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## GIRON'S 'MEMORIES' AT SOUTH COAST REPERTORY

By LAWRENCE CHRISTON

Love and death. Never can those themes have thrashed with more discernible agitation, even fury, than they do through playwright Arthur Giron, whose "Becoming Memories" opens Tuesday at South Coast Repertory.

"The play concerns five Midwestern families over three generations, from the turn of the century to the present," he explains. "We follow the people through their courtships and marriages in separate but thematically interlocked stories. One of the characters says—I'm paraphrasing—'When happiness starts in a family, it rolls through generations like a child's ball. The same with unhappiness.' I want the actors' experience to become the audience's experience."

In the space of a breath, he'll speak of his play as "a joyful expression of the healing power of love. The way it happens usually is not between parents and kids, but between *grand*parents and kids. Love is synonymous with spiritual values. Audiences are desperate for it." Then, suddenly, the darkness takes over, a gross tentacle reaching up to pull down the lazy swimmer: "The day my father committed suicide there was this green stuff oozing out of his nose and mouth. I wiped it with his suicide letter and threw the letter away. I never knew what it said.

" 'A happy bed keeps the universe in place' is a line in my play. You can tell when a man and his wife are sexually harmonious. When it's right, it radiates through the family and everyone around them." Then, "I'm constantly living in a caldron, hot, hot, hot! Between my wife's and my family we've lost 14 people in Central America. It's a loving family, but the sense of death and danger is everywhere. I was on the first airliner hijacked to Cuba, in 1961. They told us five times they were going to kill us. Who wants to live through that?"

To add to the warring emotional specter, Giron's life is inordinately infused with myth. Not your academic, detached frame of critical reference that sticks to 'a page, but an element in which he actively - and without apparent volition - moves, as through weather.

"It's important for me to be here. I spent summers here in Newport," he says. 'My father, who had been consul general for Guatemala, later went to work as MGM's dentist. We lived in the Wilshire district, next to the house that was used for the movie 'Sunset Boulevard.'

"I want to do a big novel about California. California is the mystical embodiment of woman. Its name is derived from Calafia, one of the islands of earthly paradise in 16th-Century Spanish literature, inhabited by Amazonian

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goddesses. Los Angeles is named after a virgin, and, then you have the film goddess. I'm here, too, because I go where the work is. I could have my plays done anywhere. I've been produced on Broadway. But right here is where the theater is happening."

The last time Giron was here was in August, for his mother's funeral. "Her twin brother had committed suicide in June. We never told her, but she knew." The memory so unnerves him that on this visit he wasn't able to eat for a day and a half after arriving.

Being Latin may have something to do with Giron's Lorca-like sense of foreboding. "A cousin of my mother's is Manuel de Falla. I grew up hearing great deeds of my family. All the women are beautiful. All the men are handsome. And when you look at their pictures, they really were beautiful and handsome. I was conscious of descending from the conquistadors. We grew up hearing how we were related to Clovis and Charlemagne.

"The whole imaginative life was very real in our home. One of the hard things for Americans to understand about Central America is the sense of time, where time past and time present are the same, as seamlessly tied as music and dance. But I don't want 'Becoming Memories' to be thought of in any Latin connection. It's an American play. My interest now is the American spirit."

Indeed, except for the air of feline softness characteristic of cultivated Latin Americans, Giron wouldn't strike anyone as conventionally Latin at all. His scraggly salt-and-pepper beard and longish, rough combed hair, as well as the writer's usual faulty posture, lend him an air of dishevelment. His voice is mildly avuncular, his skin pale, the acquisition of an adulthood spent in New York (where he lives with his wife and son). There's no mistaking the pensive anguish that reddens his eyes during this, a most vulnerable period of rewriting while, as he puts it, he's "trying to relive the adolescence I never had" and "searching for the man I never be." Yet he remains pleasant, outgoing, highly curious about anyone he encounters.

Giron is known in New York and regional theater circles for his foundation work in arts funding and for his plays "Money," "Dirty Jokes" (which played on Broadway with Michael Moriarty) and "Edith Stein," his first, done here at the Zephyr Theatre in 1979. He's co-founder of the prestigious Ensemble Studio Theatre. He teaches theater at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and at Hunter College in New York.

"I try to teach my kids that 'Your life is your treasure; you're sitting on it,' " he says. "Every second of our lives is a great drama. Every one of us walks around full of drama and joy and sorrow. The trick is to find a way to make it into an offering in the theater."

"Becoming Memories" had its germination when Giron was doing social work in rural upstate New York. "Dirty Jokes" came out of that period, as did his discovery of traditional America. "America's spiritual richness came to an end after the 19th Century, after relativism came in and made everything gray." (An unnerving coincidence: Giron was in Herman Melville's house the day his mother died.) "But I discovered that

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the kind of people you find in Appalachia have managed to keep it alive. When the Illusion Theatre Company in Minneapolis commissioned me to do a play for them, I said, 'Great, Tell me about your grandparents. We'll do a play about them.' They didn't know what to expect from me. They were delighted."

Director David Shookhoff helped develop the workshop production then. When South Coast Repertory director Martin Benson decided on his cast, he kept the manuscript shut for two days and had the actors talk about their families. "At the end of the two days, we already had a company," Giron says. "That's a tribute to Martin, too. Everybody in New York envies me for coming to the South Coast Rep."

He quoted a Mennonite saying: "It is written that the elder shall serve the younger and suffer with him and the younger shall suffer with the elder, learning from him, learning what came before, joined in love. . ."

Conversation had taken him through lunch. " 'Becoming Memories' means memory in the present," he said, Walking back to the theater, another memory became present. "You know, my father used to say, 'A man has the right to kill his family, if he wants to.' How: do you live with that?" The sun was out; the air was temperate. But he gave a slight shiver.