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DEFT TOUCHES, PASSION FOR DETAIL CRAFT TALE

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Elaine Romero had never been to South Florida before New Theatre, a small company with a growing national presence, began working on its world premiere of her play **Barrio Hollywood** .

Playwright-in-residence at the Arizona Theatre Company in Tucson, Romero comes from a family whose southwestern roots go back 400 years. Her Mexican-American characters in **Barrio Hollywood** are steeped in a world of faith and superstition and family.

Yet since she has come to Florida to help guide her play to its opening on Friday, Romero has found a new world to embrace and a joyous next step in her own love story.

"It's so tropical and green here," the 41-year-old playwright enthuses. "The air is so different. The Cuban food is so good. I've even fallen in love with Cuban Spanish."

Eleven years ago, Romero fell in love with engineer Brad Eggers. Just recently, they took a trip to Key West when he came to visit during rehearsals, and at the Hemingway House, he proposed. So a woman who had never been to Florida before will always hold it in her heart.

Love - familial love, romantic love - is also at the heart of **Barrio Hollywood** . The play tells the story of a young Mexican-American boxer named Alex (Euriamis Losada), his dancer-sister Graciela (Beatriz Montañez) and their mother Ama (Marta Velasco). When Alex is left comatose after an illegal fight in Mexico, a doctor named Michael (John Baldwin) enters their lives and claims a place in Graciela's heart.

New Theatre's Rafael de Acha, who is directing **Barrio Hollywood** , met Romero in 2003 at Louisville's Humana Festival, where playwright Nilo Cruz got a major award for Anna in the Tropics two days before he won the Pulitzer for it. De Acha and Cruz, who wrote Anna for New Theatre, were chatting; Romero, who knew Cruz, came up to them. She later sent De Acha the script for **Barrio Hollywood** .

It had been developed at San Diego Repertory Theatre in 1998-99 via an NEA/TCG Residency Program grant, the same grant Cruz got to write Anna in the Tropics. Though Romero had "multiple offers" before this, she says, "I wasn't happy [with the structure] and I knew what I wanted it to be. Rafael had it in his bones. . . . He has completely realized the fluidity I've always envisioned."

Other than Romero, no one putting together the production has a Mexican heritage. De Acha, Velasco and Losada are Cuban American; Montañez is of Colombian descent; and the American-born Baldwin just grins and says, "I've been to Mexico, drunk as hell."

But all have taken great pains to craft an evocative, authentic world. Lighting designer Pedro Ramirez once lived in Mexico and created a design that "reflects the flavors of the country," De Acha says. Set designer Michael McKeever has adorned the walls with huge paintings of Mexican religious icons. Choreographer Ricky J. Martinez learned authentic Mexican dances and taught them to Montañez.

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Though Hispanic plays have become more commonplace in South Florida, the majority are by Cuban-American playwrights. Other than an appearance by Culture Clash or some offerings at the International Hispanic Theatre Festival, works by and about Mexicans or Mexican-Americans are rarely done here, at least by the major professional companies. But everyone connected with **Barrio Hollywood** believes it can speak to anyone who sees it.

“Miami is a bridge to many cultures,” Montañez says. “Theater is art, not a territory.”

“The love of a mother, her devotion to her son, her hope to keep him alive - that is universal,” Velasco says.

Adds Baldwin, “This white boy [I play] learns more about himself by opening himself up to a world of magic.”

Romero, who coordinates the National Latino Playwrights Award at her Arizona theater, knows that many artistic directors and audiences see only “the other” and don't look any deeper.

“It's about looking at the works and seeing that these are truly universal stories,” she says. “I'm going to the theater to have the human experience. My play has heart, humanity and human frailty.”

IF YOU GO

Barrio Hollywood previews tonight at 8 and opens at 8 p.m. Friday at New Theatre, 4120 Laguna St., Coral Gables, where it runs through Nov. 14. Performances are 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 2 and 5:30 p.m. Sunday (no 5:30 p.m. show Nov. 14). Tickets are \$30-\$40 (\$20 for preview, \$55 opening night, \$45 for brunch with the playwright Sunday. Students \$7 at door for regular performances). Call 305-443-5373 or visit www.new-theatre.org.

Caption: photo: John Baldwin and Beatriz Montañez (a)

CHUCK FADELY/HERALD STAFF ROMANCE: A doctor named Michael, played by John Baldwin, finds a place in the heart of dancer Graciela (Beatriz Montañez) in **Barrio Hollywood**.

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