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Two Bodies, One Mind

Gritty and Glitzy Share Heritage and Cause

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Two vital segments of the Latino American community converged on Washington yesterday, but like denizens of parallel universes, they never crossed paths, separated by two miles, dueling dress codes and a scheduling conflict. There was a world of difference between day laborers and diplomats, between activists and celebrities.

Or so one would think, at first blush.

After all, on the Mall were thousands of immigration-rights ralliers, decked out in white tees and baseball caps emblazoned with the American flag, listening to Sen. Edward Kennedy drawling in his Bostonian Spanish: "See, Say Pwayday! See, Say Pwayday!" ("Sí, se puede!" Yes, it can be done!)

And at nearly the same time in the Kennedy Center, a thousand or so of Washington's Latino bourgeoisie, decked out in Badgley Mischka and Armani, were celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Hispanic Heritage Awards. They craned to check out Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith and Rosario Dawson, and listened to co-host Carlos Ponce proclaim, "There's never been a better time to be an Hispanic!"

Organizers of the awards said that rehearsals, photo ops and VIP appearances made it virtually impossible for any of the stars to make it to the Mall event.

And yet, for just a moment, the spirit of La Marcha crashed the Kennedy Center party as one of the six honorees, Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch, Tejana, community activist and highest-ranking Latina in the Army's Combat Support Field declared, "On behalf of my family and the thousands of immigrants, in this country, I thank you. . . . Imagine where we came from! They say we're poor, but I don't agree. . . . We're rich in values and traditions. . . . And I'm proud to be part of what my father called, Ahhhh-Merrrrr-Eee-Caaa!"

Ultimately, both events were about celebrating and grabbing a hunk of the national pie. After all, of the night's honorees -- Jose Feliciano, Banderas, Juliet Villarreal Garcia, Kickbusch, baseball great Juan Marichal and the Kennedy Center's James Johnson -- two were immigrants, others the children of immigrants.

Feliciano, who was given the lifetime achievement award, called the Hispanic Heritage Foundation "the equivalent of the NAACP. An organization that fights for the culture of our people is very important."

The singer said he never thought that he, a " *guajiro* from Puerto Rico" would end up having the career that he's had. And, he said, he never thought that he'd see the day when two of his kids would jam with him on television.

And with that, he cranked up his guitar, and with 15-year-old Jonathan on drums and 11-year-old Michael on bass, ripped into "Oye Como Va."

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Banderas, receiving the Arts Award, talked about the influence that Anthony Quinn had on him years ago, when he won the same award. Quinn told Banderas that when he started out, Hispanic actors were few and far between -- Quinn and Ricardo Montalban. Now, the Spanish-born Banderas said, Hispanics aren't just "a fashionable thing."

"We're like 50 million of us, legal and illegal."

Backstage, Dawson lamented that she wasn't at the rally. She did the requisite starlet thing, pouting and posing for the barrage of cameras backstage, and grabbing hands and giggling with the "X-Men's" Dania Ramirez. But when she stepped away from the paparazzi, Dawson was all about the politics.

"We were hoping to go over there," to the rally, said Dawson, whose grandfather came from Cuba decades ago. She's gotten involved with TXTvoter, a youth voter registration group. "It's not about me telling my political voice," she said, "the kids have their own voice. They're very strong, very passionate. . . . The Latino community got left behind."

Hall of Famer Marichal talked about how much things have changed since he emigrated from the Dominican Republic in 1958. "We were only friends with white players on the playing field," he said; off the field, it was whites-only bathrooms and no shortage of disrespect.

Today, he said, "you can see how much money any player can make, of any race, and be respected."

Now if only they could fix the immigration problem: "It's not fair to take these people back, away from their families," Marichal said.

Jaime Contreras, president if the National Capital Immigration Coalition, which organized the rally, lamented the missed opportunity to hook up with the celebrities.

"I think we missed that boat," he said. "We have been successful in mobilizing our communities. . . . We haven't put a lot of focus on the celebrity angle, but I think we're going to have to do that."

Two miles from the Kennedy Center, at the other end of the Mall, under the same clear sky and declining sun that bathed the marble in orange, the scene at the rally was anything but glamorous.

The turnout of several thousand was far below the million people the organizers had hoped for. Phalanxes of extra portable toilets stood odorlessly unused.

The rally was a celebration of the working man and woman. There was perhaps as much pride in the achievements and contributions of this class of people as could be felt in the celebration of artistic heritage at the glam party across the way.

The ralliers they said they believed in *el pueblo unido* -- even if a part of the supposedly united community was at that minute off having fun. They just assumed the celebs were with them.

"I've heard Daddy Yankee speak of the movement in the concerts he gives," said Antonio Menendez, 40, a roofer from Woodbridge, and before that Guatemala. "I heard Antonio Banderas speak of it on Univision."

"And especially Los Tigres!" said Selvin Ramirez, 27, Menendez's brother-in-law, a huge fan of Los Tigres del Norte, like so many of the marchers. "Los Tigres are kind of like a coat-of-arms to aid immigrants," Mendendez said.

Backstage at the Kennedy Center, the coat-of-arms sat, poised to hit the stage, where they would

sing their latest corrido, "Senor Locutor."

Los Tigres del Norte crossed the border from Sinaloa, Mexico, in 1968. Now, they are citizens and parents, but their corridos, storytelling ballads of narco-traffickers, coyotes and first-generation kids who answer their Spanish-speaking parents in English, is preoccupied with the concerns of *la marcha*. They're working on their next album, band member Jorge Hernandez said. "It'll definitely be about the March."

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