

## Multicultural experimental ensemble attracts diversity of student talent for A&M premiere

By Cray Pixley

ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

Experimental avant-garde theater has not been the byword of past Aggie Player productions, but an innovative ensemble is working to break ground with its eclectic brand of theater.

The Elenco Experimental ensemble integrates experimental theater and multicultural themes for the first time in an A&M student company.

The ensemble will debut an original play, "In Vitro," in Rudder Forum Feb. 2-4.

Although this is the premiere season of the A&M Elenco Experimental, the ensemble has strong roots in avant-garde, multicultural theater garnered from its origins at the University of Texas-El Paso.

Dr. Roberto Pomo, associate professor of theater arts and the Elenco's director, founded the ensemble at UTEP in 1981.

The UTEP company explored bilingual, experimental theater and toured throughout Mexico and the southwest United States. Many of its productions focused on Hispanic themes.

Pomo imported the idea of the Elenco when he joined the faculty at A&M last fall.

"When I was invited to join the faculty here, I requested that the concept of the Elenco also transfer to A&M," Pomo says. "I feel that they (the administration) saw my ability to move the Elenco here as one of my strong attributes to the department. They were delighted to have the ensemble on campus."

Since the creation of the Elenco at UTEP, Pomo has moved further toward the experimental side of the ensemble. However, elements of bilingual theater still exist in the current production.

The Elenco combines stylized movement, music, and varied acting styles in productions with an aesthetic, educational message.

"I will always strive to present productions with educational value," he says. "I am very influenced by the British director Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Antonin Artaud as well as the experimental theater of the 1960's and Mexican American theater."

"I draw from all these when I direct the Elenco."

At A&M, the Elenco's emphasis will be on the multicultural manifestations in society, avant-garde theater

and new scripts.

"I think we are developing a different acting style in the Elenco," Pomo says. "I'm not sure what to call it but it is happening."

The ensemble is working on different ways of movement, and ways of relating to one another.

The ensemble is a 10-person cast of multicultural descent under the direction of Pomo and Associate Director Matthew L. Hunt.

"We cast the ensemble with the multicultural aspect in mind," Pomo says. "But all the actors had to have talent and dedication to their work."

Cast members are Hispanic, black and white, but Pomo says he would also like to have Asian or other cultures in the Elenco.

"The Elenco is open to students, regardless of their major, who are interested in art and have an ability to act," Pomo says. "Perhaps in the future we will have other cultures in the Elenco."

This season's ensemble was cast in the early fall of 1988 and has worked together two hours every weekday since the members were accepted.

Ensemble members have the option to remain in the Elenco from year to year, and they will be involved in casting new members. Experienced members will bring cohesiveness to the ensemble, Pomo says.

The coming together of the first cast, the script and music defines the innovative mode spirit in which the Elenco Experimental exists.

The ensemble began its work without a script but with the intention of producing a student play. Part-way through the first month of rehearsals, the cast decided to commit to a play written by Hunt.

"We are very fortunate to have had the playwright-in-residence as the associate director," Pomo says. "He has had a very close hand in the play's creation outside of being the author."

The playwright conducted extensive video-taped interviews with each cast member in order to extract certain thoughts that he could use or emphasize in his script.

Hunt says the interviews sparked his imagination while writing the script.

"It helped me by exposing me to other people's experiences," he says. "I was able to take aspects of the ensemble's experiences and work them through the plot or theme I was writing."

Pomo says he likes that approach and that it has worked well for the Elenco.

"I think one of the fascinating elements of the Elenco is that we have a playwright who has written the script with the ensemble members in mind."

Hunt worked on the script throughout the fall while the group worked on improvisations.

As the script was being written, the ensemble worked on scenes as they were completed. Rewrites and re-blocking of scenes were part of the ensemble's fall work schedule.

"The ensemble did not receive the complete script until Jan. 3 and had yet to finish the stylized movement scenes," Pomo says. "Things really came together during a four-week period."

Aside from an original script, "In Vitro" has choreography and music specially composed for the play.

The stylized movement was choreographed by members of the Elenco, and a group called Tangent wrote the music.

