

WORLD PREMIERE

# BLACK SUNDAY

WRITTEN BY **DOLORES DÍAZ**DIRECTED BY **HELEN YOUNG** 





Dear Friends,

Just over 25 years ago, we rented this hallowed hall at 615 W. Wellington Avenue for three days to throw a New Year's Eve party—a fundraiser for TimeLine's second season. Months later, to our surprise, we were invited to become the new company in residence at this historic building that's played a prominent role in community gathering and Off-Loop theatre for more than a century.

Honestly not sure at the time how we'd cover a year's rent, we still leapt at the opportunity.

And the rest, they say, is history.

Building on the legacy that preceded us here, TimeLine has produced 77 shows in this venue, including 12 world premieres and 38 Chicago premieres. After so many seminal productions and countless memories—and realizing long ago we'd outgrown this wondrous yet limiting space—we're now closing a remarkable chapter, embarking on a new one as we move toward opening a home of our own in Uptown.

PJ Powers (center), pictured with Mark Onuscheck (left) and Brian Voelker (right) during TimeLine's first days in residence at Wellington Avenue in September 1999.



While we patiently await the completion of that dynamic new theatre, we look forward to taking you on a journey next season, partnering with three preeminent institutions—Court Theatre, The Theatre School at DePaul University, and Writers Theatre—to present three extraordinary productions in Hyde Park, Lincoln Park, and Glencoe, as we build a bridge toward TimeLine's future.

To bid farewell to Wellington, I can't think of a more fitting capstone production than *Black Sunday*—a world premiere by Chicago playwright Dolores Díaz.

Developed through TimeLine's Playwrights
Collective and embodying our mission, *Black Sunday*illuminates aspects of history rarely told, drawing
haunting parallels to critical issues of today, involving climate, migration, race, gender, and religion.

Growing up in Laredo, Texas—along the southern border—Dolores is the daughter of Mexican American educators: her mother, a librarian acutely aware of the narratives that are and aren't found in most public spaces, and her father, a high school teacher with a specialty in history and first-hand experience of the gaps in the U.S. education system. She recognized a need to bring forth Latino stories, and her playwriting evokes personal histories that live in the shadows of our nation's collective dialogue.

Drawing inspiration from the book *Decade* of *Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, Dolores's *Black Sunday* expands the canon of Dust Bowl-era stories—complementing famed Great Depression scribes such as John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, and many more who depicted the plights of poor, white workers.

Dolores introduces a story rarely uplifted on stage—shining a light on the role that Mexican Americans played in this era of U.S. history, and the injustice of deporting U.S. citizens of Mexican descent, up to one million of them, despite many "repatriated" who had never lived in Mexico previously.

The play's title refers to April 14, 1935, one of the most damning ecological disasters in our country's history—a monster dust storm that devastated crops, drove millions off their land, and sparked thousands of deaths from dust pneumonia.



Angela Morris as Sunny in the First Draft Festival reading of Black Sunday in December 2021.

It's a cautionary tale, as we watch the impacts of climate change escalate. Today as then, it's battering communities and spurring unprecedented numbers of environmental refugees to migrate, displaced from their homes and seeking new shelter and hope for tomorrow.

Despite these matters being seismic in scope, Dolores's evocative storytelling lens keenly focuses on five individuals caught in the storm—a mother, father, daughter, preacher, and field worker. Each searching. Each swept up in cataclysm.

With stirring theatricality, under the direction of Helen Young, I couldn't be prouder to have *Black Sunday* take the final bow here. Culminating a quarter century of TimeLine productions, and three-quarters of a century that pre-date us in this building, this sacred space has stories to tell. What an honor it's been to be a part of so many of them.

Thanks for joining us for *Black Sunday*. And for one helluva ride on Wellington.



A too tiny sample of Wellington Avenue memories spanning 25 years (at right, from top): Gaslight (1999), Awake and Sing! (2002), A Raisin in the Sun (2013), Dolly West's Kitchen (2008), The History Boys (2009), The Price (2015), and Notes from the Field (2024).















