

A large, stylized illustration of two hands, one dark blue and one teal, holding a black metal staircase. The hands are positioned as if they are supporting the staircase, which is a central element of the design. The background is a solid red color.

SANCTUARY CITY

BY
**MARTYNA
MAJOK**

DIRECTED BY
**JAKE
PENNER**

SEPTEMBER 10 - OCTOBER 5, 2025

AUDIENCE GUIDE

WELCOME!

Dear Next Act Patrons,

Welcome to *SANCTUARY CITY* at Next Act Theatre. We are honored to share this powerful, intimate production with you. Martyna Majok's play takes us inside the lives of two teenagers – known to us only as G and B – growing up in Newark, New Jersey in the early 2000s. Both were brought to the United States as children. Both have built their lives here, forming bonds and building dreams in a city they call home. And both live with the uncertainty and risk that come from being undocumented. A change in immigration policy, the expiration of a visa or the wrong encounter with law enforcement could mean being forced back to a country they barely remember.

Their story unfolds in a series of snapshots – late-night arrivals through a bedroom window, conversations whispered under blankets, moments of humor that flare up in the middle of hardship. Majok's writing captures the rhythms of teenage friendship and love, but also the urgency of survival when the systems around you are unstable or unforgiving. For G and B, questions about prom, graduation and the lure of delicious chicken Parmesan are inseparable from questions about safety, housing and whether they can remain in the only home they have ever truly known.

As the years pass, their circumstances shift in ways both hopeful and heartbreaking. One of them gains a path to citizenship; the other remains undocumented. What begins as a friendship grounded in shared experience becomes a partnership in navigating an impossible situation. They imagine solutions together - including a plan to keep B in the country - but every choice comes with consequences, and every decision is shadowed by risk.

The play's fragmented, non-linear structure reflects the way memory works - how certain moments replay, how the past interrupts the present and how the smallest interactions can take on enormous meaning over time. Silence is as important as speech, and what isn't said often carries as much weight as what is.

SANCTUARY CITY tells a story about two friends fighting to hold on to each other, the lives they've built and the futures they hope to create. It offers a starting point for conversations about belonging, citizenship and identity. We hope it sparks meaningful dialogue for you.

We invite you to reflect: What does sanctuary mean to you? Who helps you feel safe? What risks would you take for someone you love? And how do we make room for others to belong?

Thank you for joining us on this journey.

With gratitude,

Elyse Edelman, Artistic Associate, and the Artistic Team at Next Act



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Content Advisory

SANCTUARY CITY contains strong language, descriptions of emotional abuse and domestic violence and themes related to deportation and family separation. The play also includes moments of heightened emotional intensity.

Please note that this guide contains not only important background and context, but also discussion of plot elements that could be considered “spoilers.”



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Martyna Majok. Photo courtesy of Tess Mayer.

Martyna Majok was born in Poland and raised in New Jersey. Her work explores the lives of immigrants, the working class and those navigating systems designed without them in mind. She received the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *COST OF LIVING*. Her other plays include *IRONBOUND*, *QUEENS* and a musical adaptation of *THE GREAT GATSBY*.

Majok's writing is known for its emotional intimacy, humor and fearless engagement with political realities. *SANCTUARY CITY*, developed in part at the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab, premiered at New York Theatre Workshop in 2020.

CAST AND CHARACTERS

G (Played by **Ashley Oviedo**)

A rising high school senior who finds stability in her friendship with B while navigating a home life marked by fear and trauma. Her mother, still recovering from a string of abusive relationships, has avoided seeking help despite the turmoil affecting them both, out of concern for their immigration status. Now that G has gained citizenship, she must confront what - and whom - she's willing to risk in order to protect the people she loves.



Ashley Oviedo

B (Played by **King Hang**)

A rising high school senior balancing school, under-the-table work and the everyday pressures of teenage life. After ten years in New Jersey, he learns his mother is preparing to return to their country of origin. Left with a life-changing choice, B must decide whether to follow her or remain in the only place that's ever felt like home - even if it refuses to fully claim him.



