

finding a place to stand

**Actor and playwright Vicente Guzmán-Orozco '92
got through life's tough spots with the help of a great teacher**

Twelve-year-old Vicente Guzmán-Orozco loved growing up in Colima, a small and pretty city on Mexico's southwest coast. Although his parents had moved to Oregon to work in the fields of Washington County, his strong, vibrant grandmother provided a haven for him. He had an innate talent for performance, nurtured in theater and dance classes. Vicente's world was safe and comfortable, and then it burst apart.

It was time to rejoin his family, said his mother and father. Vicente came north and moved in with them—into a trailer in the middle of a berry field outside of Hillsboro. That reversal of fortune shook him and his sense of who he was, and it took years to overcome. He did finally succeed. The story of that success winds from rural Oregon through Catlin Gabel, to Portland's stages and beyond as Vicente rediscovered himself and learned to take pride in his life.

Vicente came to Catlin Gabel in 9th grade, introduced by Spanish teacher and admissions staffer Ron Sobel. Vicente had been attending junior high school in Hillsboro and working summers in the district's migrant education office, mostly translating letters for those who spoke only Spanish. He loved Catlin Gabel when he toured the school and was eager to attend: "My parents were always good at encouraging me to think for myself. After the tour Ron looked at them, and they looked at me, and I said yes right away."

But when Vicente started going to classes, he felt like he really didn't belong. "As far as I knew, everyone led a different life from mine. They didn't live in a trailer," he says. "It took me one to two hours to go to school and come back. I wrote a piece my freshman year, an uncomfortable

conversation between the two different people I had to be: Vinnie at Catlin Gabel, and Vicente at home." As a young gay man, he hid behind a façade of flamboyance that was not just about sexual identity: it was about the freakishness of feeling like an outsider, mostly in terms of class and color.

Vicente knew he was dealing badly with his situation. He finally confided in teacher Pru Twohy, who had often spoken up for him and expressed confidence in him. That conversation still resonates for Vicente. "Pru asked me to think about whether Catlin Gabel was a good opportunity for me or not. I admired her and Clint Darling, my English teachers, most of all. So I took her seriously and decided to deal with it," he says. "Academics weren't the hardest part of Catlin Gabel for me: it was getting a better understanding of certain forms of privilege. But I told myself that this is a good opportunity, and that Catlin Gabel will open doors for me."

"I finally did get through it," he says. "I love the school and am proud to be a Catlinite. Pru was right: it was not the torture I thought it was then. It was my own inner turmoil about moving quickly to a disadvantaged position in the States, and moving in a world that was not my own. That experience—finding a place to stand—this is where I am, this is who I am, this is who I need to be—and finding my strength taught me that I am as



worthy of a Catlin Gabel education as those around me. And I learned to say why that was."

One thing about Catlin Gabel that always connected for Vicente was the ethos of service, as expressed by the school chapter, 1 Corinthians 13 ("Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."). Back in Mexico, Vicente's grandmother had found her unique place in the world through serving others. She was the center of her community: if people needed flowers for a funeral, she'd cut them from her garden. If people needed letters written or advice on life's thorny issues, she was there for them. "She taught by example," says Vicente. "The whole thread that runs through my family is dedication to the world around you. Enjoy yourself, but serve! The contents of the Corinthians verse spoke to me then, and they speak to me now. It's why I do the things I do. I constantly use that angle in my projects."



Vicente Guzmán-Orozco '92 in "The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa"

Vicente's pursuits at Catlin Gabel built on his talents and prepared him for his eventual career as actor and writer. He wrote his first play in Pru Twohy's "Hell in Literature" class, a takeoff of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He loved his theater classes, where Robert and Mary Medley provided great support for him. He eventually got his first shot at professional theatre when Portland's Miracle Theatre asked him to join BRIDGES, its anti-racist teen theater group. Vicente's skills were a perfect match, and he fell right in with Miracle. He started directing a year later, while still in high school, then after graduation worked in the office and wrote grants. "For commissioned plays I used a bilingual style so that you could understand the whole thing if you only spoke English or Spanish, but were not bored with repetitive dialogue if you understood both," he says. Finally he was named resident playwright and guest performer in the dance ensemble.

In the three years he was resident playwright, Miracle Theatre produced eight of Vicente's plays, including an HIV educational piece they performed in migrant camps. One of his plays opened in Mexico City, toured the West Coast, and was performed in Festival Cervantino, Mexico's biggest performance event. He left Miracle to join CITE, a theater company that

put on educational plays in schools on topics such as water conservation and energy efficiency. In the evenings Vicente would rehearse and perform for Artists Repertory Theater and other companies.

As an actor, Vicente has worked mostly with Miracle Theatre, appearing in about 25 of their productions over 20 years—twice as Pancho Villa. He has performed for many local companies, including Do Jump!, Stark Raving Theatre, and Theatre Vertigo. Between shows, he's found time to present workshops in acting and improvisation, playwrighting, cultural sensitivity, environmental issues, and more. And he's spent 20 years as an activist and counselor about sexually transmitted infections, to both English and Spanish-speaking people.

Since his time in Hillboro's migrant education program, Vicente has been serving others through his knack for language and translation. That skill had an emotional cost for him when he translated for asylum hearings. "I had to speak in their words, in the first person, and say things like, 'The soldiers came at midnight and took my wife away.' But it was important that the person's statement be totally clear to me," he said. He's translated three books, one of which is used to train seasonal agricultural workers to care for senior citizens. He's spotted when he mimics various Latin American accents in his acting roles; once when he played an Argentine radio announcer an audience member said to him, "I know you're Mexican, but listening to you I was back on the streets of Buenos Aires."

Today Vicente is back in Colima, Mexico, with his partner Eric Widing. He moved there recently to concentrate on writing and researching a novel based on four generations of women in his family. He doesn't see himself living in Colima forever, but while he's there

he hopes to connect with the local arts scene, and he enjoys the slow pace of life in the beautiful city of his childhood.

In looking back on his busy life, Vicente says, "My satisfaction has come from the hopeful messages of most of the work I've been able to do. If you can do good work, you can lead by example." And in a nod to his teachers at Catlin Gabel who helped him when he needed it most, he says that working with children and youth is deeply important to him. "If other people hadn't taken the time with me when I was growing up," he says, "I wouldn't be this inspired."

Nadine Fiedler is editor of the Caller and Catlin Gabel's publications and public relations director.



Russell Young

Vicente Guzmán-Orozco '92 in "Te Llevo en la Sangre"