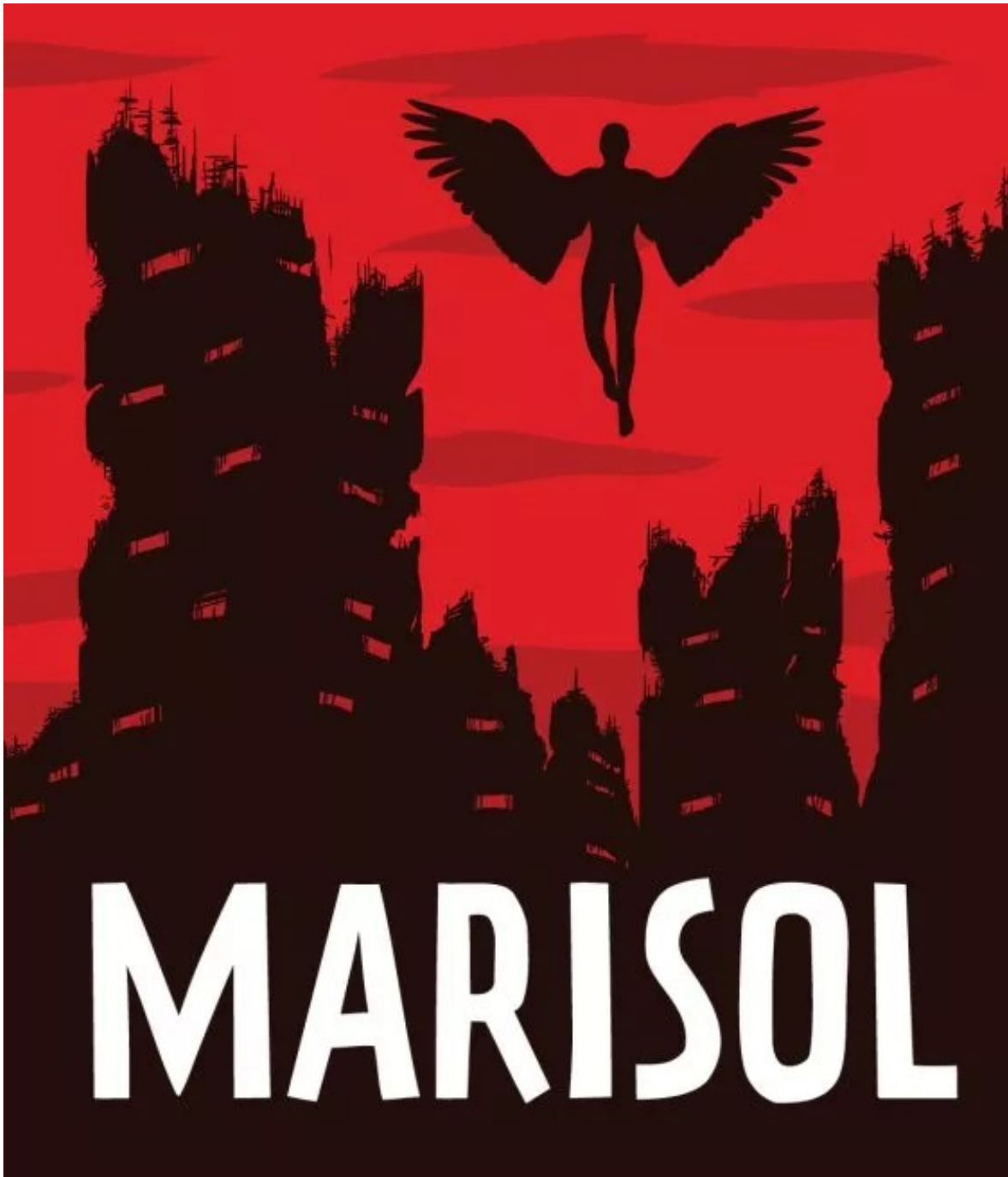


***Marisol* Outreach Packet**  
**Prepared by Noah Ezell, Dramaturg**



**This packet was created to further the depth of understanding of *Marisol* for patrons. If you have any other questions about the production, feel free to email the dramaturg, Noah Ezell, at [ezellnt@g.cofc.edu](mailto:ezellnt@g.cofc.edu).**

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## Playwright Background

José Rivera is a Puerto Rican playwright. He identifies as male and is 63 years old. When *Marisol* was written, Rivera was 37 years old. Though originally born in Puerto Rico, José Rivera and his family moved to New York City when he was 4 years old. His father worked as a taxi driver in the city. Rivera's family was religiously devout, identifying as Catholic. Rivera has stated that the only book his family owned was a Bible. Though they had few books, Rivera's family loved to tell stories. It is through his family's passion for storytelling that Rivera developed his own love of telling and creating stories.



