

RIVERA

Continued from B8

with apocalyptic landscapes, angels warring in heaven, and strange creatures.

"Rivera's ambition, however foolhardy, is noble in itself, and he writes so well in both of his alternating modes that it is easy to forgive him for it," was Village Voice critic Michael Feingold's take on the mixture of styles in a New York production of "Marisol" three years ago.

"I can't write purely fantastical surreal theater that isn't grounded somehow in reality," said Rivera, who was born 44 years ago in Puerto Rico, grew up on Long Island and now lives in Los Feliz. "But this is the first time a play had very specific scenes in which one genre is the predominant tone."

Carrillo, who has worked on several previous plays by Rivera and knows him well, read "References" on a flight to New York. She got so excited that she dashed off a note to the playwright on a vomit bag and slapped a stamp on it when she landed. Yes, she learned, the U.S. Postal Service will deliver a vomit bag.

"I wrote that I thought it was going to revolutionize theater," she said. "It's a joy to work on those very distinct styles in one piece. I think he's mastered both."

"References" was sparked about 2½ years ago by a scene that was more Norman Rockwell than Dali. Rivera said his daughter and son, now 11 and 7, brought home a stray kitten they had found crouched between the tire and fender of a Volkswagen Beetle.

The kitten lived with them for about a month, then disappeared. Coyotes had been spotted in the neighborhood around the same time, and Rivera began imagining that the cat was done in by one of them.

"I kept thinking, 'If they could have spoken to each other what would they have said? What kind of games would they have played together?'"

Benito was drawn largely from life: Rivera's younger brother, Tony, is a career military man who, like Benito, saw action in the Persian Gulf War—including a bombing strike that haunts Benito. Tony was subsequently stationed in Barstow, where "References" takes place.

From his brother, Rivera got bits of military slang, like "pogey bait," one of the affectionately lustful terms Benito has for Gabriela. A pogey, Rivera explains, is somebody who goes around sneakily snatching up other people's candy and other goodies.

From his own life, he got the marital conflict at the play's emotional core: Rivera said he and his wife separated about the time he wrote it.

There also is much drawn-from-life realism in "Sonnets for an Old Century," which Rivera wrote just before starting work on "References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot."

In "Sonnets," 24 newly dead people stand in a "Twilight Zone"-like vestibule of the Hereafter, unsure what awaits them. One by one they are called to give their last testimony about their lives—so that the words might fly back to Earth and become strands of some mysterious shared human unconscious.

"I think [the two plays] share a preoccupation with very, very personal issues," Rivera said. "I decided I should write emotionally about things I think I know. A lot of things, especially in "Sonnets," are things I've been thinking about a long time."

Rivera said he surprised himself with "Sonnets."

"Despite my sometimes general crankiness, the play is very optimistic, and virtually everybody in the play is good or redeemed. There isn't one person who I think I'm going to change. In the next draft it



CHRISTINE COTTER / Los Angeles Times

Ana Ortiz, Svetlana Efremova and Robert Montano in "References," which plays through Feb. 27.

Maybe that character will be a TV executive. In a 1992 Times interview, Rivera, who was making his way as co-creator of the NBC series "Eerie, Indiana," said: "My only agenda in television is that I would love to create a Latino presence on TV, where there is none. That's the one thing that keeps me going back."

Rivera has no great desire to go back now. After "Eerie," he had two two-year writing deals for television. Nothing he wrote got produced, he says, because of the perception that stories with Latino characters wouldn't play to a mass public.

Rivera supports his family mainly by writing screenplays; his current projects include a feature for Showtime based on an incident from his youth, when a house in his mostly Italian neighborhood was fire-bombed after a black family bought it, and a direct-to-video sequel to the film "Somewhere in Time."

He says he recently struck a deal with SCR paying him \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year as a commission for an ongoing series of plays.

Taking plays beyond the realm of naturalism is, for Rivera, what makes theater special.

"We're bombarded by realism [in film and television] 24-7. We know it, we see it, we have it all around us. If the theater is going to offer us anything that's different, it needs to exploit the possibilities of the theatrical. Another way [to heighten reality] is through language. It can be poetic, dense, full of imagery. That is why I would rather go to a play than watch TV."

• "References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot," by Jose Rivera, through Feb. 27 at South Coast Repertory's Second Stage, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa. Previews begin Tuesday, regular performances Friday, Tuesdays-Sundays at 7:45 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m. \$18-\$45. (714) 708-5555.

• "Sonnets for an Old Century," by Jose Rivera, through Feb. 26 at the Greenway Court Theatre, 544 N.

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