

**Palo
Alto**

Weekly

INSIDE

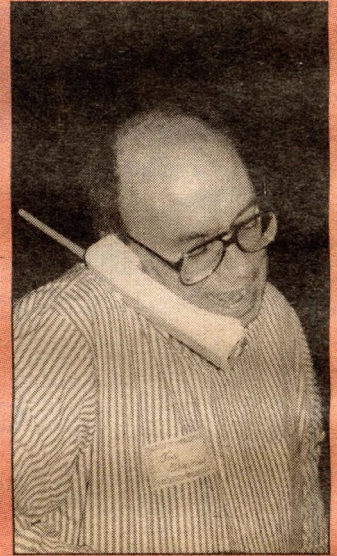
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**Complete
election results
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Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to theater, art, movies and more, edited by Monica Hayde



Joe Melena

At left, Charles Hendricks plays a Vietnamese Buddhist monk in the historic drama, "Dancing on the Brink," one of two plays about East Palo Alto opening tonight. Right, East Palo actress Jeanne Cuffey Tatum is a member of the task force that has created two plays and a video about East Palo Alto.



Joe Melena

On the cover: Channon Dade (lying down) and Stephanie Garcia portray Latina immigrants to East Palo Alto.

East side story

by Erik Espe

When a mix of Stanford and East Palo Alto actors take the stage of the Cesar Chavez Academy tonight, Nov. 10, the play they present will be about more than drama, plot, costumes and good ticket sales.

For some East Palo Altans, the two one-act plays—"Circle in the Dirt" and "Dancing on the Brink"—mark yet another milestone in the journey toward image rebuilding for a city that just three years ago made national headlines as the so-called "per capita murder capital of America."

The historical plays are premiering as East Palo Alto gears up for a major new development in its city: the construction of the Gateway 101 shopping center. The number of murders has dropped drastically, from 42 in 1992 to four this year. Some say a new sense of hope has taken hold of the city.

The Committee on Black Performing Arts at Stanford hopes the two plays—and a related video documentary—add to the city's optimism.

The committee has nearly completed a one-hour documentary featuring interviews with current and former residents of East Palo Alto. After it's completed later this year, "Dreams of a City: Stories from East Palo Alto" will become part of the third- to eighth-grade curriculum in the Ravenswood City School District. The documentary featuring oral histories by East Palo Alto residents is scheduled to have its premiere Nov. 28 at the East Palo Alto City Hall.

Much of what appears in the documentary became material for the two plays. San Francisco playwright Cherrie Moraga's "Circle in the Dirt" is set in East Palo Alto's Cooley Apartments and in the now-demolished Ravenswood High School, whose last graduating class was in 1976.

University of Michigan Drama Department associate professor Charles "OyamO" Gordon's play "Dancing on the Brink" begins with a meeting of Ohlone Indians in pre-colonial East Palo Alto. The chief recounts a dream he had about the land. Through the dream, the history of East Palo Alto is told.

In Gordon's play, East Palo Alto's history is portrayed as sometimes troubling, sometimes hopeful—and often marked by a human struggle over land, whether it's a takeover of California from Native Americans by colonialists, or disputes over borders between Palo Alto and East Palo Alto.

"What you find looking through history is that human beings have always been the same," Gordon says. "Even as

hunter-gatherers, we had rivalries and we had disputes over land. Those rivalries never stopped. Even when the Ohlones were overthrown, other rivalries appeared. The land in itself was really a character in this story."

Collectively, the two-play, one-video project is known as "Dreams of a City: The East Palo Alto Project." When Stanford drama professor Harry Elam, who is directing "Dancing on the Brink," came up with the idea of having the committee produce the two plays and the documentary in 1992, he says he still didn't know East Palo Alto.

"When I arrived at Stanford six years ago, I was warned not to live in East Palo Alto," Elam says. "If you haven't been to East Palo Alto, all you know is what you hear in the media. Few people know there's a Vietnamese Buddhist temple there. Few people know that the Princess of Tonga made a trip specifically to East Palo Alto because a Pacific Islander Outreach program, which preserves the cultural heritage of Pacific Islanders, exists there. Half of my cast, who are from Stanford and hadn't been to East Palo Alto, weren't aware of these things."

