

PREGONES HISTORY



Above, Pregones in 1981 with *La Colección*.
 Standing: Heriberto Mateo, Julio Santana, Rosalba Rolón,
 Alvan Colón-Lespier. Sitting: Roberto Lugo, Sandra Rodríguez,
 Luis Meléndez. Photo by Pablo Delano

IT ALL BEGAN when a group of Puerto Rican artists living in the Big Apple, met in 1978 to satisfy an artistic urge to see Puerto Rican theater classics produced more often in the city's stages. Founding members Rosalba Rolón, Luis I. Meléndez and David Crommett created an experimental piece: *La Colección - 100 Years of Puerto Rican Theater*.

The new production incorporated key scenes from 11 Puerto Rican landmark plays covering 100 years of Puerto Rican dramaturgy -- from 1878 to 1978. The scenes were interwoven with live music and a series of "pregones" or traditional vendors' chants. Director Victor Fragoso, actress Marta de la Cruz (both since deceased) and musicians Eduardo Carrasquillo and Gilberto Díaz were invited to collaborate.

Some say that it's legend and some say that it's true, but apparently *La Colección* was "clandestinely" premiered, after-hours, at a standing-room-only off-Broadway house. The venue happened to have a Puerto Rican security guard with a great love for theater, and most fortunately, a complete set of keys to the space. The play was a hit and the theater owners remained happily unaware of what had taken place in their property.

Over the years Pregones has developed a style that combines theater, music and movement, oral and written traditions, and a signature urban sensibility. Four artists further consolidated the company at different stages: Sandra Rodríguez (1980), Alvan Colón-Lespier (1981), Judith Rivera (1986) and Jorge B. Merced in (1987). The ensemble draws from popular Puerto Rican artistic expressions and literature to create and stage its work. Today, Pregones has grown to be one of the leading Puerto Rican/Latino theater theaters in the United States. From migrations to indigenous mythologies to subway stories, the company's repertoire covers a growing sample of Latino experiences and identities.

A BRONX HOME

DURING ITS FIRST FOUR YEARS, Pregones was primarily a touring company, traveling with *La Colección* throughout the North East of the United States and to Puerto Rico. The headquarters were in El Barrio at 116th Street and Lexington Avenue, New York City. A small closet was miraculously fitted with a desk, a typewriter, a phone and a file cabinet!

In 1981 the artists began to conduct theater workshops at different community-based organizations in New York state and throughout the Tri-State region. The company established partnerships with churches, cultural centers, universities, public schools, trade unions and grassroots organizations. These partnerships were the foundation for what would later become the company's main audience. Partnerships with groups like United Bronx Parents were key in the development of Pregones' home audience.



Above, Pregones 1981 production of *El Circo*.
Back row: Luis Meléndez, Heriberto Mateo, Félix Méndez.
Front row: Elba Lugo, Sandra Rodríguez, Rosalba Rolón
and Jose Angel Rodríguez

In 1982 Bill Aguado, the Executive Director of the Bronx Council of the Arts, invited Pregones to settle permanently in the Bronx. The Council had established the Longwood Arts Project in former P.S.39. This school was converted into a multi-disciplinary arts and community facility that offered studio space to various artists.

Pregones accepted the invitation to occupy a fourth-floor studio in the building. For four years, Longwood was the base of operations for all of Pregones' theater work.

In 1985, during an anti-apartheid demonstration in New York, artist and founder Rosalba Rolón was arrested for civil disobedience together with several other artists and community activists. In the paddy wagon en route to the police precinct, Rosalba met Puerto Rican activist and religious leader Father

Roberto Morales. Father Morales was the priest in charge of the Latino community at St. Margaret's Church, right across the street from Longwood Arts Project in the Bronx. Amidst the commotion and the chants of "Free South Africa!" and "Down with the diamonds!", Father Morales and Rosalba discussed the possibility of creating a joint project between the church's Latino contingent and Pregones.

Later that same year, company artists initiated a series of theater workshops for youth at St. Margaret's Church. Soon Pregones expanded the initiative by improvising a temporary full-scale theater in the church's gymnasium. Here the company premiered the play *Tiempo Muerto* under the direction of Ramón Albino. The play was a great success and was later featured in the New York Public Theater's Festival Latino for 1985.



