

***Los Illegals: A Performance by Cornerstone Theater, Written by Michael John Garcés and Directed by Shishir Kurup***

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*Los Illegals*, a bilingual play performed in a parking lot (and the first work in Cornerstone Theater Company's Justice Cycle, a three-year, five-work series of residencies in Los Angeles), opens with two border-crossing stories that exemplify the journey to El Norte. Woven throughout the piece, these eloquent monologues provide a poetic counterpoint to the central narrative, which involves the beleaguered manager of the Home Depot-like Giant Hardware in Los Angeles and the equally tense day laborers of the Centro, a city-sponsored work site located on Giant property. The presence on the corner of unauthorized laborers who compete for work complicates the uneasy compromise between Giant and the Centro. In literal and figurative opposition across the street are the anti-immigration California Patriots, a Minuteman Project-type of group whose strident leader later facilitates the arrest of a Centro laborer following a dispute with an employer. Subsequent revelations and the accused laborer's immigration hearing compound the tensions among all the factions, including an idealistic lawyer and an Acción para Inmigrantes activist (an immigrant herself). Inevitable squabbles among the workers and between them and various authority figures (a security guard, the police, activists on both sides) also illuminate the underlying social and political conflicts. The first act ends with a rousing show of self-determination as the laborers face a Giant-imposed injunction to close the Centro ("Me quedo aquí. Sí. I'm not going. Manos a la obra. Sí."), their refusal to capitulate presaging the second act's affirmation of solidarity with their coworker ("Luchamos juntos. Sufrimos juntos. Vencemos juntos. Sí."), which climaxes in a *Fuenteovejuna*-inspired courtroom scene. *Los Illegals* closes with the arrival of a new worker to the Centro (one of the border crossers), as the cycle renews itself.

The outdoor staging cleverly configured the central space as both the Centro and audience seating, with the spectators seated at tables alongside some of the actors as if we too were laborers waiting for work, surrounded, in effect, by the conflicted voices of the “los illegals” issue. Multiple focal points emerge as the stories alternate (the desert, the back of a refrigerated truck, the Centro, the corners), and a complex range of media (footage of protests in Farmingville, Long Island; a video feed from the truck; songs by Lila Downs and by Jornaleros del Norte; an in-progress mural at the Centro) inventively enriches the cultural, aesthetic and historical dimensions.

Despite a happy ending encapsulated in a pulsating celebratory dance, *Los Illegals* does not offer easy answers. Cornerstone’s commitment to multiethnic theatre and a community-based approach allowed Garcés to introduce issues that normally are broached only uncomfortably in the public discourse: the competing economic interests and racial tensions that underscore the black-Latino divide on immigration, Latino hostility toward Latinos who work for the system and may not be bilingual or bicultural, and the open derision of non-Latinos (even supportive activists) who speak Spanish poorly or not at all. Less obvious as a critique but equally pointed is the Central American presence, a nod to the changing Latino demographic. Dramatically dynamic, technically ambitious, poignant and thought provoking – the play triumphantly dramatizes the immigration issues that unfold not only in our borderlands and cities, but increasingly in places like Hazleton, Pennsylvania; Mamaroneck, New York; and Farmingville. (Presented at the Armory Center for the Arts Northwest, Pasadena, California, 31 May-24 June 2007).

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