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## A Brand-New Life for Taper, Too

**Theater** • The developmental program of the Mark Taper Forum is back with a festival of productions.

By DON SHIRLEY  
TIMES THEATER WRITER

The underground wing of the Mark Taper Forum is going public.

No, it's not a revolutionary movement out to overthrow Taper artistic director Gordon Davidson. It's the Taper's corps of play developers, who work on projects that usually are not ready or aesthetically appropriate for the Taper main stage.

This week, the Taper underground emerges from its usual lairs to produce a modest festival of fully staged produc-

tions, under the banner of an old Taper moniker—Taper, Too. It's taking place at the 99-seat Actors' Gang in Hollywood.

The first production, opening Saturday and playing through June 25, is a double bill: "Black Butterfly, Jaguar Girl, Piñata Woman and Other Superhero Girls Like Me"—which is described as a "homegirl poetry jam" based on the writings of Alma Cervantes, Sandra C. Muñoz and Marisela Norte—and "Drive My Coche," a memory play by Roy Conboy.

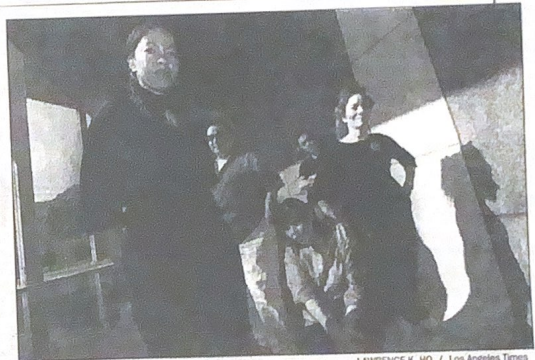
The "poetry jam" is a joint effort by the Taper's Latino Theatre Initiative and P.L.A.Y. (Performing for Los Angeles Youth)—the Taper's youth theater program that, with this production, moves away from works for younger kids, into a project that is aimed at audiences of high school age or older. The piece is staged by the Latino initiative's co-director Luis

Alfaro.

"Drive My Coche" originated in the Latino initiative as a solo show, but—under the guidance of the lab's other co-director, Diane Rodriguez—it has been expanded into a duet.

These productions and others in the new Taper, Too reflect the increased emphasis on multiculturalism that arrived at the Taper in the '90s. During much of the '80s, the first Taper, Too was an alternative subscription series of plays that were deemed more cutting-edge than those on the main stage—but they were not the products of particular special-interest labs, like those of today. The old series operated out of a different 99-seat space—located under the main John Anson Ford Amphitheatre in Hollywood. Recessary pressures shut it down in

Please see Taper, Too, F10



LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

The leaders of the Mark Taper Forum's production development programs include Kim Ewell, left, Luis Alfaro, Diane Rodriguez, Chay Yew, back, and Victoria Lewis.



## Taper, Too: Developmental Program Is Back With Festival

Continued from F1  
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1991.

As the '90s continued, the Taper continued offering sporadic productions at the same space, still using the Taper, Too name. Most of these featured solo performers and hence weren't very expensive. The space also hosted the company's annual New Work Festival of not-fully-staged workshops and readings. But when the larger Ford building went through renovations in the late '90s, the space was no longer available. The New Work Festival moved to other quarters, but for the most part, full Taper productions not on the main stage vanished.

The Taper's developmental efforts hardly vanished, however. Fueled by grant money in the mid-'90s, they expanded. Occasional productions climbed out of the developmental arena to find a place on the Taper main stage, especially in the early years of the Latino Theatre Initiative in the mid-'90s. Other projects developed by the Taper went on to full productions at other theaters. But the Los Angeles public generally received only sketchy glimpses of what was simmering beneath the surface of the Taper main stage.

### Looking for a Permanent Alternative Space

These glimpses may become more frequent when and if the Taper obtains its own alternative space. It has focused its recent efforts toward that goal on a potentially costly plan to renovate the Culver Theatre in Culver City. But the developmental troops were growing restless waiting for the fruition of that effort.

"Not being produced gets more and more frustrating," Alfaro said. Indeed, he added, "if we had not produced this season, it would have been time to go"—that is, leave the Taper.

The Taper management also felt the urgency of providing a public outlet for the developmental work, said Corey Madden, the theater's associate artistic director. The people who are doing the work "have shown incredible patience and commitment," she said. "And we all work with the same set of goals." Last year, producing director Robert Egan and Madden vowed "to keep the momentum going" by producing some of the developmental work fully and publicly.

Madden declined to be specific about how much the new Taper,

"came from sacrifices we made internally, from the rest of the development money."

The Taper has used the Actors' Gang space for small productions before, and it has now been drafted again for this more-ambitious project. "The Square"—the second of the two pieces at the heart of this Taper, Too—enlisted the work of 16 playwrights.

The production, which runs July 1-16, is a creation of Chay Yew, who directs the Taper's Asian Theatre Workshop, and director Lisa Peterson. Yew asked eight prominent Asian American playwrights and eight non-Asian writers to contribute 10-minute pieces, set in a square in New York's Chinatown, during decades separated by 40 years: the 1880s, 1920s, 1960s and 2000s. He assigned them to write different ethnic mixes of characters: Asian, non-Asian or mixed, with some Asians writing about non-Asians and vice versa. Why is it set in New York instead of L.A.? Yew conceived the project when he was working in New York, prior to his arrival at the Taper in 1995, and he said he also believes that cross-cultural encounters happen more naturally in New York.

A third Taper, Too production, with a more limited run, is Lynn Manning's "Weights," playing July 8-17. Like "Black Butterfly," it is a product of two Taper labs: Blacksmys, which focuses on work by black playwrights, and Other Voices Project, which develops work by disabled writers. "Weights" is a solo show in which Manning dramatizes the violent incident that resulted in his blindness.

The Taper, Too schedule also includes a one-night event, "A Night of Griot," featuring spoken-word artists, at 11 p.m. on June 23.

In addition to Taper, Too, the Blacksmys lab is presenting its annual Juneteenth free reading series on Sunday at the Taper Annex, just across Temple Street from the Performing Arts Center, and on June 17 and 18 at Greenway Court Theatre on the campus of Fairfax High School. Kim Euell, the new director of Blacksmys, said she is expanding the lab's efforts to include more voices from black writers outside the U.S., as well as the African Americans with whom the lab has previously worked.

• *Taper, Too, Actors' Gang*, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Call (213) 628-2772 for schedule. \$20.

• *Juneteenth*, Mark Taper Forum Annex, 601 W. Temple St., on Sun-  
day, Greenway Court Theatre,