Right: Alvan Colón-Lespier in *Tiempo Muerto*. 1985

ST. ANN'S (1986-1994)

In 1986, Father Roberto Morales, a long time Bronx activist and community leader, was named rector of St. Ann's Episcopal Church in the South Bronx. Sitting on a prominent hill, surrounded by some of the area's most magnificent gardens and parks, the colonial-style church was designated a historical landmark. The church is the burial site of Gouverneur Morris, "penman" of the U.S. Constitution.

Within days of his new appointment, Father Morales offered Pregones permanent use of the church's old parish hall/indoor gym. A true visionary, Morales saw his ministry as one of empowering the people of the South Bronx by nurturing all aspects that form a community. He pushed open the doors of this magnificent landmark. Every room and corner of the historic church was alive with dozens of community organizations and initiatives establishing their operations at St. Ann's. A holistic health clinic was opened in the basement; the kitchen and dining hall were shared by a cultural initiative led by a group of Chilean artists and activists known as *Vamos a La Peña*; Health Force, a women's AIDS Project, moved into an empty second floor studio; a needle exchange program also moved in. Other groups holding meetings at St. Ann's during this period included local youth programs, environmental coalitions, gay and lesbian initiatives, and other activists organizations.

According to Morales, his invitation to Pregones was a reconfirmation of the ancient wisdom which inspired the medieval church to provide a haven for the growth of western theater. "They [Pregones] are not for theater only just as I'm not for the Church only. We are for the people. Pa'l pueblo, pa' la comunidad."

With support from Bronx merchants and the invaluable assistance of Hudson Scenic Studios Inc., Pregones accepted the challenge to turn the high-ceiling gym into the South Bronx's first professional theater venue since the glory days of the Bronx's Teatro Puerto Rico in the 1950's. After much attention from local and mainstream press the new Pregones at St. Ann's was inaugurated in the winter of 1986-87 with the original play *Migrants - Cantata a los emigrantes*. A second renovation took place in 1990 converting the space into a 120 state-of-the-art professional venue.

During a span of eight years, Pregones set the standards for the South Bronx's new cultural renaissance. Pregones' continued activity created a new and demanding audience for theater, largely drawn from the Latino population in the Bronx and in New York city. The company's Main Stage program was thus established to provide a yearly season of original theater and music productions in the Bronx. A vast array of productions were incorporated to the company's repertoire. New works were developed and presented at the new space and later toured throughout the nation and internationally. Some of the signature theater pieces developed during this period include: *Migrants*, *The Caravan*, *Medea's Last Rosary*, *Baile Cangrejero*, *Voices of Steel*, *Remote Control*, *The Blackout*, *Quintuplets* and *The Wedding March*.

Pretty soon Pregones began to present other artists through its *Visiting Artists Series* - a presenting program allowing the company to serve a broader Latino community and to work with artists from diverse disciplines and ethnic backgrounds. From dance to opera to poetry to theater to rock to Latin Jazz, hundreds of artists were presented by Pregones at St. Ann's.

Two immensely successful renditions of *TeatroFestival* were held in 1990 and 1993. Produced by Pregones, this theater festival is the first national and international gathering of Latino Theaters in the Bronx.

The company also engaged in several ground breaking projects while at St. Ann's: *The Embrace AIDS Theater Project*, *The Adult Literacy Theater Project*, *The Youth Ensemble*, *Teatro Matinee Series*.

Pregones maintained a healthy relationship with the church's leadership throughout its tenure at St. Ann's. Upon Father Morales' move to Virginia, Father Earl Kooperkamp was named as Priest in Charge and was later succeeded by Father Luis Barrios, both of whom shared Morales' vision of inclusion. Things changed around 1993 with the appointment of a more conservative leadership at St. Ann's. Following a long and much debated battle between community leaders and the new rectorship, the doors once opened by Morales were untimely closed. Pregones terminated its relationship with St. Ann's by midyear 1994.

