

Theatre Bay Area's

Featured Member

Every month, we will be featuring one member of the TBA community. Learn more about the people that make up the TBA Family!

This month's Featured Member is Deborah Cortez.

Bay Area actress, singer, producer, and director, Deborah Cortez was born in Argentina but spent most of her youth in Peru. Deborah relocated to the US in late 1998. Her body of work includes, but is not limited to Josefa (*Convoy 31000*), Lucy (*Strange Ladies*), Theseus (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Olivia (*Twelfth Night*), Jean (*Dead Man Cell Phone*) and many more. Film credits include *No Quiero Verte*, *One Long Day*, *Drops of Sunshine*, *Drunk Theatre*, and many more. Deborah's Producing credits are *Drunk Theatre - Bread and Butter* and *Titus Andronicus* with Theatre Lunatico. She is also a company member of Theatre Lunatico, La Lengua Teatro en Espanol, and MACT (Mexican American Conservatory Theatre). Visit <https://www.deborahcortez.com/> to keep up with Deborah and her upcoming projects.

FEATURED MEMBER — AUGUST 2020



Deborah Cortez

What drew you to the theatre?

It's in my blood. I come from a family of artists, my paternal grandparents were both singers and my maternal grandfather was a circus artist. My paternal grandfather (Alberto Cortez el original) started his career at the age of 9 when he won a talent radio show contest back in 1938 in Callao-Peru. My maternal grandfather left Luxembourg in the midst of WW2 and, after spending some time here in the US, ended up in Argentina where he met my grandmother and formed a group of performers for the circus with my mom and two aunts. I was (practically) born in the circus and grew up there until I was four but never lost the connection to the circus. In fact, I held a job in the circus (Circo Tihany) when I was 15.

There is one particular occasion when I was eight that I remember as the moment I realized this is what I wanted to do with my life. I had gone with my older sister to one of her classes (she used to be a catechist) and there was a theatre right next to the church she taught at. I wandered through the halls looking for the restrooms and, somehow, I ended up in the theatre next door. *The Adams Family* was on; I sat down in the back row quietly because I snuck in and watched the play! At one moment of the play Gomez was inviting the children to come on stage, of course, I ran to it! We got on stage and formed a line, I looked at the audience and I said to myself "this is home, I love it here". I started my career at the age of 16 in Peru, I knew I wanted to be in theatre and tell stories but I wasn't too sure why until I was in *ReproRights* with B8 Theatre. I realized [then] the type of stories I want to tell and the reason I want to be in theatre and film.

How and why did you go from actor to actor/producer/director?

There are so many stories that should be told but aren't, there are so many talented BIPOC artists that should be consistently working on our stages but aren't (myself included). I want to change that and I know that a way to help change that is to be someone who makes things happen, to be "in the room where it happens" (I see you *Hamilton* fans!) and that's why I wanted (and still do) to be a producer and director. It was during a rehearsal for *Convoy 31000* with Theatre Lunatico that I expressed my desire to do more with my career, I asked them if there were any opportunities for me to learn new hats, and it happened that they were looking for a producer for their production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. They made the experience very much enjoyable, they knew that I didn't know much (actually nothing at all!) about producing and they supported me in every single step of the way. I've since taken a workshop

on Theatre Management and Producing online with Beaubourg Theater taught by Tiffany Vega-Gibson.

You have such a beautiful story and rich background as not only a BIPOC artist but also an immigrant. How has that empowered you as a storyteller?

Aww, thank you! To be honest with you, I'm still figuring that out. I often come across with "you're too brown for this story" or "you're not brown enough for this story" or "your accent is in the way" or "your accent is not thick enough" etc, etc, etc. I don't think people realize that you don't need to be a super dark brown Latinx person with a thick accent that "crossed the river" to be here in order to tell Latinx immigrant stories. My journey migrating to the US may not be "the typical" one but I arrived here alone at the age of 19, I had to learn the English language here, I worked as a nanny in a white household, I cleaned houses. Coming here wasn't in my plans, I was forming my artistic career in Peru but my family saw a way to a better life for myself and kind of pushed me to come here when the opportunity presented itself. I recently did my 23andMe DNA testing and found out that I have 33% Native American and 3% Nigerian DNA in me so now I'm in the process of learning that side of me and how that can inform the choices of what stories I tell. Maybe there is some empowerment in what I've just shared with you.

We are in the midst of a social justice revolution — what actionable changes would you like to see take place in Bay Area theatre? How do you wish to be part of that change?

And a much needed social justice revolution. There are so many changes needed to take place. I would love to see more BIPOC (especially women) in leadership roles, behind the casting tables. I would like to see more theatre companies offer "radical hospitality". You see, I believe this is one of the biggest problems we have right now — seasons are curated to cater to the privileged group of people in our society because that's where the money comes from and theatres are so afraid to lose those patrons. I want the people in power to see the richness in the BIPOC stories, we want to see our stories told and we want to be able to see them. I would like to see more accessible resources for BIPOC artists to excel in our creativity. I would like to see acting schools teaching Latinx, Black, Indigenous theatre. I know this is a wish list and I can keep piling up more.

It's one of my dreams to be part of this change. I wish to work for a non-profit organization that offers resources needed so that BIPOC artists can excel in their careers and lives. I wish to mentor younger and/or newer BIPOC artists. I want to tell stories that advocate for social justice, I want to give voice to the voiceless, I want to inspire others. I see myself as a valuable

instrument to bring change in our theatre community on stage, in front of the camera and behind the scenes. I want to be an active participant when it comes to casting, season curating, and community building.

What has been the most rewarding part of this career? What has been the most challenging?

I've had several rewarding parts — the people I meet, the friendships formed, the audience reactions, after-show talks, my spiritual growth, being able to say "Today I get to do what I love to do". But there is one particular moment that I can say has been the most rewarding. It was during *Strange Ladies* (with B8 Theatre). There was a young black girl in the audience, she was probably 8 years old (I think she was one of my colleague's nieces), and she said to us after the show that she was going to advocate for climate change. She felt that way because she saw herself on stage and she felt her voice matters, that she too can make a change in the world, hearing her tell us that was priceless and is a memory that helps me keep doing what I do.

The most challenging part of this career, in general, is making a living out of it. Only 3% of actors make a living out of acting (according to the Audrey Helps Actors podcast!), the rest of us work a survival job or several small gigs in order to make ends meet. Other challenges are finding the strength to keep going, as this isn't a career for everyone and it takes a lot of work, a lot of falling, getting up, dusting off and keep going. A lot of sweat and tears. It's very important to surround yourself with people who love, support, and believe in you because sometimes it is hard for one to believe in oneself.

What advice do you have for new artists or those coming back to the theatre?

To new artists I say, don't be afraid to do the work, get to know who you are, and love yourself, don't let others dictate who you are or what stories you should be telling. Find yourself a mentor that is going to help you through your journey, don't get too comfortable thinking you have all the time in the world to achieve your dreams, time flies. Don't be afraid to fail, failing is how you learn and become better. Also, don't get too cocky, be humble, be compassionate, be empathetic. And to those coming back I say, welcome back! I am so happy you did not give up on your dreams. It's never too late and you are never too old to do what you love and become what you always wanted to become. Share your wisdom with the young ones and with the ones who are starting out.