

ART/THEATER

Stage and Craft

Jo Vito Ramírez '13 brings a scientist's curiosity to a multifaceted arts career.

From children's theater at the Arden to Shakespeare in Clark Park to roles with some of the city's most artistically adventurous figures and troupes, including Whit MacLaughlin, Headlong Dance Theater, and FringeArts, among others, actor and artist **Jo Vito Ramírez '13** (they/them) has pushed the boundaries for more than a decade in the Philadelphia theater scene.

In February, Ramírez wrapped up a mainstage run in the title role at Arden Theatre Company's *Peter Pan*, and more recently served as assistant director for the company's children's production of *The Hobbit*.

"I'd never directed on such a large scale, so I asked if I could assist the director, Becky Wright," says Ramírez, who'd been directed by her once. "I knew I'd learn a lot from her."

It's an example of what's become a recurring theme in their career: constant learning through pushing into new forms of artistic expression. For example, Ramírez is currently focused on painting and music making. "What's most important to me as an artist is to stay curious and to continue to challenge myself, which often means trying new media," says Ramírez, speaking from their home art studio in Germantown. "Often, I'll pick up a new medium and find it has something to teach me about my artistic practice in general."

Their current project is a 3 feet by 3 feet landscape painting combining an interest in Roman history (Ramírez's mother and grandmother live in Calabria, Italy) with a portrait of Ramírez wearing the hairshirt of St. John the Baptist (it's an homage to Renaissance compositions). "I didn't have any training in painting and I think that's one of the reasons I enjoy making art so much. In some ways, it can be extremely foreign to me, but feel so close to home."

A QuestBridge College Prep Scholar from the Bronx, Ramírez attended high school at the borough's Collegiate Institute for Math and Science, then came to Haverford to study astrophysics and minor in theater. "There was very little in the way of art at my high school," says Ramírez, who started a drama club there after dabbling in theater in junior high.

At Haverford Ramírez realized that the hard sciences weren't a strong suit, so they shifted to sociology while taking theater classes at Bryn Mawr. "Junior year I decided I'd much rather write and direct a play than write a sociology thesis, so I shifted



my major to theater to focus on the playful act of creation."

Ramírez was especially inspired by two professors in the Bryn Mawr-Haverford Bi-College Theater Program: Professor Mark Lord, with his rich academic view of theater practice, and Associate Professor Catharine Slusar, who most influenced Ramírez's artistic practice.

In a Lord course on playwright Samuel Beckett, for example, Ramírez learned that Beckett, a native English speaker, challenged himself by writing in French. It's a technique adapted by Ramírez, who's currently playing instruments they're not familiar with, including harmonica, cello, and the chord organ, and composing music in what they call an earnest, playful, and contemplative style.

"Art can be a practice in pretension—you can try to impress people and make it purely with the audience in mind," explains Ramírez, "but I feel like I have this one precious life and I ought to continue to play and challenge myself and fail, because that's the best way to learn."

Making a life in the arts, Ramírez admits, is challenging. "With the recent [proposed] defunding of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), I'm hyper-aware that it's important for artists to come from every class in our society, and I encourage artists who aren't particularly wealthy—who are scraping it together as I've had the challenge and delight, at times, to do—to be gentle with yourself and rely, when possible, on a strong artistic community."

—Anne Stein

*Ramírez is also part of Theatre Contra, which stages movie readings at Philadelphia-area bars. Ramírez's paintings, poems, handmade furniture, and other creations can be seen at jovitoramirez.com. Their first album, *There Is No There There*, by Jo Vito and the *There There*, is available on Spotify and other music sites.*