

A COFFEE WITH RUPERT REYES

## Playwright's passion for theater is no act

Rupert Reyes, whose 'Vecinos' opens today, keeps a hectic pace.

By Ricardo Gándara

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After pulling up in his dad's well-worn 1991 Ford F150 with a "Longhorn Grandpa" bumper sticker, Rupert Reyes racewalks into the Clementine Coffee Bar on Manor Road, his neighborhood. You will find him often on a couch with his laptop, writing to keep Chicano theater alive.

It is 8:45 a.m., the time we agreed to meet. After selecting a Guatemalan medium roast, the respected Austin playwright appears antsy to talk but waits to see where this is going. And we're not used to seeing the clean-cut Reyes with longer hair and a full, graying beard.



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[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Rupert Reyes delivers mail by day and delivers lines at night.

"How's the family? Do you prefer to be called Rupert or Ruperto?"

"Rupert is fine. A few years ago I was at an audition and the casting director asked, 'Is Reputo here?' So I became Rupert."

"My son Julio (28) is in grad school studying architecture at UC Berkeley. Carina (25), a registered nurse, just got a new job with a children's hospital in Fort Worth. Anya (19) is exploring life. She wants to go to college but isn't ready. She just got a job as a waitress. My wife, Jo Ann, and I will be married 34 years this May. She is my best, most honest critic."

Switching from hand to hand is a postcard announcing his latest work, "Vecinos," a bilingual romantic comedy that opens today and runs through March 2 at the Mexican American Cultural Center. He plays Roberto Velez (hence the beard and hair), who falls in love with his neighbor, Doña Maria Alva Turner. The lovebirds, both 68 and widowed, get grief from Maria's daughter, Silvia, who believes they're too old for love.

"Vecinos" is a departure from Reyes' three previous plays featuring the character Petra, a saintly store owner whose nice deeds include giving food to people who can't afford it. He began writing "Vecinos" five years ago and has conducted private readings for friends and other community theater actors. The play is being presented by Teatro Vivo, founded by Reyes and his wife in 2000, and directed by T.J. Gonzales.

Reyes keeps a hectic pace. By day, he's a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service, a job he's held for 22 years. He just finished working with Johnston High School students on "Nerlandia." He's now running a writers workshop called "Voces de Vivo" at Teatro Vivo. Participants are writing four, one-act plays that will be performed in August. Later this month, he's part of a writers workshop at Travis Heights Elementary School. For three weeks straight, he's been rehearsing almost nightly for "Vecinos." He's also working on his next play "The Dancer," the story of a young man who leaves the farm fields of Mexico to attend dance classes at Ballet Folklorico. He encounters resistance from American-born Hispanics. Reyes calls it his "Zoot Suit."

"Everybody's always waiting for the next one," he says.

When Reyes isn't talking about theater, it's children and education. Speaking of the Hispanic community, he says, "It's not that we don't value education. We don't understand the value of education."

"I'm hoping my plays make a difference and that we take advantage of our tools — education — to be successful," he says. That message is driven home in "Vecinos" in which Roberto's son, Samuel, is torn between staying with his good-paying state job and becoming a teacher to help poor children.

In real life, Reyes, who has a degree in drama from the University of Texas, dreams of teaching the art to students. "I just love working with kids," he says.

For ticket information on "Vecinos," visit [www.teatrovivo.org](http://www.teatrovivo.org)

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