Elam had heard about a drama program at Brown University that reached out to a neighboring African-American community. "Rites and Reasons" was a successful research and performance program developed 20 years ago by two African-American studies professors at Brown, who first researched and then produced plays about the neighboring community in Providence, R.I. The project launched a theater company that still produces plays today.

"What was significant about it was that they had done the play for the residents," Elam says. The residents weren't "subjects" of a research experiment or drama production. They participated in the research and the production of the play.

The same is true of Dreams of a City. Although the playwrights aren't from the area (they were found following a national search, Elam says), half the cast of each play hails from East Palo Alto.

"We wanted to get beyond the ivory tower," says Elena Becks, an administrator for the Committee on Black Performing Arts and a lifelong East Palo Altan. "Bottom line is, the most important thing is the collaboration. What we're trying to do is portray the community from the eyes of the community."

"I think the plays are dynamite," says East Palo Alto resident and "Circle in the Dirt" cast member Walter Matherly. "They show that East Palo Alto has a rich history. The real character of East Palo Alto will be available to people. There

(continued on next page)

Two plays
strive to capture
the real
East Palo Alto



Joe Melena



Joe Melena

Top, bringing to life the era of "blockbusting" in the 1950s, John Wright plays a real estate salesman selling a house to a hesitant woman (Channon Dade). Bottom, left to right, Native Americans Rosemary Cabra and Norma Sanchez help director Harry Elam get details historically accurate in "Dancing on the Brink."

East side story

(continued from previous page)

are people who have lived in East Palo Alto for generations, who have loved it and don't want to leave."

Matherly, who plays a 90-year-old man who retells East Palo Alto's history in "Circle in the Dirt," moved to the city from Mountain View five years ago—and prefers East Palo Alto. "The image that has gotten out about East Palo Alto is so biased and twisted that I hope this documentary and two plays will get the real message out," he says.

"East Palo Alto is a warm, close community. I'd lived in a wealthy neighborhood in Mountain View before and found it dead and antiseptic. People didn't know each other. I never knew my neighbors. But within six weeks of moving to East Palo Alto, I knew everyone on the street."

"It's been a difficult to overcome this big media thing about the 'homicide capital of the United States,'" says 25-year East Palo Alto resident Jeanne Cuffey Tatum, an actress who serves as a member of the Dreams Project task force. "To begin with, it's not true. It's gone down from more than 40 homicides in one year to four, because the police have begun to respond in numbers and in good community policing techniques. Yes, three years ago we were not so hot. But we have done a complete turnaround."

It's a message that Tatum also wants the world to hear. Already, she says, real estate agents know the truth about the new East Palo Alto. She gets cards in the mail every week asking her to sell her home. "I'll never sell," she says. "I will never leave."

Still, the plays aren't going to gloss over some of the city's problems. Gordon, who visited the city for a month last year gathering research materials, has his own criticisms of the way East Palo Alto has dealt with challenges in recent years.

"The town potentially could be a nice little paradise," he says. "If there's anything that's holding it back, it's a lack of intensive collaboration among the citizens. They shouldn't be fighting each other about anything . . . They need to agree upon one agenda. Power needs to be shared all the way around."

"Both plays end on a note intended to be empowering," Elam adds. "They're saying things are positive, but there's a need for action. We've got to work together."

Tatum, an administrative assistant with Peninsula Community Foundation and an actress in a number of TheatreWorks productions, says she hasn't seen a drama project filled with as much love as this one.

"It's about giving people the history of a city that has been here a long time," she says. ■

"Circle in the Dirt" and

"Dancing on the Brink"

Who: Committee on Black Perform-

ing Arts at Stanford

When and where: 8 p.m., Friday-

Saturday, Nov. 10-11, and 2 p.m.

Sunday, Nov. 12, at the Cesar

Chavez Academy, 2450 Ralmar

Ave., East Palo Alto; and 8 p.m.,

Wednesday-Saturday, Nov. 15-18,

and 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 19 at

Nitery Theatre, Old Union, Stanford

Cost: For the East Palo Alto shows,

tickets cost \$5 at the door. Stan-

ford tickets cost \$10 general ad-

mission, \$5 students and seniors.

Information: 723-4402 or 723-

2646