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Jennifer Berry's 'Ojala' explores 'secret' land of Latina nannies

The playwright based the work, showing at Casa 0101, on her 'life-changing' relationship with her nanny Manuela and incorporates social and political themes.

By Yvonne Villarreal, Los Angeles Times

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As a little girl, Jennifer Berry navigated two worlds: the one with Crockpot casseroles and the one with chicken mole.

Her mother made the casseroles, her nanny Manuela the spicy mole.

A self-described "privileged white girl" who grew up in a wealthy section of Glendale, Berry, now 44, had a visitor's pass into Latino culture, with "Mana" — as Berry affectionately called her — serving as a tour guide.

"It was like we had our own secret play land," Berry said. "It was more than a special relationship. She was like my spiritual mother. Some of the most intimate things — things usually reserved for a mother — were done by her."

From the time Berry was a baby until she was 8 years old, Manuela was always there. Whether it was changing a dirty diaper, taking Berry to the park or cooing lullabies, Manuela's duties nurtured a "life-changing" relationship. One that produced lasting memories — some in English, others in Spanish — for Berry.

And now she's translated those memories into a play that explores the cultural phenomenon of Latina nanny-maids and the children they help raise.

"I knew how big the bond was. [Manuela] knew how big the bond was ... and I'm trying to get the world to see that," Berry said. "I was really attracted to the collision of opposites and how this woman who was responsible for a lot of my caretaking exposed me to this whole other world."

Set in Los Angeles' Eastside in the mid-1960s, "Ojalá" ("I hope so") tells the story of two women:



Manuela, a Mexican illegal immigrant, and Kathrine, a brash rich girl. After being wronged by the men in their lives, they're forced to live together and confront a variety of issues as they raise a young girl.

"It's not just this fluffy look at the love between nanny and child," said Berry, a stay-at-home mom with 2-year-old twins. "The play also explores the politics of the era — the women's movement, immigration laws — things that continue to be big issues even today."

And with the recent uproar over Arizona's new immigration law, Berry said the play, which runs through June 6, is even more relevant to understanding just how damaging the ramifications could be.

"It's not a black and white issue," she said. "These are people. People who have relationships that can't just be ignored because a paper declares so."

For Josefina Lopez, the artistic director of Casa 0101 Theater Art Space in Boyle Heights — where the play is being performed — it was a story long overdue.

"So often, the media portrays maids or nannies as these throwaway characters without any dignity," Lopez said. "We like the idea of showing their multi-dimensionality. For many of them, this isn't just a job. It is their life. These kids are their life."

And that's what Berry hopes people take away from the play: the connection "not just between nanny and child, but the connection we all have to each other."

"I remember Manuela used to say to me, 'Heaven is a place where we all speak the same language,' " Berry said. "A place where we all value each others' struggles. That's what I want people to take away from this production."

Berry's play "Big Pharma," which ran at the Hudson Theatre in Los Angeles in 2005, dealt with the rise of the anti-depressant drug industry. Her most recent play, "After All," was selected for presentation at the 2010 Great Plains Theatre Conference.

"Ojalá" was originally written as a screenplay — in English and Spanish. Without the option of subtitles for a stage production, most of the Spanish dialogue was translated into English.

And she's certain Manuela, who died in 2004 with pictures of Berry and other children she cared for by her bedside, will be looking on.

"I just hope that she'd be proud of me," said Berry, her voice cracking as she fought back tears. "And that she knows how much she gave me. I want everyone to know how much these women give."

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