LIMBO: Marie Gonzalez & The Dream Act

Glenn Hutchinson, Johnson C. Smith University

Playwright Glenn Hutchinson discusses his play Limbo, which is based on interviews with Marie Gonzalez, an undocumented college student. Like many other young people in limbo, Marie has made the United States her home; however, because she is undocumented, she is at risk of being deported back to a country she has not known since she was 5 years old. Marie has become an activist for the Dream Act, legislation that would help people in her situation. Following an introduction, Hutchinson has included some excerpts from his play that was performed in Charlotte, NC last year.

Originally from Costa Rica, Marie Gonzalez came to the United States when she was five years old. She grew up in Missouri and her father ran a restaurant and later worked as a courier for the Governor. When a “concerned citizen” contacted immigration about their citizenship status, Marie’s parents were deported. With the help of Sen. Durbin of Illinois, Marie has been given a temporary extension to study at Westminster College. She graduated in December 2008; however, her extension will expire in June of 2009.

Over the past several years, Marie has become a national leader in immigration reform and has testified before Congress promoting the Dream Act (legislation that would help other students in her situation).

Mama and Papa prepare to be deported. They say goodbye to their house with their daughter, Marie.

Based on my interviews with Marie, LIMBO explores the story of Marie and other students like her who are in limbo. Their parents have brought them here often when they are very young. They go to school here. They make America their home; however, they are not citizens. They are in limbo.

With the help of the Hispanic Cultural Center of Charlotte (HCCC), the Arts & Science Council, and a small independent theater (Carolina Actors Studio Theatre), LIMBO became a collaborative effort to tell
Before she is deported, Danielle asks Isabel to take care of her son.

The opening dance of Limbo

these stories of undocumented students. The HCCC helped connect the theater to the Latino community by recruiting actors and also helping me interview more students who had similar stories like Marie. We received a grant from the Arts & Science Council to pay the actors and bring Marie to Charlotte and speak with the audience after each show opening weekend.

What resonated most in this community effort was how Marie’s story connected with many young people in our community. Many audience members commented on how they feel like they are caught in between two places—the place that they call home and the place that tells them it is not home.

Here are some scenes from the play that was produced at CAST Theatre and the University of North Carolina-Charlotte in 2008. In the play, two college film students decide to make a documentary about Marie.
Scene 3: The First Interview

(Westminster College. The beginning of the interview is on film, and then it fades out as the actors onstage recreate the interview. MIGUEL is sitting beside his camera & microphone, and MARIE sits in front of the camera. Nathan holds a boom mike.)

MIGUEL
Gracias por la entrevista.
(Thanks for the interview.)

MARIE
Sure. So, you make a lot of movies?

MIGUEL
Well, not really. We’re independent, you know.

MARIE
Yeah?
(Slight pause.)

MIGUEL
And we’re finishing up school.

MARIE
Oh.

MIGUEL
Sorry if... This is our senior project for film school. Is that cool? We hope that this documentary will get picked up and shown a lot of places.

MARIE
Yeah, sure...

MIGUEL
I really admire what you’re doing.

MARIE
Thanks.
MIGUEL
I mean, you’re standing up, trying to change something.

MARIE
Well, a lot of people can’t tell their story.

MIGUEL
But you can?

MARIE
Yeah. They deported my parents, but they let me stay—thanks to Senator Durbin. I have a temporary extension to stay, at least until June 30th. After that? I don’t know. I hope that I can finish school.

MIGUEL

MARIE
I have this status—legal to be illegal in the U.S.

(Mighty pause.)

So I speak out. I tell my story. I want to change things.

MIGUEL
What’s your major?

MARIE
Political Science/International Business.

MIGUEL
Any brothers or sisters?

MARIE
I’m an only child.
MIGUEL
Me too.

MARIE
Oh, so we’re both spoiled rotten.

MIGUEL
Yeah . . . Tell us where you’re from.

MARIE

MIGUEL
No, I mean, where were you born?

MARIE
Costa Rica. I was born in Alajuela.

MIGUEL
And you grew up in Missouri?

MARIE
Yes. Since I was five years old.

MIGUEL
So, when did . . . when did all this . . .

MARIE
I was a sophomore in high school when I found out we were, as they say, “undocumented.” My parents had filed the paperwork with un abogado . . . a lawyer, and we thought we were OK. But it turns out we weren’t. So that’s why my parents were sent back to Costa Rica.

MIGUEL
Do you get to talk with them much?

