

A VOICE FOR LATINO VETS

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Sometimes life's path is filled with rich irony.

Growing up in Arizona in the early 1930s, Hector Santa Anna attended segregated schools, "Latinos and Mexicans in one school, Anglos in the other."

Later, still a teenager, he joined the Army during World War II and soon was fighting alongside Americans of all races, defending the country that treated him like a second-class citizen by flying 35 combat missions during a 17-week blitz over Europe.

Sometimes life's path is filled with symmetry.

Santa Anna traces his lineage to the Mexican general who prevailed at the Alamo: his great-great-uncle. "We've been in the history business a long time," he wryly told University of Texas researchers in 2003.

Stories like his fascinated playwright James Garcia, whose play "Voices of Valor," opening tonight at UT, dramatizes the lives of the estimated half-million Latinos who served during World War II.

The war was a turning point for Latinos who received their education in segregated schools and were greeted at restaurants by signs reading: "No Dogs. No Mexicans." During the Great Depression, 1 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans were forced from their homes and expelled to Mexico.

The Latinos and Latinas who returned from WWII, however, felt empowered to claim equal footing.

"A whole community starts on that road to fully realizing its own American citizenship or its rights as full-fledged Americans," said Garcia, a former Austin American-Statesman reporter who now teaches at Arizona State University. "In that sense they really are the catalysts for the (Latino) civil rights movement."

The Latino servicemen and women who returned helped desegregate schools and formed civil rights organizations such as the American GI Forum and later, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

Garcia was inspired by the work of the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project, led by UT's **Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez**. Since 1999, project participants have interviewed more than 500 veterans across the country, chronicling stories rarely told in mainstream history books.

"Voices of Valor" premiered this month at Arizona State. Rivas-Rodriguez said it is faithful to the spirit of the history project and added that "people get it right away."

Garcia said "Voices of Valor" is not a classic war story but an epic tale about community. Six actors play 40 characters, all but one composites of the men and women interviewed by UT researchers. In more than two dozen scenes, characters travel in time, from the Mexican Revolution to the war and the decades after it.

The only character not a composite is Santa Anna, who went on to teach hundreds of pilots how to fly during a 22-year military career.

Now 83 and living in Dover, Del., he plans to be in the audience Saturday and at a reception tonight.

"I have strong feelings that many of those people who fought in World War II have been forgotten," Santa Anna said.

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(box)

'Voices of Valor'

When: 8 p.m. tonight and Saturday

Where: B. Iden Payne Theatre, 23rd and San Jacinto streets, at the University of Texas

Cost: \$10 for students, \$18 for adults

Information: For tickets, call 477-6060

Playwright James Garcia's play 'Voices of Valor' - about Latinos who served in World War II - opens tonight at the University of Texas.

Maria Amorocho, clockwise from top left, Bruno Cisneros and Marcos Najera rehearse a scene at the B. Iden Payne Theater on Thursday. 'Voices of Valor' will play today and Saturday at the theater.

'Voices of Valor' has six actors who play 40 characters across a wide swath of time.

Bruno Cisneros, left, Maria Amorocho and Marcelino Quiñonez rehearse a scene in the play.

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