

Latin Theater Off to Firm Start With 'The Toothbrush' by Diaz

By HOWARD THOMPSON

Friday evening was a record-breaking scorcher, the small theater wasn't air-conditioned, and the show started late before a tiny, wilting audience. Then things clicked, namely talent and some helpful electric fans, and the fourth season of the ADAL (translated as the Latin American Art Group) got off to a firm, professional start.

In its neat, cozy and comfortable 74-seat theater at 682 Avenue of the Americas, convert from a loft, the group was presenting "The Toothbrush," a two-character work by the Chilean playwright Jorge Diaz. Forget the Spanish language, especially if you don't know any to forget, like us. The play is obviously imparting still another "lack of communication" theme, in this case two young marrieds in a New York apartment.

They coo a bit, they prowl their living room, snapping and snarling, and all triggered by trivia. Occasionally, they speak to the audience. There is mid-point murder (not fiery enough, even on a hot night), and the play ends full-circle, with the

couple mounted on stepladders straining to reach each other.

There are shadings of Pinter (the wife becomes the maid in the second act) and Ionesco. Some candid, barbed humor punctuates the rantings. What matters is that two personable, excellent young performers, Elsa Ortiz and Frank Robles, play it straight through with utter credibility, under the keen, tight direction of Max Ferra.

Tom Foley's setting is vivid food for thought in itself, with a cavalcade of large animals lining blue-and-yellow walls, centered on a full-length figure of a haloed Christ staring fixedly at the premises.

And the beautiful movie-style series of color photographs projected on a screen behind the watching couple at the beginning and the end are captivating footnotes, credited to Felipe Napoles.

Judging by "The Toothbrush," which plays Friday through Sunday evenings through Oct. 18, the ADAL people understand what theater is all about. They have something to give it, they did so on Friday, and what follows will bear watching.