



PRESS RELEASE

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## **Cunningham Commission for Youth Theatre Winner Announced**

**CHICAGO** (August 26, 2025) - **The Theatre School at DePaul University** is pleased to announce that **Alvaro Saar Rios** has been awarded the 2025 Cunningham Commission for Youth Theatre. Rios is a Texican playwright living in Chicago. His plays have been produced in Chicago, New York City, Mexico City, Hawaii, and throughout Texas. Mr. Rios' works include *Luchadora!* and *Quetzali & Comic Book Queen vs. The Alebrije of Darkness*. He recently adapted Pam Muñoz Ryan's novel *Esperanza Rising* for Milwaukee's First Stage.

The Cunningham Commission for Youth Theatre was established at The Theatre School to honor the memory of the Rev. Donald Cunningham, a Chicago priest, playwright, and theatre supporter. The Cunningham Commission was established through an endowment gift from the Cunningham family and is presented biannually. The purpose of the commission is to encourage the writing of dramatic works for young audiences that affirm the centrality of religion, broadly defined, and the human quest for meaning, truth, and community. Playwrights from the Chicagoland area and alumni of The Theatre School are eligible to apply each year.

Through the Cunningham Commission, Rios will be writing a play that is titled *How to Catch an Alebrije*. This original piece is about a group of eighth-grade friends searching for a mythical creature in the hopes it will grant them one wish. Rios will develop *How to Catch an Alebrije* over the next year with input from the Cunningham Commission Selection Committee which is composed of members of the Cunningham Commission advisory committee and faculty of The Theatre School.

Chair of the Cunningham Commission Selection Committee and Artistic Director of Chicago Playworks for Families and Young Audiences, **Dr. Ali-Reza Mirsajadi** said, “*How to Catch an Alebrije* captures the excitement and whimsy of childhood imagination at the intersection of Mexican culture and folk art. Rios's piece questions humanity's relationship to power and control in a world where we coexist in balance with nature, creatures, and dreams.”

The Theatre School intends to produce the plays created through this commission in its award-winning Chicago Playworks for Families and Young Audiences series. Chicago Playworks has welcomed nearly 2 million audience members since it began in 1925.



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Rios said, “I’ve had the privilege of seeing my plays *Luchadora!* and *The Mole Hill Stories* produced as part of DePaul’s Chicago Playworks. Each experience left a strong impression on me, thanks to the talented performers, designers, and directors. When I saw the call for submissions for the Cunningham Commission, I was enthusiastic about the chance to develop a new play with DePaul’s students and faculty. This play aims to incorporate puppetry, and I have no doubt that everyone involved will showcase the same creativity they brought to my previous works.”

Chicago Playworks is dedicated to reflecting our audience’s experience in an urban, contemporary, and multi-ethnic environment. Each season has productions that are attended by over 30,000 young people and their families. The age of target audiences varies for each show, with a primary interest in serving grades four through seven. Past recipients have included Ike Holter, Isaac Gomez, Caro Macon, Gloria Bond Clunie, Ricardo Gamboa, Omer Abbas Salem, Jeremy Ohringer, and Lavina Jadhvani.

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*The Theatre School is celebrating our 100th anniversary this year. Founded as the Goodman School of Drama in 1925, The Theatre School trains students to the highest level of professional skill and artistry in an inclusive and diverse conservatory setting. For more on our Centennial year, please visit [www.tts100.com](http://www.tts100.com)*