

Finding My Voice in the Silence

The Silent Observer by Leandra Torres

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Artistic Aims

The Silent Observer is the story of four Puerto Ricans, their love for pantomime, and the journey it sets them on. It all starts with Julio when he is introduced to a pantomime club by a friend and eventually connects with it so much that he ends up teaching it himself. It's through his teaching that Emiliz becomes interested in pantomime and immediately becomes passionate to continue practicing it. Emiliz and Emmanuel grew up together and so as she grew devoted to pantomime, Emmanuel soon did as well, breaking away from his old self that was tied to toxic masculinity. Brenda is the last to join the group as pantomime helps her to discover a new side of herself, one where she can be more outgoing. This tight-knit group of friends is brought together and intertwined through their adoration and enthusiasm for pantomime. They are so moved by this art form that they themselves decide to run their own school to teach pantomime. However, economic struggles proved to be too great, and unfortunately, their love alone was not enough to keep the school running. Although distraught about the school and the group splitting off in another direction, the group still felt fulfilled knowing that their school and pantomime itself were able to touch so many people and still continue to influence others to this day.

Throughout *The Silent Observer* my character, the Child, is seen watching some conversations transpire. This "child" takes the form of several people throughout the show, from the younger version of one of the characters, to the teenage version of a friend of the group, to the younger version of the director herself. The Child itself is not only the representation of a character's youth but also a symbol of the group's never-ending passion

for pantomime. In the movement scene between the Child and Emiliz, here the Child is the five-year-old version of her, embodying the younger and bubbly side of her personality. Here the goal was to use as much of my physicality as I possibly could to really convey just how energetic and lively Emiliz is in real life. During the two rehearsals where Emiliz was actually present, she always made a clear presentation of her explosive intensity and power as she taught the pantomime techniques she had learned from the legendary mime Marcel Marceau. Being a generally calm person, it was imperative that I exerted as much energy as I felt it took to really display Emiliz's unique spirit on the stage.

At the conclusion of the Child's dance with Emiliz, I wanted to hold on to this older Emiliz, who is about to take a big step into adulthood, because both the future and being a grown-up can seem terrifying for a child. However, at the same time, so many children look up to adults because they perceive adults as being free to do whatever they want whenever they want. And so, while the Child is momentarily scared of this jump that older Emiliz is about to make, the Child eventually lets go of Emiliz's hands because they are excited to see where this journey takes her and they long to have that freedom and independence that Emiliz will soon have.

In times of tribulation, the Child will be there to either show a character a brighter path or to put things into perspective for the character. When Julio is offered a better-paying opportunity in California, he and the Child exchange a look. It's during this look that the Child stares at him with big, innocent eyes, hoping that they can send a message to Julio to go with his heart, not money. Through the Child's naiveté, they are able to remind Julio that home is where the heart is, and his heart lies with his friends who have become family to

him. The Child was able to steer Julio down the right path with one look. In order to successfully execute this character aspect of the Child, I had to maintain that mentality of childlike purity. The Child serves the purpose of putting things in perspective for the characters they interact with by utilizing their innocence and reminding the older characters of their true sense of self.

As an artist, the biggest goal was to be able to express certain emotions without any spoken text. This was the main thought in my mind as I prepared for this role. In past roles, I had the comfort of having text along with my mannerisms that would help express the thoughts and motives of the character. This time around I was only able to rely on my physique and mannerisms to express the Child's thought process and emotions. Weirdly enough, having grown up as a quiet kid, not having spoken lines for this role oddly felt like home even though, paradoxically, this was a new challenge for me as a performer. It is comforting and satisfying to know that after this performance I will be going out into the world already having the experience and knowledge of bringing to life a character with no lines.

