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FALL 2005

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"a fabulous gamble"

By Deryl Davis

Karen Zacarias, founder and artistic director of Young Playwrights' Theater (YPT), calls it "a fabulous gamble": Take 60-odd elementary school students, many of them non-native English speakers and some with learning disabilities, give them 2,000 years of Latin American history and portraits to consider, and ask them to cooperatively write a single English-language play for performance at the world's largest museum. A bit daunting, isn't it?

"We've never done anything this big before," Zacarias admits of the YPT - Smithsonian Discovery Theater initiative, "and we don't really know what the end product will be. We're trusting the kids to pull it off."

According to Zacarias, they always do. An award-winning playwright, theater entrepreneur, and administrator, Zacarias founded Young Playwrights' Theater 10 years ago to teach young people how to write plays and to foster literacy and community dialogue. Now, she and other YPT members are working with three majority-Latino DC public schools to create a play which will be performed September 30th through October 21st during Hispanic Heritage Month at the Smithsonian Institution's Discovery Theater. Students from

Bancroft Elementary School in Mount Pleasant, Oyster Bilingual Elementary School in Woodley Park, and Lincoln Middle School in Adams Morgan are basing their play on a forthcoming exhibit at the Smithsonian's S. Dillon Ripley Center titled *Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Portraits*. The idea of creating a play around the comprehensive Latino exhibit came from Discovery Theater Director Roberta Gasbarre.

"I wanted to do something special with this amazing exhibit," Gasbarre says. "The idea that we are portraits of our heritage is wonderfully vibrant and a great way to teach about where we come from."

The collaboration with Young Playwrights' Theater was natural, given Discovery Theater's mandate to educate young people through the performing arts. Although there was some early discussion about Zacarias writing the play herself, she suggested that children, in this case mostly fourth through seventh-graders with whom YPT had an ongoing relationship, create the play instead. Her role would be to guide the students along and, eventually, weave the many narratives into a single, coherent whole to be called *Retratos: Portraits of Our World*.



Karen Zacarias leads class exercise



"The whole mission of Young Playwrights' Theater is to get the voices of kids out into the public, so they're heard," Zacarias says. "We want to get them excited about literacy and learning, so they want to be in school." Zacarias recounts stories of students whose grades and interest in school markedly improved after their involvement with a YPT program. Teachers appreciate the way YPT reinforces the

reading, writing, and comprehension skills that are part of the basic curriculum.

"They came in and used our academic assessment rubrics and discussed the importance of writ-

ing and revising," says Lisa O'Neill, whose class at Bancroft Elementary is involved in the *Retratos* project. "I'm a big believer in using the arts in education, and they do a phenomenal job."

Each of the classes involved in the project studied Latin American history and culture during the regular school year. Then, starting in April, members of YPT came in for two months of bi-weekly workshops involving theater games, monologue and dialogue writing exercises, play analysis, and discussion of poetic devices like similes and metaphors. Zacarias and her colleagues showed the students facsimiles of some of the paintings in the *Retratos* exhibit (opening in October) and asked them to come up with stories based upon what they saw or thought they imagined.

"We'd show them a painting and say, 'What do you see

here?'" Zacarias says. "Sometimes it would be [obvious], but a lot of times it would be really whimsical and highly imaginative." Zacarias describes a story developed by students at Bancroft Elementary about sibling rivalry between the god of fire and the god of water, sacred to the pre-Columbian peoples of Latin America. "They have the two gods fighting and, suddenly, in the middle of the fight, they switch and start salsa dancing," Zacarias says. "I could never have come up with that juxtaposition of the ancient and the modern." She adds, "I'm really honored to be a playwriting partner with them."

Many students continued to work on the project with YPT over the summer. Zacarias says certain themes or images run through many of the students' stories, related to the artwork they have studied. Frida Kahlo's famous uni-brow, seen in her many self-portraits, is one example. By studying Latin American art and culture, and then writing about it, the students have the opportunity to more seriously reflect on their own roots.

"Karen really has a vision of what can be accomplished with these kids," says Gustavo Velasquez, director of the Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs, which provided almost \$30,000 for the *Retratos*

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playwriting project. "She understands how important it is to develop artistic concepts that highlight their heritage. She puts the seed in their brain."

Most, but not all, of the students involved in the playwriting

a rising sixth-grader, the most fun was seeing her play performed by professional actors in a workshop just before summer break. "It was really exciting to see it get acted in class," Washington says. "I can't wait to see it at Discovery Theater in September."



project come from Latino households. Terry Huynh, one of Lisa O'Neill's students, is of Vietnamese extraction. "It's been really fun learning about the gods and all

they do," Huynh says of her class' study of Latin America's pre-Columbian period. "I didn't know anything about this culture before."

For Airen Washington, an African American student of O'Neill's and

Zacarias feels that the *Retratos* project is symbolic of where Young Playwrights' Theater has come in its first decade. Previous projects have included collaborations with Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company on a play about life in the city's 14th Street corridor and a project about the Holocaust produced in concert with Theater J. But these were mainly local productions for local audiences. The *Retratos* project is the first national/international production the theater has undertaken.

"It's really making something out of nothing," Zacarias says. "What started as a homework

assignment is going onto the stage at one of the biggest museums in the world. What could be better?"

Discovery Theater's Gasbarre estimates that 5,000 children and adults from around the world may see the play in its three weeks of production at the Smithsonian. She also hopes to find other venues where the play can be performed by her small company of professional actors. In addition, Discovery Theater is developing an after school outreach program at neighborhood Latino Centers in the District.

What does all this add up to? "It's a call to action," Gasbarre says. "We want these young people to take the idea behind the portraits home with them and see themselves as valuable, vibrant portraits of the multicultural world they come from."

Which is what Karen Zacarias wishes for all her students. "I have no doubt this is going to pay off," she says, reflecting for a moment. "It could pay off big."

Retros: Portraits of Our World, at Discovery Theater, Sept. 30 – Oct. 21.



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