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An Actor Shares Secrets to His Success : Tony Plana Co-Creates the Latino Classical Repertory at Cal State L.A.

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Like most good character actors, Tony Plana has a face that looks familiar even if you can't remember his name.

That could be attributed to the wide range of roles he has played: a ruthless drug dealer in one movie and a comical caricature of a Mexican bandit in another; on one television dramatic series he was a slick lawyer, and he was recently seen as a sensitive cop in the Fox comedy series "Bakersfield P.D."

Ironically, Plana says he is able to play each diverse character with conviction because of his classical training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, England.

"I think it is one of the reasons why I have been successful competing in this business," said the Cuban-born actor who was reared in Culver City. "To get through a monologue of Shakespeare, you better know what you are doing to interpret it effectively."

And now, Plana, 40, wants to share the secret of his success with other Latino actors and actresses, as well as expose the Latino community to the classics, both American and British.

Along with fellow actor and longtime theater professor Ruben Sierra, Plana has created the Latino Classical Repertory at Cal State University, Los Angeles. Sierra said the City Terrace campus is ideal for the program.

"This is where I need to be in terms of what we are talking about," said Sierra, who has also taught at CalArts and USC. "It's the only school where I can walk into class and the majority of students are Latino.

"There are certain things in the classics that we can relate to. It helps us understand our own society and the society we are in."

The program, which is still being developed, put on Eugene O'Neill's "A Touch of the Poet" last summer. In the spring, there are plans to produce Arthur Miller's "The Price," followed by Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the summer.

"I want to create the opportunity for Latinos to interpret the classics because they never get the chance to interpret them in mainstream theater," Plana said. "Television work is like lifting a chair, but the classics are like lifting weights."

Plana is making the classics pertinent to Latinos by adapting them with Latino characters and situations. For example, "A Touch of the Poet," the story of an Irish patriarch, was changed to an 1872 Mexican family, 10 years after the battle of Puebla, for which Cinco de Mayo is celebrated.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for Latino professionals to be challenged by the classics and to educate our community," Plana said. "The fusion of our ethnicity and cultural heritage with classical pieces is going to create some wonderful explosions of creativity."

Plana hopes to create some fireworks of his own with comedian Paul Rodriguez, with whom he has formed a production company. Plana co-produced Rodriguez's directorial debut feature film, "A Million to Juan," which is a Latino adaptation of Mark Twain's classic tale "The Million Pound Bank Note."

"We want to take control of our destinies," said Plana, who is married to actress Ada Maris, currently starring in the TV series "Nurses." "We want to do projects that are Latino-produced, Latino-directed, and Latino-acted."

Plana said that an example of the type of project they hope to produce is the movie "Born in East L.A.," which was directed by Cheech Marin and starred both Plana and Rodriguez.

Rodriguez, who is gradually making the move from performing to producing and directing, said that Plana is an ideal partner.

"Tony brings in what I don't have: the education, the structure, the experience," Rodriguez said. "He is probably the most underrated serious actor we have. And he's not one of these guys who has studied Shakespeare and lets it get to his head and looks down at *batos* like me."

Plana did not always want to be an actor. His family moved from Cuba to Miami when he was 6, where they lived for two years before relocating to Culver City in 1964. Plana eventually enrolled at Loyola Marymount University with the idea of becoming an attorney. But a part in a high school production of "Guys and Dolls" led to a role as Snoopy in a college production of "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," and the rest, as they say, is history.

"I just got hooked," Plana said. "Acting all of a sudden became a focus of everything I love. I love literature. I love history. I love psychology. I love music. All the humanities come together for me in the theater."

He said growing up in Southern California as opposed to Miami also made it easier for his parents to accept his career decision.

"Even though we had a Cuban community here, it was not so pervasive and all encompassing as it is in Miami," Plana said. "I have cousins who had artistic aspirations who were basically pressured by their parents to become CPAs."

Plana has had more than 20 featured roles in such films as "JFK," "The Three Amigos," "One Good Cop" and "An Officer and a Gentleman." On television, he has appeared on "L.A. Law," "Miami Vice" and "Hill Street Blues," as well as "Golden Girls," "Seinfeld" and "Blossom."

On stage, he has performed in "Richard III," "Hamlet," "Equinox," "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Zoot Suit," for which he won a Dramalogue Award.

"Tony is a really, really interesting actor," said Risa Bramon Garcia, who runs her own production and casting company called Alomar Pictures. "He plays such great bad guys, and yet he is such a sweet guy. He has an incredible amount of integrity as a person and an actor."

But, while he has had a successful 15-year career, Plana is not totally fulfilled with the roles he has played. "It's a double-edged sword," he said. "There is a certain frustration, but it's hard to bite the hand that feeds me. The fact that I am Latino put me in a small pool of talent, and I was able to be successful within that smaller pool. I may not have been able to be as successful in a larger pool."

"At the same time, the nature of the work is frustrating."

Although Fox recently took "Bakersfield P.D." off the air (it should return later in the season), Plana hopes his role as a sensitive cop opened doors as to how the industry portrays Latinos on screen.

"This guy basically demystified the macho stereotype of the Latino," said Plana, his eyes widening as he speaks fondly of his character. "This is a Latino guy with nothing but feelings and can't control them. It humanizes the way people see Latinos."

"I think Latinos are making inroads. We're starting to climb the hill and staying up there."