Throughout this process, I realized I am also a silent observer of my own; drifting unnoticed in the background but still having my own loud expressive moments here and there while also having a knack for reminding people of their admirable qualities. This was my first time being in a production and I loved absolutely every minute of it, even when the rest of the cast and I were totally exhausted after our surprise third show on Friday. The mainstage production, *We Are Proud To Present A Presentation...*, had canceled a showing that day due to a cast member becoming ill, and so my director was contacted and asked if

we were up to do a third show, to which we enthusiastically said “yes,” to, not realizing just how tired we would become after our second show. I know everyone probably says this, but I genuinely mean it when I say that our cast and crew felt like such a warm, supportive family. Just as I predicted back in the junior seminar, now I know I’ve made connections during this production that I’m positive will last a lifetime. Ever since I was young, even sometimes ‘till this day, I was known as “the shy kid,” but recently in my time at Purchase, and especially during senior project season, I’ve been able to go through a lot of personal growth and discoveries that have allowed me to really come into my own and become comfortable in my skin. Although I’m still sometimes perceived as shy, I don’t see myself as a shy person. It’s true it may take a little while for me to open up but, once I do, I let people see all of me; my quiet calmness, my crazy spontaneity, my seriousness, my burning passion for the arts, and so much more.

In this devised play I have had the chance to contribute to the telling of a story that originates in Puerto Rico and ends with inspiring the next generation of creators. During the rehearsal process I’ve been able to exercise the creative part of my brain in ways I have not been able to yet in most of my acting classes. I learned to be comfortable with myself on the stage during moments where I am not commanding the attention of anyone. In this production I was able to find out for myself the true meaning of “saying more, by saying less.” In the beginning I was a bit worried that maybe my physical expressions might fall flat and I wouldn’t be able to properly convey the emotions necessary in order to contribute to the story. In that moment of anxiousness, I had forgotten just how physical I can be especially when there’s music playing. I’m no trained dancer but I can confidently say that I

surprised myself on that stage. I really was amazed at my own endurance while caught in the adrenaline of performing such an upbeat and physically demanding number.

A role as special as this one definitely instilled me with a great sense of responsibility since I was playing real person and am telling a true story. Past scene partners will tell you that I am not one to always take myself too seriously and that I know when it's time to take a break and have a laugh. However, I am treating this role very delicately and sincerely since it is my senior project performance, my first production in Purchase, and a piece based on people's real lives. I've been saying it for almost a year now, but I'll keep saying it for the rest of time: this role and this play will always hold such a tender place in my heart. To me, just being part of a show that will place Latinx people and Latinx narratives at the forefront is such a privilege and a pleasure.

Ever since I first came to this country at the age of seven, growing up in a mostly white town made me realize the importance of representation and community. Our show, *The Silent Observer* has wholeheartedly told Latinx stories made by and for Latinx people. As a POC artist, I think it is our duty and our right to unapologetically and accurately represent ourselves on the stage and screen. Since, as children, many of us probably grew up watching shows and films that were mainly led by white people, we would be doing ourselves and others who look like us a favor by paving the way and making more room for the new POC artists to come. This is exactly what *The Silent Observer* is about: starting with a past generation's story being passed down and immortalized on the stage by the current generation and sparking another fire of passion and inspiration throughout the next generation.

Research Essay

Charlie Chaplin, born in London in 1889, was the child of actors and singers, and he was so beloved as a performer in England that he eventually made it to the U.S. and became known as one of the most sensational silent film actors the world has ever known (“Charlie Chaplin”). He is and forever will be a household name thanks to his indisputably unique performances as a pantomime actor turned filmmaker. In Chaplin’s opinion, “sound has spoiled the most ancient of the world’s arts, the art of pantomime, and has canceled out the great beauty that is silence.” To an extent, I agree with this statement. While it is understandable for Chaplin to be undeniably loyal to pantomime, seeing how he was brought up in it, we now have many different styles of filmmaking and acting largely due to the advances we’ve made in sound technology. It is true that the use of silence can be a powerful one when it comes to intensifying the effect of an actor’s performance. The absence of sound can definitely deepen the emotional impression one can make in a film. Sometimes when you remove the score of a scene from a movie, the gravity of the actor’s performance can feel even more palpable than when it was accompanied by music. In *The Silent Observer*, some of the show’s most profound and emotionally stirring moments can be found in the silence.

