

‘Dream of Wealth’ Offers Look at U.S. Imperialism : Theater: Arthur Giron’s latest play, part of SCR’s annual Hispanic Playwrights Project, is based on the history of the United Fruit Co. in Guatemala



Los Angeles Times

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AUG. 10, 1990 12 AM PT



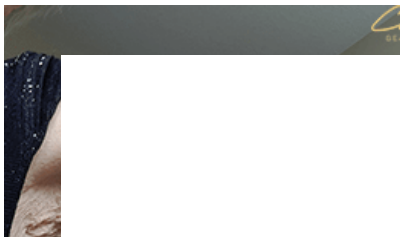
TIMES STAFF WRITER

COSTA MESA — When South Coast Repertory describes the main attraction of its fourth annual Hispanic Playwrights Project as a sweeping epic of capitalist imperialism in Central America, the key phrase is *sweeping epic*.

In the very first scene of Arthur Giron’s “A Dream of Wealth”—which is to receive an SCR Mainstage reading on Saturday at 7:30 p.m.—the Pope enters, followed by Cardinals and Spanish conquistadors, and mulls over the concept of legitimizing the half-breed offspring of Christian men and Indian women.

It is, he says, “unnatural to contemplate. Revolting. Bestial. The mating of upright men with . . . with . . . these newly discovered creatures . . . it is monstrous.” Two of the Cardinals don’t mind telling him that Indian women are reported to have “long tails” and “teeth between their legs.”

Unless Giron rewrites that scene between now and Saturday—which is not out of the question, since “A Dream of Wealth” is a play-in-progress undergoing daily rewrites—one of the conquistadors soon tears off his cloak and sword and reveals himself to be an American engineer.





He is, moreover, the same engineer who drove 20,000 men to their deaths while laying the first four miles of railroad track through the Central American jungle at the turn of the 20th Century.

Sweeping epic, indeed--and, it turns out, based on the notorious case history of the United Fruit Co.

“May I make a bold statement?” asks Giron, having just taken a break from the first rehearsal. “I think that theater in general is the last haven of the truth. We’re not getting the truth in the newspapers. We’re not getting the truth in film. We’re not getting the truth on television at all. And so we in the theater have the responsibility to go under the surface of things, to get to the raw stuff.”

The techniques of getting there, says the 53-year-old playwright, are familiar from the magic realism of various Latin American novelists. Like their works, “A Dream of Wealth” not only makes quantum leaps of time, it also uses ancient myths, focuses on historical issues and locates them within heroic or anti-heroic figures. And, resorting to something novels cannot do, the play also relies strongly on the use of music and masks.

“It is total theater,” Giron emphasizes. “The time is over when we listen for the closing of a door on stage. I think we are coming into a whole new period in American theater where four-walled realism is dead. People don’t want to see what they can see on TV or in films. I think the audience is hungry for something entirely theatrical.”

But why a play about the United Fruit Co. or, as it is called in “A Dream of Wealth,” the Imperial Fruit Co.? That saga has been told time and again in history books as a paradigm of corporate hegemony over sovereign nations, cultural subjugation, monumental greed and all the attendant evils of unrestrained capitalism.

As for the other side of the story--the good that resulted from the company’s creation of new jobs and the development of a worldwide market for bananas that didn’t previously exist--it too has been detailed many times over.

“For me there is a very deep reason,” Giron explains. “My family is from Guatemala, and for the last few years I’ve been doing a roots search. I am trying to understand how the United States has affected me personally and, by extension, how it has affected Central America.

“I had many relatives who worked for the company at the managerial levels. I get very angry when Guatemalans are paid 50% less than Americans for the same work. This still goes on.

“On the other hand, there are people in my family who say, ‘Thank God for the United Fruit Co. Because during the Depression it gave us work. Our babies were born in its hospitals. Look at all the medical research it did. It helped to cure malaria. It’s a wonderful company.’ ”

To this day, Giron maintains, people throughout Central America are split over what happened. The truth is, the company built the railroads, built the cities in the jungles, gave work to 50,000 people.

“In one way it was almost slave labor,” he says, “but in another way it was an attempt to teach people American leadership techniques.”

Perhaps more important, Giron believes that he can explore other elements of the saga such as the disappearance of the 19th-Century Western frontier as a root cause of the imperialistic adventures in Central America and what he terms a deep-seated Anglo prejudice against Spanish culture traceable to Elizabethan times 400 years ago.

“I blame that on Queen Elizabeth, who engendered an incredible English publicity machine,” Giron says.

He also wants “A Dream of Wealth” to express his feelings about being “a double person.” In fact, Giron’s personal sense of being both an outcast and a half-breed is a theme that has run through some of his six other plays--most notably “Edith Stein,” which is based on the life of the German-Jewish philosopher who became a Carmelite nun, died at Auschwitz and was beatified by the Pope three years ago.

Giron, who has had two previous plays produced at SCR--“Becoming Memories” in 1984 and “Charley Bacon and His Family” in 1987--points to his own background as the source of his interest in doubles. Giron was born in New York, where his father was the Guatemalan consul general at the time. Giron says his family tree links two disparate influences--Spanish conquistadors on his paternal side and Bavarian Jews on his maternal side.

He maintains that because this “weird mixture” came together in Guatemala, of all places, it has fueled his imagination and has had a resonance in his work that it might not otherwise have had.

“You see, the Hispanic writer holds on to the past, whereas the American writer does not,” Giron claims. “For example, there’s no demarcation between the past and the present. In Guatemala you see buildings still standing from the 16th Century. You use them. You walk through them. The past is always with you.”

Yet Giron concedes that he is thoroughly North-Americanized. He is a U.S. citizen and has lived most of his life in this country. Since 1983, he has been in Pittsburgh, where he heads the graduate play writing program as a tenured professor at the Carnegie Mellon Institute.

True to the fate of a born double, however, Giron divides his time between that city and New York, where his Guatemalan wife--a producer of Spanish-language cable TV programs--lives and works. “We have a commuter marriage,” he says, “which means I really live in two places.”

That, Giron quips, is merely further evidence of his role as a mediator between cultures.

“A Dream of Wealth” will be read at South Coast Repertory at 7:30 p.m. Saturday as part of the Hispanic Playwrights Project. Two other plays will be read publicly: Octavio Solis’ “Prospect” tonight at 7:30, and Edwin