

EXPOSURE



A NEW LEADING CHARACTER

Telling untold stories to inspire youth

Story by [Fresno State](#)

May 1st, 2019

Blonde hair, blue eyes and fair skin — those were signs of beauty for Alexis Elisa Macedo growing up in Reedley, California.

“The only person I had to represent me was ‘Dora the Explorer,’” Alexis says. Her dark hair, brown eyes and tan skin give away her Latina origins. “Whenever I’d be playing with other girls, I’d say, ‘Oh, I want to be Barbie.’ They’d say, ‘You can’t be Barbie, you’re not blonde.’”

Getting involved in theater in school only made the disparities of her features and those of the characters more obvious.

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“In writing, and in plays and movies, a sign of beauty is having fair skin,” she says. “I played a character where it was said ‘her skin is white as snow.’ I’m just like, ‘Well, that’s not me.’”

But media representation is changing, Alexis says. Disney’s television show “Elena of Avalor” and the movie “Coco” feature children of color as leading characters. Alexis says she proud to be a part of that change.

A theater arts student at Fresno State, Alexis plays the lead role in "The Super Cilantro Girl: Three Stories of Juan Felipe Herrera." The play revolves around the lives of a family of migrant workers: 12-year-old Esmeralda, played by Alexis, her younger brother Juanito, Papi and Mamá.

“When I got cast, I immediately called my dad and I said, ‘Dad, I’m a little brown girl playing a little brown girl!’” she says.

Alexis adds, “I really don’t get chances to play a Latina that isn’t a stereotype or isn’t just the comedic relief. Esmeralda is not. She isn’t a princess. She’s a little girl navigating through changes and trying to encourage her brother to find his voice and to really use it.”

In the play, the family settles down in California’s Central Valley after years on the road, and Esmeralda and Juanito must attend new schools, learn a new language and find their places in the world. When Esmeralda’s mother is taken away by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Esmeralda transforms into a superhero — as green as cilantro — to rescue her.

The play is inspired by Juan Felipe Herrera’s children’s book, “Super Cilantro Girl,” and adapted by Arnold Anthony Schmidt. The goal of the story is to tap into children’s imagination to address and transform the concerns many first-generation children have about national borders and immigrant status. The award-winning author was the first Latino to be named U.S. Poet Laureate in 2015 and is a former Fresno State professor.

“The reason I chose this show this year is because of many of the real life issues that are going on right now in our country,” says J. Daniel Herring, professor and chair of the Department of Theatre Arts. “This is a story that deals with it in a way that’s very real but also very accessible for young people, and not frightening.”