Marcel Marceau was a French actor who is probably the most famous mime artist this world has ever seen. Marceau and his craft had such a distinct influence on the characters and their stories that its presence could be felt at certain parts throughout the show. Marceau has been quoted saying, “do not the most moving moments of our lives find us all without words?” I think there is such an underrated truth to this. In the modern world, we live in

today, so many people are trying to fill in the silence with either music or having Netflix on as background noise (guilty). A lot of people seem to be uncomfortable with silence and often try to run away from it, but some of the most beautiful moments that stay with us for the rest of our lives are found in complete silence: when a sleeping baby holds your finger, or when you're watching your significant other sleep, or when you catch a warm and particularly hued sunset after a long day.

Marceau's pantomimes de style "illustrate[s] a man involved in satire, trials, bureaucracy, or going through life from youth to death" ("Discover the Art of Mime"). This proves pantomime is not simply an art style that is full of silly expressions or movements, but it can actually be used for more serious and progressive topics and conversations. This is true for Chaplin's performance in *Modern Times* (1936) during the factory scene, which was a satire of the horrible exploitation of factory workers during the industrial revolution. Pantomime can be perceived as wacky and pointless humor but it can serve as a vessel that can deliver layered and deep messages.

One of the earliest pieces of evidence we have on the subject of mute characters comes from the Roman comedy playwright Plautus. Typically, his mute characters were slaves and lower-class people to whom he would give the opportunity to occasionally humiliate upper-class people, like masters, in his plays. Plautus would give these *servi callidi*, or cunning slaves, the power to "either complement or contradict the meaning of a text," by not being fazed at all by the master's threats or reacting in fear (Klein). By not showing that they're afraid of their master they prove to the audience that the master is weak and only pulling empty threats. Plautus was careful to not make mute characters too

favorable for risk of promoting social change in terms of class, and so many times these characters would go unacknowledged for several dozen lines of dialogue. It was that “lack of recognition [that] arguably reinforces the mute characters' low social status,” after all they were the lowest class, treated as property not people (Klein). While they were far from being the main characters, they definitely had the capacity to steal a scene and cause uproarious laughter within the audience. They had the ability to spark social commentary, as much of the content revolved around the horrible treatment of slaves and the power dynamic between them and their owners.

Although they had absolutely no lines, they “can add rich layers of subtext to a story,” and “have the ability to dictate the tone of the scene through their reactions to the speaking characters” (Klein). This made me think of the silent film era of Hollywood, in which the industry was heavily reliant on the use of pantomime to tell stories and create entertainment. Pantomime is defined as a performance using gestures and body movements without words. It can involve mime makeup as well which serves the purpose to make the performer’s face more visible to the audience from far away and to further exaggerate the performer’s expression. These silent characters “vividly demonstrated the important role that pantomime can play in such scenes,” and can “help to tell the story in a visually interesting and dynamic way” (Klein). We can see just how much of the comedy that exists today was deeply influenced by pantomime. This is exactly the type of impact I wanted the silent role of The Child to have: to be able to add more layers of emotion and perspective throughout the story. When I think of traditional pantomime it makes me think of a time that was forever ago, and

yet, at the same time I can see the subtle ways that pantomime still lives within our art today; in dancing, both classical and modern, and in our film and television entertainment.

These shows garnered crowds regardless of which class people pertained to. Pantomime and the arts brought all those people together to enjoy a show despite the differences between them. Just like how *The Silent Observer* brought together performers with cultural backgrounds from all over Latin America, it also brought together audiences from many other backgrounds when it went up at Purchase. Part of the reason I think many people really resonated with this story is that it was about the passion of family and friends. Given the background that this world, especially this country, has with oppressing marginalized groups, this show was able to have the impact that it did because it was about a group of people of color managing to make their dreams come true against all odds. The pantomime school in Puerto Rico may have only operated for a couple of years but within that time span it was still able to touch and change so many lives, including the many more people who heard this story told at Purchase. People who have or are experiencing ethno-racial oppression and trauma especially need a show like this. Many marginalized communities in the U.S., unfortunately, share the same trait of being othered and mistreated, so a heartfelt underdog story like *The Silent Observer* was sure to strike an emotional chord because it was told by the community it belonged to. No part of the story was whitewashed or meddled with; it was made and told completely authentically.

