

Theatre of the Heart

In an area of El Salvador that is beset by poverty, youth violence and the aftermath of civil war, a dream is coming alive—one shared by a Canadian community, a DFAIT team with vision and a cast of caring people.

About an hour from the capital of San Salvador, the town of Suchitoto is recreating itself as a centre for the theatre arts in Central America. They're getting help from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, which revived the town of Stratford, Ont., in the 1950s—a testimony to the role that culture can play in economic development.

The EsArtes Suchitoto-Stratford Initiative began when Canadian actress Lally Cadeau, a former member of Stratford's repertory company, visited Suchitoto and suggested a joint program. With funding from CUSO International through CIDA, volunteers from the Stratford Festival's performance, technical, production and administrative staff have gone to Suchitoto over the last two years to help teach everything from acting to carpentry, tailoring to welding. Stratford has also sent materials and raised funds for Suchitoto.

EsArtes, with the support of DFAIT, in turn reached the world stage in November, when students from Suchitoto visited the Organization of American States in Washington, D.C., during a meeting of OAS culture ministers. Some 19 students and staff held workshops, screened video testimonials and performed selections from Molière and Spanish playwright Lope de Vega.

For Deana Jordan Sullivan, communications and outreach officer for Canada's Permanent Mission to the OAS, it was a culmination of months of planning to give the project a helping hand. "We're building bridges between cultures," she says.

The idea for the Washington event came when Jordan Sullivan and a group that included Allan Culham, Canada's Permanent Representative to the OAS, and Marianick Tremblay, Canada's Ambassador to El Salvador, visited Suchitoto during the OAS General Assembly in El Salvador in June. "I was amazed at the impact it is having," says Culham.

The EsArtes visit to Washington showcased the program during the OAS International Year of Culture, and marked the 50th anniversary of



EsArtes dancers performing in Suchitoto - photo: Mike Walsh

Canada's diplomatic relations with El Salvador while highlighting the pillars of security and prosperity in our engagement in the Americas. The event also featured a workshop with Young Playwrights' Theater, a Washington group doing similar work with local public schools.

Tatiana de la Ossa Osegueda, artistic director of EsArtes, says the Suchitoto program is "creating community" in the town, and has "been working side by side with Canada's embassy in El Salvador."

Housed in a former hotel, EsArtes has staged one professional production and a number of student shows. "At the beginning, there were more critics than supporters" in the area, de la Ossa Osegueda recalls, but now performances have long lineups. "It's really working." She hopes EsArtes will have as great an impact on Suchitoto and the region as the Stratford Festival has had on its area.

Melissa Renaud, head of sound at Stratford's Studio Theatre and one of the EsArtes coordinators, says the picturesque community of Suchitoto is "the ideal setting to recreate what happened in Stratford." In less than three years, she and other volunteers have watched the students become more confident and "take ownership" of the program.

Jordan Sullivan says the EsArtes performers at the OAS in Washington, especially, showed what a profound effect the program is having. "To see these kids presenting themselves to a hemispheric audience was pretty meaningful," she says. "For them—and for many of us—it was a dream come true."

For more information on the organizations mentioned, visit www.esartes.org, www.stratfordfestival.ca, www.cuso-vso.org and www.yptdc.org