

In the play 'Deferred Action,' the call to end DACA comes from an unexpected place

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By Margaret Gray



Sonny Franks plays a Republican presidential candidate in "Deferred Action," part of the Encuentro de las Américas festival at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. (Cara Mía Theatre Company)

"Politics makes strange bedfellows," wrote the waggish essayist Charles Dudley Warner in 1870. He wasn't referring to an Oval Office sex scandal but to the way even the fiercest political opponents could find themselves, from time to time, on the same side of the bargaining table.

In "Deferred Action," a fast-paced, provocative play staged by the Texas-based Cara Mía Theatre Company at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, two U.S. presidential candidates battle for the soul of an idealistic immigration activist.

Presented as part of the Latino Theatre Company's three-week Encuentro de las Américas festival, "Deferred Action" could be an alternate-reality, fun-house-mirror look back at the events leading into the 2016 election. It premiered in Dallas in 2013, and its plot — dreamed up by writers David Lozano (who also directs) and Lee Trull — now seems almost a prophecy.

Javier "Javi" Mejía (Ivan Jasso) was brought into the U.S. as an infant and raised by his loving grandmother (Frida Espinosa-Müller), who took him in when his mother died. His childhood was overshadowed by fear of deportation. "Getting sent to the principal's office was like getting busted by *la migra*," he recalls. But under Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals — the DACA program that President Trump announced in September that he was phasing out — he can legally attend college, drive, work and vote as long as he renews his papers every two years. Still, without an avenue to full citizenship, he doesn't feel at home.

Javi's fiancée, Lisa (Maya Malan-Gonzalez), works for a Democratic senator named Nancy Rodriguez (Lisa Suarez)

who is running for president as the nation's first Latina candidate. Opposing Nancy is a buffoonish Republican, Dale Jenkins (Sonny Franks), who wears a cowboy hat, oozes oil money, punctuates his catchphrase "I'm sticking to my guns" by firing a rifle — and wants to end DACA. Javi's polling-booth choice seems like a no-brainer, at least at first.

But one night a traffic cop pulls Javi over and tries to bully him. Javi eloquently defends his rights, his friend Robby (David Zaldívar) films and posts their interaction, and Javi quickly becomes the national face of the "Dreamers," the youth whom DACA was designed to protect.

Delighted by the publicity, the senator invites Javi onto a show to debate DACA with her and her opponent. But to her surprise, Javi criticizes the program as a Band-Aid, not a solution: "The time for Deferred Action is over. It's time for real legislation," he says.

Unwilling to back this stance, the senator asks him to walk back the statement. Lisa agrees, urging her boyfriend to wait until the senator reaches the Oval Office so she can pursue real change.

It is at this point that the plot takes an abrupt, brief detour from naturalism. Dale has a dream that transforms him overnight into an advocate for sweeping immigration reform. He's still a gun nut, an oil-pipeline booster and quite possibly a racist — but in terms of Javi's interests, and compared to the equivocating Nancy, he looks like the cozier bedfellow.

A swerve this violent could capsize a wobblier craft, so it's a testament to Lozano's lively direction and the convincing performances that "Deferred Action" so swiftly gets back on course, with a suspenseful narrative and unexpected twists. The competing forces of loyalty, self-interest, friendship, love and idealism that buffet Javi from scene to scene evoke the irreconcilable cultural values that come head to head in Greek tragedy (which, as a genre, is also prone to paranormal intervention).

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'Deferred Action'

Where: Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., L.A.

When: 2 and 5:30 p.m. Sunday, 10 a.m. Thursday, 2 and 8 p.m. Nov. 18

Tickets: \$44

Info: (866) 811-4111 or www.thelatc.org

Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes

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