José Rivera's early education occurred in the New York state public school system. Rivera would later go on to study at the Sundance Institute, a non-profit organization committed to advancing the work of independent storytellers in film and theatre. At the Sundance Institute, the playwright studied with Gabriel García Márquez, another Latin American playwright. Márquez heavily influenced Rivera's own writing style. It is from his work with Márquez that José Rivera began to write heavily within the genre of magical realism, the genre of *Marisol*. *Marisol* itself was inspired by the situation of Rivera's homeless uncle. Later, Rivera began to venture into screenwriting. He is the first Puerto Rican screenwriter to be nominated for an Oscar.

Rivera's first published work is *The House of Ramon Iglesia*. This is a play about the themes of assimilation and cultural suppression. It explores what these do to an individual and their psyche. Other important works by Rivera include: *References to Salvador Dalí Make Me Hot*, *Cloud Tectonics*, and *Sonnets for an Old Century*. Rivera states that some of his greatest influences are Timothy Williams, Sam Sheppard, and Harold Pinter. Others are Migdalia Cruz, Eduardo Mechado, and Pedro Prieti.

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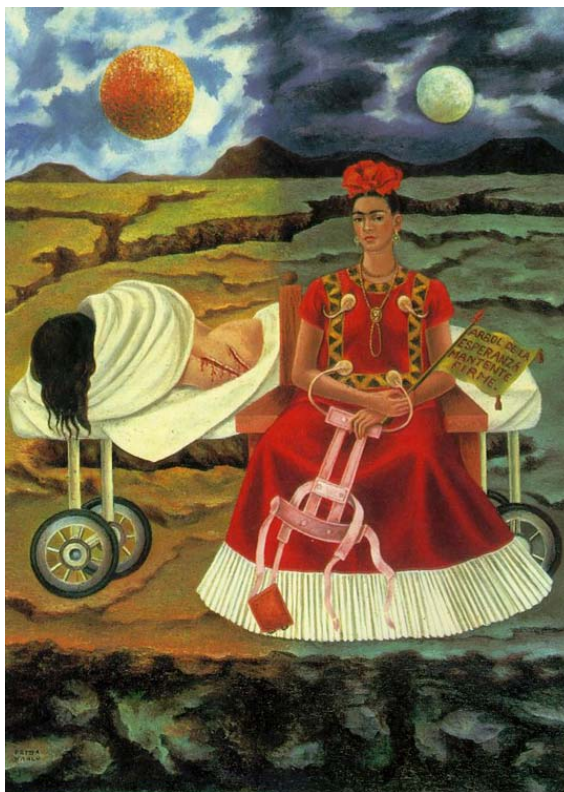
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## Magical Realism

### What is it?

Magical realism is a genre of art and literature. It is the genre that *Marisol* falls into. The genre is called magical realism because it presents a primarily realistic view of the world while adding in supernatural or magical elements. Magical realism in literature has primarily been associated with Latin American writers and artists. As the form developed, it has become inextricably linked with Latin American culture. The form became a way for its writers to subvert and critique the political systems they lived under. Many of the pioneers of magical realism lived in dictatorships where elements we might consider fantastical (being thrown in jail for maxing out your credit limit) were actually reflections of the reality they lived through daily. For these reasons, it has even been a point of contention as to whether or not works of literature can be considered magical realism if they were not created by a Latinx individual.



Gabriel García Márquez, one of José Rivera's major influences, is considered one of the founders of the style. Speaking on magical realism, José Rivera stated "I was once asked to try to define magical realism, and I said, in a very general sense, 'it's the use of externalized metaphors; it's taking what is an internal state of mind or emotion and projecting it into the world'."