MARIE
When I can. Sometimes on the webcam, when they’re at my uncle’s—in Costa Rica, he has an internet cafe. The internet is kind of expensive. An expense they can’t really afford. I got some calling cards for Christmas. I use it once a week, 10 minutes, 15 minutes.
MIGUEL

How are they?

MARIE

A couple of my sorority sisters have gone down & stayed with them . . .
They’re very hopeful.

MIGUEL

What is your first memory?

(PAPA sits at kitchen table. He places a newspaper article
into a large brown binder. MAMA clears the table of dishes.)

MARIE

I haven’t been to Costa Rica since I was 5. I don’t even know if my
memories are really mine or just things my parents told me that I’ve
made my own.

I remember images, bits and pieces. My grandfather, my dad’s dad,
took me to this park in Costa Rica. Toucan Park.

PAPA

Cahuita Park, mi amor.

MARIE

I remember this one tree, and there were always toucans there. The
bright feathers. Those beaks.

When people ask me about Costa Rica, I don’t have much to say. I
don’t know much. I know where my parents live, my grandparents.
There are rain forests, gorgeous beaches, but I don’t know much else.

What I remember most is leaving and coming here. Five years old.
Getting on the plane. Before that, anything is fair game if it’s my
parents’ memory or mine.

But what happened to my family—I don’t want anyone else to go
through that.

(Lights on PAPA and MAMA fade.)

I haven’t seen them in 2 ½ years.

[In this other scene, Marie says goodbye to her parents. After our two
productions, many audience members commented on the different ways
animals and people are treated in America.]

Scene 14: Dogs

(MAMA and PAPA sitting in living room of their empty
house. Sound of a barking dog outside. Their luggage is near
the door, beside a kennel for MARIE’s dog, Precious.)

PAPA (looking out back window)

¡Callate!
MAMA
Papi ... Los vecinos.

PAPA
What does it matter? We’re leaving anyway.
(Slight pause.)

PAPA
Perro estupido.

MAMA
Marvin ...

PAPA
¿Qué? I love dogs. I love Precious, but he doesn’t bark like that.
(PAPA looks inside kennel.)

PAPA
Are you still alive, dog? Don’t you hear your friends? They’re ...
They’re trying to say goodbye.

PAPA
(Sí. Trying to say goodbye.)

PAPA
¡Silencio!
(Slight pause. Barking stops.)

PAPA
Gracias.

MAMA
Sometimes, yo quisiera ... I wish was one of those dogs.
(Slight pause.)

PAPA
¿Qué?
MAMA

Have you noticed how the Gringos take care of their dogs? ¿Los vecinos? Buy them special food. They buy special little clothes for them. Walk the perros around. They even gift wrap their poop. Consienten their dogs more than their niños.

PAPA (laughing)

Si.

MAMA

In Costa Rica—do you think dogs live en pura vida? ¿Recuerde los callejeros?

PAPA

Si, mi amor.

(Slight pause.)

MAMA

Papi, ¿Qué tú crees? There are illegal people, but are there illegal dogs?

(Slight pause.)
PAPA (comforting her)

I know.

MAMA

When will I see her again? Papi? Tell me, when?

PAPA

No sé. But we want her to stay and live her life.

MAMA

Ah, mi amor. Your graduation. Que linda.

MARIE (enters with small box.)

Stop, mom. You’re going to make me cry again.

MARIE

I think this is everything.

MAMA

And aquí. The . . . ¿Qué?

MARIE

National Honor Society.
MAMA
And here, you playing volleyball. The way you hit that ball—fuerte!
Where did you get that? Not from me. I hated sports.

PAPA
From tu papá probamente.

MAMA
¿Ay, the athlete, sí?

MARIE
I don’t want you to go.

MAMA
Yo sé. But we have to. We will come back.

PAPA
You need to stay and go to college. Tu sueño. Become una abogada and
change the law.

MAMA
Sí. We are so proud of you. Mi vida.

(PAPÁ hug.)

PAPA
We need to go.

MARIE
Even Precious.

PAPA (going to front window)
You can say goodbye to him at the airport. We have to go. Ay, look at
the people out there.

(MARIE goes to front window.)

MARIE
Dios mío, I didn’t think this many people would show up.
MAMA
¿Quiénes son?

MARIE
Friends. And look at that—all of those cameras.

PAPA
Let's go, Marina.

(Pause. They all take a look at the house they are leaving.)

PAPA
Adiós, mi casa.