Today “Latinxs are living through one of the most anti-immigrant periods in modern U.S. history” (Chavez-Dueñas 52). The threatening presence of ICE, the existence of the inhumane detention centers at the border, and the illegitimate use of ethno-racial profiling all

contribute to the torture and persecution of Latinx migrants in the U.S. Well over half of the Latinx migrant families in the country at one point or another will worry about a family member's possible deportation (Chavez-Dueñas 53). Even the families that manage to migrate safely across the border don't get the luxury of living in peace after making it past the hardest part of the journey. Amongst all the injustice and pain, whether they suffer from systemic abuse in the U.S or they're fighting against extreme poverty and high crime rates back in their own countries, Latinx people deserve a story where they get to escape from everything and not have to think about anything bad that they're going through. The impact that *The Silent Observer* has can go far beyond the local impact that it has had. In a perfect world, this show would go on to have great success on Broadway stages, receiving the attention it deserves and touching more souls of those who need to cross paths with a story like this.

Latinx communities in the U.S. are also at risk of getting out of touch and losing their culture as they are often pressured and bullied into assimilation (Buckingham). One really important moment from the show was when Julio was offered more money to work in the U.S. than he would've earned back home, and yet he still decided to go back to Puerto Rico. This choice that Julio made was of colossal importance because had he chosen to chase money in the U.S. instead of following his heart, the company would've never gone on to have the impact that they did as a unit because their hearts would've been in the wrong place and they would've just been acting on greed. Thankfully, all of them did have their hearts in the right place and they were able to make a distinct impact and have a positive effect on the

lives of both the students of their pantomime school and the children who now carry the legacy of true artists.

According to “Psychiatry Research,” “immigrant youth, in particular, are at an elevated risk for mental health issues,” due to past experiences during the migration process and post-migration discrimination (Zetino 1). *The Silent Observer* is a story about a group of friends’ love and commitment to an art form, but it is also a coming-of-age story with generational themes. The characters were so young when they went on this life-changing journey; Emiliz was still in her teens when she made the courageous choice to pursue pantomime in California with Julio. The Latinx community needs and deserves a story where they get to see their youth be full of ambition and tenacity as they chase and live their dreams. Puerto Rico, the island that is still suffering from long-lasting effects of colonization and modern gentrification, *must* be reminded of this powerful and influential story that was born right in its streets. This show *needs* to live to see bigger audiences.

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Technical Essay

During the pre-show, the Child was alone playing with their teddy bear, indicating that at least a portion of the story was going to be told through their eyes. What more innocent and wholesome way to tell a story than through the eyes of an unassuming child? Throughout the show, the Child is silently observing in order to help tell the story by offering a new perspective and adding another layer of emotion to the scene. Every child has a beloved toy, something they just had to take with them everywhere at some point during their childhood. For The Child, it was their teddy bear. Life in Puerto Rico is not easy, especially for those who wish to pursue the arts. In all the hardship a child will seek and find comfort with a familiar pal like a teddy bear. Whenever the adults would have their hands full with financial problems or when they were bickering about relationship problems, a teddy bear was always to the rescue and was the perfect emotional support toy for The Child. When Julio is close to giving up on the pantomime school because of the financial troubles, the Child is right there absorbing that same grief and sadness. Since they're young and they don't have the vernacular to express their frustrations, they do what a child can only do in a situation like this: clutch onto their teddy bear to try and soothe themselves. Having witnessed some of the arguments between Julio and Emmanuel, and older Emiliz and Emmanuel, I know it must've been a heartbreaking and traumatizing sight for their children to have seen the people they love most feel so disheartened and choleric. In that moment the only thing that succeeded in making me feel better and safer was holding onto my teddy bear. This teddy bear serves to silently understand how you feel and to console whoever is in need, much like the character of The Child.

The set design for *The Silent Observer* was very minimalist, and so it felt like I had a lot of creative freedom when it came to visualizing the actual locations throughout the play. When Julio talked about people coming from all over the world to see about the first pantomime workshop in the Caribbean, I would look throughout the whole ceiling visualizing first a starry night sky with lights from airplanes flying through. Then my mind would transition to the people from different corners of the world, different cultures, visiting the workshop, being brought together by a fascination for pantomime. Having a mostly pitch black ceiling made it not too difficult for me to visualize all these little moments that popped into The Child's mind with only one line of text.

