

ETHNICALLY DIVERSE SOLANO COUNTY MUST SEE “THE HOUSE OF RAMON IGLESIA”

Since our beginning, “Great Migrations” have sought to bask in the torch light of Lady Liberty as she illuminates Ronald Reagan’s and pilgrim founder John Winthrop’s “shining city on a hill”. Wayfarers in westward wagon trains, waves of northward flooding emancipated slaves and legions of huddled masses shuffling through the gates of Ellis Island have rested their hopes in a better future and concocted Jefferson’s “grand American experiment”. All wrestled with ties to their former lives.

Solano College Theatre’s (SCT) gripping production of “The House of Ramon Iglesia”, superbly paced and directed by Hector Correa, reminds us that emigration and severing the umbilical cord of ones’ homeland is neither surgically precise nor bloodless. America is a jumbo melting pot gumbo of ethnic spice whose sizzle and seasoning is best when the flavors of our differences remain vibrant and alive. However, the nutritional necessity of assimilation of immigrants into the American recipe is as undeniable as the intergenerational family conflicts inevitably bred.

The inescapably realistic and riveting 1983 play, “The House of Ramon Iglesia”, was seminal in launching academy award nominee Jose Rivera’s writing career. SCT, under the expert tutelage of Artistic Director George Maguire, has garnered rights to the west coast premier of this ‘must see’ winner.

Temblors and aftershocks of emotion rock the “The House of Ramon Iglesia” as an immigrant family is tested by the challenge of new social mores, language and necessary rules for survival pitched against traditional totems and taboos. Such foundational shuddering can steel a great nation and is the stuff of great plays. On opening night, Harbor Theatre quaked and then held fast with rapt attention.

The play concerns the Iglesia family living in Long Island since emigrating from Puerto Rico nineteen years prior. Bitterly disappointed patriarch, Ramon, plans to retire from his menial job, sell his house and move his family back to Puerto Rico. Homes and families have many rooms; each framed differently by those who dwell within. Thus, the play examines the deep emotional and psychological impacts of Ramon’s plan on family members after he tragically finds that it is no easy matter to sell “The House of Ramon Iglesia”. It may only be deeded on no sturdier stuff than a dream.

Ramon’s alcoholism, diabetes and bad decisions rain torrents of disappointments as an irrepressibly pious heartache for her homeland drowns his not so English illiterate wife. The family is further torn as eldest child Javier proclaims himself enlightened as a totally assimilated American college grad while in reality he is in tortured conflict, ashamed and enraged at his father’s “foolishness”. Predictably, the gemstones in Javier’s self made crown are neither flawless nor precious and family decisions have profound intergenerational consequences. People are simply not so simple.

Carmalita Shreve as the wife is near flawless as the archetypal matriarchal glue cementing irrepressible bonding of a family of audience, script and actors. Robert Ponce pounces on and devours the role of Ramon with the breadth and range of pathétique, pathos and Puerto Rican patriarchal pride intended by the author. Justin Hernandez as Javier Iglesia aptly negotiates his journey from fear born arrogance into the welcoming arms of loyalty, love and acceptance. Chelsea Militano as Javier's "fereakin goil friend" Caroline, delivers a sultry blend of sleaze, sweetness and street savvy while winning our sympathies. Ultimately, scorning college boy Javier, horrified at the possibility affiliating with mediocrity, is schooled by Caroline's genius in love. Mark Irwin nails the callous, cocky Caucasian neighbor Nick Calla, the potential home buyer. He was born to wear a gold chain, muscle shirt, platform shoes and tight pastel polyester disco bellbottoms. Ruben Oriol-Rivera drops and delivers as the bullet-brained, phrase-spitting, hell bent for leather middle son and new Marine recruit. Nick Ramirez is believable in his debut as the wise in loyalty and love but short in learning teenage baby of the family.

The dilapidated dingy set, complete with catholic trim shop shrine to Dolores's dead infant daughter, is masterfully in sync with perfect costuming, haunting lattice work shadow lighting and laser accurate Puerto Rican folk and pop music.

"The House of Ramon Iglesia" trumpets that challenging never-ending changes in life are as inevitable as the price of engaging or denying their treasures and accepting or rejecting their traumas. Thus, Ramon lovingly observes of Javier's' struggle, "'If he's changing, let him...until he finds peace'" while warning the self styled budding American prodigy, "You eat their food, wear their clothes, love their women, but they don't love you - you're still their little Puerto Ricano."

Generations of Solano County citizens, co-tenants in the most ethnically diverse 'house' in all of California, must not miss this important and courageous work. Attendance is a civic duty. Just plug in any ethnicity and it's about us all.

Kevin Ryan is a retired Colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.