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Today
Tomorrow
Plays
Musicals
Physical Theatre
Cabaret/Comedy
For Kids & Families
Gay & Lesbian
Indie Theater
Plays by Women
New This Week
By Neighborhood
Stars on Stage
Late Night
Accessibility

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Coming Attractions
Trip Planner
Venue Listings
Ticket Discounts
One Night Only

REVIEWS:

nytheatre Reviews
Reviewers' Picks
Current Season
Previous Seasons

FESTIVALS:

Theatre Festival Info
FringeNYC Reviews
FringeNYC Previews
FringeNYC Venue
Map
Festival Calendar

EXPLORE NYTHEATRE:

Interviews
Podcasts
Indie Theater
How to Buy Tickets
nytheatre FactFile
People of the Year

DE NOVO



nytheatre.com review

Jo Ann Rosen · April 30, 2010

What is to be done about immigration? More specifically, how does America save the 8,000 children that cross its borders alone every year to flee the very worst consequences in their native countries? Writer/director Jeffrey Solomon raises this urgent question in his timely docudrama, *DE NOVO*, a play based on the court case of 16-year-old Edgar Chocoy-Guzman of Guatemala.

The play, in 59E59's 50-seat theater, begins inside a U.S. court room, where questioning reveals that Edgar, a shy defenseless boy, is a member of a gang. As the story unfolds, we learn that some years earlier his mother left him behind in Guatemala under the care of an aunt, an uncle, and his grandfather while she sought better economic opportunities in the U.S. She sends home clothes and gifts. But it is the watchful eye of a caring mother that he needs most, because Edgar's uncle is dealing drugs from the house and his other guardians are busy scratching out a living, leaving the young boy lonely and free to seek guidance and companionship elsewhere. At 10, he finds friendship in the street gangs of Guatemala—gangs that initially cropped up in the U.S. during the '80s and were transplanted to various Central American countries as gang member deportations increased. Deportees arrived without a sense of country and more hardened than ever.

Solomon patches together research from interviews, police reports, psychiatric exams, letters, legal briefs, and affidavits to follow Edgar's travails. The research demonstrates the awful predictability of recidivism. Here's how it works. Gangs lure innocent pre-teens, mostly from poor preoccupied families, to join them. They offer a

VENUE
59E59

OPENED
May 4, 2010

CLOSED
May 15, 2010

CREATORS & ARTISTS

Cast

Jose Aranda, Carlo D'Amore, Socorro Santiago, Emily Joy Weiner

Written & Directed By

Jeffrey Solomon

Sound & Music

Andrew Ingkavet

Lighting

Michael Kimmel & Lisa Weinsrott

Sets

Alex Escalante

Costumes

Arnulfo Moldanado

Producer

Houses on the Moon Theater Company

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[nytheatre blog](#)
[Plays and Playwrights](#)

[HOME](#)

sense of family, pride, and responsibility. The responsibilities include hefty tasks, such as delivering drugs for which the 18 or 19-year-olds would be imprisoned, but the 10-year-olds are not. The gangs readily rob, beat, and kill people, although Edgar does not.

A new world opens to Edgar when he meets children playing soccer and they ask him to join them. He tries to quit the gang, but the gang threatens to kill him. He flees to America in search of his mother. In the U.S., a gang member spots him on his way to school, and he is forced to join them. After six months, his mother kicks him out of the house. Subsequently, he is in and out of her house, in and out of the courts, although he yearns to pull his life together, get a good job, and help his family.

Although the actors work the small stage to excellent effect, some details remain unclear. For example, I was unsure about Edgar's age at various points, how much time had passed between court dates, and how he happened to be in courts in three different states: Arizona, California, and Colorado. These are structural shortcomings that don't actually interfere with the red alert that Solomon raises about the problems associated with children immigrating to America on their own. He demonstrates the serpentine American judicial system with its weighty bureaucracy, its endless paper trail, and the seemingly arbitrary sense of fair play—whatever fair play means.

Solomon manages to keep the play moving at a pace unprecedented in any U.S. court. It is particularly notable since *DE NOVO*, which means "as if for the first time," is performed in both English and Spanish with the Spanish translated. Jose Aranda performs Edgar admirably. The rest of the cast play multiple roles, moving from major characters to ensemble roles seamlessly. Socorro Santiago eases from the frustrated, hardworking mother to translator to hard-hearted judge without a beat; Emily Joy Weiner embraces the role of the various pro bono attorneys; Carlo D'Amore carries the prosecution nicely and slides easily into the role of supportive school teacher.

The set, designed by Alex Escalante, has visual impact, with pages upon pages of testimony hanging like laundry out to dry. Arnulfo Moldanado's costumes are simple and relevant to the roles. Michael Kimmel and Lisa Weinshrott help emphasize the action with their lighting.

So, how does America save the 8,000 children that flood U.S. borders? This is the problem that Solomon raises. Other questions come to mind. What can the cities do to intervene? How do the current youth programs attract, nurture and protect these children? And, as my companion, an L.A. resident who knows something of this problem, asked, "Who pays for it?" Indeed. It is a Kafkaesque story of the grimmest magnitude, and one that raises timely and relevant questions. In this story, even after Edgar has straightened himself out, the U.S. justice system emphasizes process over protection. It shows very smart professionals, embracing technical jargon without examining the best way to salvage a life; but perhaps that is not the role of our courts.

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Pictured: Emily Joy Weiner, Jose Aranda, and Carlo D'Amore in a scene from DE NOVO