### Defining Features

The existence of magical elements in a real world setting provides the basis for the genre. However, there are many other defining features as well, though the extent to which each is used in a work varies from work to work. One important feature of the genre is the presence of an indifferent narrator or protagonist coupled with the author's lack of explanation for fantastical events. The narrator/protagonist accepts the extraordinary as if nothing outside of the norm has occurred. Magical realist texts also often present opposing planes of reality. One example would be urban and rural settings. Works falling in this genre often present heightened and intensified circumstances. When experiencing magical realist texts, the reader or audience member must "let go of preexisting ties to conventional exposition, plot advancement, linear time structure, scientific reason, etc., to strive for a state of heightened awareness of life's connectedness or hidden



meanings.” Finally, magical realism’s dedication to political critique is an important defining feature. Within a magical realist work, the alternative world is often used to correct the reality of the established world. It is within the alternative world, because of its magical/supernatural nature, that elitist/privileged viewpoints are destabilized.

- Contains fantastical elements.
- The fantastic elements may be intrinsically plausible but are never explained.
- Characters accept rather than question the logic of the magical element.
- Exhibits a richness of sensory details.
- Uses symbols and imagery extensively.
- Emotions and the sexuality of the human as a social construct are often developed in great detail.
- Distorts time so that it is cyclical or so that it appears absent. Another technique is to collapse time in order to create a setting in which the present repeats or resembles the past.
- Inverts cause and effect, for instance a character may suffer *before* a tragedy occurs.
- Incorporates legend or folklore.
- Presents events from multiple standpoints - ie. alternates detached with involved narrative voice; likewise, often shifts between characters' viewpoints and internal narration on shared relationships or memories.
- Mirrors past against present; astral against physical planes; or characters one against another.
- Open-ended conclusion leaves the reader to determine whether the magical and/or the mundane rendering of the plot is more truthful or in accord with the world as it is.

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## Late 1980s New York City

### Politics and Government

During the late 1980's, the United States was controlled by republican president Ronald Reagan. Reagan's fiscal policies, denoted Reaganomics, slashed taxes and removed regulations hoping to boost the economy. Reagan's policies worked, and the economy came out of its recession and moved into a period of economic boom. However, Reagan's policies had negative effects on minorities. Because of attacks on affirmative action and welfare programs, minorities had less access to opportunities and programs that would have boosted their social and economic standings.

Unlike the country as a whole, New York City was led by Mayor Ed Koch, a democrat. Though his first two terms were met with public approval, during Koch's third term, beginning in 1985, he suffered a loss in popularity due to a series of corruption scandals. During his tenure as mayor, race relations were also poor. These poor race relations intensified in the latter part of Koch's mayorship as he publicly criticized Jesse Jackson, a black democratic candidate in the 1988 presidential election.



### Homelessness

The rise of contemporary homelessness developed in the 1980s. Prior to this period, homeless populations were mainly middle-aged white men with alcohol issues. However, during the 1980s, economically driven homelessness emerged. Many of the economic policies of the time led to a rise in income inequality and a smaller middle class. Because of these catalysts, homelessness skyrocketed in the 1980s, disproportionately affecting people of color and other minority communities. In response to the rise in homelessness, Mayor Koch attempted to institute policies that removed homeless individuals from the streets at night and kept them from loitering. The policies would have empowered the police to forcibly remove the homeless if temperatures were low and take them to shelters.



Though well intentioned, the reality was far from helpful. Homeless shelters were potentially dangerous and forced removal created an ideology that public spaces in New York City were designated for the upper class. Once the anti-loitering laws were struck down by the New York City supreme court, Koch turned to propaganda as a way of attacking the problem of homelessness. Koch, speaking on the deviancy of the homeless, pitted them against all other individuals in a speech in 1988 about the

unresolved problem of homeless loitering in the Grand Central Terminal. He stated “They’re sitting on the floor, occasionally defecating, urinating, talking to themselves. . . We thought it would be reasonable for the authorities to say, ‘you can’t stay here unless you’re here for transportation.’ Reasonable, rational people would come to that conclusion, right?” Koch’s attack against the homeless serves as one of the major themes throughout *Marisol*.

