or did you read fairy tales, like *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, or *Jack and the Beanstalk*, among others? If so, you've probably realized that many fairy tales share certain characteristics, from their language to their settings to their characters. *Wolf at the Door* fits into this category neatly, and it's also similar to early fairy tales in that it's definitely not a kids' story.

Fairy tales reflect the cultures in which they develop and in turn shape those cultures by their impact. But fairy tales across cultures can also have similarities. For example, there are at least 354 versions of the story of *Cinderella* across the world. In a 1964 book, psychiatrist Julius Heuscher presents a theory arguing that merchants, migrants, and anybody else who traveled hundreds or even thousands of years ago carried different stories to various places, where they were then adapted to local cultures. Another component of his theory is that they touch on issues and themes people around the world experience, so different cultures sometimes have similar stories to explain similar situations.

Fairy tales are a subgenre of folklore and folktales. But for most people, it's difficult to distinguish between fairy tales, folktales, legends, and myths, though there are some differences. Folktales are generally thought to be completely made-up stories that happen in unspecified times and places with characters who are put into simple categories of "god" or "evil." Legends are stories that supposedly have some foothold in reality but whose exact details may be falsified or exaggerated. Myths are stories set in the past that explain social rituals or some other aspect of the world.

In varying ways and to various degrees, all three of these types of stories have the same purpose of teaching, entertaining, and inspiring their listeners or readers. While sometimes it's hard to find clear-cut differences between these stories, *Wolf at the Door* takes an Aztec myth about death and makes a fairy tale out of it.

Fairy tales have many specific characteristics. Some include:

- Short sentences and simple language that sometimes rhymes
- Fantastic settings like distant kingdoms or dark forests
- Easily identifiable characters (as in, good ones and bad ones)
- A mysterious being who befriends the protagonist and gives them a gift
- A villain who wants to abuse nature and magic and a protagonist who respects it
- Miraculous transformations
- "Success" for the protagonist at the end - survival, marriage, money, etc.

In a 1953 essay on fairy tales, librarian Lillian Smith notes some of the many references to fairy tales in our everyday speech that we're usually not even aware of: "He's an ugly duckling," "Open Sesame," "It's a Cinderella story," and many more. Though we may sprinkle these phrases into our daily language, fairy tales, like so much else in the world, did not begin by being accessible to all.

To start, European fairy tales were not even for children when they first started to be formally cataloged in the 1600s. French author Charles Perrault was one of the first to organize them in one place and published *Mother Goose Tales*, considered a children's classic today. However, at the time, the book was aimed at adults and was even popular in the court of Louis XIV.

In the nineteenth century, the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen began to compile and also write their own fairy tales for children. However, by our standards, we probably wouldn't think they were kid-appropriate. In *The Hard Facts of the Grimm Fairy Tales*, the author explains that the Grimm's Cinderella ends with the stepsisters getting their eyes pecked out by doves, and another story involves a stepmother making a stew out of her stepson. Perhaps not the stories you'd read to a five-year-old. But by the standards of the time, the Brothers Grimm actually made the stories much milder than the original tales and made them acceptable children's literature.

If we think about it though, most children today get exposed to "fairy tales" through Disney movies, which are a departure from the Grimm stories (Do you recall the sisters getting their eyes pecked out in the Disney version?). But when we think about what the original recorded fairy tales were like in Europe, *Wolf at the Door* fits that definition very well in comparison to the Disney definition that many of us may be used to.



From *Cinderella or the Glass Slipper* by George D. Hurst.



Xoloitzcuintli (Photo: American Kennel Club).

Aztec Mythology about Death and the Xolo

In various Aztec and Maya burial sites in modern-day Mexico, archaeologists have found thousands of clay statues of a hairless dog, the xoloitzcuintli, or xolo for short. You may have noticed it in the movie *Coco*. Clearly, if the statues were found in people's graves, they were important and needed for the afterlife. Both the Aztec and Mayan civilizations had elaborate beliefs about death and the afterlife, and the xolo had a big role.

These worldviews held that there were thirteen tiers of heaven above earth and nine layers of Mictlán, the dark and damp underworld. Mictlantecuhtli, the skeleton god, ruled over this realm with his queen, Mictecacíhuatl. This was a scary world. Mictlantecuhtli's flesh was falling off, and his claw-like hands could quickly rip you apart. Mictecacíhuatl had no face, just a skull, and wore a skirt made of serpents. Not where you'd want to find yourself. Very few people made it to the thirteen layers of heaven

above, so they ended up in Mictlán and needed helpers to guide them. Enter the xolo.