The beginning of The Child's solo started off with older Emiliz talking about her free-spirited, energetic personality as I sat at the center of the stage with a spotlight on me. I personally have a particular kind of relationship with lighting on a stage. I'm still one to get very anxious speaking to large groups at times but most of that anxiety seems to dissipate when I'm acting. When I'm playing I'm able to trick my brain into thinking that I'm only talking to one person or a small group. Since stage lighting can at times be very much blinding, it became even easier to forget that there's a whole crowd of people staring at me and my every move because all I'd be able to see in their direction was either bright lights or pitch black darkness. This helps me to immerse myself even deeper and more effectively into the role and the world of *The Silent Observer*. When I'm unable to see the audience I can give my scene partner my undivided attention without subconsciously acknowledging or keeping an eye out for the crowd. Having the audience members not visible to me served as a motivator to stay in character as long as possible throughout the show including the quick

changes, which were at times a bit tedious, especially with the heat. The costume for The Child consisted of only a light-yellow dress; no shoes, barefoot, and hair down, wild and untamed. In an interview conducted by the director, Leandra Torres, Emiliz revealed her favorite color is yellow, positivity and euphoria personified. There's even a picture of Leandra, Emiliz's daughter, as a baby wearing a yellow dress. So, the color yellow in this scene carries the importance of representing Emiliz and her unparalleled liveliness. Wearing that dress while barefoot and with my hair not styled gave me a good flashback of how peaceful it was to be young and not care much for your appearance. The costuming aspects definitely played a part in aiding me to revert back to my childhood mentality.

The song playing during The Child's solo is "Obvs," by Jamie xx. It was either a lovely coincidence or fate that this song, chosen by the choreographer, had no lyrics just as my role had no spoken lines. Right off the bat, "Obvs" started off with a lighthearted, upbeat rhythm on the steel drums to signify the playfulness of The Child. It was even more fitting that the beginning of the choreography started with me playing a little game with myself on the floor. This was a perfect combination of elements that resulted in a wonderfully layered scene that displayed the cheekiness and exuberance of the five-year-old version of Emiliz. The song's percussion beat grew more intense and this influenced my body to make even bigger and messier moves like a true toddler with not a care in the world about who's watching. After the song's climax, it returned to its original jovial steel drumbeats except more relaxed and flowy, and so I skip around freely because if there's one thing many children wished they could do, it's flying. And no other bodily action gives off that sensation quite like skipping. It was after this that I began to spin with no intention of stopping until I

saw myself but as a sixteen-year-old. This quite literally stopped me in my tracks and as the music continued softly, it felt very reminiscent of a heartbeat to me. During that part, it was one of those moments where your heart stops for a second and then all you can hear is your heart pounding as if it was trying to beat out of your chest.

As some of the choreography for The Child and Emiliz's part showed, the main driving point of the scene and for my character was to literally reflect Emiliz in order to further accentuate that, at that moment, I am her and she is me. The mirroring part of the choreography required special attention in order to get the synchronization just right. During that part of the dance, it truly felt like we were moving as one and it made our characters' connection feel that much stronger and intimate. As the music slowly started fading before the next song and number started, it felt more bittersweet to let go of the older version of Emiliz. The more gentle the music got, the quieter it became, and as a result, there was time for the realization to hit that I'm letting go of the older version of me because she has to go on and start living the life she's meant to live.

Pantomime is a very physical art form, so, in exploring it, my confidence in my own body was at times challenged and, as a result, strengthened. This was my first time learning and attempting pantomime. Seeing as how I was introduced to this craft for the very first time, I got the chance to explore uncharted territory in regards to my acting career by creating scenes with my body instead of with spoken lines. I do credit my several years of Zumba classes for giving me the ability to be physically coordinated and to remember several choreographies. This background in physical movement did help me obtain a proper foothold before starting pantomime training, which avoided a lot of internal insecurity and

awkwardness. Thanks to this piece of past experience I didn't have to worry too much about getting a certain move or pose wrong because of my history of paying close attention to the details in regards to choreographies and movement. I think I definitely underestimated my physical abilities during this project.