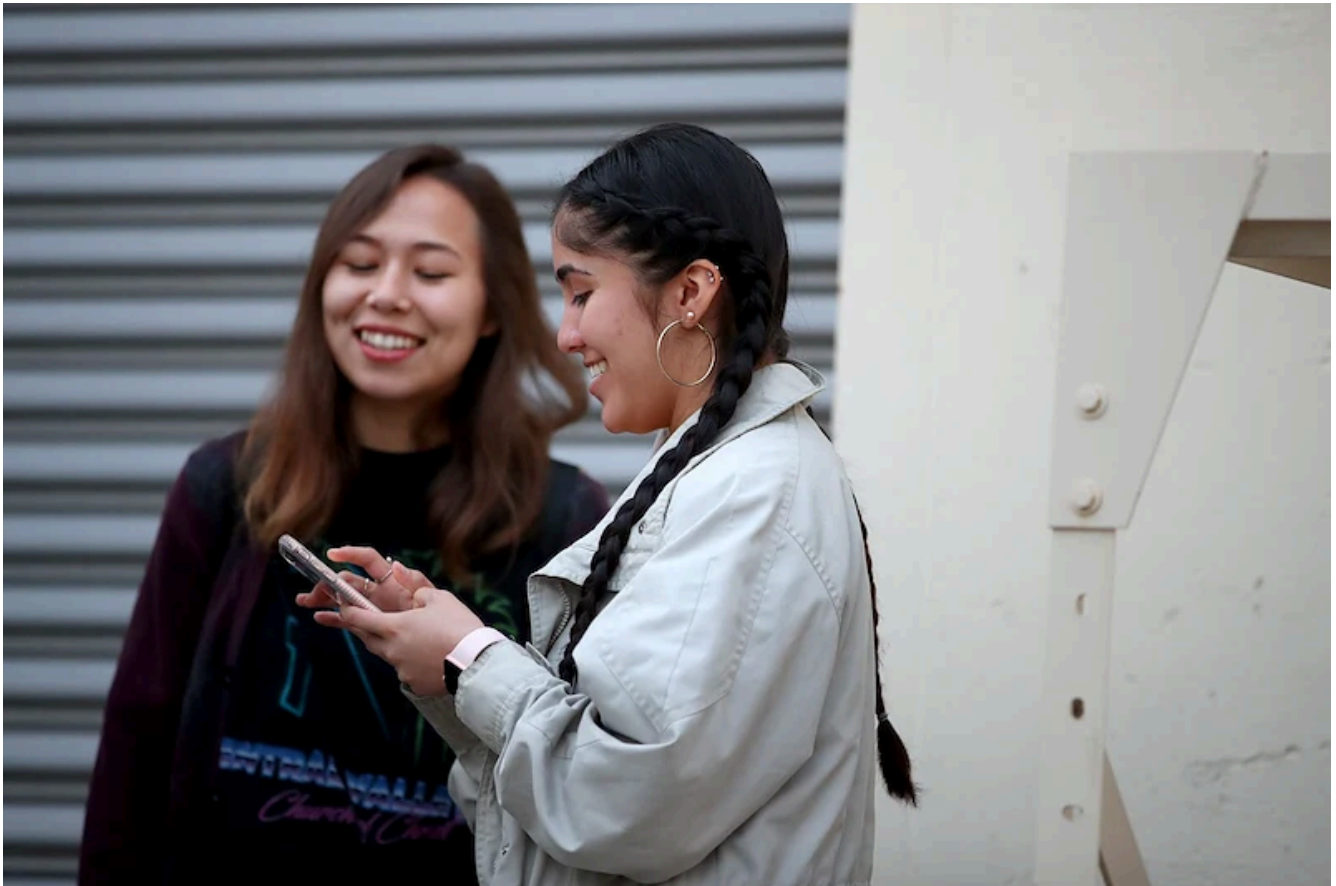
A new leading character



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INSPIRING VALLEY YOUTH

The play is part of the University's Theatre for Young Audiences program, wherein each spring, Fresno State students enroll in a course to bring children's theater productions to elementary and middle schools throughout the Central Valley.

The Theatre for Young Audiences touring company of student actors has been a tradition at Fresno State for over 60 years. They have toured to more than 40 schools and performed in front of over 16,000 children in a single season.

The majority of schools are in rural areas; oftentimes, the schools have limited funding for arts programs.

“A lot of these young people may never see a live theater production if it wasn't for the fact that Fresno State tours these productions into the Central Valley,” says J. Daniel, who is also director of the program.

