The Austin Chronicle: Arts: Who They Are and What They Deserve: Th...

BY BELINDA ACOSTA

As those Americans who served in World War II pass away in ever-growing numbers, they're taking their stories with them — those personal histories whose intimate details bring the period into sharper focus, and more importantly, reveal the human experience within History's panoramic view. There has been no shortage of World War II oral history projects to capture these histories before they are lost forever, but several years ago Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, associate professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, knew something among them was missing: the U.S. Latino experience. Thus was born the U.S. Latinos & Latinas World War II Oral History Project. In 1999, with early seed money from the A.H. Belo Corporation and an appropriation from the state of Texas, professional and student journalists and volunteers took on the Herculean task of interviewing and writing accompanying narratives. (See "Collecting Voices.")

Next week a new play based on these narratives opens at the B. Iden Payne Theatre in conjunction with the third national symposium of the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project. Written by James E. Garcia, Voices of Valor is a joint project from Artes Americas partners Arizona State University Public Events and UT Performing Arts Center. They presented the play's world premiere in Phoenix, Ariz., on March 11 and are now bringing the cast of that production, directed by Richard Trujillo, to Austin for two performances.

If Garcia's name sounds familiar, it may be because he was a reporter and political columnist who covered U.S. Latino affairs and Latin American politics for the American-Statesman in the 1990s and later the Mexico City correspondent for Cox Newspapers. After 18 months as editor of the San Antonio Current, he moved to Phoenix, where he returned to an earlier interest in theatre and was accepted into the MFA creative writing program in playwriting at Arizona State University. In 2003, he won the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival ten-Minute Play Contest for his play about undocumented immigrants, "The Crossing." Garcia spoke about writing Voices of Valor from his home in Phoenix.

Austin Chronicle: With hundreds of interviews to choose from, how did you know where to begin?

James Garcia: The first thing I realized, after reading a few dozen transcripts, was that there was no way to pick, oh, these 10. I decided on composite characters, with one exception. The [two-act] play has an ensemble of six actors playing 35 roles. Because of my training as a journalist, I know how to write on deadline and have learned how to deal with a mountain of material.

AG: Oral histories can be dry. What was your process to create a theatrical piece?

JG: One of the first things you learn as a journalist is how to bear the quote. When there was a gem of a line that was great, I went to that. I culled as many as those as I could to build the characters. I wanted to stay as true to the fictional characters and true to the content that was great, I went to that. I culled as many of those as I could to build the play. I saw it as a play called The Exonerated, based on transcripts of death row inmates. It was presented with six actors, with music and strands of transcripts. I liked that.

I wanted the audience to experience not just the facts of the story but also the experience of hearing a story for the first time, that experience of people experiencing their memory. There's a lot of movement, and I guess you could say a filmic quality to the play.