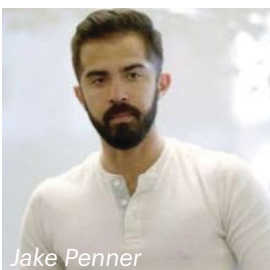
King Hang

Henry (Played by **Joe Lino**)

B's boyfriend, raised in the U.S. by immigrant parents and deeply in love with B. He's kind and supportive, but there are parts of B's experience he can't fully grasp. Though he wants to help in any way he can, the legal system offers him few options - and even fewer guarantees.



Joe Lino



Jake Penner

SANCTUARY CITY is directed by **Jake Penner**

NOTES FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

"G and B were born in other countries and brought to America young."

"Henry is first generation. Born in America of immigrant parents."

"All have American mouths. All raised working class."

"The countries of origin can suit the actors chosen. No character, however, is of Western European or Canadian origin. Or from a country of greater liberalism than the United States, especially as it relates to marriage equality in 2006 or earlier. These characters have grown up within working class multicultural America. They have connections, feelings, and knowledge of their countries of origins (or, in Henry's case, the country of his parents) but I limited moments of this in the script in an effort for wider, more inclusive casting across productions."

-Martyna Majok (*SANCTUARY CITY*, script notes)



Martyna Majok. Photo by Bronwen Sharp.

ACTOR INTERVIEW

During each production Next Act Theatre produces, more than one person prepares to take on a role. All shows have an overstudy—the actor who plays a role each night—and their understudy, who prepares to go on if the overstudy cannot. In SANCTUARY CITY, Ashley Oviedo plays G, while Patricia León de la Barra understudies the role. We sat down with both of them to talk about the play, the role and how their life experience informs their approach to this play.

What draws you to a play like SANCTUARY CITY?

Ashley Oviedo: What draws me to a play like SANCTUARY CITY is essentially the same things that draw me to music and dance! I love telling stories, and from the time I was eight years old, it's what I have always loved to do. I love knowing that I can create meaningful art through song or dance, but I especially love when a piece speaks to me personally. For me, it's about the feeling I get as an artist when a song, dance, musical or play resonates with me as a person!

Are there things that you feel personally connect you to G? If so, what are they?

Patricia León de la Barra: As a Venezuelan international student, opportunities to inhabit a character whose story echoes my own are rare. I first played her [as a student at Marquette University] during the closing months of the 2024 election. In many ways, G carried me through the immediate aftermath of Donald Trump's second win, and she continues to accompany me now as I revisit her a year later.

Like G, I grew up in a violent and volatile home, and I know what it means to have to fight to survive and to love in the midst of instability. While I have always held privileges that G initially did not—being able to study here, for instance—the weight of her story still resonates within me. I resonate with her especially in this political moment, when immigration crackdowns are reshaping lives in America, just as I resonate with her through the memory of growing up in Venezuela under [Venezuelan Presidents] Chávez and Maduro, when protests, disappearances and economic crises were part of daily life.

I also find myself connecting deeply with the “uglier” sides of G: her lashing out, her distrust of others, her immense capacity to hurt the

very people she loves. Those are impulses I recognize in myself, born of growing up in environments where safety could not be assumed and trust was dangerous. What I love about SANCTUARY CITY is that it does not condemn her for this. Instead, it frames her anger, her harshness and her contradictions in a sympathetic light. The play insists that survival is complicated, that love and harm can live side by side, and that those who endure instability should be seen not just for their wounds but for their humanity.

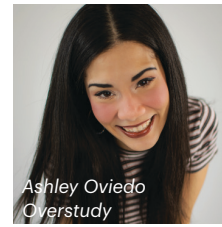
G's story is not mine, but it lives very close to my marrow. That is why I carry her with me.

Does the way the first half of the play is presented change how you think about your role, memorize, rehearse?

