

## First Production in Tiffany's Playhouse

# Theater Group Settles Into New Quarters

By ANNA DOOLING

The rehearsal ends with the sounds of actors scurrying to pick up Styrofoam coffee cups and the stage manager dragging out a vacuum cleaner. Even after four hours of being put through their paces by director Jose Rodriguez, the actors of La Compania are as solicitous of their surroundings as newlyweds in a new home.

"This will be our first production here," explains Rodriguez, gesturing around the carpeted Tiffany Playhouse hall. So his group is understandably careful of the rented space.

But that's not the only reason for their concern. When La Compania's production of "Nuevo Mexico, Si" opens on Nov. 19, it could mark the opening of a new chapter — one about permanency — in the group's hitherto itinerant history. Although present arrangements call only for La Compania to rent the Tiffany Playhouse through December, the home and visiting groups have been considering joint occupancy of the 110-seat theater on Central Avenue.

A half time permanent home would be like half a dream come true.

What Rodriguez really wants, of course, is a theater of his own, which would allow him to attain his goal for La Compania de Teatro de Albuquerque since its origins in 1977, to perform in repertory.

"We could do a musical one night, a comedy the next and a drama the night after," he says. "We could do a revival of our production of 'Blood Wedding,' keep 'Nuevo Mexico, Si' going, and have a constant calendar of events. If you don't come one night, you'll come another."

La Compania's upcoming production

is typical of the work Rodriguez has been doing with the Albuquerque-based group, and the sort of thing he would like to offer on a rotating basis. Written by him and featuring a musical score by Nobel Shropshire, "Nuevo Mexico, Si" is a Brechtian musical revue illustrating the history of the state from the Conquistadores to the present. It exemplifies one of Rodriguez's theatrical theories. "Any theater that is relevant has to be relevant to the community it is in," he says. And it's his ideas and personality that dominates the company.

Previous productions, for instance, have included a modern version of the traditional Hispanic Christmas play, "Los Pastores;" a recasting of Lope de Vega's "The Sheep Well" as a story of New Mexico at the time of the cattle barons; and Lorca's "Blood Wedding," set in New Mexico at the turn of the century using native songs and dance. Rodriguez has also presented an original trilogy written by New Mexico playwrights Denise Chavez, Tony Mares and Rudy Anaya, as well as last year's political passion play for the Easter season called "La Pasion de Jesus Chavez."

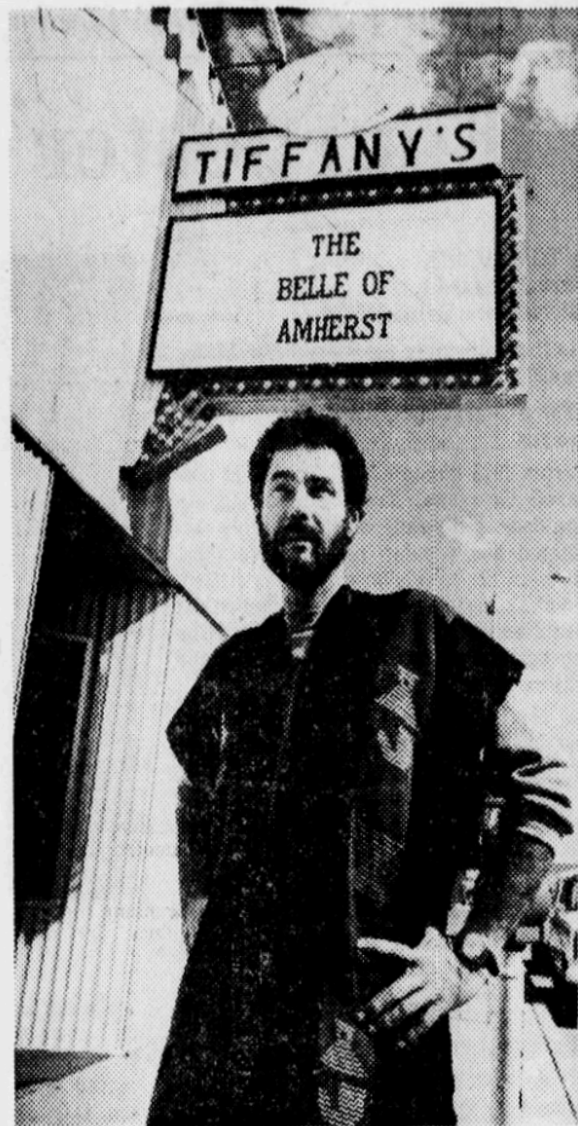
If critical reaction to La Compania has run the gamut from enthusiastic to unimpressed, one thing has remained a constant in its history — audiences. "We have a following that is statewide," Rodriguez says, and the figures back him up. La Compania's supporters have followed it, literally, from its first days in 1977 as part of the University of Albuquerque's multicultural program to sold out houses at the downtown KiMo. It was the closing of the KiMo that put La Compania out on the street and into the real estate market last spring.

"God, how we looked for a place," Rodriguez recalls. "We needed a permanent home. You can't rehearse in a borrowed space; if someone else wants to use it, you get bumped." Rodriguez did locate one space, but it had a price tag of half a million dollars and needed renovation work that would cost as much again.

By the end of the summer, the members of La Compania felt they had gone too long without a production, and the initial work of writing and scoring "Nuevo Mexico, Si" was begun. Soon after, Rodriguez approached the Tiffany Playhouse and negotiated the rental agreement that could result in permanently sharing the space. Rodriguez, of course, would like to buy the theater outright, but Tiffany business manager Rick Tejada has seen no firm offer from La Compania yet. He needs the theater for his group, but favors the sharing arrangement because it relieves the Tiffany Players of the pressure of keeping shows constantly on the boards.

Moving from the 600-seat KiMo to the 110-seat Tiffany Playhouse necessitates some scaling down on stage, but the kind of work La Compania does will remain essentially the same. Although most of that has been Hispanic, drawing either on classic Spanish playwrights or original bilingual works by local authors, Rodriguez dislikes the term "ethnic theater." "I see us as a theater group," he says. "But most of us are Hispanic and we draw from our roots."

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Journal Photo by Dennis Dahl

La Compania Director Jose Rodriguez