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Farmworker history told in school play

Alvarez students write about life in Salinas Valley fields

By MARC CABRERA

Herald Salinas Bureau

Standing beneath dark skies Monday afternoon, members of the Everett Alvarez High School drama department fumbled over rehearsal lines through chattered teeth, truly suffering for their art.

The students were making a final run-through of "Whispers From the Fields," written by students in the drama department and inspired by drama instructor Michael Roddy's research on Salinas Valley field workers, their stories and history. The play will debut at 7 p.m. Thursday in the school's multi-purpose room.

Students rehearsing a pivotal scene Monday weathered chilly gusts of wind that forced them to take cover beneath an awning in front of the school. But given the story line, a tale of Mexican immigrants struggling to make a living in the California fields during the pre-United Farm Workers era, the method acting was apt.

As the actors illustrated the path to unionization, they seemed to find a sense of purpose, which Roddy found quite charming.

"I think it's good that we work in these conditions, otherwise they might get a little lazy," Roddy said. "And if they get some sense of introspection, all the better."

School was out on Monday and administrators were unwilling to pay the overtime to have a maintenance worker come on campus to open the multi-purpose room where the students usually rehearse. But that didn't stop them from rehearsing the scenes that Roddy said needed some "tightening up."

The cast of 23 students will play a total of 121 parts through 18 scenes, all inspired by the students' family histories. Students were asked to write vignettes based on interviews with relatives. From there, Roddy stitched together a narrative.

"I told them, 'Go home and talk to your parents and abuelos (grandparents),' " Roddy said. "I got some good stories."

Some of those scenes relate directly to the farmworker struggle, including "Going North," the portion students rehearsed on Monday. The scene was culled from three student stories about their family's migration from Mexico
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to California.

While the story of Salinas Valley farmworkers is largely about Mexican immigrants, Roddy wanted a multi-cultural focus and cast. When an Anglo student asked Roddy how a Mexican mother would respond in one scene, Roddy instructed her to "find a Mexican mother."

Other stories stepped straight out of the fields. "La Llorona" (The Crying Woman), written by freshman Elvia Jimenez, was based on the legend of a woman who wanders the Mexican countryside crying over the loss of the children she murdered and the husband who left her because of it.

Jimenez wrote it from the perspective of her mother, who said she heard La Llorona while walking home from a party one night in Tlaltenanga, Zacatecas. While the legend has long been written off as a myth, for Jimenez and her family, it remains a permanent part of their oral history.

"When my mom told me about La Llorona, I thought it was a fairy tale to scare children," she said. "But when it did happen to her, she found out it was true."

Jimenez said all of the stories served to bring some humanity to the image of Salinas Valley's field workers, who often go unnoticed in the landscape.

"They carry a lot of wisdom," she said. "More than any book."
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