AO: For plays that have this specific structure; time jumps, quick scene cuts, et cetera, I usually like to try to focus on memorizing the throughline of the play itself! Of course, you always have to know the sequence of events in a play as an actor, but for this play specifically, I am focusing more than usual on remembering and figuring out exactly why the scenes are ordered the way they are and that usually helps me remember! Rehearsal helps me a lot too! Once I get the show in my body, it's honestly hard to forget... even after a few weeks of having closed a show!

What is the difference between preparing to perform the role and preparing to understudy it?

PL: Preparing to understudy the role is a different kind of discipline than preparing to perform it. As an understudy, I want to hold the character in my mind and body while also honoring Ashley's process and choices. It requires flexibility and an attention to detail that is just as rigorous as performing, but in a quieter, more adaptive way. There is something



both daunting and liberating about knowing I must be ready to step in at a moment's notice, while also supporting the work happening onstage from the wings.

What do you think is the role of a play like SANCTUARY CITY in our modern society?

AO: To, on one hand, give a voice to every story that either never gets told, or is told in a one-sided way, and by doing that, inspire empathy and community not just in the groups of people that the play is written about, but everyone in between.

PL: To me, the role of SANCTUARY CITY is to remind us that immigration is never just an abstract policy debate. It is a lived experience. The text is an unsentimental yet deeply empathetic portrait of how real, complicated lives are shaped by laws that rarely leave space for nuance or humanity. Policy is blunt: it cannot hold the contradictions that make up a person's life. This play does.

In an era where immigration discourse is weaponized for political gain, SANCTUARY CITY insists on the specificity of human experience. It asks audiences to sit with the ways in which status dictates the possibilities of love, trust and survival. And it does this without romanticizing its



King Hang and Ashley Oviedo in rehearsal for SANCTUARY CITY at Next Act Theatre, 2025. Photo by A.J. Magoon

characters: B and G are allowed to be flawed. It shows us that immigrants do not need to be perfect, virtuous angels in order to be deserving of dignity and respect.

I think that's the vital role of theatre in moments like these—to resist flattening, to complicate, and to demand empathy without sentimentality. *SANCTUARY CITY* argues for seeing the people whom immigration policies most affect. In a time of immigration crackdowns and increasingly rigid definitions of belonging, the play makes visible the cost of those abstractions on people's real, tangible lives.

Despite being set in 2001, what makes this play still relevant in 2025?

PL: The play's relevance is undeniable in 2025, as the president's renewed immigration crackdowns deliberately target migrants—raiding, detaining, and even kidnapping people with no criminal record. *SANCTUARY CITY* shows how policies that seem abstract on paper devastate real lives, dictating who gets to feel safe, who gets to love freely, and who is forced into impossible choices. Though set in the early 2000s, its story mirrors today's reality: a nation still denying immigrants' belonging.

What excites you the most about *SANCTUARY CITY*? What scares or challenges you the most?

AO: What excites me the most about *SANCTUARY CITY* is the same thing as what scares me the most about it: as soon as I read the play, I had a very personal connection to it. Those are some of the most rewarding projects to work on as an artist, and I couldn't wait to start in the months leading up to rehearsals. That same thing can also be a little scary, though. For every reason you can imagine, it's a very vulnerable thing to put stories that feel so close to your own up [on stage] every night for friends, family, and strangers to see.

What do you hope audience members take away from this play?

PL: I think *SANCTUARY CITY* exists to show a microcosm of what is, in many ways, the American story. It is about the compromises, sacrifices

and acts of love that survival demands, and how those choices are shaped by forces far larger than the individuals who must endure them. For immigrant audiences, I hope there is recognition and admiration for the characters' perseverance—for the way they continue to build lives and sustain hope even in systems designed to break them down.

For LGBTQ+ audiences, I hope the play's exploration of chosen family, loyalty and the difficult negotiation of love feels both validating and expansive. I hope there is resonance in B's relationship with Henry, which unravels under the weight of laws that deny their love legitimacy. They can't marry; they can't build a future together; and ultimately, they're forced into a choice where love itself becomes a site of resentment. That struggle—of love colliding with systemic exclusion—is one that queer communities know intimately, and I think the play honors that history with empathy.