## Guardian Angels

The Guardian Angels are a non-profit international volunteer organization of unarmed crime-prevention vigilantes that were created in 1979. The organization was initially formed to combat widespread violence and crime on the New York City Subway system. After the financial crisis of the 1970s, the New York Subway system became a cesspool for crimes. Most of these crimes were committed by packs of teenagers carrying switchblades who would steal items from passengers on the train. However, many situations became much worse. The overall culture of crime on the subways and the lack of police intervention spurred Curtis Sliwa, the organization’s creator, to take matters into his own hands.



To identify themselves as a group, the Guardian Angel’s wore red berets and t-shirts with their logo on it. These pieces of clothing made the Angels easily identifiable on a subway in case of an emergency situation. The Angels were mostly made up of minority individuals. In fact, the Angels were 80% black and Hispanic/Latinx.

After several headlining news reports detailing the Angel’s acts of salvation, the Guardian Angels were publically denounced by

Mayor Ed Koch. Koch viewed them as “paramilitaries,” or members of a semi-militarized force whose organization resembles that of a professional military but is not included in the State’s armed forces. Eventually, Koch relented, and, after their success in New York, the Angels expanded to other troubled cities like Los Angeles, Detroit, Atlanta, etc.

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## Assimilation

### General Assimilation Information



Assimilation is the process by which different cultural groups become more and more alike. When full assimilation is complete, there is no distinguishable difference between the formerly different groups. Assimilation can be forced or spontaneous. It is important to note that assimilation is markedly different than acculturation. With acculturation, one's native culture is not lost over time like it is with assimilation. Acculturation allows immigrants to adapt to the culture of a new country in order to function in everyday life while still

maintaining the values, perspectives, practices, and rituals of their original culture.

When assimilation is forced, several techniques are often used. Some of these include: forced religious conversion, removal of children from parents, division of community property into individually owned land, the undermining of local economies and gender roles, and the elimination of access to indigenous foodstuffs. Forced assimilation is rarely successful, and it generally has enduring negative consequences for the recipient culture.

Voluntary assimilation during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries occurred in the United States when millions of Europeans emigrated to the New World. In this case, being able to “pass” as a member of the dominant Anglo-Protestant culture was an important form of protection against violent nativist groups.

### Puerto Rican Assimilation

Puerto Ricans began to migrate to New York City in large numbers after the Jones Act of 1917 extended citizenship to islanders. However, it was not until after World War II that a huge influx of new immigrants began. These newcomers faced intense bias and marginalization during this era. Immigrant communities struggled with inadequate housing and discrimination in the job market.





However, during the 1960s, in response to poor conditions and spurred by the various social movements of the time, young Puerto Ricans began to protest in large numbers. Their activism included elements of Puerto Rican nationalism and international anti-imperialism. Puerto Ricans in New York City allied with their African American neighbors to create a “community control” movement that had its roots in the late 1960s but solidified in the late 1970s. This group was known as the Guardian Angels (see **Late 1980s New York City** section above for more information).

By the mid-1970s, urban fiscal crises and the rising conservative backlash in national politics created more problems for Puerto Rican communities in the United States. Since the 1980s, however, Puerto Ricans have achieved some economic gains, and a growing number of college-educated, middle class Puerto Ricans have managed to gain more control over the cultural representations of their communities.

One of the major roadblocks to Puerto Rican acculturation/full assimilation is their skin color. Puerto Rican’s mixed-race heritage made them very unlike European immigrants. As a psychologist by the name of Kenneth Clark stated in an interview, “The reality of the United States is that assimilation is blocked by skin color.” The paradox of this is that United States majority culture demands assimilation but does not allow non-white immigrants to actually assimilate. Because of the struggles they have faced and their only recent economic and social developments, Puerto Ricans have stayed within ethnic communities in big cities as a way to survive in an inhospitable America. However, this has helped them retain much of their primary culture.

## Irish Assimilation



When the Irish came over in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were destitute by American standards. They often had no money beyond the fare for their passage. Because of this, they settled in the cities of the ports where their ships arrived. Initially, the Irish lived in terrible conditions and received considerable prejudice from Americans. However, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, attitudes towards the Irish had begun to change. Many Irish participated in the Civil War and gained acceptance and respect from Americans because of their loyalty.