Its full name, *xoloitzcuintli*, comes from the words *Xolotl*, the god of lightning and death, and *itzcuintli*, meaning "dog." Aztec belief says that the dog was made by Xolotl as a way to protect the living and guide the souls of the dead through Mictlán. Even apart from mythology, the xolo is known as a very loyal dog and a true companion in tune with its humans.

The xolo specifically helps spirits by aiding them in crossing an underground, crocodile-infested river. Only black dogs are thought to be suited to the task, which means that the black or dark grey xolo is perfect. In some cases, not only were statues of the xolo buried with the deceased, but the dogs themselves were killed upon their owners' deaths. In *Wolf at the Door*, a wolf, the ancestor of the dog, helps the protagonist navigate a situation almost as treacherous as Mictlán.



Luison sculpture.

El luisón

According to one superstition, the seventh son (el séptimo) in a family of all boys is prone to fall victim to a curse that would turn him into a luisón (also el lobizon or lobisomen). This creature exists in the mythology of South America, particularly in the countries of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. The myth of the luisón originates with the Guarani, an indigenous people from Paraguay. In Guarani mythology, the luisón was the seventh and youngest offspring of Tau, an evil spirit, and Kerana, a mortal woman. In the original story, the luisón is said to be the God of Death and had a horrendous figure. His face was long and pale, and much of his body was covered with long dirty hair. He also had frightening eyes and had the stench of death and decay around him. It was perhaps interaction with European colonists that transformed this myth overtime, as the luisón changed from a God of Death into a werewolf. In other cultures, however, the seventh son is especially lucky, and the seventh son of a seventh son is believed to have healing powers.



Hacienda Yaxcopoil. Yucatán residence.

Hacienda System in Pre-Revolutionary Mexico

The abusive husband in *Wolf at the Door*, Septimo, is an *hacendado*, the owner of an *hacienda* or large rural estate. The *hacendado* owned the land and essentially ruled over the *peones* (“laborers” but also literally “pawns” in the sense that they got moved around by the hacendado) who worked for him like in a feudal system.

About half of rural Mexico was involved in the peonage system by the mid-19th century. After the Mexican Revolution, roughly 1910-1920, many of the large estates were broken up, but land reform was still certainly not fair. Under the *hacienda* system, the *peones* were also disproportionately indigenous people who worked for their oppressors and had very few opportunities to improve their situations.

Machismo and its Impacts

In the play, Septimo arguably displays qualities of *machismo*. It’s an idea and attitude in Latin American countries dictating expectations for men and often seen as privileging maleness to an extreme and thinking of and treating women as objects to be dominated. However, it’s crucial to keep in mind that as we think about *machismo*, what it means, and why its definition(s) is important, we also have to realize that these are generalizations made by various groups, from scholars to regular people, and that their impressions are filtered through their perspectives. This is to say, there are likely as many slightly different variations on the term as there are people to define it, and we shouldn’t instantly assign a certain image or identity to people based on these ideas.

Mexican-American author Américo Paredes' analysis of Mexican *machismo* says it is centered around “the outrageous boast, a distinct phallic symbolism, the identification of the man with the male animal, and the ambivalence toward women — varying from an abject and tearful posture to brutal disdain.” In other language, *machismo* is in part about performing and being proud of being stereotypically male and not displaying any feminine characteristics.

Anthropologist Matthew Gutmann explains that *machismo* is intertwined with Mexican national identity, as the term came about soon after Mexico's Revolution, when the country was starting to unify and define what it means to be Mexican. Though it's a generalization and one person's analysis, Gutmann says that “Mexico came to mean *machismo* and *machismo* came to mean Mexico.” As the 1940s gave rise to the “Golden Age” of Mexican cinema, Mexicans were also being literally shown how a man was expected to behave, especially through the films of legendary actor Jorge Negrete.

Mexican writer and critic Carlos Monsiváis notes that these films showed men as “untamed, generous, cruel, womanizing, romantic, obscene, at one with family and friends, subjugated and restless...” and women as “obedient, seductive, resigned, obliging, devoted to her own and slave to her husband, to her lover, to her children, and to her essential failure” (qtd. In Gutmann 228). In his analysis, men are the ones who are active participants in the world, and women are expected to occupy roles in relation to them, not in terms of their own personhood.



Jorge Negrete

The debates over *machismo* have become a Mexican national symbol, Gutmann says. Its specific definitions are influenced by people's location, class, and life stages, among other factors, but ultimately, it is a discussion about male identity that has placed the Mexican man at the center of defining the nation, which excludes and disdains women and any men who don't adhere to what is “traditionally male.”