Pomo explains that in an experimental group such as Elenco, it is important to integrate the other arts. The essential arts that go hand in hand with theater are music and dance.

"A member of the cast, Misha Cantu, had experience with movement and dance that she was willing to incorporate for the play," he says.

Ensemble members were free to help in the choreography. Lanell Pena and Mary Ellen Brennan helped Cantu put polish to the dance sequences.

A&M students Russell Lutz, David Gaw and Rip Rowan of Tangent composed the original music while in sessions with the playwright who helped interpret the script.

"We were lucky to find students who were excellent musicians who were interested in contributing music and working in the theatrical tradition," Pomo says.

During performances, the musicians are on stage with the ensemble playing both live music and keying up programmed segments of music.

Tangent's compositions are keyboard renditions of what may be termed New Age or futuristic music in the tradition of French artist Jean-Michel Jarre.

Hunt wrote "In Vitro" in verse form and says he had hoped the choreography and music would bring that verse to life.

"I feel the choreographer and musicians translated my work very well," he says. "It all came together beautifully for 'In Vitro.'"

The music and choreography truly to complete a play that is a series of vignettes concerning the human existence from the beginning of time to an exit of the human race from the world. The play views life as a sort of experiment conducted within a test tube, hence in vitro—in glass.



Photo Courtesy of Elenco Experimental theater company

The experimental theater group Elenco debuts at Texas A&M with its play "In Vitro" at 8

p.m. Feb. 2 in Rudder Forum. Tickets are \$2 for students and \$3 for the general public.

"In Vitro" at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, La. during the first week of spring classes.

The play received encouraging responses that the directors and cast hope will carry over to A&M.

"We didn't know what to expect from our performance at McNeese," Pomo says. "We got a good response from two very different audiences. The students and the older community audience seemed to really enjoy the play."

"Some people felt the play was pessimistic because it didn't answer the questions it raised, but I think the playwright has taken an optimistic approach," he says.

Hunt agrees with Pomo. "At the close of the play, the characters do have self-doubt which causes them to narrow their vision," he says. "Instead of being a vision for society, it becomes a vision for self."

In the play, the characters deal with problems poorly, but Hunt rejects the pessimistic view his play

seems to project.

"I amplify the problems that are happening in America today. But I use this to jolt the audience.

The idea is to raise questions not provide answers, Hunt says.

"I think by not giving an answer I can move an audience to think about their world."

Although that approach may put some audiences off, the directors and cast say they believe that A&M audiences are ready to be challenged.

Ensemble member Oliver Tull says the Elenco will stir up people's emotions.

"We do stir up ideas that may upset some people, but I think we will get a favorable reception."

"I think people will realize it is a different approach to theater for A&M and are interested to find out what the Elenco can show them," he says. "Some people will hate it and some people will love it. But they will appreciate it because it is something new for the campus."

## Overnight campers get in line early for country concert tickets

By Keith Spera

REVIEWER

The scene outside Rudder Tower that particular midnight was not pretty.

The top of the tower was shrouded by fog. At its base, several bodies were strewn about on the cold, damp pavement. Some were covered by blankets; others lay exposed to the humid night air. These bodies were not dead—they were waiting for morning, when tickets would go on sale for the Feb. 10 Reba McEntire concert to be held in G. Rollie White Coliseum.

I myself had never camped out for concert tickets. I also had never purchased a ticket to a country-and-western show. Here was an opportunity to meet and mingle with people who were about to do both.

I would endure what they endured, I would feel what they felt—I would, for a night, become one of them.

My first contact with the campers did not exactly start us on the road to friendship. Just for kicks, I sat down in front of the group of good ol' boys who held the first spot in line.

"How ya' doin'?" I said nonchalantly.

"Howdy," they answered, not knowing what this long-haired guy in aqua blue high-top tennis shoes was up to.

"Ya'll did find my note, right?" They looked at one another.

"What note?" they asked in a very suspicious tone.

"The note I left saying I was first in line, and that I had to go run some errands, but would be back."

Now, they started to sit up. A very unfriendly atmosphere was developing.

"We didn't see any note."

