

24TH STREET THEATRE ON A LATINO ROLL

By Dale Reynolds, Senior Arts Critic, LatinHeat.com
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There are many participants in the grander-scale search of Latino identity in the United States, some with Latin surnames and some not. One of the latter is **Jay McAdams**, 53, Executive Director of the **24th Street Theatre**, at Hoover Street, west of downtown Los Angeles.

McAdams and his wife, **Debbie Devine**, run this small 99-seat theatre, located in a run-down section of mostly Latino, mostly poor, immigrants. A populace, not so coincidentally, untrained in the habit of theatre-going. So, that's where they've gradually initiated a program that brings in the theatrically under-served audiences, especially the young, of the surrounding neighborhoods.



Now celebrating their 20th anniversary of producing theatre at their simple but comfortable space, McAdams and Devine's interest lies in leftist political theatre, justly demonstrated by their award-winning production a couple of years ago of *La Razon Blindada/The Armored Reason*, which ran eleven months here, followed by a two-month run in Ventura, winning several prizes, including a coveted L.A. Weekly Award for Best Production, the first time a Spanish-language play was so awarded in its 31-year history.

Just revived, *La Razon Blindada* was originally written by **Aristides Vargas**, a well-known name in international Latino theatre, who based it on a horrific time his brother spent in an Argentinean prison for fighting the corrupt military junta that ruled Argentina in the hectic 1970s. "Mr. Vargas," says McAdams, "is a highly political person and fighting injustice is part of what he wants theatre to do. Aristides originally wrote, directed and produced it in Ecuador at his **Teatro Malayerba/ Theatre Bad Grass** (a colloquialism for a bad person). "I met him at a theatre festival and we fell in love with his play as it was a triumph of the human spirit. We're interested in theatre that is anti-totalitarian, along the lines of *Midnight Express*, or *Kiss of the Spider Woman* – anything that helps the common folk to fight injustice by staying strong."

The McAdams' were the first theatre company to produce it in the U.S., which proved to be highly effective and a huge audience hit for them. The folk at Ventura's Rubicon Theater saw it then and were aware of how 24th Street's Latino theatre model was working and they wanted to tap into that. "Where we're located has more lower-income audiences. Downtown's L.A. Theatre Center, by contrast, tends to tap into more upper-class Latinos. But here we're teaching our neighbors how to go to the theatre – and, as important, teaching them theatre etiquette. It's a cultural awareness that we're both teaching and learning from."

Two of the ways of getting youth into their theatre turned out to be simple and innovative: feed 'em tamales and charge 'em \$2.40 a ticket. "Building a culture of theatre-going is time-

consuming and demands patience. About a quarter of the audience pays the lower fee and we've garnered some grants to market to Latino audiences," – from the Irvine Foundation for one.

Community-based theatre they may be, but with professional actors in all the roles. In addition, they've developed after-school programs and once a year produce a Holiday show consisting of members of the community who are not professional actors, in a Holiday-play for their families, written by Victor Vazquez.

Some background: starting in 2003, they began producing Spanish-language plays to which the kids in the area came – but not their parents, who assumed it would be non-Latino, "Western European" art. "But we brought in some Latino artists, found we did okay, put some artwork on the walls, and showed some films, all materials that brought in the neighborhood. I didn't particularly like the quality of the work, but I began to suspect it was because I didn't understand the culture, as so many of the others *did* like it. Then I brought in **Jesus Castaños Chima** (called simply Chima) to teach and direct for us. He was a great choice as he's a talented theatre-artist and we saw things begin to turn around. But that meant that we were becoming apartheid, with Latinos only coming to Spanish-language shows and non-Latinos only attending English-language shows. But when we added supertitles (to both audiences), we found that our poor kids were actually mixing it up with our Board Members: Eastside met Westside; poor, the rich; brown to white."

For Chima, *La Razon Blindada* is important theatre as "people are rapidly disengaging from the political process – they are tired of the news and want to hibernate for the next four years. Our play is relevant to them because of our message. Folk may not [agree with] us, but we put our heart into it and have made it as good as possible."

Ironically, investing time and money in these projects has actually increased 24th Street Theatre's international standing. Until recently, American embassies from around the Spanish-speaking world have invited them over to increase the American/Other cultural awarenesses.

To the Oklahoma-born artist, "the spread of this new arc of our work is exciting. Personally, we've become bored with dull theatre. We feel we must say something about the world, and our work is solid, with standing ovations everywhere we play as we continue to tour. We believe that we are building new audiences." And one of the examples of this outreach was 24th Street Theatre's win five years ago of the Theatre Communications Guild's **Peter Zisler Award** (out of Boston) for "innovation and risk-taking in the American Theatre."

In addition to racial outreach (which includes African-American and Asian neighborhood residents), they are committed to building quality theatre for young audiences. "There is no longer much quality children's theatre in Los Angeles, which can make a difference in people's lives. We intend to invite more under-served audiences to the table."

Not much more need be said.

"La Razon Blindada" closes October 15th, 2017. Call 213.745.6516 for reservations.