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CONEJO VALLEY LIFESTYLE AND ENTERTAINMENT

## OAK PARK WRITER FINDS INSPIRATION IN GUATEMALA'S BLACK-MARKET BABY INDUSTRY

By Karen Lindell

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Photo by Carlos Chavez

Ants and kangaroos are a tangle of humanity in an opera written by a woman from Oak Park.

Cynthia Lewis Ferrell encountered — and was transformed by — both "species" in Guatemala.

While traveling there in 2007, the "kangaroos" she heard so much about were not the pouched marsupials native to Australia, but rather "canguros," or "kangaroo mothers," a term used to describe impoverished Guatemalan women who breed and sell their babies to American couples who can't have children of their own; "canguro" also means "baby sitter" in Spanish. The babies are sold for as much as \$50,000. After intermediaries take their share, the birth mothers end up with about \$800 to \$1,000 — to them, a fortune.

Ferrell also was mesmerized by Guatemala's leaf-cutter ants, destructive insects that can tear apart a tree in one day, cutting off all its leaves and carrying the green bits back to their colony to grow a fungus that feeds the ants' larvae. The ants return, again and again, to the same tree, denuding but never totally destroying it.

The title of Ferrell's opera is "El Canguro" (The Kangaroo), and leaf-cutter ants "are symbolic in it," she said.

"It just makes for opera," she continued, referring to the ants, trees, moms, babies, corruption, violence, infertility, patriarchal power and everything else in the opera. "It's so dramatic, pulled straight from your heart. And as much as you can talk about international politics, it's just people."

### CULTURE SLAM

"El Canguro," which despite its title is sung all in English, will have its world premiere Sept. 10 in Los Angeles as part of the third annual California International Theatre Festival. For the past two years, the festival was centered in Calabasas but this year will expand into Ventura and Los Angeles. The 10-day event opens in Los Angeles on Thursday, moves to Ventura Sept. 13-15 with performances at the Museum of Ventura County, and ends in Calabasas on Sept. 16-18.

Although many of the plays, concerts and other performances will travel to each city, "El Canguro" will be staged in L.A. only, at KUSC's AT&T Center Theater.

The festival will include performers and works from Armenia, Canada, France, Germany, Iceland, Japan, Scotland, Ukraine, the U.S. and, of course, Guatemala.

Actually, the origins of "El Canguro" are listed as the odd trio of "USA/Guatemala/Germany." The opera's composer, Peter Michael von der Nahmer, is from Germany. Joe Peracchio, a CITF co-founder and this year's festival director, said "El Canguro" is a "multicultural opera that hits on all that the festival is meant to do: It slams cultures together, and makes them get to know each other. We're about building bridges, expanding what cultures are and what they mean."

He cited as another example one of the productions that will be in Ventura, "¡Gaytino!" "You have big Latino and gay populations up there," said Peracchio, who lives in Los Angeles. "¡Gaytino!" "embodies what the festival is about — although it's international, it's intercultural too."

## **ADOPTION 'INDUSTRY'**

So how did an American woman end up writing an opera about Guatemala with music by a European composer?

Ferrell, an Oak Park resident for 19 years, is a longtime author, playwright, librettist and musician whose works have been developed by venues including the Colony Theatre, 24th Street Theatre and Theatricum Botanicum in Los Angeles, and Stage Left Studio in New York. She has a master's of professional writing degree from USC, where she won many awards and honors for her writing, and was an adjunct writing professor at Pepperdine University.

Ferrell, who's directing the production of "El Canguro," explained that in 2007, a year after her mother died, her father, Chuck Lewis of Studio City, wanted to study Spanish in Guatemala, staying at the home of a close family friend. Ferrell joined him, and after their language studies they traveled extensively through Guatemala, including Antigua.

She first heard about child trafficking when a holding house for infants was raided in Antigua. Infants placed for adoption were collected and hidden at this house, she explained, then transported to Guatemala City, to hotels where foreign adoptive parents were staying.

"The whole industry was scandal-ridden," she said. "I had only been aware of adoptions in Guatemala like most people are: People went down there because paperwork was fast and you could get an infant, and for infertile couples that was a wonderful thing." But Guatemalans have a different perspective, she said. "As we

were driving past this house, the local who was driving us suddenly became furious. He said, 'You Americans, you think you're coming down here to save our children from poverty, but what you've created is an industry.' "

As a storyteller and writer, Ferrell immediately started researching anything she could find about illegal adoptions, and learned that at the time, Guatemala was exporting 1 percent of its infants, and child trafficking was a significant part of the country's economy.

A Marriott Hotel in Guatemala City, she said, was a hub of illegal adoption activity. She and her father stayed in the hotel, where a "baby lounge" served as a spot for the moms to meet Guatemalan babies, and for "notaries" to strike financial deals. The hotel's restaurant, Ferrell said, was full of "pale white Caucasian women holding very dark indigenous babies and just glowing."

When she returned home, Ferrell signed up for some classes at the Academy for New Musical Theatre in North Hollywood, where she met von der Nahmer. They collaborated on an assignment to write a short musical about "anything ripped from the headlines."

Ferrell didn't have to think too hard to come up with a timely news topic. Their initial half-hour musical turned into a full opera.

The music, she said, is "a collision of things. Certainly, it has jungle sounds. And some of the melodies are just gorgeous. And it's jazz-inspired, and modern. These aren't rain-forest tribes that haven't been in touch with humanity. They're living in rural situations, but they have radios and all kinds of eclectic tastes."

They've been working on the piece since 2007, even with von der Nahmer back in Germany (the festival is flying him out to L.A. to see the premiere, Ferrell said).

The production will have a 14-member cast and a 20-member chorus, including graduate students from Pepperdine.

## **EMOTIONAL FALLOUT**

"El Canguro," Ferrell said, "is based on collected stories from the tour guides, and people I met and talked to. The main plot has to be fictional so I'm not stepping on anyone's toes, but all of the facts surrounding it are true."

The opera, she said, is about a father with a son and daughter, the only two surviving siblings from an initial nine children. They live in poverty in the rain forest, and the daughter supports the family by supplying babies for the foreign adoption market, with her very patriarchal father acting as the notary.

Ferrell explained that in 2007, international pressure was about to force a shutdown of Guatemala's corrupt adoption industry. As of Jan. 1, 2008, Guatemala had to improve its adoption procedures or the U.S. would no longer provide visas for babies.

"So the race was on to place as many babies as possible," she said. In the opera, "the family has already

sold two babies into the market, and the daughter has been pregnant with a third, and because it's shutting off, the father has taken deposits from three different couples. And he owes money to a gang, for the house. As the opera opens, the girl has miscarried in the night. So it's all too late, right from the beginning. And that's the story, how this little family is going to try to survive, and the emotional fallout from it."

Ferrell's own family is helping her stage the opera. Her husband, Bill Ferrell, is making the sets at his Sun Valley technical set shop; her daughter, Tess, is a professional singer; her brother, Jeff Lewis, is a sound engineer; and her father is an artist who contributed a piece of art that has become a sort of "logo" for the show — a painting of a Guatemalan man smoking,

Ferrell explained that "it's true 'El Canguro' doesn't refer to a man, it refers to a woman, but the picture is about the power struggle, and the patriarchal control."

She wishes, though, that she had taken some photos of the leaf-cutting ants to use as an image to represent the opera.

Those ants just "keep going back to the same tree, and chewing it down almost to death again," she said.

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