The process of the cast and I learning pantomime was instrumental to the whole point of creating *The Silent Observer*. There was more authenticity in the environment knowing that we were now in the very same shoes the real-life cast stood in years ago when they first discovered pantomime and realized how much it would strengthen their bond. Like with many other physical art forms, pantomime did not only consist of abrupt movements and sudden expressions but it also involved physical touch. It takes a good amount of mutual trust to do things that require physical contact, especially during the pandemic, such as lifts or tableaux (from *tableau vivant* meaning "living picture"), as it describes the synchronized emotions we expressed as a group in the opening number. After a few icebreakers, trust building exercises, and deeply personal conversations, we were able to form a harmonious and empathetic relationship as a group of young artists creating a show about friends who become like family to each other. This bond is what made me cherish every moment of this senior project even more, and it did wonders to solidify our chemistry in the production. Having this distinct relationship created an atmosphere of authenticity, trustworthiness, and wholesomeness. This influenced the rehearsal process and the overall performance since it felt less and less like acting and more like we were a close group of friends.

Portraying the role of the Child was such an exciting and illuminating experience as I got the rare opportunity to play and represent different, real people and experiences. I believe

the role of The Child was an important one because it is not often that a story is told from the eyes of both a child and someone who is silent. I believe my actions and expressions did all the talking for me and I am proud of both the work I've done on this show and knowing I got the opportunity to tell this beautiful, unique story. Playing this role gave me all the confidence and reassurance I needed to know that I can hold my own in a role with no dialogue. Silence is no stranger to me and I found it almost poetic that this role was how I would start my professional acting career.

The opening song was "Alegría," by Cirque du Soleil, and it was a song that Leandra, director and daughter of Emiliz and Emmanuel Torres, grew up hearing a lot since a big part of her childhood consisted of traveling around the world with her parents as they taught and performed pantomime. This song served as a permanent reminder of her uncommon yet adventurous childhood and the relationship she was literally born to have with theater. This song was passed down to her as a child and now, as a college student, she handed it over to the cast so that we may pass it down to the future generation of theater and art lovers. Knowing that Leandra's baby niece was in the audience during one of the performances lets me know that a new generation influenced by pantomime may be closer than we think.

Photos

The Silent Observer

Directed by Leandra Torres

Featuring Sam Espino



Poster



Opening Scene

Cast from left to right: Solangel Galindo, Kenzo James-Lozano, Mauricio Gonzalez, Daniel Pierre, Kaira Rivera, Karissa Leonardo, Anya Febus, and Sam Espino



Finale



Cast, crew (Chelsea Muller, Molly Mead, Kylie Cottrell), and director (Leandra Torres) of *The Silent Observer* with past students of the pantomime school in Puerto Rico (left) and Julio and Brenda themselves (on the left and right of Leandra)

Six Steps

Who am I?

In scene three, I am five-year-old Emiliz in Puerto Rico in the early 1990s.

What are the circumstances?

I am on the beautiful island of Puerto Rico, my home, and I am being the wild and carefree five-year-old that I am with my endless amounts of fiery energy. I find myself with sixteen-year-old Emiliz who wants to go to California to pursue pantomime.

What are my relationships?

I'm happy to see that older me is as daring and passionate as I hoped she would become. However, she is growing up and there is a bit of tension knowing that she may be leaving me, the younger version of herself and her childhood innocence, behind.

What do I want?

I am conflicted between holding onto her youth and letting her go to become an adult. Part of me initially wants her to stay young and not become an adult because I'm worried that if she grows up she might forget about me, the younger, more naive and spunky version of her. Eventually, I am content with letting her go because I want her to have a life that will make her happy

What is my obstacle?

The older version of me is about to take a big step towards adulthood and this could change things forever. This will bring so much hardship including financial, housing, and food insecurity, as well as relationship troubles.

What do I do to get what I want?

As we dance together, I try to show the older me how much more energetic and lively I am compared to her in order to get her to want to stay young and wild with me. Eventually she proves to me that she will stay the same high-spirited person even throughout adulthood and so I accept that I can let her go and no longer be worried about her losing her sense of self during the lows and mundane moments of adulthood.