

THE ARTS

Play seeks to capture legacy of the Chicano movement



ABOVE AND BELOW: LACC Theatre Academy students act in "Aug. 29." Set in 1990, it's about a professor visited by the spirit of journalist Ruben Salazar as she writes about his legacy. **PHOTOS BY YAZLIN JUAREZ — THE LATINO THEATER COMPANY**

Championed by community college performing artists, 'August 29' reaches back to examine resistance movements in Los Angeles

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Decades after a pivotal moment in Chicano history, the Latino Theater Company is reaching back to the height of resistance movements in Los Angeles.

"August 29," a play set in 1990, centers on a young professor who is visited by the spirit of late journalist Ruben Salazar as she writes about his legacy.

Salazar, a Mexican American, was recognized as a pioneering figure in the coverage of Latino communities across L.A. An award-winning journalist, news director of KMEX-TV and columnist for the Los Angeles Times, he had become a pivotal voice in the Latino community. Until his life was cut short.

The Chicano Moratorium, which took place Aug. 29, 1970, was one of the largest anti-war protests in the nation, held in East L.A. by Mexican American demonstrators.



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With more than 20,000 people strong — the movement protested the disproportionate deaths of Mexican American troops in the Vietnam War, along with police brutality against Latinos.

The protest turned violent when the L.A. County Sheriff's Department declared it an illegal protest and launched tear gas from helicopters.

It killed three people — including Salazar.

In the play, Salazar is played by Alex Bravo, 22, a recent graduate from Los Angeles City College and a member of the LACC Theatre Academy.

This is Bravo's second time returning to the role after his successful "August 29" debut at LACC last fall.

"At first it was definitely a lot of pressure," said Bravo, reflecting on his first time portraying Salazar. "I (really) dove into who he was and wanted to do him justice."

The Latino Theater Company first launched the play in 1990. This year's rerun was brought by their Impact Initiative, a program bringing professional theatre to community colleges.

The play debuted once more at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in early

August, and has since transitioned to performances across L.A. colleges.

According to the theater's website, the play blends personal stories with the larger Chicano movement, offering emotional and relevant reflections on cultural pride, activism and justice.

The story weighed heavily on the cast members, Bravo added. They wanted to share it as truthfully as they could.

"It took on this whole life of its own that we all just felt this immense responsibility," Bravo said. "And not only responsibility, but we felt privileged and blessed to be able to tell this story in the height of all of this craziness."

On Sept. 8, the U.S. Supreme Court lifted a federal judge's order that prohibited federal agents from stopping and questioning people based solely on ethnicity.

Now federal agents can decide to question an individual's immigration status based on factors such as place of work, apparent race or ethnicity, or speaking English with an accent.

For the Donald Trump administration, the widespread immigration crackdown across the nation since early June has been fueled by a mantra of deporting the "worst of the worst" criminal immigrants.

And administration officials say federal agents have

successfully rounded up such migrants.

But for many in Southern California, images of arrests of day laborers, car wash workers and construction workers in immigrant-rich L.A. and its suburbs, has raised the ire of immigrant advocacy groups and others, who say they are unconstitutional.

Amidst immigration raids and increased fear in Latino communities, Bravo believes the play provides the "hope that there can be a better tomorrow if we start today."

"I think art has the ability to change culture, to change perspective, to end wars and to start them," Bravo said. "And I think that it's such a powerful tool."

He referenced a moment in the play where his character, Salazar, asks: What are young people doing now?

Bravo said that playing Salazar inspired him to reflect on the Chicano movement and where it stands today. He questioned if he, himself, was doing enough.

"The injustices that are happening to us now, we think we've taken so many steps forward," he said. "And in ways we have, but we can't get comfortable with it."

José Luis Valenzuela is the founder and artistic director of the Latino Theater Company, which he established in 1985.

An award-winning direc-

tor and distinguished professor, Valenzuela also served as head of the master of fine arts directing program at UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television.

In 1990, Valenzuela directed the LTC's debut of "August 29" — two decades after the death of Ruben Salazar.

"The play allows the community to be proud of who we are, and also to talk about the idea of resistance," he said. "And how we as a community have to unite and resist the attacks by the administration."

Valenzuela spoke about the importance of telling Chicano history, especially through the voice of community college students.

After seeing very few Latinos in the selective art programs he participated and led, Valenzuela wanted to ensure the arts had a place in community colleges.

"This is something that we have dealt with historically," said Valenzuela, referencing discrimination and racial bias toward the Latino community. "The importance of now is why we have to be visible."

Valenzuela emphasized the Impact Initiative's purpose — to give students the chance to tell important stories.

When asked about the significance of the arts in

relation to Chicano history, Valenzuela emphasized Salazar's character — hoping the audience can reflect and feel a sense of community.

"We need the arts," Valenzuela said. "I've been doing this since the '60s, and Chicano theater as a response to what's going on... if we can gather the people through (art), we touch their soul."

The play's director, Ramiro Segovia, referred to the play as a "call to action."

Segovia, an adjunct professor at both East Los Angeles College and Los Angeles City College, participated in UCLA's master's program for acting & television, where he was mentored by Valenzuela.

"The play gives our students the opportunity to be leaders in the community," he said. "We're not all going to be Rubens, right, but we can be our own voice."

Segovia shared that when he was an acting student, he also didn't see many Latinos in theater.

Now, as a leader who directs the artistic storytelling of Chicano history, Segovia feels a responsibility to give students the opportunity to learn, thrive and be proud of their identities.

"I think it's my duty to at

least cater to the majority of our students in the department, which, a majority of them are Latino," he said. "We need to share our stories within our community."

Reflecting on the history of a movement and how it relates to the present is also important, Segovia added.

"What we workshop is really parallel to what is happening in the world," he said. "It's a beautiful story of flashbacks, and we get to see culture, families going through it, Ruben, all of those special moments."

Segovia hopes that attendees are inspired enough to show up for their communities.

"The arts are huge and give hope to students, to young adults, and keep me alive as a director," said Segovia. "It's what identifies culture and it also gives a moment in time to reflect."

"August 29" will have two performances today and Friday at Mt. San Antonio College at 1100 N Grand Ave in Walnut.

The final performance will be on Sept. 26 at CSUN's Plaza De Sol Performance Hall.

For more information, go to latinotheaterco.org/august29.