



From Chile, with love

When Maria Gonzalez, board chair of FaithAction International House, attended the 2017 performance of “Nómadas” at UNC Greensboro, she witnessed a dramatic change in the audience from before the opening scene to after the final curtain.

“Some people were like, ‘I don’t speak Spanish. What if I don’t understand what they’re saying?’” she says. “After, everybody was like, ‘This was amazing, and they didn’t even speak!’”

That kind of reaction is why Rachel Briley went to extraordinary lengths to bring “Nómadas” to Greensboro. The associate professor of theatre first saw the play at the 2017 Santiago a Mil International Festival in Chile, which she attended as a delegate of the U.S. Theatre Communications Group.

“I fell madly in love with this play,” says Briley, who is head of UNCG’s MFA program in Theatre for Youth and artistic director of the North Carolina Theatre for Young People.

“Nómadas” is Spanish for “The Nomads,” and the dialogue-free play shows people entering and leaving each others’ lives. It is, by turns, heart-wrenching and funny, Briley says, combining physical movement with fanciful objects and large-scale puppets.

CHILDLIKE VS. CHILDISH For Briley, bringing international theater for young people to the U.S. is about more than entertainment. It’s a way to advance the field. “The cultural construction of the child in North America is so vastly different from other parts of the world,” Briley says. “In many places, childhood is respected in a different way — the art created for young people elevates the entire human condition because it honors the child. We can do this here too.”

“It’s about exile, loss, love, and relationships,” Briley says. “It’s about what we gain when we go places, what we lose when we leave.”

Convincing the play’s creative team — theater company La Llave Maestra — to bring it to North America for the first time was easy. Getting them here was more difficult.

The U.S. Embassy in Santiago awarded \$20,000 to fund the production, then reversed its decision after a new administration took over in Washington. The deficit was bridged via a UNCG Faculty First grant, a grant from the Children’s Theatre Foundation of America, and contributions from UNCG departments and individuals. Local business owners and individuals also chipped in with free meals and lodging.

Everything came together in the end. Local nonprofits helped extend performance invitations and provide tickets to immigrants in the community, representing more than a dozen countries. Seating was arranged to bring together people from diverse cultures, many attending a theater performance for the first time.

The company followed the performance with a three-week residency at UNCG. The Chileans collaborated with professors and led workshops for students, sharing skills and methodology. “I still cannot believe how much I learned in such a short amount of time,” one student wrote.

Briley has already begun work on bringing La Llave Maestra back to present a new play, possibly drawing inspiration from their Greensboro experiences. The response to “Nómadas” convinced her that the hard work was worth it, including a student email that moved her to tears.

“Last year I decided that I didn’t want to do theatre anymore,” the student wrote. “But after seeing ‘Nómadas’ and working with La Llave Maestra, I have never been more inspired.”

By Eddie Huffman • “Nómadas” performance photo by Michael A. Gálvez
Learn more at <https://go.uncg.edu/briley>