

Words, not war, star in play set in WWII

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Words That Burn” is a dramatized exploration of the earth-shattering period of World War II, through the words and experiences of William Stafford, Lawson Inada and Guy Gabaldon. It premieres at the Milagro Theater during their annual La Luna Nueva festival, Sept. 25-28.

“Words That Burn” was created by Cindy Williams Gutiérrez and Frank Delgado. Both Cindy and Frank are members of Los Porteños, a local group of Portland Latino writers dedicated to raising awareness of their diverse languages, stories and cultures. Members hail from Los Norteños in Seattle. In 2006, they started a Latino writers’

collective committed to making Latino and Latin American literature an integral part of the Portland community and of Oregon’s literary legacy. Joaquin Lopez is co-executive producer of the play, responsible for grant-writing and ensuring that everything is in place.

Patricia J. Rumer: *Cindy, when I listened to the first staged reading of Words That Burn, I was so moved by the words and images. This is a play that resonates with timeless life and death decisions. What was the artistic impulse behind the creation of Words That Burn?*

Cindy William Gutierrez: At the first planning meeting for the William Stafford centennial celebration, Kim Stafford, his son, encouraged us to come up with projects that furthered our own organization’s objectives while also supporting what William Stafford stood for: peace, place, personal truth, and reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the seed that germinated Words That Burn. The kernel was my curiosity about Oregon’s literary legacy – what former poet laureate William Stafford, a conscientious objector, and Lawson Inada, a Japanese American internee, have bequeathed to us. I found myself wondering: What can we learn about the juxtaposition of two men who were in camps during “the good war” – one because of what he believed; the other because of what others believed about him?



Actors from the play, “Words That Burn,” which will be playing at the Milagro Theater in late September. Pictured, left to right, are Paul Susi as Lawson Inada, Todd Van Voris as William Stafford, and Anthony Green as Guy Gabaldon.

P.J.R.: *And Guy Gabaldón, how did you find him?*

C.W.G.: When I presented the original idea for the play to Los Porteños, member Frank Delgado asked if I had ever heard of Chicano Marine Guy Gabaldón. Frank was writing about his own father’s life as a Chicano sailor from Texas and had learned about Guy, who is known as “the Pied Piper of Saipan.” That turned out to be a turning point: Gabaldón was “the missing link” offering another perspective on World War II.

P.J.R.: *Frank, how did you learn about Guy? What interested you in his life?*

Frank Delgado: Too many times people say that you don’t know war until you have been in a war. I saw the movie, “Hell to Eternity,” a long time ago and later in life, I found out he (Guy) was from East L.A. In fact, I was watching This Is Your Life when Guy was introduced in the TV show.

My father was in the U.S. Navy during World War II and drove a landing barge under bombardment ferrying Marines in the invasion of Saipan, where Guy Gabaldón served. My background is of humble people of the fields who struggle to scratch an existence from the land. Being a military brat I traveled from place to place, base to base.

I want ordinary people – veterans, poor and working class folks – to see this play and to have access to the information in it. I hope that some of the Street Roots vendors will come to see the play or perhaps, one of the free pre-or post-performances.

P.J.R.: *Cindy, Frank mentioned that he is writing his father’s story, a story rife with painful memories, so he will tell his father’s story and free him of his pain. Is that true for you as well?*

C.W.G.: My dad was in the Army Air Force but did not see combat duty. But he was a proud veteran who left high school to serve his country. I reread his honorable discharge papers recently and was moved by the final sentence: We now look to you for leadership and example exalting our country in peace, President Harry S. Truman.

I hope to honor multiple World War II experiences and to hold opposing points of view without judgment, as well as to generate dialogue in our community that spans politics, cultures, and generations. My hope is that “Words That Burn” will engender a deeper well of understanding, empathy, and reconciliation.

Both Stafford and Inada were in camps for different reasons during World War II. And Guy is a compelling character whose story brings dramatic tension to the work: first, as a scrappy, Chicano kid from Boyle Heights in East L.A. who befriends Lyle and Lane Nakano. Then the Nakanos become his foster family at age 12 and he starts going to Japanese language school with Lyle and Lane. He is at the Nakano home when the news of Pearl Harbor is broadcast. The Nakanos are taken to a Japanese-American internment camp. Lyle and Lane volunteer to serve in the European theatre and the “rough-and-tumble” Guy sees it as his duty to join the Marines. He serves his country in the Pacific. A maverick determined to prove he is as American as any other

Marine, Guy discovers a new way to win the battle on Saipan by singlehandedly capturing 1,500 Japanese soldiers and civilians.

P.J.R.: *What are your hopes for this staged reading? How do you feel about the play now?*

F.D.: This production is not just an exercise in the art form of rhetoric. It is about the hopes and dreams of those who paid the price in World War II: the “insignificant” lives of refugees, women, children, soldiers and of those on the home front. This story belongs to the parents of young soldiers for whom they had so many dreams and the anguish of the wives and families who paid the price at home. This is their story, in their own words.

P.J.R.: *Joaquin, as a new and emerging writer, why are you involved in this project and Los Porteños?*

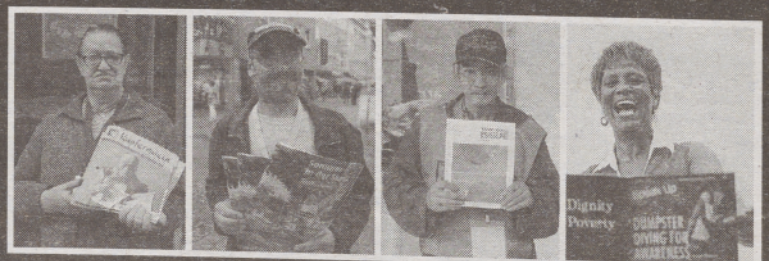
Joaquin Lopez: I think Los Porteños is a breeding ground for new ideas and new uses of language, both in Spanish and in English. The group has a diverse make up of writers who are rooted in Latin American culture either by birth, blood, or spirit. We are poets and prose writers. We have members who are accomplished published authors as well as emerging writers who are developing their unique voice. Los Porteños feeds my soul through listening to the words of other writers and considering the feedback and critique we offer each other. It is fantastic mental floss and cultural inspiration.

Patricia J. Rumer is a member of Los Porteños and assistant producer of “Words That Burn.”

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