For all audiences, my hope is that they leave understanding that immigration and queerness are not abstract issues; they are lived in bodies, in relationships, in private moments of trust and betrayal.

Patricia, what does it mean to be studying and performing in the United States right now?

PL: I am afraid. For the first time since I moved to the States, I have not been able to go home and visit my family. This is the longest stretch of time I have ever gone without seeing my own mother. But I carry with me the immense sacrifices my parents have made to support my education at Marquette, and to only talk about this fear would be a disservice to their investment.

Despite the current political climate, I have found an incredible support network here in Milwaukee. Studying and performing here right now means honoring those sacrifices by giving my full presence and dedication to the work, even while navigating fear and distance. I am grateful to my mentors, especially [Next Act Administrative and Artistic Manager] Caroline Norton, Marquette Theatre faculty, the directors who have trusted me with opportunities, and



Nelson Benítez and Patricia León de la Barra in *SANCTUARY CITY* at Marquette University, 2024. Photo courtesy of Marquette Theatre.

my friends—who are all American, all amazing people—who have helped me navigate the stressors of living abroad. Thanks to their support, I feel welcomed, seen and loved, and that sense of belonging has allowed me to continue to take risks as an artist, even in a time of uncertainty.

What do you think is the role of hope in the arts right now?

AO: The role that hope serves in art today is to create a sense of calm, love and understanding among people. Art serves as a mirror so much of the time; it shows us our flaws and the things we may be avoiding in our own hearts. Art gives us the opportunity to sit with those difficult things and hope to be better as individuals and a society. Hope is the “why?” in my opinion. Why we choose to tell difficult and sometimes uncomfortable stories as artists, and why we choose to sit and listen as audience members.

PL: To persevere.

Anything else you'd like audiences to know about this play?

PL: Once, I heard someone dismiss [this play], saying it sounded “too sad.” I think that reaction is telling, and exactly why we need plays like this. Audiences shouldn't shy away from stories because they carry pain or tragedy; that pain is part of the truth. At the same time, *SANCTUARY CITY* is not only a story of hardship. It is also full of love, joy and survival. It shows the beauty and humor that exist even in the harshest circumstances, and the ways people fight to hold on to each other despite everything stacked against them.

I hope this play cracks people's hearts open the way it did mine.

SUMMARY

The play is structured in two parts: the first fragmented and non-linear, the second more grounded in time. Below is a chronological breakdown:

WINTER 2001

G shows up bruised at B's window after an incident of abuse. He lets her in. She stays.



Ashley Oviedo and King Hang in rehearsals for SANCTUARY CITY. Photo: A.J. Magoon

SPRING 2002

B reveals his undocumented status. His mother is considering leaving the U.S. G vows to help him stay.

FALL 2002

B's mother leaves. G becomes a citizen through her mother and offers B support. Her home life remains unstable.



King Hang and Ashley Oviedo in rehearsals for SANCTUARY CITY. Photo: A.J. Magoon

SPRING 2003

G is accepted to college. G and B attend prom. G proposes a marriage plan to help B gain legal residency.



Ashley Oviedo, King Hang and Joe Lino in rehearsals for SANCTUARY CITY. Photo: A.J. Magoon

FALL 2003

G moves to Boston for college. B stays behind. They remain in touch.

WINTER 2006

G returns. They haven't seen each other in years. Their dynamic has changed. The marriage plan resurfaces - but so do their doubts.

END

B is left waiting, uncertain. Time passes. He remains.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2001 - 2006

After 9/11: A Shift in National Priorities

The play takes place in the years immediately following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. This was a moment of seismic change in the United States, not only in terms of grief and fear but in how the country viewed immigration. Because the attackers entered the U.S. on tourist, student or business visas – some overstaying or using false documentation – immigrants across the board faced increased suspicion. The federal government quickly reframed immigration as a national security issue. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established, with a primary focus on counter-terrorism. Policies that had once emphasized paths to citizenship gave way to new systems of surveillance, detention, and deportation.

