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Cultures meet in producing play

By Tonnie Dakin
Of the Emerald

"Teatro Nuestro," which opens Saturday night in the EMU Ballroom, is a play that deals with the customs and standards of the Northwest farm worker.

A culmination of the efforts of people from two different cultures, the play was written by Cheyney Ryan, head of the University philosophy department; Ernesto Roberto, recruiter for the High School Equivalency Program at the University; and Hans Christofferson, who works with independent theater

Professor, recruiter, director combine talents to spread cultural message through comedic means

companies in the area.

To research the topic, the three went to Oregon legal services and labor camps and talked to migrant farm workers in the state, Christofferson said.

"We came across the idea of a festival...and we decided to devise a plot around that," Christofferson said.

In the initial stages of writing the script, the three met with people who work in migrant education to discuss the plot, characters and technical aspects of the production, Ryan said.

The dialogue in the play is about 90 percent Spanish, but the play was written in English, Ryan said. Roberto did a large part of the translation of the script, and they all worked together in script conferences for a couple of months, he said.

Ryan and Christofferson worked with the translators at every stage because not all English idioms and expressions make sense in Spanish, Christofferson said.

"It was basically a constant script conference for a few months to work out these problems," he said.

"We try to make it a human situation...without drawing any particular reference to right and wrong," Christofferson said. The primary goal of the play is to entertain and to get a message across, he said.

The play centers around the Sanchez family, whose daughter is having her quinceanera, or 15th birthday party, an event of special significance in the Mexican culture.

On the eve of the party, her father is fired from his job as a farmworker because he protests the conditions of pesticides where he works, Ryan said.

"This kind of throws the family into a crisis because they don't know where they are going to get the money to do this," Ryan said.

Although this makes the story sound melodramatic, the tone of the play is that of light comedy, Ryan said.

"That's the way you best communicate to people...through (comedic) situations," Christofferson said.

Many parts of the play include music, and the band Sandunga is part of the cast of 11 characters, Ryan said.

Armando Moralis, a junior anthropology and Spanish major, is a musician in the play, and he plays the guitar, sings and acts. He portrays a member of the band, which is trying to receive payments from the family, he said.

"The thing is, it's a good message," Moralis said. "When you're acting, you're giving a good education."

"The best way to communicate these things is to know what community you are going to...and to realize those values," Moralis said.

The play is directed toward the Spanish-speaking community, and the University production is also directed toward students who are studying the language, Ryan said.

"The culture in this area is very lily-white," Ryan said. "There aren't really many opportunities at all for people to be exposed to theater done by any of the minority groups."

"It deals with...some facts about that culture that people are probably not familiar with...and also, the working conditions," Ryan said.

"The play was created to meet the needs of the migrant workers," especially those who are illiterate and have no means of written communication, Roberto said.

The purpose of the play is to educate farm workers and others about the dangers of working in the fields because "in earning a living they could be earning their death," Roberto said.

The production at the University is sponsored by the Department of Romance Languages and the College of Arts and Sciences.



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