Second or third generation Irish-Americans moved up the social and managerial ladder from their early laboring work. Some would even enter the higher-class professional world. The Irish’s large numbers were also instrumental in raising their social status because they were able to elect candidates to power that represented their communities. The Irish were also aided by their skin color because they were able to pass as natural born citizens unlike immigrants from Puerto Rico, for example. Overtime, because of their rising social status, acceptance, and appearance, many later generation Irish immigrants fully assimilated. Since the initial

major influx in Irish immigration, negative stereotypes and prejudices associated with the Irish have slowly faded from American society.

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# Religion

## Folk Catholicism and Spiritualism

Folk Catholicism is a term that refers to any of various ethnic expressions of Catholicism as practiced in Catholic communities. Typically, folk Catholicism is referenced in developing nations. The practices that fall under the umbrella term of folk Catholicism vary from place to place. These various practices sometimes contradict the official teachings of the Catholic church. However, even though some of the practices deviate from mainstream Catholic beliefs, the Catholic church generally does not speak against them unless they view the practices as heretical or detrimental.

In Puerto Rico, the practice of Catholicism often blends native Taíno and African traditions with mainstream Catholic beliefs and practices. In fact, it has been said that the real religion of Puerto Rico is not Catholicism but *espiritismo* (spiritualism), a quasi-magical belief in occult forces. For example, many people in Puerto Rico believe in the *mal de ojo*, or evil eye.

On the Island, rich homage is paid to Catholic saints. Beliefs in saints' miracles, faith healing, and witchcraft abound, and icons of Catholic saints are often found in Puerto Rican homes. This unique blend of mainstream Catholic ideologies with witchcraft and other occult beliefs create Puerto Rico's distinct form of folk Catholicism. The tradition of syncretism, or mixing different parts of various religions, is deeply rooted in the Catholicism of Puerto Rico and Latin America at large.



## Catholicism in Latin American Communities in the United States

Religion and immigration are often closely tied together. It has been said that post-1965 immigrants and their children are actually revitalizing religion in America. 84% of Latinos report that their religious affiliation is Christian, and 35% of all Catholics in the United States report their ethnicity as Latin American. It is clear to see that Catholicism has been extremely influential in Latin American communities. Scholars have concluded that without the inflow of Latin American immigrants, the Catholic church would have experienced catastrophic collapse in America. The Latin American connection with Catholicism is linked with a strong cultural/ethnic identity within the community. Scholars have reported that Latino immigrants tend to have a stronger ethnic/racial identity than white immigrants do. This strong link between ethnicity and religion contributes to the prevalence of separate ethnic congregations in America. All the information in this paragraph was sourced from a scholarly article entitled *Religion and Ethnicity: Theoretical Conclusions*.

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## Now What?

### Get Involved!

If you are interested in making an impact in Charleston to help remedy the issues of homelessness and environmental degradation, here are some local organizations that focus specifically on these problems:



**BEGIN AGAIN**

**One80Place:** One80Place is an organization that seeks to end homelessness by providing housing, medical care, legal services, job training, and more for homeless or housing insecure individuals. One80Place has a shelter on 35 Walnut Street here in Charleston. If you are interested in volunteering, visit this link:

<https://one80place.org/volunteer/>

**Fields to Families:** Fields to Families focuses on alleviating hunger in the Charleston area by “harvesting, collecting, growing, and distributing local produce.” They also partner with One80Place allowing them to make an impact on the environment by promoting sustainable agriculture and supporting local farms while also working to end homelessness and food scarcity. If you are interested in volunteering with Fields to Families, visit this link: <http://www.fieldstofamilies.org/volunteer.html>



**South Carolina Aquarium**

**South Carolina Aquarium:** The South Carolina Aquarium has several initiatives seeking to make an impact environmentally. Their Good Catch initiative promotes the consumption of local and sustainably harvested seafood, and the Citizen Science initiative promotes

collaboration between “people of all ages and abilities” and “professional researchers” to help researchers collect and analyze data addressing issues like “plastic pollution, sea level rise, and invasive species.” If you are interested in volunteering with the Aquarium as a conservation assistant, visit this link: <https://scaquarium.org/volunteer/>