At this point, I considered several factors. First, these people were not entirely sober. Second, they had been watching the

movie "Shoot to Kill" on the TV they had set up. Third, they had believed for a number of hours that they would obtain front row tickets to see a woman who, in these parts, is almost akin to the Virgin Mary. Here was some different-looking guy trying to cut in front of them. Common sense told me it was time to end the game.

After letting them know I was just kidding about the note, I got down to the business of actually "mingling." These guys were, come to find out, rather nice. Graduate student Larry Cox was officially the first person in line. Although he had already seen Reba in concert three times, he had been in line since 11 a.m. in order to get tickets to see her again. Besides greatly admiring her music, Cox explained his other reasons for camping out so long: "It's the first week of school, there's nothin' better to do. We didn't get to camp out for Cotton Bowl tickets, so what the hell."

When the Cox camp broke out the cigars, I moved on. Next in line was another graduate student, Debbie Tolman. With a gray fedora on her head and a copy of "Since Silent Spring" (a book dealing with the effects of pesticides on the environment) in her hands, she seemed a bit out of place (kind of like me). I found out that she had never seen Reba in concert before, and did not own any of her albums. She had just started hearing Reba's music since moving to Texas.

Since we both had very little to say about Reba, we had a nifty discussion about the big black muscular statues decorating the Rudder Fountain area. After exchanging observations such as "they're kind of ominous" and "the size is something that shocks you" (hers) and "it's like, they're spongy, but they resist, like muscle gone bad" (mine), I bid Tolman adieu.

Coincidentally, I found in another group of campers a member of the Texas A&M weightlifting team who had very definite

thoughts on the statues. Although he didn't appreciate the artwork's title ("Mindless Competition"), he said he "loved" the works themselves. Having already pressed my luck at the beginning of the line, I didn't argue.

It was at the next stop on the Reba line that I learned what a truly magical night this was for country fans. Not only were Reba McEntire tickets going on sale in nine short hours (it was now about 1 a.m.), but Randy Travis had been on the David Letterman show earlier that night.

There were enough supplies with one group of campers to sustain a family of five for a week, and keep them entertained to

throughout the evening.

The people at the end of the line that night were Stacey and Kayla, freshman residents of Mosher Hall, who had only been in line since 10:30 p.m. They hadn't even planned on coming out then, but a friend who happened to be jogging past Rudder earlier that night had warned them that a line had already formed. They were going to spend the night on a pile of beach towels (they couldn't find any blankets) so they could get seats that would afford a close-up view of Ricky Van Shelton, Reba's opening act.

At this point, they hadn't begun to show the effects of spending a few hours on cold pave-

ment, and they were still in a pleasant mood. They were about to eat a couple of Whataburger chicken sandwiches when I joined them. I had several slices of apple in my overcoat pocket, so we had little late-night picnic. We chatted for awhile about past encounters with members of the entertainment world, and gossiped about the activities of the other folks in line. We noticed there were no ants at this particular picnic.

Around 2 a.m., things had gotten pretty quiet. Most everyone had wrapped themselves up in whatever garments they had for a night of less than quality sleep. I was faced with a choice between sleeping on cement in misty, cold weather with only my trenchcoat for a blanket, or walking about 100 yards to a warm dorm room complete with pillows and mattresses. You decide where I slept.

Eight hours later, when I returned to Rudder, about 250 people were lined up inside the tower at the box office windows, counting the seconds until the tickets went on sale. People who were talkative the night before had very little to say now, unless it was a comment meant to let the box office personnel know that "my watch says its 10 a.m.—start selling tickets!"

When the only important clock—the one linked to the Box Office's computer—struck 10, the coveted tickets did indeed go on sale. Here it was, the big prize, the payoff, the object of everyone's quest. Was it worth it?

For Cox's group, it certainly was—they snagged a handful of front-row center seats. The lady with the hat seemed a bit disappointed when she got sixth row tickets in the left-hand floor section. The people with the loud VCR were satisfied with their eighth row seats. Stacey and Kayla, who weren't quite as bright-eyed and bushy-haired as last night, and who had to borrow blankets from their well-stocked neighbors, ended up in row 19, much to their dismay.