COMPANY EXPANDS

IN THE 1980'S PREGONES became one of the leading theater voices in New York. A new generation of artists joined the original core group. While many of the company's original artists continued to collaborate with Pregones, the core company at St. Ann's consisted of Rosalba Rolón (founder), Sandra Rodríguez (joined in 1980), Alvan Colón-Lespier and Julio Santana (both joined in 1981), José Manuel Meléndez (1982), Cristina Rieke (1983), José J. García (1986), and Jorge B. Merced (1987). Jaime Acosta (1986) served as Technical Director.

As the work progressed, the company expanded to include artists César Rodríguez and Dianilú Cora (1988), Ricardo Pons (1989), Rafael Decena (1991), Cristina Hernández (1990), Waldo Chávez, Desmar Guevara and Alberto Toro (1993). Guest artists during this time included Tomás Rodríguez (1988), Sandra Berríos, Lalo Cervantes and Ibrahim Fernández (1989), Luis Felipe Meléndez, Eva Cristina Vázquez and Luis López Detres (1991), Axel Cintrón, Yeidi Rivero, Tony Chioldes and Nelson Landrieu (1993).

THE STUDIO 1994-2001

Considered one of the Bronx's most handsome and spacious avenues, the Grand Concourse is home to several of the borough's arts centers, including the Bronx Arts Museum and Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture. Pregones relocated its offices to a spacious 2,500 sq.ft. loft on 153rd and Grand Concourse, just a few blocks away from Yankee Stadium. Thanks to a generous grant from the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, Pregones turned the loft into a performance venue: a self-contained, small studio to be used as a lab for the development of new works and the presentation of small productions over a period of 5 to 6 years. The capital grant also allowed Pregones to establish its first cash reserve to protect its programs.

Large company productions and visiting artists were presented at other venues throughout New York. Two new productions and two revivals were presented at Hostos Center: *Fables of The Caribbean* (1994), *The Blackout* and *Baile Cangrejero* (1995 revivals) and *The Other Shore* (1996).

The company's revival of *Quintuplets* (1995) was presented at The Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and later at Repertorio Español.

During this time Pregones also embarked in some of its most ambitious projects, including a very successful one-year Arts Partners Residency in Allentowns, Pennsylvania (1993-1994); and the creation of *La Ruta Panorámica* (1994) -- the first network of Latino presenters in the East Coast of the United States.

Considered one of the Bronx's most handsome and spacious avenues, the Grand Concourse is home to several of By November of 1996, the first phase of the new space renovation was complete. Pregones Studio was officially opened to general audiences in February 1997 with the premiere of *El bolero fue mi ruina*, directed by Rosalba Rolón and starring Jorge B. Merced. The production became one of Pregones' most beloved and critically acclaimed pieces.

At the studio Pregones continued to increase its repertoire with new productions such as *The Monkey's Tail & Other Tales* (1996), *¡San Miguel, amarra tu perro!* (1998), *Translated Woman* (1999). Repertory pieces included *The Wedding March* (1998) and *Quintuplets* (1998).

In addition to the company's already established programs, the following projects were developed at Pregones Studio:

- The Exchange Project (1996) - A four year collaboration with Roadside Theater from the Appalachian mountains and Junebug Productions from New Orleans, Louisiana. The collaboration culminated with the premiere of the original musical theater production *Promise of a Love Song* and its subsequent national tour (1999-2002)
- An ongoing collaboration with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater (since 1996) in New York City
- A second Arts Partners sponsored residency in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1998) with Taller Puertorriqueño, La Salle University and Painted Bride Arts Center
- Theater and Education (1998) - a series of curriculum development sessions for school teachers at Pregones sponsored by the New York Office of Bilingual Education of the Board of Education Department.
- The creation of Pregones Summer Stage (1999) - a yearly series of outdoor theater performances throughout Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey.
- Conversations on Culture at Pregones Studio (1999)
- Asunción (2000) - a playwright's laboratory, open by script competition to Latino playwrights, whose work explores issues of difference and transformation at the limits of queer identity, particularly works that challenge assumptions about gender and sexuality.