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## Acting on Bad Experiences

■ **Immigrants: Seven Latinos will take to the stage to vent the pain and struggles of trying to live in Southern California.**

BY DAVID HALDANE  
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Gerber Romero, 28, once was happy with his life and work as a teacher in his native El Salvador. But four years ago, the death and violence in that war-ravaged country took its toll. "I love to teach and I love to learn," he

explains. "But under the fire, that was impossible."

So, crawling through the underbrush one night, Romero crossed the border and illegally entered the United States, seeking peace and a better life.

That was not what he found. Instead, he encountered hostility, underemployment, alienation and struggle, he says.

"People take advantage of you," says Romero, who supports himself in Los Angeles by working part time as a church janitor for \$8 an hour. "It shouldn't be that way, but that's the way it is."

Just what sort of lives do immigrant Latinos lead in Los Angeles? In a city

of millions of faces and millions of tales, Romero and six other immigrants have been offered a rare chance to tell their stories, to cross the lines of geographic, cultural, economic, linguistic and spiritual ignorance to reveal their often invisible, anonymous existences in a theater project called "Fronteras/Borders."

The seven who will appear in the show were recruited from English classes for non-natives; only one had previous theatrical experience. All were relatively recent immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala or Mexico. They work now as a security guard, video technician, housekeeper, stable hand, seamstress, janitor and

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## LATINOS: Immigrants to Tell of Hardships on Stage

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baby-sitter.

Laboring with an Anglo producer on what she calls an example of "documentary theater," they shared stories of how Latino immigrants are routinely cheated by unscrupulous landlords and merchants.

They spoke of the hostility they encounter from fellow workers, who see them as competitors. They discussed how, because many of them came here illegally, they feel vulnerable and afraid.

The immigrants say they feel tortured because they are so close yet so far from enjoying many of the rights, privileges and protections most Americans take for granted.

Speaking in Spanish and English, David Rustrain, who works at a stable, tells of a 1986 incident.

"A horse kicked me in the neck, the stomach, my hands," he recalls. "I couldn't work, and the boss didn't take me to the hospital. She wouldn't pay me, either. That lady, I worked for three years. Sometimes I still see her and she pretends not to see me."

Lilian Ramos of El Salvador relates the pain she feels at being treated as an anonymous immigrant.

"When I go to a store or a restaurant and the person who works there sees that I'm Latin," she says, "sometimes they don't serve me. But if it's an American person it's 'Oh, may I help you?'"

The immigrants also expressed frustration over the hard lives they must lead.

Argulia Ochoa, who is Guatemalan, observes: "I clean houses and baby-sit. But it's very hard because people want a perfect job, and they don't know about the buses. From where I live to where I work is four hours; that's eight

hours a day [just riding] on the bus."

And Eulalia Camargo, a housekeeper from Guatemala, speaks of the emotional barriers she faced in coming to the United States in the first place. "I was eating only once a day to be able to feed my children," she says. "The most difficult thing in my life was to leave them with a friend to come here."

"Fronteras," the 40-minute bilingual work scheduled to open June 10 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, is the brainchild of Susan Franklin Tanner, a Los Angeles actress-turned-producer who directs the local TheatreWorker's Project.

It has pioneered a dramatic form she calls documentary theater: "It's a form to tell a story that is emotionally powerful. It's better than a leaflet."

Her past productions include "Lady Beth," in which six unemployed steelworkers tell how the 1982 closing of the Bethlehem Steel plant in Vernon, Calif., affected their lives. The play was a hit, went on a 16-city tour and became the subject of a half-hour public television documentary. Tanner has also produced plays on the history, culture and disintegration of Southeast Los Angeles, and a piece featuring shipbuilders laid off from the Todd Pacific Shipyard in San Pedro.

By last year, she was ready to explore the Southern California drama caused by the infusion of thousands of immigrant workers from Spanish-speaking countries, she says, explaining: "I felt that there was a lot of resentment against the immigrant workers and [that they suffered from] a lot of anonymity. . . . I wanted to give them a forum in which to talk about their lives and express their

opinions, hopes and dreams—to break down the isolation they feel in coming to a country that is essentially hostile to them."

She found an ally in David Sickler, regional director of the AFL-CIO, whose California Immigrant Workers Assn. agreed to sponsor the play, along with the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor.

Organized labor needs to work more closely with Latinos, who now make up a major part of the work force in Los Angeles and Orange counties but who suffer job and wage discrimination, Sickler says.

"This is Ellis Island all over again and we need to be sensitive and helpful to these new immigrants," he says. "These are as productive, bright, hard-working human beings as our forefathers were. . . . They do the work that we don't want to do, and they've been doing it more cheaply."

To create the play, Tanner asked the participants to attend months of workshops in which they swapped stories, wrote poems, shared personal histories and expressed opinions on various topics. Tanner turned that material over to a professional, bilingual playwright who fashioned it into a script. For several weeks, group members, who are paid \$8 an hour, have rehearsed twice a week under a professional director to ready the show of words and music, which will be followed by a question-and-answer period.

While all concerned hope the work carries a professional sheen, its main value, Tanner says, may be in its therapeutic effect on the immigrants, many of whom will express themselves publicly for the first time.

As for the participants, they

hope their play will help sensitize non-Latinos to the immigrants' plight—and help other Latinos realize they are not alone.

"The play is very important," Romero says. "It's one way to give a message to our people—to show them that we are able to do something as Latinos and not just stay behind."

Too much of his own life has been spent in that fashion, he says sadly. He notes that after he came to Los Angeles in 1986, he used phony papers to get a \$3.25-an-hour restaurant job, which ended three months later when a burglary in his apartment drew police, forcing him to flee rather than face deportation.

Other menial jobs, all of which ended badly, followed. Once, he says, he was fired for suggesting that he and his fellow workers get Christmas off, an on-the-job accident landed him in the hospital and cost him another job.

Romero eventually received temporary legal status under the federal immigration amnesty program.

Today, Romero says, he sends a major part of his less-than-\$200 weekly income home to help support an ailing mother and teen-age brother.

Romero wants to teach again but says he realizes he has a far way to go before becoming an American educator.

For starters, he spends hours of his own time attending classes to improve his English. And a few nights each week now, he sneaks off to rehearsals for the play that has become a central part of his life.

"We didn't know each other in the beginning," he says of the cast and crew. "Now we love each other like brothers. You have to do something to stay alive."