While The Dust Bowl seems to exist in United States history as a distinct, immortalized moment in time, the effects of the Dust Bowl (and what we learned from it) are persistent and ongoing.

It is true that we've learned from our mistakes and have created more sustainable farming practices, but the same issues that led to the Dust Bowl among them American exceptionalism and capitalism, continue to rear their heads throughout history.

Even those who lived through the Dust Bowl were aware of the ecological and social impacts of the disaster. Hugh Hammond Bennett, the first head of the Soil Conservation Service. saw soil erosion problems stemming from a belief in "a false philosophy of plenty, a myth of inexhaustibility."

Influenced by colonialist ideals like Manifest Destiny, many people believed that resources like soil were inexhaustible: it was the world's will to further settlement and development. This is exemplified through the popular phrase at the time, "rainfall follows the plow." People believed that plowing land was not only good for the economy, but actually encouraged rainfall.

Once people realized the human impact on the Dust Bowl, farmers started using sustainable practices like crop rotation, strip farming, contour plowing, terracing, planting cover crops, and leaving fallow fields (land that is plowed but not planted).

Although these new farming practices dramatically helped farmers, the United States found itself in a similar (though not as severe) climate disaster in the 1970s. During this time,



A call to protect farmland from further erosion. (Ken Burns's "The Dust Bowl," PBS)

the amount of erosion damage in the Great Plains region was comparable to that of the 1930s. Dust storms came once again when a drought hit the region, following yet another rapid expansion of crop production.

However, this time, the climate disaster of the 1970s happened as a response to a "world food crisis" instead of post-World War I challenges. Although much of the world was facing starvation and poverty, the U.S. experienced an economic boom as the price of wheat skyrocketed. Sustainable farming practices were maintained until it became more profitable to overwork the land again.

The power of money remains a huge reason why sustainable farming methods are rejected today. According to a recent U.S. Agriculture Department study, only 3% of farmers, ranchers, and landowners are using available carbon credit programs that pay them to remove carbon dioxide from the air and sequester it in the soil, in part because of limited return on investment and high transaction costs.

Due to poor soil quality and effects of global warming, some farmers are shifting to indoor farms, an industry move that is relatively new. This offers an optimistic future as farming technology advances. However, caution is warranted to ensure that indoor farming doesn't echo its predecessors by becoming similarly overworked and unsustainable in the years to come.

Eroded farmland in Oklahoma in the 1930s. (USDA Soil Conservation Service)



RS The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl are RKE significant historical and cultural markers for the United States. This is exemplified by John Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath, which eloquently describes the hardships and migration of a farming family, mythical heroes, struggling to hold on to their livelihood, purpose, and pride during a catastrophic time.

Missing from this great narrative are Mexican migrant (born in Mexico) and Mexican American (U.S. citizens of Mexican descent) farmers also grappling with the same disasters. As part of the birth, upbringing, and sustainability of the United States, decades of U.S. exploitation and forced deportations of these communities remains largely unknown to the public.

REPATRIATION

THE STORY OF MEXICAN

Prior to the large migration of Mexican migrants into the U.S. from the 1910 Mexican Revolution, individuals and families traveled regularly between Mexico and the U.S. Often lumped into the same categories as newly arrived European immigrants, they established numerous communities since the 1800s throughout California, the Southwest, and as far as Virginia.

Some Mexican migrants worked toward seed money for a possible dream back home when the Mexican Revolution ended, but many stayed, developed lasting neighborhoods, churches, and small businesses. Mexican migrants produced Mexican American children, who went to World War I, fighting alongside their fellow U.S. citizens. Through their work with expanding industries, like the railroads and cattle, and bolstering factory labor during the war, communities of Mexican descent had a direct hand in tilling and cultivating the country's fertile potential.

