



# Discussion & Study Guide

*Olivia*  
THE MUSICAL

# About

Olivia O, The Musical, set in El Paso, Texas is a story about a 14 year old girl who is separated from her mother at the US/Mexican border and sent to an abusive foster home, and her aunt who builds a community of support and activism in an effort to find her and reunite families separated by cruel immigration policies.

Through its engrossing story and rich musical score, this work confronts the emotionally and rhetorically charged issue of migration, immigration policies and the movement of people across borders.





# The Story

It is 2017 in El Paso, Texas. Fourteen year old Olivia Ortiz is ripped from her mother's arms and left in an immigration detention center ("Cage of Lies"). Alone and desperate to reunite with her mom, Olivia learns of the dangers ahead ("Monsters"), but fights to stay hopeful and dreams of better days as she starts to look after a younger girl who was put in her care ("Cenicienta at the Ball").

Olivia's aunt, Isabel, is distraught as she had been eagerly awaiting to welcome her sister and niece in El Paso, hoping to provide refuge for them and develop the family connection she's always longed for ("Paint Me a Picture"). In her quest to find answers, Isabel joins an immigration justice group and discovers the hastily and secretly implemented new family separation policies at the border have left the local immigrant community shaken to the core. As she gains confidence and tells her own story, she begins to feel a sense of hope, encouraging community members to share their stories and plan ways to make a difference, find justice, and most importantly, reconnect with their loved ones ("Manos A La Obra").

Olivia faces a growing sense of desperation and fear as she is sent to an abusive foster home and told to forget about her family ("Guardian Angels"). She is agonized by the loss of her mother and fearful of more abuse ("Mama, I'm Sorry").

Act 1 concludes with Olivia running away from the foster home while Isabel's plans for a peaceful protest at the detention center simultaneously go awry, as violence breaks out and Isabel is arrested ("Where Volcanoes Sleep").

As the immigration justice movement grows and the community of El Paso responds to the story of Olivia ("Good Morning, We're Alive"), Isabel begins to fall in love with a journalist-turned activist as they work together to find justice and reunite families ("In This Beautiful Place").

Olivia battles to avoid homelessness and faces an immigration raid at the home of a local family ("Cenicienta at the Ball" reprise), while Isabel's attraction to her activist colleague grows along with the 'fight back' energy of the El Paso community, who build a radical new network of support and activism ("Women are Talking").

But even as Isabel re-doubles her efforts, the militarized deportation machine operating in their midst steps in and Olivia is re-captured by immigration officers and sent back to the foster home ("Salió el Sol"). Growing frustrated by the lack of progress in finding Olivia, Isabel challenges her activist boyfriend to stop holding back and put it all on the line to help find Olivia ("Count to Ten").

As a heartbroken yet defiant Olivia is on her way back to the abusive foster home, the activist network kicks into high gear. Isabel confronts the foster parents, demanding Olivia be returned to her family. As they threaten her and refuse to give her Olivia, the El Paso community rallies around her and Olivia is united with Isabel. They both vow to keep looking for Olivia's mother and reunite families, as the community surrounds them in love and solidarity ("Weave the World").

# Time & Place

The story is set in El Paso, Texas, in the El Paso immigration processing center and the surrounding community.

It is early spring in 2017, and the US government has suddenly and secretly ramped up their practice of separating migrant parents from their children, in an unannounced 'pilot project'. The pilot project ran in El Paso prior to the zero tolerance policy, eventually publicly implemented nationwide in May 2017.

Under this policy, undocumented asylum seekers were imprisoned or deported, and any accompanying children under the age of 18 were handed over to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which shipped them miles away from their parents and scattered them among 100 Office of Refugee Resettlement shelters and foster care arrangements across the country.







## Olivia & Gabriella Ortiz

Olivia and her mother Gabriella are Guatemalan refugees who arrive at the US/Mexican border seeking asylum. Olivia's father has been killed by gun violence, and in desperation, they've turned to Gabriella's half sister (and Olivia's aunt), Isabel Castillo, for help.

Gabriella's father, Eduardo Castillo, fled Guatemala in 1985 to escape persecution for involvement in Leftist rebel activities. He left his family in Guatemala, crossed the border into the US illegally, and ended up in El Paso, Texas, where he eventually married again and started a new family. Gabriella grew up without her father, and has only recently learned about her half-sister Isabel, who contacted her after Eduardo's death.

