

'Promise' mines old Spanish gold

By Kyle Lawson

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It was *El Siglo de Oro*, the Century of Gold, the period between 1550 and 1660 in which Spanish arts achieved a greatness that was never to be matched.

In literature, there was the poetry of Luis de Góngora, Francisco de Quevedo and the mystical Fray Luis of Leon. Miguel de Cervantes published *Don Quixote*. Theater welcomed the plays of Juan Ruiz de Alarcon, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina and Calderon "of the Boat."

The art world gave us the paintings of El Greco and Diego de Velazquez. Humanities produced the histories of Mariano Zurita and the philosophical treatises of Baltasar Gracián.

If English-speaking theatergoers connect to the era, it is generally to the work of William Shakespeare, who they tend to think dominated the world stage. Spaniards proudly point out that their golden age of theater lasted longer than its English equivalent and produced 10 to 20 times as many plays.

The Valley will have a rare opportunity to see one of the Century of Gold's masterpieces when Los Angeles' Antaeus Company stages Alarcon's *The Proof of the Promise* (*La Preuba de las Promesas*) on Friday through Sunday at Viad Playhouse on the Park.

Written in 1618, it is the comic tale of a magician who is hellbent on seeing that his daughter marries the right man, encountering every frustration that can beset fathers who think they know best.

Although it's not regarded as Alarcon's greatest achievement — his *The Truth Can't Be Trusted* ranks as the era's outstanding comedy — *Promise* is remarkable for its broad humor, sophisticated psychology and clever handling of theatrical convention to blur the line between illusion and reality, says Dakin Matthews, Antaeus' founder and artistic director.

Matthews has translated Alarcon's script, written in



John Apicella/Antaeus Company

Blanca (Jennifer Gatti) and Don Juan (Bill Mendieta) in *Proof of the Promise*, written in 1618 by Juan Ruiz de Alarcon.

if you go

'The Proof of the Promise'

WHAT: The Antaeus Company of Los Angeles stages Juan Ruiz de Alarcon's comedy.

WHERE: Viad Playhouse on the Park, 1850 N. Central Ave., Phoenix.

WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. next Sunday.

ADMISSION: \$15 to \$17.50.

PARKING: Free.

SUITABILITY: Adults, mature young people.

DETAILS: (480) 965-5900.

de Oro Drama Festival at Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas, widely regarded as the world's most important showcase of Spanish-language drama.

Alarcon was born in Mexico City (leading to his oft-used nickname, "the Mexican Moliere") but achieved his success in Madrid. Writing a half century before Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, he is considered the first professional playwright of the Americas.

In spite of that, he is "barely known by English-speaking readers and hardly ever produced for English-speaking audiences," says Antaeus' John Apicella.

classes."

Matthews is determined to change that. This is his second translation of an Alarcon play, the first being *The Truth Can't Be Trusted*, which premiered at Chamizal in 2000.

"What I have tried to do is translate his wonderfully witty 17th-century Spanish into contemporary and very speakable English, while maintaining the complex verse forms of the original," Matthews says.

"It's a crazy idea, I know, but his plays are so wonderful, his dramaturgy so modern and his style — at once racy and poetic — so striking, I felt he deserved my best shot."

Antaeus' Phoenix appearance is sponsored by the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater, in conjunction with the annual conference of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Society of America at Arizona State University.

There will be a separate workshop at 1 p.m. Thursday at the Playhouse on the Park, 1850 N. Central Ave. It will focus on performing Spanish classical drama in English. Susan Paun de Garcia of the association will join Matthews and members of his company on the podium.