By the roaring 1920s, these communities were the main work force during the farming boom. Yet despite the abundant resources to yield the "American" dream, these communities—and more importantly, Mexican American citizens were continuously denied those opportunities. There was widespread belief in the U.S. that these communities were best suited for backbreaking work and exploitative wages.

### THE TIMELINE: **EVENTS LEADING TO BLACK SUNDAY**

"Everybody remembered where they were on Black Sunday. For people on the southern plains, it was one of those defining experiences, like Pearl Harbor or Kennedy's assassination."

> - Pamela Rinev-Kherberg, author of Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas

1862 The Homestead Act of 1862 is enacted during the Civil War. It encourages citizens to move westward by giving them 160 acres of government land, as long as they live on and "improve" the land. Ultimately, 270 million acres, or 10% of the area of the United States, will be claimed and settled under this act and its later amendments and related laws.

Following the Homestead Act, farmers lacking sufficient knowledge of the land or appropriate farming techniques begin digging up vital prairie grass to plant crops. The prairie grass has deep roots that have kept the soil in place. The removal of this grass loosens the soil, which makes it susceptible to high winds during drought.

Those moving westward also believe that they are the cause of precipitation; they believe that pulling up the native vegetation will allow rainfall to be directly absorbed by the soil, allowing it to evaporate and provide more frequent precipitation. People believe that "rainfall follows the plow."

Early 1900s The population of iackrabbits increases, and so does the presence of covotes; the jackrabbits eat and destroy crops, and the coyotes kill farm animals. Farmers begin killing these animals to salvage their farms' productivity.



Mexican American carrot worker. (Library of Congress)

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 1920 census, of farms owned in the U.S., 13.4% were owned by people of Mexican descent, compared to 65.6% owned by white people. While 85.7% of people of Mexican descent rented farm land to work, countless individuals and families traveled from farm to farm, in some cases state to state, following the harvests for enough seasonal work to get through the year.

For communities of Mexican descent living in California and the Southwest for generations before the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—in which Mexico ceded 55% of its territory to the U.S.—this endeavor to maintain a livelihood and dignity had to be difficult to digest. Regardless, they continued to flourish, nurturing their roots deep in the earth of the United States.

Until the onset of the Great Depression, U.S. immigration laws were rarely enforced. With a high demand

People of Mexican descent at a train station waiting to be deported, circa 1932. (Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library)



for cheap labor, the country turned a blind eye, focusing on the promise of a copious golden wheat horizon. But the crumble of the stock market and skyrocketing unemployment closed the U.S. border to Mexico. Attempting to curtail financial devastation, the U.S. government created relief and job programs, available only to U.S. citizens. Suddenly jobs had to be "protected," and Mexican Americans were constantly pressured to prove their citizenship.

Even as many disillusioned Mexican migrants voluntarily returned to Mexico, the U.S. began to coercively "repatriate" and forcibly deport people of Mexican descent indiscriminately.

As intense dust storms plowed through the Dust Bowl, deportations occurred frequently. Though the campaign was supported by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), U.S. civilians energized by nativism executed raids of their own. Fear ran throughout communities of Mexican descent, causing many to carry birth certificates everywhere. (This terror was echoed in 2010 with Arizona Senate Bill 1070, which invited racial profiling of those who looked or sounded "foreign.")

A raid of Los Angeles's La Placita on February 26, 1931 was highly organized and psychologically damaging to these communities. While 400 Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans, including many families, enjoyed the afternoon after church, officials discreetly locked entrances to La Placita. At 3 p.m., INS officials and local authorities surprised the crowd and immediately began the deportation process. There are accounts of Mexican migrants with legal residency, as well as Mexican American citizens, who saw their official papers destroyed in front of their eyes. Families were torn apart. Crying echoed in the streets. And countless loved ones disappeared forever.