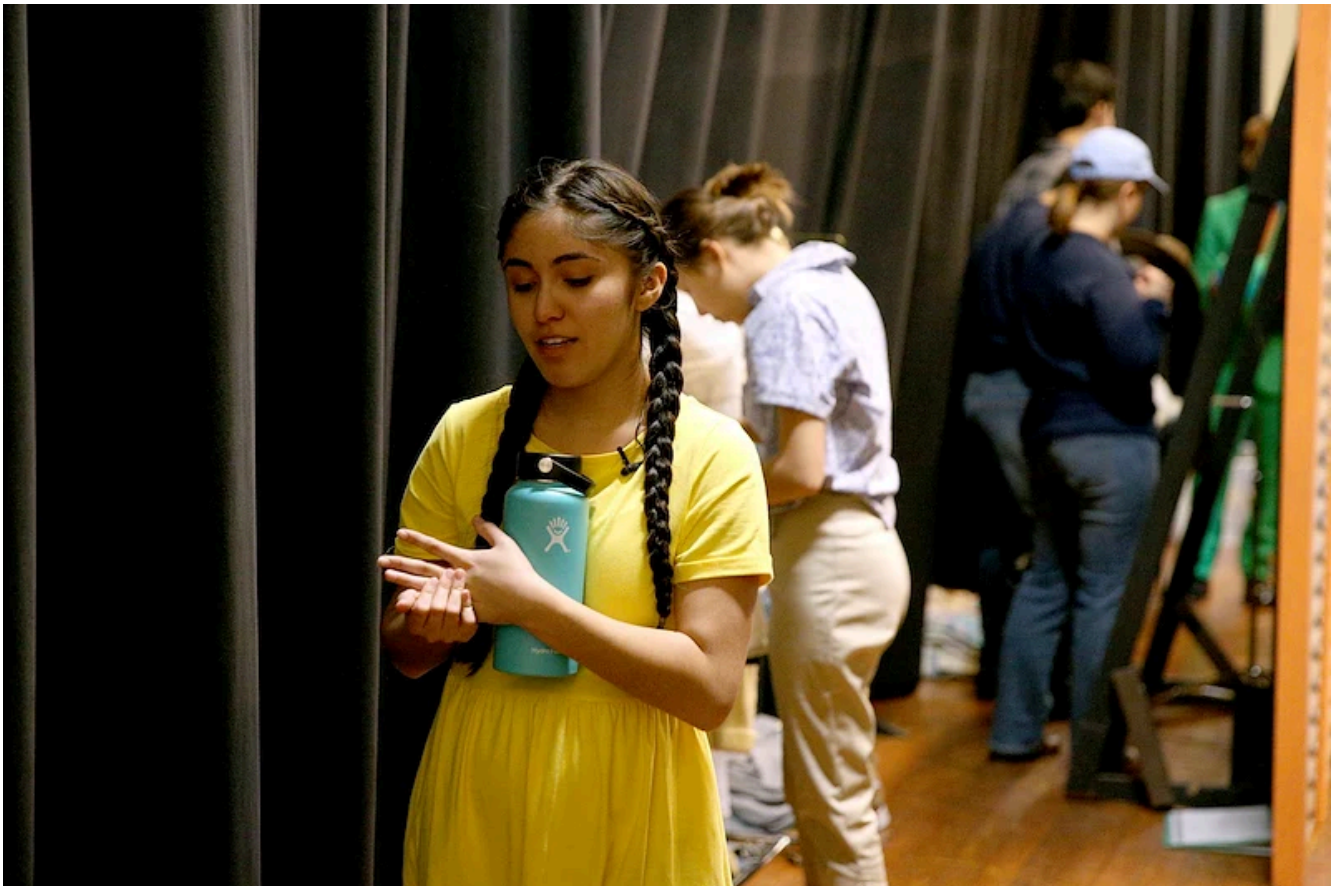
Alexis agrees.

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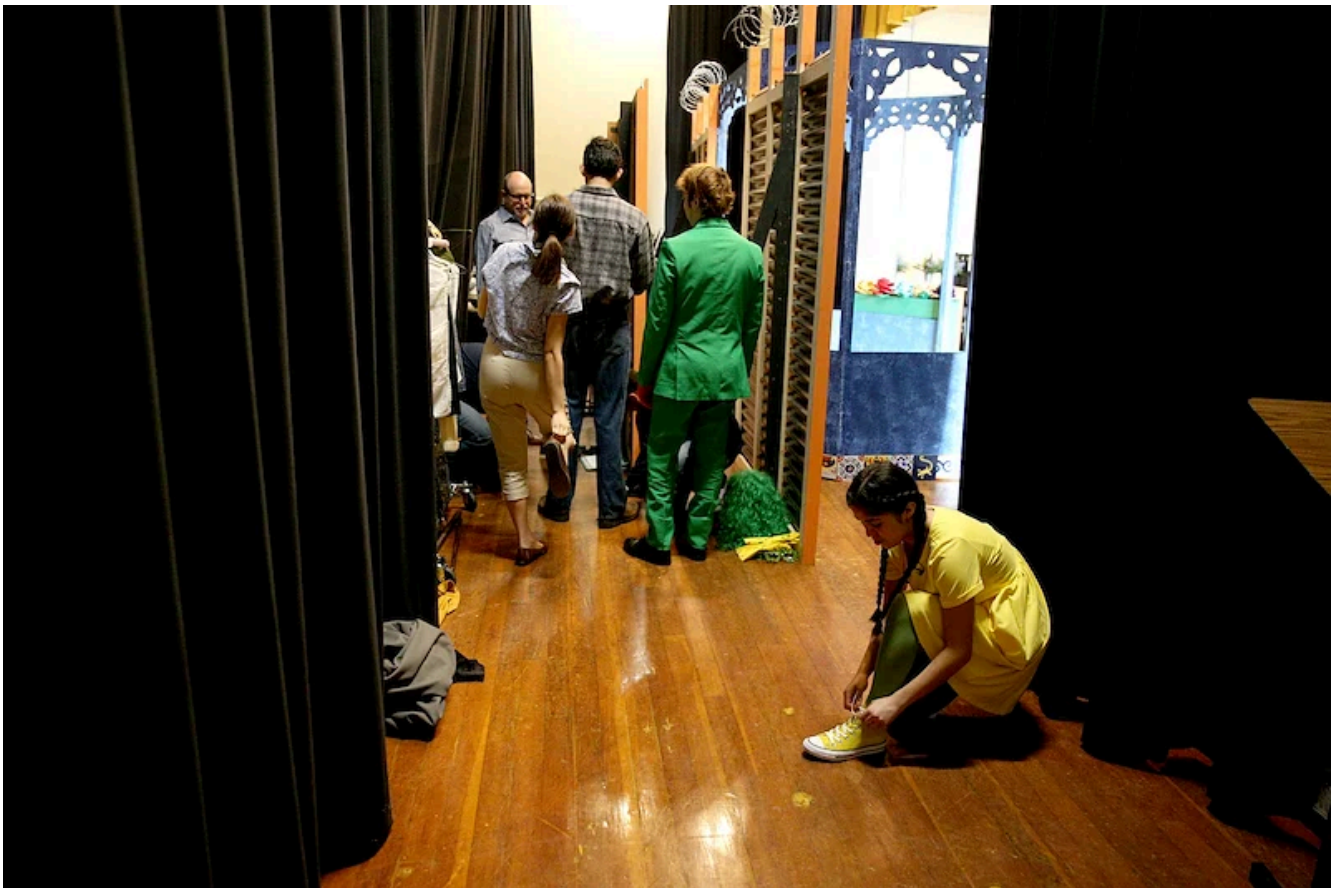
“We go into these schools and some kids who have never seen live theater before are immediately floored,” she says. “They’re so excited and it’s amazing.”

