

Guadalupe Spreads Her Theatrical Wings

By Mireya Navarro

LOS ANGELES — Andrea García Soto, who sings in the choir, was recently found to have breast cancer, so she prayed for her own health. Guillermo García, a dancer, has a terminally ill sister, so he danced to stop her suffering. His wife, Nellie García, another singer in the choir, was simply thankful for past blessings, so she sang to show devotion.

These performers in the play “La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin,” mostly amateurs, take to the stage with very personal agendas. “She came down to the poor people and said there’s hope for everyone,” said Ms. García Soto, 61. “I’m part of everyone, so there’s hope for me.”

A play-with-music in Spanish and the Aztec language Nahuatl, “La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin” has become a two-night holiday tradition at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles. A production of the Latino Theater Company, it is staged on the Thursday and Friday before the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is Wednesday. But this year, for the first time since it opened at the cathedral in 2002, the play will continue beyond its performances there, moving to the newly renovated Los Angeles Theater Center for seven more shows Thursday through Sunday and Dec. 20 to 22.

“La Virgen” re-enacts the 1531 story of the brown-skinned, Nahuatl-speaking Virgin who offers her embrace to the beleaguered Aztecs in the wake of the conquest by Roman Catholic Spaniards. She appears to an Aztec peasant, Juan Diego, who is not believed when he tells the Spanish bishop that she wants a church built on the hill of Tepeyac. The Virgin fills Juan Diego’s cloak with roses to meet the bishop’s demand for proof, and when he presents the roses to the bishop, the story goes, her image appears imprinted in the cloth.



Lazaro Arvizu in “La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin.”
Credit: Monica Almeida/The New York Times

The 3,000-seat cathedral here, which is only blocks from major cultural centers like the Walt Disney Concert Hall, offers a sprawling stage for the pageantry, which involves more than 100 performers, including 20 children. The cast features 53 dancers in feathered headdresses and ankle bells, as well as the mezzo-soprano Suzanna Guzmán of the Los Angeles Opera, who plays the Virgin in four apparitions, including one from the 30-foot-high atrium.

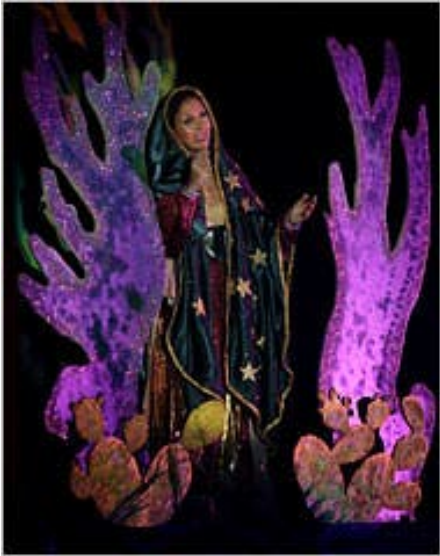
Pope John Paul II named Guadalupe patron saint of the Americas in 1999 and canonized Juan Diego in 2002. While a symbol of Mexican identity, in multiethnic cities like Los Angeles the Virgin of Guadalupe, revered as a protector of the downtrodden, is now a multicultural icon. A procession in her honor this month led by Cardinal Roger M. Mahony drew more than 10,000 devotees, not only Latino but also Vietnamese, Chinese and Filipino.

The audience of about 1,800 people at last Thursday’s opening performance included three priests and a canon from All Saints Episcopal Church in neighboring Pasadena.

“We’re big Guadalupe fans,” said Canon Lydia López, who said she had also visited the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

All Saints’ rector, the Rev. Ed Bacon, called Guadalupe “the center of Angeleno spirituality.”

“God calls us to be bridge builders, and Guadalupe to me is an incarnation of God building bridges between cultures and religions,” he said. “And she does it in a radical way. She appears not to the bishop or a European or even a Christian. She appears to an Indian, a marginalized person.”



Suzanna Guzmán, who portrays the Virgin.
Credit: Monica Almeida/The New York Times

The play itself has its genesis in a rebellious act. José Luis Valenzuela, artistic director of the Latino Theater Company and a drama professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, once staged a sleep-in with other members of what was then the Latino Theater Lab to protest the planned closing of the Los Angeles Theater Center, the municipal complex that was the company's home. (His Latino Theater Company took over the theater last year under a lease from the city.) For 10 days people from the community took the protesters food, and after the dispute ended, Mr. Valenzuela said, he decided to stage the play as a thank you.

The play, borrowed from a version staged by Luis Valdez at El Teatro Campesino near San Jose, ran on and off in the 1990s at various locations until Mr. Valenzuela took a tour of the cathedral during its construction and asked to stage it there.

At the cathedral, the company has used an adaptation by the writer and actress Evelina Fernández, Mr. Valenzuela's wife, based on the 16th-century text "The Nican Mopohua" and the translation from Nahuatl to Spanish by Miguel León-Portilla.

Mr. Valenzuela said that besides providing a spectacular setting, the cathedral serves to affirm that "it's our house, we're inside, and we're in total command of the space and who we are." He said he had a political aim with the play, hoping to inspire Latinos to become more assertive.

"It's so hard for immigrant people to survive in this country," he said. "Juan Diego had to keep working on it, and he makes the miracle happen through his perseverance. I hope people connect on a personal level to the story and not just from the religious part."

The play, which started with 50 performers, has more than doubled in size over the last five years. For the 500-seat space at the theater center, Mr. Valenzuela needs to cut the cast by half, but he said he would alternate players so no one is left out.

Sal López, who plays Juan Diego and whose wife and two teenage sons also appear in the play, said his performance was aimed at Latino audiences that may not be able to afford the tickets for holiday shows like "The Nutcracker." (The cathedral shows were free; at the theater center, tickets are \$15 and \$28.)

"It's a gift to our community," he said.

Ms. Guzmán, the opera singer, who is one of only nine paid actors in the play, has performed as the Virgin seven times.

She said that she had sung all over the world, most recently appearing with Plácido Domingo in the Los Angeles Opera's "Luisa Fernanda" last summer, but that only after a performance as the Virgin of Guadalupe have people wanted to touch her. It made her so uncomfortable, she said, that she now removes her mantle to take her bows to make sure there's no confusion.

"It's the most surreal event," she said.