Between 1929 and 1939, an estimated 500,000 to 1 million people of Mexican descent were deported to Mexico. Sixty percent of Mexican American adults and children—United States-born citizens—were expelled to a country many knew only from the songs sung by their families harvesting the bounty of the United States.

# In Spanish means "the But for far el cortito i handled h

In Spanish, "el cortito" means "the short one." But for farm workers, el cortito is a short



El cortito. (National Museum of American History)

handled hoe widely used in farming practices from the 1920s to 1975.

Also known as "el brazo del diablo" or "the devil's arm" this tool required laborers to stoop over for up to 12 hours a day, in order to thin and weed field crops. Farmers claimed that el cortito "provided less crop damage," and ensured laborers were working. Numerous young laborers quickly developed the backs of 70-year-olds, with lifelong back injuries and pain.



THE HISTORY AND SYMBOLISM OF EL CORTITO

Worker with el cortito. (Smithsonian)

While communities of Mexican descent were heavily relied upon to quickly harvest the food that was feeding the allies of World War I and a growing United States, these communities also experienced exploitation. It was not uncommon for a farmer to refuse pay-

ment of wages or to have workers deported at the end of the day. (Treatment that continues today.)

In the 1960s, fueled by the Civil Rights Movement, these communities began to organize and successfully strike on a national level. For the Chicano movement and United Farm Workers Union, el cortito was an especially powerful symbol of the oppressive work conditions endured by generations. "So one could stand and work with dignity," outlawing el cortito was a top priority for organizers. On April 7, 1975, California ruled to ban el cortito from labor use.

### **FURTHER READING**

Explore further with these book recommendations from the dramaturgy team:

- Dust Bowl Diary by Anne Marie Low
- Years of Dust: The Story of the Dust Bowl by Albert Marrin
- The Worst Hard Time by Timothy Egan
- Whose Names Are Unknown by Sandra Babb

The Kinkaid Act (1904) and Enlarged Homestead Act (1909) encourage even more inexperienced farmers to travel westward, exacerbating the soil issues.

A post-World War I recession leads farmers to try new mechanized farming techniques to increase profits. Many buy plows and other farming equipment, and between 1925 and 1930, more than 5 million acres of previously unfarmed land is plowed.



Practices that removed long-established prairie grasses in favor of crop planting contributed to the Dust Bowl when drought occurred.

1930 Topsoil is at just a fraction of normal levels. Severe drought hits the Midwestern and Southern Plains.

1931 As crops die from the drought, the "black blizzards" begin. Dust from the over-plowed and over-grazed land begins to blow.



Map of the areas most affected by the Dust Bowl. (National Geographic Society)

July 26, 1931 A swarm of locusts descends on the region and will remain throughout much of the 1930s.

Early 1930s As the drought and dust become too destructive, people in the Great Plains region receive handbills sharing that California is looking for families to work. More than 300,000 people will move to California.

Living in a bustling city like Chicago, it's hard for one to picture themselves existing in rural farm land. It's even harder to imagine that pastoral life during an era as traumatizing as the Dust Bowl. Days that were once filled with community, sunlight, and work were replaced by isolation, darkness, and fear.

Less sun and more "black blizzards" meant fewer opportunities for folks to gather in ways that were familiar to them. On the rare occasions that they were able to gather, the dust all around them impacted their ability to actually connect with one another. Something as simple as walking home from school as a group was not easy.

**Dust Bowl survivor Norma Tonverlin** recounts, "We started home and [a big storm] hit. We laid down in the ditch. There's about four of us ... and them tumbleweeds come over us ... And we laid there until the storm was over. And then we crawled out from under all the tumbleweeds. You can imagine how dirty we was. And we finished walking home."

The dust affected indoor communal events, as well. Homesteader Caro-

line H. Henderson writes of a friend "attending a dinner where the guests were given wet towels to spread over their faces so they could breathe ... dust to eat, and dust to breathe, and dust to drink." Humans usually find solace in sharing space together, but during this time in the Great Plains region, the overwhelming dust was inescapable and made the act of true connection almost impossible.