In more modern terms, social work professor Yolanda Mayo says that in many Latino cultures, *machismo* places men at the head of the household and makes them responsible for important decisions. She says that in these cultures, legal and religious systems consistently reinforce men's roles as the leaders of the family who in a sense “own” their wives and children. She also notes that *machismo* is a phenomenon present in different forms in various cultures but that the stereotypes around *machismo* and Latino men in the U.S. serve to make them look like bad fathers. However, she also argues that *machismo* can have a positive side that inspires men to nurture and protect their families that sometimes gets overlooked.

Different or changing ideas around *machismo* can also be seen in Gutmann's analysis that in recent years in Mexico, some younger men have been more reluctant to label themselves as *machista* or as adhering to *machismo* because of the word's negative connotation of men beating their wives and displaying other aggressive behaviors. Even if their behavior doesn't match what they're saying, they're at least realizing the images the word brings up and recognize that they're negative. Certain groups and movements in Mexico City have also been working to generate conversations about *machismo* among men that get them to reflect on their privilege and roles, especially in relation to women.

Related to the idea of *machismo* is the attitude and culture of men maintaining their honor or pride in Latino cultures. We see this idea at times in the play when Septimo wants to maintain a good image for the outside world, such as when Isadora's family comes to visit. Gutmann even explains that for an older generation of Mexican men, to be macho is associated with being “honorable” and providing for and protecting one's family. Psychologist G. Miguel Arciniega argues that for some people, the term itself

can also connote a more positive image of a caballero (“knight”), a proper upper-class gentleman who holds himself to a strict code of ethics and maintains his reputation.

In *The Tyranny of Opinion, Honor in the Construction of the Mexican Public Sphere*, history professor Pablo Piccato explains that in the nineteenth century in Mexico, protecting one’s honor became even more important, to the point of the legal framework changing to give rise to practices allowing people to defend their honor. *Fama pública* (“public reputation”) was the idea most often brought up in these cases, and it “could be destroyed and had to be defended as a personal possession” (207). The fact that this reputation is “*pública*” indicates that honor was gained and lost by the approval/disapproval or opinion of others in the community, emphasizing the lengths people would go to and the work they would have to put in to ensure that others had a good opinion of them.

Toxic Masculinity

“Toxic masculinity” is a term we hear used often in the wake of a mass shooting or other violent event. Although we can assume its definition, what exactly does it mean, and why does it matter? While it’s not the same thing as *machismo*, it’s related to it in that it still assumes a certain type of identity that men should adopt.

It has to do with the idea that [there’s only one way to be a man](#), which typically implies being powerful, “strong,” not showing emotion, and not displaying any feminine characteristics. We see this belief in the idea that men need to hide their emotions, either because they don’t know how to display them or because they know they’re not supposed to show them, until they reach a point where their relationships suffer and they harm people, often women.

The author of [this article](#) phrases it well by explaining that discussions of toxic masculinity are not about trying to label men as “good or evil,” and they don’t imply that men are by nature prone to being violent. She also raises the important point of why

it’s necessary to talk about toxic masculinity: rigid understandings of what a man is supposed to be can quickly make people feel like they’re “failing ‘at being a man,’” which will prompt them to want to affirm their identity by behaving like “traditional men” (suppressing emotion, being aggressive, dominating women, etc.), which harms themselves and people of all genders in the process.

Another factor apart from and/or possibly intertwined with the problematic and dangerous standards that toxic masculinity has made Septimo internalize is the fact that Septimo certainly describes what sounds like abuse and bullying from his father and brothers during his childhood. He recalls getting the silent treatment and being beaten by his dad and brothers because it was the only thing that would make him a man and enable him to survive in the world.

Septimo is also the last child and an apparently “unwanted” child in his family. Being the last child means that he would’ve received very little, if anything, of the family inheritance, and that he may in a sense have felt that he had to prove himself the most. The abuse from his family, feeling inadequate, and ultimately getting kicked out by his family at 15 could have all conspired to make him the way he is and influence his behavior toward his wife.

[One article](#) explains that domestic abuse happens when one partner feels that they need to dominate the other, and this need can stem from “low self-esteem, extreme jealousy, difficulties in regulating anger, or when they feel inferior to their partner.” It’s plausible to see how Séptimo’s childhood could have made him have one or all of these experiences. And the NIH explains that childhood bullying can lead to lowered self-esteem, so it’s reasonable that Septimo’s childhood set him on the path to becoming abusive later in life. All of this is to say that while the reasons people become abusive are complex, suffering as Septimo did in his childhood could have a role in that outcome. It’s not an excuse for his behavior, but a possible explanation, and also gives us something to reflect on in terms of how we treat others and the impact we may have on them.



