

THE BLOG

Greenway Court Theatre's Thought-Provoking & Entertaining "Swarm Cell" Echoes "The Grapes of Wrath's" Call to Arms

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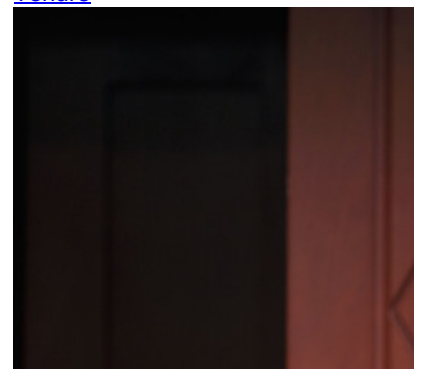
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"Well, maybe it's like Casey says. A fella ain't got a soul of his own -- just a little piece of a big soul. The one big soul that belongs to everybody...Then it don't matter. I'll be all around in the dark. I'll be everywhere -- wherever you can look. Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there."

--Tom Joad in The Grapes of Wrath

[Greenway Court Theatre's](#) co-artistic director, Pierson Blaetz, and producing director, Jason Bruffy, are eagerly watching a rehearsal of their upcoming world premiere, *SWARM CELL*.

The cozy theater, housed in an historic building and nestled next to Fairfax High School's campus in Hollywood, saw 10 world premieres in 2015. Now Blaetz and Bruffy are enthused by *SWARM CELL*, which has previews January 28-29, and opens January 30 for a five-week run. The early word is that this entertaining production, which tells a tale of "a brave new world of womanhood and identity," is one of the first must-see events in the Los Angeles 2016 theatrical calendar.

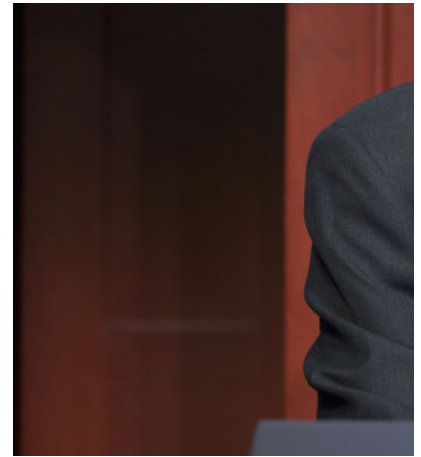


SWARM CELL, with previews Jan. 28-29, opens Jan. 30 at Greenway Court Theatre

Blaetz says their new production is inspired by John Steinbeck's classic American novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which takes place during the Great Depression and features the mythical Tom Joad character who unforgettably gives his "I'll be there" monolog at the end of the piece, promising to work for the oppressed.

SWARM CELL, which features a diverse all-female cast, takes place 25 years into our own future during a modern day Depression. It powerfully tells the tale of two homeless women, one deaf and the other pregnant and undocumented, who are desperately in need of food and shelter but ultimately forge an unlikely alliance. This poignant drama mirrors the economic dislocation that many of us feel today with the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Suggesting that theater still offers a powerful means to provoke discussion, Blaetz cites stats about our very real modern-day economic dislocation, including: a new Social Security Administration report that 51 percent of all workers in the U.S. make less than \$30,000 a year; and, headlines that proclaim "End of the American Dream." Additionally, economic analysts say the U.S. has fallen way back, "We're behind many countries in Europe in terms of the ability of every kid in America to get ahead. It's a real problem."



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Blaetz, along with Whitney Weston, co-founded [The Greenway Arts Alliance](#), which oversees the Theater and the Melrose Trading Post while uniting the local arts, business and education communities. He explains how *SWARM CELL*, which features six actresses with diverse Latin American backgrounds plus two African-American women, cuts to the bone of several socio-political issues:

It's tied into everything that's around this huge economic gap between the rich and the poor. Also related, is that Black lives do matter. All of these movements are looking for answers, and for me one answer can be found in that Tom Joad monolog -- look to one another and don't see this just as an individual struggle, but as a group struggle, for diverse people, including illegal immigrants, who feel like they don't have power or the ability to be successful in our country.



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The SWARM CELL cast in rehearsal

Bruffy oversaw the alchemic casting of the all-female group including Martixell Carrero, Raquel McPeek, Bianca Lemaire, Diana Elizabeth Jordan, Caro Zeller, Cheryl Ann Gottselig, Sheresade Poblet, and Tania Camargo. He adds:

The socio-economic gap continues to grow within our country, the disparity between people from the top to the bottom, something we haven't seen since perhaps the 1930s Depression. So it's an interesting conversation to bring up now, what does the collective do?

And, continuing on with this "collective" struggle concept, playwright Gabriel Rivas Gomez re-read *The Grapes of Wrath* several times for inspiration for his *SWARM CELL*, explaining:

One of the many quotes that stuck with me was: 'The two men squatting in a ditch, the little fire, the side-meat stewing in a single pot, the silent, stone-eyed women; behind, the children listening with their souls to words their minds do not understand. The night draws down. The baby has a cold. Here, take this blanket. It's wool. It was my mother's blanket--take it for the baby. This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning--from 'I' to 'we.' For me, through each step of this process, that transformation -- where 'I becomes we' -- has been

central to my understanding of Steinbeck's novel. And how that inspired my play where where Tomasina -- played by Maritxell Carrero and in a nod to Tom Joad -- moves from a woman who's concerned only with her own survival to a selfless leader who understands the importance of community.



SWARM CELL director Robert Castro puts his cast through their paces

Director Robert Castro continues the thought:

That transformative spirit is at the heart of our play. All too often we think of Community in terms of being with others like ourselves: the same class, same race, same ethnicity, same social standing. *SWARM CELL* challenges us to dream and envision new and necessary visions for the 21st century.

Through its various programs, Greenway Arts Alliance has raised over \$8 million that's gone directly to the needs of students at the local Fairfax High School. And *SWARM CELL*'s producers also leaned on these same students, many of whom are children of immigrants, to tell their own personal struggles and stories. Blaetz adds, "We asked them questions, and got their contributions, about their own immigrant experience. Playwright Gabriel was strongly influenced by their stories, and it generated ideas for his play."

As Blaetz, Bruffy, Gomez and Castro gear up for the world premiere of *SWARM CELL*, we should all continue to ask questions about how we can band together, and help each other find a future with productive work and dignity -- and, re-ignite that somewhat tarnished American dream.

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Ashley Jude Collie is a big fan of Greenway Court Theater and *SWARM CELL*.

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Ashley Collie · Blogger and Writer at Made Man

Adjustment: The actress's name is correctly Maritxell Carrero, not Martixell.
Good luck with the play!

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