MAMA
Hasta luego.

(Pause. They leave.)

MARIE
And as we went to the airport, a caravan of 40 cars. Everything had been switched to my name. My dog was in a kennel. Precious. It was the last time to see my dog... They let me go to the gate. That's the last time I have seen them...

[Marie's story is not unique. The following scene attempts to dramatize the problems and messages about college that affect young people]:

Scene 8: School

MARIE (interview)
I always had that dream. Most of the counselors had met with us—planning for college. I was always very studious. I loved school. There was no question that I was going to college... going to law school.

(Actors enter and recreate school classroom.)

TEACHER
Each one of you, take an envelope and count the money inside.

STUDENT #1
Money? We get money?
TEACHER
It's monopoly money. Fake money.

STUDENT #2 (to STUDENT #1)
Stupid!

TEACHER
I want you to count the money. Each one of you has a different amount.

STUDENT #1
I got more than you.

STUDENT #2
It's fake, stupid. ¿Cual es la diferencia?

TEACHER
Please! OK. Now I want you to put the money back in the envelope. Put it back in the envelope... There you go. OK. How much money do you have?

STUDENT #1
$1000

STUDENT #2
$400

STUDENT #3
$300

STUDENT #4
$20

STUDENT #5
$1
TEACHER
Now read what’s written on your envelope.

STUDENT #5
HS DO.

TEACHER
That stands for high school drop out. Next.

STUDENT #4
HS G.

TEACHER
High school graduate.

STUDENT #3
CG.

TEACHER
What do you think that stands for?

(Pause.)

STUDENT #4
Oh, I get it . . . Mine is GD.

TEACHER
Graduate degree.

STUDENT #5
What’s PD?

TEACHER
Professional degree. Like a doctor.

STUDENT #1
Wow. Well, this sure was a fun game.

TEACHER
Do you know what the point of this activity was?
STUDENT #2
You forgot to do your lesson plan for today?

TEACHER
The point of this lesson, young lady, is to show you the power of education. If you drop out of high school, this is how much you are going to make.

STUDENT #4
That's not true. My cousin, Lorenzo, makes a lot of money. He just bought a new car.

STUDENT #3
Oh, sí, that new red Mustang. ¿No?

STUDENT #4
Qué padre.

STUDENT #3
Chevre.

TEACHER
That may be true. But what about college? What about his future? That money is only temporary.

STUDENT #3
What isn't temporary, Miss Smith?

TEACHER
What?

STUDENT #2
And Lorenzo can't go to college. He's illegal.

STUDENT #3
¡Cállate, estupido!

STUDENT #2
Es la verdad. ¿Sí o no?
TEACHER
That’s enough! Sit down, please.

STUDENT #3
¡Estupido!

TEACHER
What I want you to think about is... What is your dream? What do you want to do when you leave this place? Do you want to work the same job for years and years making just enough to get by? Or do you want to pursue something more? Danielle, what is your dream?

DANIELLE
You don't think I have dreams? ... Sueños. And what is the dream for mi niño, Samuel? Money?

(Slight pause.)
[This is the closing monologue of Marie]:

**Scene 26: Voice**

MARIE

I can’t make any long-term plans.  
A ton of my girlfriends are getting married . . .  
I can’t promise anything past June 30.  
That’s my last and final day to be in the U.S.

(Slight pause.)

you know, sometimes when i’m reading my history textbook, i hear the voice of sean connery.  
i’m not sure why.  
it works for the war stuff,  
but i have to get him out of my head for women’s suffrage—  
he doesn’t sound believable.

my roommate says that she hears the voice of her professor,  
which works out, because she has this ridiculous crush on him & so she reads it every night before she goes to sleep.

my other roommate tells me she doesn’t hear a thing when she reads.  
well, of course, she would have to actually open a book to really know.

i have a whole cocktail party up there,  
people going back and forth, never stopping &

sometimes it’s that movie announcer guy,  
sometimes it’s papá, mamá,  
sometimes it’s some voice that i’ve never heard before.

but what worries me is that i’ll lose my voice.

because when i listen for my voice—

even when i speak—  
is that me?

each day,  
changing.

mi voz . . .

(Slight pause.)

limbo.

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What will we as educators and citizens do in response to the many students who are in limbo? Marie’s story is one of many for us to consider. If you would like to see the complete interview of Marie following our performance, type in Marie Gonzalez and Limbo on youtube OR visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGDZjdYqA-8.