

New Opera Based on Experiences of Immigrants Opens in L.A.

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From the personal stories of teenage refugees in America, from their confusion, dreams, disappointments and laughter, Edward Barnes has crafted an opera.

"A Place to Call Home" began as a touring show that introduced live theater to many high school students for the first time.

Now, revised and expanded to more than an hour in length, the opera will be given its first public performance October 9-13 at the John Anson Ford Cultural Center in Hollywood, under the auspices of the Los Angeles Music Center Opera.

"I went to a high school and interviewed about 15 immigrants from Vietnam, Guatemala, Iran, Iraq, El Salvador," said Barnes, 34, whose previous works have been performed by the Opera Company of Boston, the Seattle Opera and the Aspen (Colo.) Music Festival, among others.

He also talked to university students at the Central American Refugee Center in downtown Los Angeles, he said.

Writing both libretto and music, Barnes, who also conducts the opera, weaved a free-form story centering on the experiences of four teenagers as they adjust to their new country.

"Some of the stories were very funny and I tried to incorporate those into the show," he said. "One girl on her first day at a high school — she didn't speak any English — had to go to the bathroom. She asked someone where the bathroom was and ... she ended up in the men's room."

He found a boy who was adopted, only to discover that his new

parents expected him to act as a servant. Then there was a 19-year-old who, after receiving no schooling in his native El Salvador, had only reached ninth grade in the United States but planned to go on to graduate.

"A Place to Call Home," directed by Charles Otte and choreographed by Kimi Okada, features professional singers Wonjung Kimm, Stephanie Vlahos, Greg Fedderly and Richard Bernstein. Sets were designed by Richard Hoover.

In March, when "A Place to Call Home" was performed at 15 Los Angeles high schools, Barnes had to prepare a class of untrained students at each school to serve as his chorus.

"I would say 90 to 95 percent had probably never, ever seen a theater piece before, had no concept of being on stage in front of people, of singing, acting, anything like that," he said.

Although the performances might be ragged, Barnes said, "it was successful the first time around. The piece is accessible and yet it's very modern. The high school audience that we first performed it for liked it."

For the public production, the chorus is drawn from trained students at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, and their roles have been enlarged to take advantage of their talents.

The music, Barnes said, incorporates some rhythms and themes inspired by the traditions of Asia, Central America and the Middle East.

"There's (also) a lot of pop music influences in it," he said. "There's contemporary Latin sounds, there's a little sort of music theater thing."

"A Place to Call Home" does

not deal with the recent riots, Barnes said, but includes a confrontation with police when students are caught spraying graffiti.

"I think more importantly (the story includes) a lot of the sentiment that came out of the riots in terms of trying to be aware of the

people around us, who they are and where they are from," Barnes said. "I hope the show will be important in terms of that healing

process."

The Gettysburg, Pa., native also heads an experimental theater music company in Los Angeles

The San Diego

Union-Tribune.