While Alexis juggles classwork and responsibilities in other productions — like her role in the student-run Experimental Theater Company and her position as assistant choreographer in Roger Rocka's Dinner Theater's “Hairspray” — the opportunity to perform in front of Valley youth is especially important.

“For the kids, it's important for those who can identify with a lot of aspects of the story,” she says. “Many have trouble speaking English, come from a home that's predominantly Spanish speaking, and then are thrown into a world at school that's all English — just like the characters in the play.”



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SMALL TOWN, BIG POSSIBILITIES

Visiting rural towns in the region for Theatre for Young Audiences reminds Alexis of where she grew up. Orchards and packing houses surround the Central Valley town of Reedley. Alexis calls it “the fruit basket of the world.”

According to the United States Census Bureau, its population is just above 25,000, with over 26% of people living in poverty. Alexis says many residents are farm workers who work long days in the fields.

“A lot of those kids who go to Reedley schools, the only meals that they have during the day are given to them from the school,” Alexis says. “Their parents get up really early in the morning and come back really late at night because they have to provide for their families. That’s a predominant theme where I come from.”

It’s a small-town with big possibilities.

“A lot of young kids think, ‘Well, this is going to be my life,’” she says. “To me, that’s heartbreaking. No — you’re not going to be here forever. Exposing them to all these different stories and possibilities can really make the difference.”

That is Alexis’ goal: To make a difference through theater. After earning her bachelor’s degree, Alexis aims to attend graduate school and pursue a career in playwriting. She hopes to “write stories for those who don’t really get their stories told” — stories like the one she is performing for Theatre for Young Audiences this year.

“I hope the kids get to hear their stories being told and know that there are people like them who understand what they’re going through,” Alexis says. “I hope this gives them a voice and represents them.”



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ADOPT A SCHOOL

Theatre for Young Audiences tours every Tuesday and Thursday in the spring, with a culminating performance at [Vintage Days](#), Fresno State's largest student-planned celebration, open to the public.

Schools in the Central Valley region can [request a performance](#). Through the Adopt-a-School Program, donors can make contributions to help reduce costs, and can identify specific schools they wish to donate to help bring Theatre for Young Audiences to their community.

Each dollar donated sponsors one child.

"That means \$300 will sponsor 300 kids to see the production," says J. Daniel. "This is a way in which they get an arts experience that they might not otherwise get."

YOU CAN HAVE A HAND IN STUDENT SUCCESS.

Footnote: *Photos by Cary Edmondson, Story by Esra Hashem, Video by Chris Samaro — University Brand Strategy and Marketing*

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