Refugee admissions were frozen for months. International student visas were scrutinized like never before, requiring colleges to track and report the movements of their foreign students. Immigration enforcement expanded, and people like G and B – young, undocumented and brought to the U.S. as children – found themselves navigating life in a country that increasingly viewed their presence as a threat.



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Family, Survival and Risk

G's mother, still undocumented at the start of the play, relies on unstable and sometimes abusive relationships to survive, all while trying to stay under the radar. B's mother, fearing discovery at work, makes the devastating choice to leave the country – leaving B alone to find his own way. For both teens, safety is never a given.

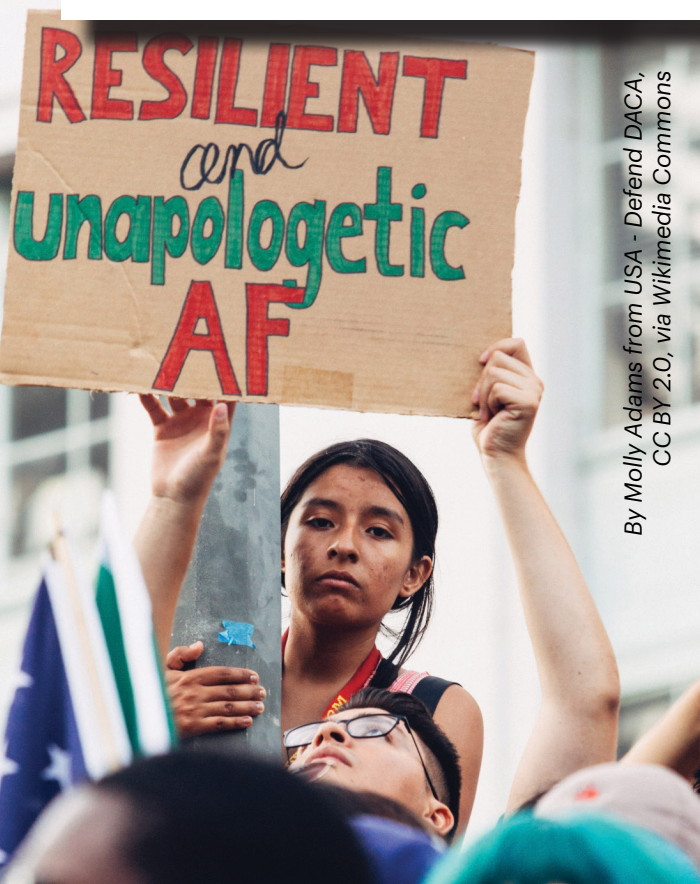


By Molly Adams from USA - Los Angeles March for Immigrant Rights, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons



Before DACA: Few Options for Undocumented Youth

SANCTUARY CITY takes place in a time before DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), which wouldn't be introduced until 2012. At the time, undocumented young people had no legal protections. They couldn't apply for federal financial aid, couldn't work legally, and faced constant fear of deportation. Though they had grown up in the United States – often with little memory of any other country – they were barred from many of the milestones their peers could pursue. For B, that meant watching his dreams of college slip away, not because of his grades or ambition, but because of his legal status.



By Molly Adams from USA - Defend DACA, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons



By Molly Adams from USA - Defend DACA, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The term “DREAMers” – used to describe undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children – first emerged from the proposed DREAM Act, introduced in 2001. The bill sought to create a path to legal status for qualifying youth, but it repeatedly failed to pass. Even in the early 2000s, the idea of “DREAMers” was part of the national conversation, offering hope to young people like G and B, even though it remained out of reach.