What Hurst One Affects All. Photo by: Airman 1st Class Christopher Quail, Andersen Air Force Base

Domestic Abuse - Reality and Resources

Wolf at the Door centers on a woman, Isadora, suffering physical, verbal, and psychological abuse from her husband, Septimo, a handsome, high-society man who nobody expects would treat his wife this way. However, it's important to realize that domestic abuse can happen in any family.

The [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) reports that 3 in 10 women and 1 in 10 men in the United States have reported rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by a partner, and nearly half of all men and women “have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime.” A 2001 journal article showing that “family violence” exists across cultures explains that it can take many forms, such as: physical abuse, psychological abuse, threatening to harm another person, pet, or possession, manipulation, isolation, economic abuse, and controlling another

person's resources (like time, food, clothes, etc.), among other forms. The hotline website has another guide to identify abuse, and you should definitely watch [this TED talk](#) by activist Zahira Kelly, creator of #MaybeHeDoesn'tHitYou, for a testimony on the pain and danger emotional abuse in relationships can cause and how our society normalizes it.

Though it's true that domestic violence can happen in any family, regardless of race, ethnicity, and class, it's misguided to assume that it's equally likely to happen in any family and ignores the big roles these factors have in people's lives. Intersectional identities “color the meaning and nature of domestic violence, how it is experienced by self and responded to by others; how personal and social consequences are reproduced, and how and whether escape and safety can be obtained” (Bograd qtd in Sokoloff 1-2). In

other words, different identities can influence how likely you are to be a victim of domestic violence in the first place and how you will react to such abuse, the resources available for you to get help, and how others will react to the pain you've experienced.

For example, communities of color are also more likely to be poor communities, which means that domestic abuse is more likely. Systemic and individual racism are also rampant in U.S. society, which means that when someone from a community of color or from other marginalized communities tries to get help in the face of domestic abuse, it will likely be harder for them to find easily accessible resources.

Sokoloff points out several ways that these barriers can exist, such as Black or Latina women being afraid for them and their families to interact with the police or immigrant women with little to no English skills not being able to effectively communicate

On average, **24 people per minute** are victims of rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner in the United States — more than 12 million women and men over the course of a year.

Intimate Partner Violence alone affects more than **12 million people** each year.

Nearly half of all women and men in the United States have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime (48.4% and 48.8%, respectively).

Females ages 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 generally experienced the highest rates of intimate partner violence.

Most female victims of intimate partner violence were previously victimized by the same offender, including 77% of females ages 18 to 24, 76% of females ages 25 to 34, and 81% of females ages 35 to 49.

with authorities. Often, there are not culturally or linguistically appropriate prevention and intervention resources to remedy all of these situations.

Resources

Locally, there are a number of government and private resources available for survivors of domestic violence on the [Portland Police Bureau](#)'s site. Here are some:

- For immediate help, dial 9-1-1
- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#): 1-800-799-7233 (in 200 languages) and also online chat
 - Advocacy, safety planning, and resources — free, confidential, and available 24/7
- [Multnomah County Domestic Violence Coordinator's Office](#)
- [Call to Safety](#) (formerly Portland Women's Crisis Line): 503-235-5333
 - Confidential support services and education in many languages; can connect to local culturally-specific resources or advocacy
- El Programa Hispano Católico — [Proyecto UNICA](#): 503-232-4448
 - Crisis line, support group, legal advocacy, and more
- [Bradley Angle House](#): 503-235-5333
 - Emergency shelter also offering culturally-specific resources to rebuild safe lives after domestic violence
- [Familias en Acción](#): 503-284-5178
 - Promotes family wellbeing for Latinos through community engagement, education, research, and advocacy



About the playwright

Marisela Treviño Orta

Marisela Treviño Orta is a Chicago-based poet and playwright from the small town of Lockhart, Texas. *Wolf at the Door* is the first of her plays to be produced by Milagro. She recently earned an M.F.A. from the Iowa Playwrights Workshop but refers to herself as an “accidental playwright” who happened upon the theater while working on an M.F.A. in poetry at the University of San Francisco. While at USF, she took a job as El Teatro Jornalero’s (Day Laborer’s Theatre) resident poet. It’s a group made up of Latino immigrants and highlights social justice issues in Latino communities.

