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By ALVIN KLEIN

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THE neon sign that lights up the rear of the stage reads "La Flor de Union City" — The Flower of Union City.

It is the backdrop for Manuel Martin Jr.'s play "Union City Thanksgiving," which spans three generations of a Cuban-American family that escaped the revolution, settled here and engaged in its own internal warfare.

To reach for realism and absorb local color, the play's director, André Ernotte, visited three of Mr. Martin's Union City friends and held a day of rehearsals last month at the 23d Street home of one of them, Cira Chavez.

Mr. Chavez's kitchen inspired Michael Sharp's set design for the play, which is being performed through April 4 at the Intar Theater, one of the playhouses along Manhattan's Theater Row on West 42d Street.

Intar, an acronym for International Arts Relations Inc., is a "multi-arts" organization that includes an art gallery and a musical-theater workshop. It was formed in 1966 to develop, present, promote and assimilate the work of Hispanic artists into the American cultural mainstream.

Mr. Martin, who came to the United States from Cuba in 1956 — three years before the Fidel Castro takeover — is one of the organization's six "playwrights in residence." He has

been highly praised for his direction of Spanish versions of various Off-Off Broadway plays and is currently adapting his play "Swallows," the precursor of "Union City Thanksgiving," into a "docu-drama" that will be seen on educational television next year.

Union City was chosen as the play's locale — and the thrust of its title — because, the playwright said, it represents the sort of "warm and friendly middle-class little town, with a taste of Cuba and a wonder of urban revitalization."

Mr. Martin, who lives in Manhattan, goes to Union City to shop for artifacts and food, visit friends and collect what he calls the "paraphernalia of life."

In the play, Union City is alternately described as a "micro-inferno" from which no one escapes and a haven. In either case, it's only "a 10-minute trip" (from Manhattan) "on the Orange and Black No. 7 bus," in the words of one of the play's characters, Nidia, a young woman who supports the family financially and emotionally.

One of her brothers is a catatonic who finally asks to be readmitted to a mental hospital. Another is a political reactionary who makes contributions to a terrorist group.

"But it's really a Mickey Mouse organization," Mr. Martin said. "He

doesn't have the nerve, only Robin Hood dreams."

The play, which has an eight-member Hispanic-American cast, contains intimations of lesbianism ("That would be a disaster in a real Cuban family," Mr. Martin said), racism, revelations of long-concealed family truths and shattered illusions. How-

A 'warm, friendly,' town with a 'taste of Cuba'

ever, the tone is affirmative and shot through with flashes of ethnic humor.

("How can you eat turkey without black beans and flan?" the grandmother asks rhetorically while preparing the holiday dinner. "Cranberry sauce is an American invention.")

Mr. Martin intended the play's fictitious Valdes family to be "atypical."

"They're imprisoned by their own conventions and divided because of

the revolution," he explained. "The antagonistic brother is fighting to recognize a glorious heroic past that probably never existed.

"They fled the Communist government, but soon the oppressed became oppressors here. Everyone is hurt by divisiveness, and I tried to see both sides."

Still, universal family rivalries permeate "Union City Thanksgiving."

Although Mr. Martin claims that his own family did not inspire the Valdeses, it, too, suffered a rift created by clashing political ideologies. (When Mr. Martin came to Manhattan, he left his parents, two sisters and one brother in Cuba. The brother followed. Mr. Martin's father died, and his mother and two sisters remain in Cuba, to which he has returned for three visits in 26 years.)

The playwright said he believed in the importance of preserving the family, one of the themes of his play.

"I've seen Jewish ladies here crying their hearts out; they've been our most responsive audiences," Mr. Martin said. "They know the pain."

"Ideally," he said, "our audiences should be 50 percent American and 50 percent Latin. Each can get so much that the others don't. But I have no party affiliations. I care about the human soul. The play is about passion, not politics." ■