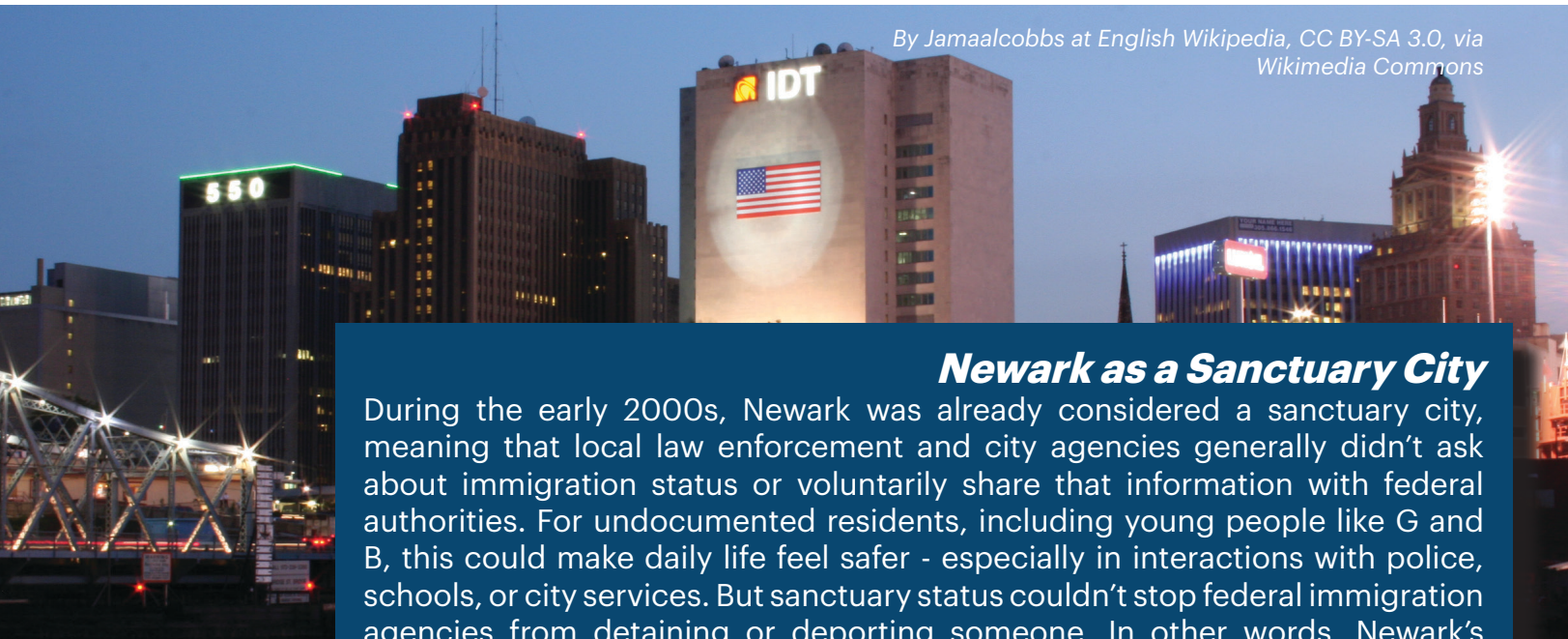
Barriers to Citizenship

During this period, one of the few viable paths to permanent residency was marriage to a U.S. citizen. In *SANCTUARY CITY*, G and B consider this option as a last resort. But the process is far from simple. Couples must prove their relationship through detailed documentation and face a high-stakes interview, conducted by U.S. immigration authorities, that tests the intimacy and authenticity of their connection. If immigration authorities determine the marriage is fraudulent, the consequences are severe – up to five years in prison and heavy fines.

For G and B, rehearsing this interview becomes a charged and emotional experience - one that blurs the lines between strategy and emotion, between friendship and, for one of them, maybe something a bit more romantic.



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By Jamaalcobbs at English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Newark as a Sanctuary City

During the early 2000s, Newark was already considered a sanctuary city, meaning that local law enforcement and city agencies generally didn't ask about immigration status or voluntarily share that information with federal authorities. For undocumented residents, including young people like G and B, this could make daily life feel safer - especially in interactions with police, schools, or city services. But sanctuary status couldn't stop federal immigration agencies from detaining or deporting someone. In other words, Newark's policies could reduce the risk of being exposed through local systems, but they couldn't offer legal protection or erase the constant fear of being forced to leave the country.