These folks not only lost their sense of normalcy, but were also forced to endure much more trauma than before. Robert Enns describes the fate of his cattle when his family could no longer feed them: "My dad said, 'you boys can't go to school today.' We rounded all the cattle up ... and we chased them ... and there was a sheriff ... and deputies ... they dug a big hole. Chased the cows down in the big hole and then they killed them. And why they killed them when people of that town were starving to death, I'll never know." Instead of maintaining a routine and being at school, Enns had to experience firsthand the cruel domino effect of the drought and catastrophe around him.

The memories here are only a few examples of the isolating and lonely reality that millions of people endured throughout the Dust Bowl. They are reminders that the outcomes that occur when humans are stripped of their expectations and sense of community in the wake of environmental despair should not be taken lightly.

Three children prepare for a dust storm on their way to school.





During the rehearsal process for TimeLine's world premiere of *Black Sunday*, dramaturgs Bryar Barborka (BB) and J. Isabel Salazar (JIS) engaged with playwright Dolores Díaz (DD) about the obscured history that helped inspire her work, her kinship with her characters, and the darkness within that we must all fight.

(BB) What inspired this piece?

PLAYWRIGHT DOLORES DÍAZ

(DD) I was actually working on a different play when I came across the initial spark for *Black* Sunday. While I'd always been interested in climate, I'd never found an entry point until I started learning more about the Dust Bowl and the ways its man-made happenings collided with drought to devastating ecological and societal ends. When I learned that Mexican Repatriation was part of the story left out of our popular narratives, I knew there was something there to reveal—a new angle to look at as a society and something from our collective past that could help us reflect on the present moment.

The play's opening is inspired by the first moment of the Ken Burns documentary but quickly takes a sharp turn. It's my way of artistically introducing a lost narrative into a popular form.

I brought the idea to TimeLine's Playwrights Collective in 2020, and when the pandemic hit and we all retreated to our homes, I knew it was the right story to pursue at that moment in time. I felt a kinship with my characters—isolated and homebound by an inhospitable environment and at a loss for an end in sight.

(BB) Most people experience stories about the Dust Bowl in books or documentaries. What made you want to tell this story as a play?

June 18, 1933 The Civilian Conservation Corps opens the first soil erosion camp in Clayton County, Alabama. These camps are an effort to combat soil erosion, with workers laying new topsoil, landscaping, and planting native trees and shrubs. By September, there will be 161 soil erosion camps.

June 28, 1934 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs the Taylor Grazing Act, which allows him to take up to 140 million acres of federally owned land out of the public domain and establish grazing districts that will be carefully monitored. Although this is an attempt to heal the land, damage to the plains has already been done.

December 1934 The Yearbook of Agriculture announces that approximately 35 million acres of formerly cultivated land have been destroyed for crop production, 100 million acres have lost all or most of the topsoil, and 125 million acres are rapidly losing topsoil.



A massive dust storm approaches Spearman, Texas, on April 14, 1935. (Monthly Weather Review/Wikimedia Commons)

April 14, 1935 The day known as Black Sunday occurs. The dust storm on this day blows away an estimated 300 million tons of topsoil. The temperature drops 30 degrees, and the wind whips and creates a dust cloud that grows hundreds of miles wide and thousands of feet high. Folk singer Woody Guthrie will say, "you couldn't see your hand before your face."

Late 1930s Dust storms begin to reduce in number due to soil conservation methods and significant rainfall.

### "I want us to recognize in ourselves the capacity to commit crimes against humanity, so we can be internally vigilant to work against our darker natures."

(DD) I knew I had a play when the historical record made mention of the surreal situation people living in the Dust Bowl found themselves in. The real-life things that were happening seemed almost at odds with a documentary that would otherwise be limited to interviews, old photos, news stories, etc. At the same time, I recognized the complete sensory experience that is the strength of theater. I was also interested in invoking a higher emotional reality that I knew the theater could make manifest. I wanted a piece that could bring both the stress of climate desperation and a Duster to life on a gut level.