Although the Olivia O, The Musical focuses on the events that happen after Olivia arrives in the US, the story of Olivia's family remains an ever-present backdrop and influence.

### Discussion/Topics

- War/violence, generational trauma, and family separation
- Reasons why people flee their countries and seek refugee



## Isabel's Search for Family

Isabel grew up in a middle class suburb in El Paso, and though she had a Guatemalan father, she grew up somewhat removed and detached from her culture. Her father Eduardo did not talk much about his past, and was determined to keep a low profile, because he was traumatized by what he experienced during the civil war in the 1980's, and just wanted to put the past behind him.

He was also determined to keep Isabel protected and provide an all-American safe privileged life for her. He married the white daughter of a local pastor, worked hard and eventually owned his own landscaping company.

Though half Guatemalan, Isabel has been protected from any immigration related problems or consciousness.

After both of her parents die within a couple years of each other, she is going through her father's papers and finds out about her half sister and niece in Guatemala. She is lonely, yearning for connection, and she reaches out.

In the show, we see Isabel's baptism by fire into the immigration justice movement, and her gradual change from someone who was feeling lonely and detached from her community (with a certain naivete and cluelessness about the immigration system) to a leader who is passionately dedicated to finding Olivia and Gabriela, and reuniting separated families.

### Discussion/Topics

- First generation Latinos and Mestizo identity and sense of belonging to the larger community





## Activist Group

Seeking answers about what happened to Olivia and Gabriella, Isabel goes to a meeting of a local advocacy/activist group “E-PAIR” (El Paso Alliance for Immigrant Rights). Throughout the show, we both see her growing role in the group, and the group’s growing influence on the surrounding community.

The emerging movement is struggling. They have budget problems as they can’t afford to keep up with providing for their community, costs are going up as families are detained, breadwinners are deported, and they have legal fees from unfair arrests.

They also grapple with their own fear and anxieties as they deal with targeted harassments, arrests/fines, and ongoing threats.

### Discussion/Topics

- Growing power of the militarized immigration and legal systems
- Targeted harassment of journalists and activists and how this silences stories that need to be told



# Foster Homes, Trafficking & Immigration Raids



Olivia and the younger girl she met in the detention centre, Maria, are sent to a foster home run by a burnt out former televangelist who wants to rebuild his ministry by taking in 'poor migrant children' and 'offering them an opportunity for new life'. While Olivia struggles to adjust, we see her being forbidden from speaking Spanish, not being enrolled in school, forced to be a domestic servant in the house, and suffering verbal and physical abuse.

It is revealed that the eventual plan is to send both Olivia and Maria to work at a hotel. They will join the thousands of children lost in the 'system' and trafficked to work in harsh conditions in under-the-table operations across the US.

## Discussion/Topics

- The foster home to child trafficking pipeline (and its relationship to family separation policies)
- The lack of care given to safeguard children in vulnerable situations
- Loss of culture and language

After Olivia runs away from the foster home, she is taken in by a local family. She doesn't stay there for long, as their family dinner is interrupted by an immigration raid, and eventually she is asked to leave and told she is 'safer' back in foster care.

## Discussion/Topics

- The incredible strain that immigration raids place on Latino communities—and its impact on families and communities over both the long and short term

# Discussion

This musical-in-development confronts emotionally and rhetorically charged issues, as it explores the impact of harsh immigration policies, especially through the eyes of women and youth.

- How can we create a living, culturally significant theatre piece that moves beyond a singular audience into a larger discussion, a movement that informs, makes us think, shows us what's going on in the world?
- How do we tell this story with empathy for the real people impacted by these events - with nuance, honesty, and care for our performers, and our audience?
- What does it mean to welcome the stranger, especially in a time of growing unrest, unease and global migration?

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# Further Reading

## **Separated**

Family and Community in the Aftermath of an Immigration Raid

William D. Lopez

## **My Boy Will Die of Sorrow**

A Memoir of Immigration from the Front Lines

Efrén C. Olivares

## **UN Refugee Agency**

Central American Refugee Crisis

## **ABC News**

"Trump admin ran 'pilot program' for separating migrant families in 2017"

## **United States Senate**

Report on child trafficking of unaccompanied minors/migrants

## **NY Times**

"Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S."

## **No More Deaths/ La Coalición de Derechos Humanos**

Disappeared: How US Border Enforcement Agencies are Fueling a Missing Person's Crisis.



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