

24th Street embraces role as neighborhood's theater

By Karen Wada | April 28, 2015 8:50 AM



Mark Bramhall, left, Micaela Martinez and Tony Duran in 24th Street's 'Walking the Tightrope' at the Kirk Douglas Theatre this weekend / Photo by Craig Schwartz

"Before," says Yolanda Baza, "I felt I had to be *Señora Yolanda*." Her voice lowers, her expression turns stern. "I was very serious."

Then, the Pico-Union grandmother joined an acting program at [24th Street Theatre](http://www.24thstreettheatre.com). "Everything changed. Now, I play and enjoy life." Gleefully, she squeezes an imaginary orange. "Now, I take the juice."

"She was dead," her husband, Cipriano, agrees. "But now she is alive."

The Bazas are sitting side by side in a back office at 24th Street, a little stage company with big aspirations. "We want to do great work," says its executive director, Jay McAdams. "We also want to change lives."

Since it opened in 1997, the theater has found ways--offstage and on--to serve the largely Latino, working-class community north of USC. "We started out intending to just do plays," says Debbie Devine, the artistic director

and McAdams' wife. "But the needs of the neighborhood made us realize we should do much more."

So, 24th Street gives audiences an affordable mix of local and international artists and its own productions, such as the highly lauded family show "Walking the Tightrope," which ends a national tour at the [Kirk Douglas Theatre](#) this weekend.

It offers education programs for all ages and outreach that is definitely grass-roots: a Day of the Dead celebration that draws 1,500-plus, homemade tamales dished up before and after shows, an open-door policy that keeps its building's big green doors wide open during the day.

"Everybody is welcome," declares Devine, walking across a lobby that doubles as a community hub. On this cloudy afternoon, kids snack on fruit before class while women browse through stacks of donated clothing. Visitors drop in for coffee or to use the computer printer. Through those green doors have appeared old friends, curious passers-by and, on occasion, people in distress. Theater staffers have come to the aid of homeless strangers and a domestic violence victim seeking refuge.



Photos: Yolanda Baza, above, and last year's Day of the Dead celebration / Photos by Cindy Marie Jenkins.

"We do things theaters don't usually do," McAdams says. "Things you can't measure in awards or reviews."

Even so, 24th Street has managed to earn more than its share of acclaim. The company has won year's-best honors for Spanish-language and children's plays -- genres that don't usually get such attention. Its 2010

version of Aristides Vargas' "La Razón Blindada," co-produced with two Mexican partners, was named L.A. Weekly Production of the Year. The drama about Argentine political prisoners travels to Mexico City this summer.

The West Coast premiere of Mike Kenny's "Tightrope," the story of an English family's love and loss, wowed critics in 2013--the L.A. Times called it "delicately poised between children's fable and adult reverie at once, only to become another transcendent thing altogether."

Helping kids 'After 'Cool'

Devine is a devoted arts educator. McAdams is a conservatory-trained actor. The couple, who live in the Valley, say they and fellow theater artists Stephanie Shroyer and Jon White-Spunner founded 24th Street at the urging of USC's then-drama school dean, who hoped to see a professional stage close to campus. (Shroyer and White-Spunner have since left the group.)

The company moved into a converted '20s-era carriage house near Hoover Street. "We expanded our mission once we saw this was a true neighborhood," says Devine. They also saw the neighborhood had lots of social/economic problems and not a lot of resources, especially when it came to helping kids.

Kids are a priority at 24th Street, which runs a teen leadership academy and After 'Cool after-school theater classes that also develop social skills.

Reaching beyond the community is Enter Stage Right, an interactive introduction to the theater that has become a field-trip favorite, serving 10,000 students this school year. Each visit begins with the basics. "What do we buy at the box office?" Devine asks eager first-graders gathered in the lobby one morning. "A box?" someone guesses. A welcoming video features actor Jack Black, who credits Devine, his former teacher, with transforming his life. Onstage, children learn how to transform an empty space into a magical place.

In 2012, Theatre Communications Group, the national non-profit theater organization, honored 24th Street for its innovation and risk-taking. That year, Devine and McAdams took a risk by announcing they were going all-TYA (Theater for Young Audiences). "We did it not because we like children's theater, but because we hate it," says McAdams. "So much of it is junk. We want to create sophisticated plays parents can share with kids."

One such creation is Devine's staging of "Walking the Tightrope," in which a grandfather can't bear to tell his granddaughter that her grandmother died, so he says she joined the circus. Devine points out that Kenny's tale confronts two taboos of children's theater--death and sadness. "Kids can handle more than people think," she insists, noting that the grandmother's spirit is represented by a bald male clown. "Parents were puzzled, but children got it right away."



Photo above: Debbie Devine and Enter Stage Right students / Photo courtesy of 24th Street Theatre

'Heart-anguishing' stories

While its youth programs filled up fast, 24th Street had trouble getting area adults to attend plays, even with neighbors paying just 24 cents' admission. "We were told, 'If you want people to come, do Hispanic art,'" McAdams says. Hence, the creation of a Latino theater initiative in 2003. "After a few bumps, things took off. But we had this apartheid-- English shows and Spanish shows. Now, we make things bilingual, using super-titles."

Yolanda Baza and other residents were given the chance to act in holiday plays they helped to create through a project called Teatro del Pueblo. "The first year, 2013, we had two dozen folks, from homeless to financially OK," McAdams recalls. They shared intensely personal stories--many "heart-anguishing"--that were crafted into a script.

"Year One was life-changing," says McAdams. People who were going to get divorced didn't. An After 'Cool mother was inspired to earn her GED and is aiming for college. "There was deep sharing, the building of trust. Year Two, we still had sharing but focused on skills. Along the way, it wasn't always smooth sailing. Some people fought with each other or quit and came back. But on opening night, everyone was sobbing and hugging."



Teatro del Pueblo's foundation funding has run out, however 24th Street plans to keep the project going. The company, which has a \$500,000 annual operating budget, relies on donations, grants and tour income. McAdams says it spends much of its money on education and outreach. "We produce relatively few shows because of finances." He and Devine are figuring out the effects of Actors' Equity's new minimum-wage rules on their 80-seat theater. (Both opposed the changes.)

One certainty, says McAdams, is that "we will keep helping people like Yolanda."

Baza, who is retired from the bakery business, came to L.A. from Mexico City more than 40 years ago. "Once, I was nervous about the audience," she admits, recounting her experiences in Spanish and English. "Now, I have fun onstage."

Delightedly, she describes her role in last year's show: "I was a coquette." She clasps her face in mock horror. "My grandchildren were like this. They said, 'Oh, Grandma!'"

Baza laughs. "I am 72, but now I forget my age. If you ask, I say I am 10 or 20."

Photo above: Debbie Devine and Jay McAdams / Photo by Jon Deshler