- (BB) How do you hope this piece resonates today?
- (DD) I read in one *Time* magazine article that climate change could see 143 million people displaced. I hope audiences recognize the interconnectedness of the climate issue with displacement and movement of people and recognize the dangers of oversimplifying the problem/solution.
- (JIS) You mentioned the relatively unknown story of Mexican Repatriation. What's most important for us to remember about that history?
- (DD) I want us to recognize in ourselves the capacity to commit crimes against humanity, so we can be internally vigilant to work against our darker natures. The shame of Mexican Repatriation bears similarity to other events, like Japanese American internment during World War II, and we miss the point if we walk away saying, "well, weren't those people awful."
- (JIS) Thinking of the context of that history today, what do you hope for the future of migrant and immigrant communities?
- (DD) I hope that U.S. citizens and legislators recognize the complexity of these issues and the humanity of migrant and immigrant communities while balancing the practical realities when making decisions that affect them. There is so much history and context surrounding these happenings.



Dolores Díaz at first rehearsal of Black Sunday.

- (JIS) Could you speak about the play's evolution since you started it in 2020?
- (DD) I experimented with a different creative approach and that is one of the reasons it evolved the way it did. Namely, I wrote moments, bits, and pieces that interested me. This helped me keep the writing fresh. It also made the editing and rewriting process more intense!
- (JIS) Do you have a favorite resource for audience members to discover more?
- **(DD)** Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s by Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez provided insightful scholarship and would be a good resource.

## BACKSTORY: THE CREDITS

Dramaturgy & Research by Bryar Barborka and J. Isabel Salazar

Written by Bryar Barborka and J. Isabel Salazar with contributions by PJ Powers and Lara Goetsch

Editing and Graphic Design by Lara Goetsch

Black Sunday *promotional image design* by Michal Janicki

Backstory is published to accompany each production

#### **OUR MISSION**

TimeLine Theatre presents stories inspired by history that connect with today's social and political issues.

Our collaborative organization produces provocative theatre and educational programs that engage, entertain and enlighten.

# **ACKSTAGE**

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YOUR ROLE: VITAL TO SUSTAINING TIMELINE'S WORK

# YOUR SUPPORT TODAY HELPS US MAKE HISTORY TOMORROW!

As we embark on our exciting new chapter, on the precipice of making our dream home in Uptown a reality, **YOU are a crucial part of making our future a success.** You're not only our partners in discussion and continual progress, but a driving force for our core value of exploring everyone's history.

With ticket sales covering only a portion of our annual income, donations from our community are vital to sustaining the work we do.

Your donation to TimeLine enables us to:

- Continue to present and nurture ground breaking new and acclaimed plays
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To learn more about History Makers, visit timelinetheatre.com/individual-giving or scan the QR code.

"TimeLine is a place of dreams and collective imagination, where artists and audience can come together to create something truly special. We work together, support each other, and grow together."

- Tiffany Fulson, TimeLine Artistic Producer of Innovative Partnerships







(PICTURED FROM TOP): Alex Benito Rodriguez (from left), Juliet Hart, and PI Powers in TimeLine's 2023 Chicago premiere of The Lifespan of a Fact; playwright Dolores Díaz sharing insights into her new play Black Sunday at The History Makers Celebration in January 2024; members of the 2023 TimeLine South teen ensemble and teaching artists after performing their original work, The Bereaved.

### **OUR 2024-25 SEASON**

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TRAVEL WITH US ACROSS CHICAGOLAND AS WE LAUNCH OUR NEXT ERA—TOGETHER!



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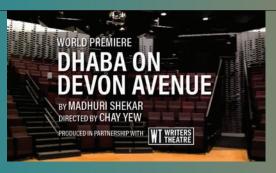
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