Same Sex Marriage: Not Yet a Legal Option

B's later relationship with Henry offers a contrast to his relationship with G – and a limitation. While Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2004, federal recognition would not come until 2015. In the early 2000s, even if B and Henry had married in a state where it was legal, it would not have granted B legal status. For queer couples like them, love could be real, but it couldn't offer a path to protection.

By WisPolitics.com - March down State St., CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons





U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Public Domain, via Flickr

Where We Are Now

Much has changed since 2006 – but much hasn’t. The policies put in place after 9/11 laid the groundwork for many of today’s immigration debates, practices, and enforcement systems. **SANCTUARY CITY** reminds us of our neighbors living in the margins of those policies – young people making impossible choices in search of stability, belonging and hope.

By The White House via X, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons



By Pax Ahimsa Gethen - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

THEMES

Belonging and Exclusion

Memory and Fragmentation

Friendship as Survival

Citizenship and Systems

Love as Risk

Youth and Agency

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does “sanctuary” mean to each character?
2. How does the non-linear storytelling mirror trauma or memory?
3. Who has the most power in this story - and who has the least?
4. How do systems (immigration, education, family structures) shape possibility?
5. How would this story be different or similar in today’s legal context?

EXTENSION: MILWAUKEE CONTEXT



Ashley Oviedo and King Hang in rehearsals for SANCTUARY CITY. Photo: A.J. Magoon

1. Is Milwaukee a sanctuary city? What does that mean?
2. What services exist here for immigrants or refugees?
3. How can you get involved in advocacy or allyship?

SUPPLEMENTAL MEDIA (ADAPTED FROM OUR FRIENDS AT SEATTLE REP)

(This further reading and media list for Martyna Majok’s SANCTUARY CITY was originally curated by librarians at Seattle Public Library for Seattle Rep’s 2024 production, directed by Desdemona Chiang.)

Books:

1. *The Undocumented Americans* by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio
2. *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* by Jose Antonio Vargas
3. *We Are Here to Stay* by Susan Kuklin
4. *Beautiful Country* by Qian Julie Wang
5. *In the Country We Love* by Diane Guerrero

Films/Media:

6. *Dream With Me* (documentary on DACA youth)
7. *Papers: Stories of Undocumented Youth* (Kanopy)
8. *The Sun Is Also a Star* (teen fiction adaptation)



Ashley Oviedo and King Hang in rehearsals for SANCTUARY CITY. Photo: A.J. Magoon

MENTAL HEALTH AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Next Act Theatre is proud to be part of the Milwaukee community, where numerous organizations support youth mental health, immigrant families, LGBTQ+ young people and those navigating complex life circumstances like the ones explored in *SANCTUARY CITY*. Below are several trusted national and local resources.

Local Resources (Milwaukee):

ACLU of Wisconsin – youth empowerment programs, immigrant and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, legal support, and community education on civil liberties
www.aclu-wi.org | (414) 272-4032

Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee – equal access to legal representation
www.legalaidmke.com | (414) 727-5300

Voces de la Frontera – immigrant rights, worker justice, and community organizing
www.vocesdelafrontera.org | (414) 643-1620

Milwaukee LGBT Community Center – youth programs, mental health support, and advocacy
www.mkelgbt.org | (414) 271-2656

16th Street Community Health Centers – medical, behavioral health, and counseling services
www.sschc.org | (414) 672-1353

CORE/El Centro – bilingual holistic healing, trauma recovery, and community wellness
www.core-elcentro.org | (414) 384-2673

National Resources:

National Runaway Safeline

www.1800runaway.org/youth-teens | 1-800-RUNAWAY (1-800-786-2929)

NAMI HelpLine (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

www.nami.org/help | 833-626-4244

Thank you for joining us for this play. We hope you find meaning, empathy and reflection in *SANCTUARY CITY*.



Ashley Oviedo and King Hang in rehearsals for *SANCTUARY CITY*.
Photo: A.J. Magoon



SANCTUARY CITY

BY MARTYNA MAJOK | DIRECTED BY JAKE PENNER
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