

Redemption overcomes disaster

By Michelle Mills

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Los Angeles County resident Suzanna Guzman is a fearless opera singer and devoted arts educator, but when she was asked to play the Virgin Mary for the Latino Theater Company's production of "La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin" 14 years ago, she was terrified. She received the script only nine days before opening night.

"I said, 'Can you give me the songs, is there a score?'" Guzman said. "They said, 'We can play you the music and you can hear it. I got there and I looked at the script and there were these massive monologues in Spanish and in Nahuatl — Aztec — I was completely freaked out.'"

The 14th annual "La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin" will be presented at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles Thursday and Friday. Evelina Fernandez adapted the play from a text dating back to the mid-1500s that tells the story of a peasant, Juan Diego, to whom the Virgin Mary appeared in Tepeyac, Mexico. Believing she wanted a chapel built in her honor to help those in need, Diego repeatedly petitioned the bishop who ultimately agreed.

The work is performed in Spanish with English subtitles. It's directed by Jose Luis Valenzuela and stars Guzman and Sal Lopez with Castulo Guerra, Lucy Rodriguez, Geoffrey Rivas, Gabriel Gonzalez, Luis Aldana, Pepe Serna and more than 100 actors, singers and dancers from the community.

"For us in the United States, especially for Mexican people, it's a very important story in that Diego has to go through so many tribulations to be believed," Valenzuela said. "There's a little bit of doubt and courage,



PHOTO BY PABLO SANTIAGO

Suzanna Guzman stars as the Virgin Mary in the Latino Theater Company's 14th annual production of "La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin" at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles on Thursday and Friday.

LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE, DIOS INANTZIN

When: 7:30 p.m., Thursday and Friday

Where: Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, 555 W. Temple St., Los Angeles

Admission: Free, reserved seating \$40

Information: 866-811-4111, www.thelatc.org

heart and love, all the things that go into the story in trying to convince the bishop."

Guzman was aware of the importance of the piece when she first took on her role in "La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin" more than a decade ago. She could learn the music quickly, so Valenzuela suggested that she conceal a copy of the script in her hands, which would be folded in prayer throughout the show. She also worked with a dialogue coach.

"I was able to learn the Spanish monologues — and they are quotations, the words are straight out of the historical dialogue she had with Juan Diego — so I didn't want to screw it up," Guzman said.

Adding to her apprehension, at 5 foot 9 inches Guzman towered over the rest of the cast, which made her feel awkward. She decided to play Mary as being larger

than life.

Dress rehearsal went well, but opening night it seemed like a different play.

"Every catastrophe that could happen, happened," Guzman said.

Guzman's first appearance in the show was in the rafters, awash in a blue spotlight. Unfortunately the spotlight's battery was low and it grew darker as she read from the script secreted in her hands. She drew her hands closer and closer to her face in order to eke out the words and finished her monologue just as the blackness of the space overtook her.

Heading to her next scene, the heavy mantel Guzman was wearing slid on her head and she struggled to move it back into place. It flipped up in an odd position, and then her mic went out. One of the angels gave her a handheld microphone, which she tried to get someone to hold so she could focus on her script to no avail.

"I looked like Lena Horne singing with a handheld mic. I felt like the most utter catastrophic, abysmal failure of the world," Guzman said.

The production ended with Guzman balancing on a small disc that four Aztec men carried through the cathedral. She could feel them shaking as they struggled to hold it up.

"I'm supposed to be this beautiful, mythical, larger-than-life person, and at the end of it my hair is falling down, my arms are filled with roses and I'm on the verge of tears. And of course it threw me on my lines," Guzman said.

As the men bore Guzman through the aisle the audience joined them in song and reached out with reverence to touch her and take her roses. Even so, many in the crowd followed the procession to the back of the cathedral to shake hands with the actors and thank them for the performance.

"It still brings me to tears, because it was so powerful. For me, it was redemption. I did not destroy this icon, this image of hope," Guzman said.

"The biggest responsibility is that I serve the words and the music with the understanding that she is a mother as well and no matter what your beliefs are, no matter who you are, every person in the world started from that point and when you bring it down to that small relationship this is a woman who bore a child and she has been the mother to millions and millions of people," Guzman said.

"La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin" relays the message that in the eyes of God all people are equal, Guzman said.

"It is the music that unifies and as we lift our voices up we are all the same," Guzman said.

Valenzuela said that the play will be more meaningful this year because of all the stress in the country.

"The play is one of hope and love. It will also be healing for the community to gather together and share the joy of the production," Valenzuela said. "It's really important that people come and gather and be joyful by music and poetry and beauty."