

CALENDAR

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photo by Karen Almond

AN ENCOUNTER WITH LATIN AMERICAN THEATER

The LATC's Second Encuentro Festival Brings 14 Companies to Downtown

This week, 14 theater companies from the United States, Cuba, Mexico, Peru and other countries will congregate at the LATC for the Encuentro de las Américas festival. The lineup include *Deferred Action*, from Dallas' Cara Mia Theater Company.

By Nicholas Slayton

Three years ago, Downtown Los Angeles played host to a new festival centered on Latin American and Latino theater. The event brought together more than a dozen national and international companies, and in addition to presenting works, the participants teamed up to write and perform new pieces.

This week the Encuentro de las Américas festival returns to Downtown, with even broader ambitions.

The Encuentro festival opens Thursday, Nov. 2, and continues through Nov. 19 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. Fourteen companies will stage shows in the LATC's five theaters.

The Latino Theater Company, headquartered in the LATC, is hosting the Encuentro (or "Encounter") festival. It is intended to showcase Latino productions, which are often overlooked in the greater theatrical community, said Latino Theater Company Artistic Director José Luis Valenzuela. He noted that the original event also offered an opportunity to craft new relationships and build for the future.

The success of the 2014 festival, in terms of interaction and engagement with the community, along with ticket sales and feedback, prompted the Latino Theater Company to plan a second iteration, Valenzuela said.

This year's Encuentro features groups from across the United States, as well as companies from Canada, Mexico, Peru, Colombia and Cuba.

"We're having an international encounter that brings Latinos from the U.S. and Latin Americans in the rest of the Americas together," Valenzuela said. "It is a dialogue about the theater and how these companies work with the community and

what they do in their country."

Most of the plays are under 90 minutes, Program Director Selene Santiago said, but a few reach two hours. Some are in English, others are in Spanish, and many are bilingual. Works range from *Broken Tailbone*, a one-woman show in which Carmen Aguirre tells her life story of growing up in a dance salon, while teaching the audience salsa dancing, to *Quemar las naves: El Viaje de Emma/Burning the Ships: Emma's Journey*, a version of *The Odyssey*, though devoid of dialogue (see sidebar for other highlights).

The 14 companies were chosen through an application process. The organizing committee whittled the list down to 20 before deciding on the participants, Santiago said.

"We had put out a call to companies. What we were really looking at was, 'Does this play fall in line with the goals and mission of the festival? Is this tour ready? Would it be feasible to bring this?'" Santiago said.

The works are wildly varied, deeply diverse, and in some cases politically timely. Tickets for individual plays are \$44. A pass for two shows in one day is \$80. A 13-show pass is \$310.

Some companies were part of the previous Encuentro. That includes the Pregones Theater, from the Bronx. Artistic Director Rosalba Rolon said the first festival was an exciting experience, and that many of the company members still talk about the workshops and shows from 2014.

"Some of us are going for the first time. We've got artists who are eager to experience what the previous cast experienced," Rolon said.

The company will stage the Los Angeles premiere of *The*

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FIVE ENCUENTRO HIGHLIGHTS



photo courtesy Pregones Theater

The lineup includes the Pregones Theater's production of *El Apagón/The Blackout*, which is set during the 1965 Northeast blackout.

With 14 main-stage performances, it will be difficult to see everything at the Encuentro de las Américas festival. Here are five highlights, with their show times this week (there are also future dates for each).

Culture Clash: An American Odyssey

Thursday, Nov. 2, at 8 p.m., Sunday at 7 p.m.

Los Angeles' own Chicano theater troupe takes the stage for a series of excerpts and speeches from past shows, including *Bordertown* and *Radio Mambo*. Along with their repertoire, the members of Culture Clash will perform a new piece.

Quemar las naves. El viaje de Emma/Burning the Ships: Emma's Journey

Saturday, Nov. 4, at 2 and 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m.

The Organización Secreta Teatro from Mexico City stages this adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey*, flipping the gender to focus on the widowed Emma and her journey of exploration. The play is performed without dialogue, relying on score, physical language and elaborate costumes.

10 Million/10 Millones

Sunday, Nov. 5, at 2 and 7 p.m.

Performed by Cuba's Argos Teatro, *10 Million/10 Millones* is the story of a young man growing up in Cuba following the communist revolution. Along the way, he has to reconcile the political views of his parents with the realities of the new era.

El Apagón/The Blackout

Saturday, Nov. 4, at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m.

Set during the 1965 Northeast blackout, *El Apagón/The Blackout* tells the story of a Puerto Rican man in New York City trying to make it to the birth of his first child. His journey home takes a turn when the power goes out. The show uses popular Latino songs from the period.

Deferred Action

Friday, Nov. 3, at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 p.m.

Dallas' Cara Mia Theater Company delivers a timely show looking at the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. The play tells the story of Javier, who came to the United States as an undocumented minor, and now as an adult finds his life in danger due to changing politics.

—Nicholas Slayton

➔ THEATER, 14

Blackout/El Apagón. Rolon said the show, a fast-paced journey through New York during the 1965 Northeast blackout, is emblematic of Pregones Theater's style, with an emotional journey told with a fast tempo and witty dialogue.

Along with the main-stage companies, Encuentro includes a "micro-festival." Twelve Los Angeles-based artists will stage shows in other parts of the LATC, and audiences who stroll through the green room, a vault from the building's time as a bank, and other spaces can catch parts of the performances.

The second weekend of the festival will hold discussions and forums on various trends and issues in Latin American and Latino theater. Altogether approximately 300 actors, writers, directors and other theatrical creators will be at Encuentro that weekend.

"Every company is going to have a forum to talk about their artistic journey and why they chose the work they do in their community," Valenzuela said.

As with the first Encuentro, there will be an opportunity to create. When not performing, Santiago said, the companies will be broken up and reorganized into groups to work on a new play based on an assigned topic. On the final night of the festival, the groups will perform their works for one another. These plays are not open to the public.

"We create 10 different companies that create 10 different pieces. It makes it different than most festivals," Valenzuela said.

Rolon said that the creation part of Encuentro is fun, but also intense. Still, she said, forming new groups adds to the excitement and the point of what the festival is about.

Encuentro de Las Américas runs Nov. 2-19 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., (213) 489-0994 or encuentrodelasamericas.org.

nicholas@downtownnews.com