



KEN HOWARD

Greg Fedderly, right, with high-school cast members in "A Place to Call Home": Powered by a lean production.

MUSIC REVIEW

A High-Energy 'Home'

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Los Angeles itself is almost a character in "A Place to Call Home," the city acknowledged in details small and large, carefully calculated and serendipitous, from a sardonic spray-painted allusion to the prolific tagger Chaka to a patrolling helicopter that regularly buzzed the Ford Amphitheatre Friday.

But paradoxically, the new music theater piece from composer-librettist Edward Barnes and Music Center Opera

works most effectively where it is least specific, evoking the struggle for social integration of a culturally alienated Everyman.

Make that Everykid. "A Place to Call Home" was originally created as an educational and outreach project for interactive performance in local high schools, and presented there last spring. Though expanded from 40 minutes to an hour for its first public performances, outdoors in Cahuenga Pass, the piece remains largely for and of adolescents.

Barnes' subject is teen immigrants, entering L.A. alone. Working from local

interviews, he put together a scenario of linked vignettes moving from terrified arrival through cultural clash to take-charge affirmation.

There is nothing particularly subtle about the libretto, and its upbeat, justification-by-success finale—"Home isn't where you're from but where you've made it to"—comes from nowhere dramatically and sounds hollow sociologically.

But it does provide a capable engine for a "Fame" kind of show, powered by a lean, high-energy production.

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'HOME': High-Energy Outing

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Designer Richard Hoover's clever, Spartan set used the hillside terrace space effectively, suggesting the unfortunate similarity between an urban playground and a penal colony with enough chain-link fencing to cloak a Frank Gehry building.

Director Charles Otte maneuvered his ensemble cast—four leads from the opera company and 36 versatile, hard-working singer-dancers from the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts—with purposeful economy. His blunt approach gave the more histrionic scenes a stylized element and created an edgy buzz in the stronger, central portions.

Even better at establishing the frustrating agony of learning new group patterns was the dancing,

choreographed by Kimi Okada. She also provided a simple but vivid abstraction of Korean movements for soprano Wonjung Kimm's solo, one of the few specifically ethnic gestures in the show.

For the most part, the plucky immigrants were cast into the melting pot of American show styles, most prominently seasoned with Middle Eastern spices. Barnes' score—conducted by the composer—proved direct if not memorably eloquent, long on rhythmic pizzazz and deftly arranged for percussion and electronic keyboards.

Kimm, mezzo Stephanie Vlahos, tenor Greg Fedderly and baritone Richard Bernstein sang their shifting roster of generic characters with sympathy and point, inconsistently balanced. They didn't al-

ways look the part, but that only underscored the universality rather than the peculiarity of their quests for identity.

The high school contingent offered confident, characterful movement and willing, uneven singing. The functional lighting was by Michael Gilliam, and the come-as-you-are costumes by Kristine Doiel.

The last of five performances are tonight and Tuesday.