As she saw the group produce plays, her curiosity about playwriting grew, and in 2005, she submitted her first play, *Braided Sorrow*, to the Bay Area Playwrights Festival, where it was presented, officially beginning her career as a playwright. As a third-generation Mexican American, Treviño Orta often examines themes of bicultural identity and social justice issues in Latino communities. She has said that theater offers a better venue than poetry to explore political matters and that her plays often explore themes relevant to Latinas specifically. She also incorporates science, astronomy, mythology, and folklore, some of which factor into *Wolf at the Door*.

Treviño Orta’s plays have won or been finalists for several awards. *Braided Sorrow* won the 2006 Chicano/Latino Literary Prize in Drama and received a 2008 world premiere at Su Teatro in Denver, CO, and won the 2009 Pen Center USA Literary Award in Drama. Her play *American Triage* was a finalist for the 2012 Repertorio Español Nuestras Voces, and *Heart Shaped Nebula* was a semi-finalist for the 2012 O’Neill National Playwrights Conference.

With *Wolf at the Door*, which will have a Rolling World Premiere with the National New Play Network, Treviño Orta looks forward to seeing a Mesoamerican myth retold and creating a grim fairy tale out of it. She also eagerly awaits how each creative team that produces the show will interpret the play. You can read her interview with Milagro about the play on the [Milagro blog](#).

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National New Play Network Rolling World Premiere



Nelda Reyes (Pilar) and Jaryn Lasentia (Vi) in the 2018 NNPN Rolling World Premiere of *The Mermaid Hour* by David Valdes Greenwood.

NATIONAL NEW PLAY NETWORK (NNPN) is an alliance of professional theaters that collaborate in innovative ways to develop, produce, and extend the life of new plays. Founded in 1998, NNPN continues to revolutionize the new play landscape through the strength of its member theaters, collaborate efforts, and its nationally recognized programs and services for artists and organizations.

Over the past twenty years, NNPN has provided millions of dollars in funding to its Member Theaters, supported hundreds of productions nationwide through its innovative programming, helped launch and sustain the careers of thousands of artists, and reached hundreds of thousands of audience members around the world with plays that were created and honed with support from NNPN and its diverse consortium of theaters and artists.

[Learn more](#) about NNPN and the RWP.

NNPN's flagship initiative, the Rolling World Premiere (RWP) program, is shifting the new play paradigm of the one-and-done premiere to a diversified, traveling, multi-production premiere. The RWP program models a process for developing and producing new plays — one that results in stronger work overall and the momentum needed for a play to join the repertoire of frequently produced new American works.

NNPN has championed the RWPs of 75 new plays with over one million dollars in financial support. RWP alumni plays have received hundreds of subsequent productions and citations in markets across the world, been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, won Steinberg/ATCA, Stavis, PEN and Blackburn awards, and adapted into feature films.



National New Play Network
Rolling World Premiere



WOLF AT THE DOOR

Written by **Marisela Treviño Orta**

Directed by **Rebecca Martinez**

May 2 – 25, 2019

Thursday – Saturday, 7:30 PM | Sunday, 2:00 PM
Milagro Theatre | 525 SE Stark Street, Portland

Tickets start at \$27

Student, senior, and veteran discounts available
For group sales/student matinees, contact
Laurel Daniel at **503-236-7253 x 117**

SPECIAL EVENTS

Tuesday April 16, 6:30 – 8:30 PM

ENFOQUE: Cafecito con nuestras antepasadas
with Frances Portillo.

Saturday April 27, 4:00 – 6:00 PM

ROUNDTABLE: Wolf at the Door: Fairy tales, morality stories, and mythology with Marisela Treviño Orta, Rebecca Martinez, and Dr. Elena Avilés

Preview

Thursday May 2 at 7:30 PM

Wine tasting by **Coopers Hall** from 6:30 – 7:30 PM

Opening night

Friday May 3 at 7:30 PM

followed by a reception in El Zócalo
courtesy of **Tortillería Y Tienda De Leon's**

Maya Malán-González as Yolot in *Wolf at the Door*.
Photo © 2019 Russell J. Young.

Cast

Marian Mendez Isadora
Maya Malán-González* Yolot
Patricia Alvitez Rocío
Matthew Sepeda Septimo

* Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States



The Northwest's premier Latino arts and culture center
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Milagro has been dedicated to bringing the vibrancy of Latino theatre to the Northwest community and beyond since 1985. In addition to its national tours, Milagro provides a home for Latino arts and culture at El Centro Milagro, where it enriches the local community with a variety of community outreach projects and educational programs designed to share the diversity of Latino culture. For more information about Milagro, visit milagro.org or call 503-236-7253.