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:The *Viva!*; Changing of the guard brings major shift in direction for show

BYLINE: By Maribel Villalva

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Fans of the long-running "**Viva El Paso!**" who are expecting to see the same show they've seen for the past 25 years will either be pleasantly surprised or slightly disappointed.

But one thing is certain: The show won't be the same.

When the lights at McKelligan Canyon go down Thursday and the music begins, audience members will witness the beginning of a new era for the most recognized show in **El Paso**.

"I hope people are open to this whole revision," said Craig Wells, the show's new director.

The **El Paso** Association for the Performing Arts -- which produces "**Viva El Paso!**" -- is under new leadership. Layle Chambers has replaced David Mills as executive director, and Wells replaced Hector Serrano as the production's director.

Mills and Serrano resigned from the organization in October and are pursuing other creative interests in **El Paso**. Neither Serrano or Mills would comment for this story.

With the changes in personnel, come the changes in the show. For starters, Wells, who has a theatrical background (having performed on- and off-Broadway for many years) wants to make sure "**Viva**" is a true representation of **El Paso**.

Traditionally, "**Viva El Paso!**" has told the history of **El Paso** through dance and song. But Wells wants to tell this story using actual accounts of the **El Paso** people, in addition to the songs and dances.

Wells is also an administrator with the UTEP College of Liberal Arts. He teamed up with the university's Institute of Oral History and collected several stories that tell of **El Paso's** early days through the people who lived them.

"It's more powerful to tell the audience actual stories of people who were born here and who remember things about **El Paso** as they were growing up," he said. "We get to hear about the Chinatown that once existed here and how the railroad brought so many people here."

Those stories are told throughout the various dance sequences to help propel the story along. In addition, a recorded narration has been replaced with a live narration, something Wells said will also help the flow of the show.

Some of the more blatant changes are the deletion of the Old West sequence, which portrayed **El Paso's** gunslinging

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days, complete with a saloon backdrop and a show favorite, brothel owner Miss Kitty.

In place of the Old West sequence, Wells has added a sequence that chronicles the Mexican Revolution, which he said is an appropriate place to showcase some dances from Chihuahua.

East Side resident Gerald B. Money hasn't been to "**Viva El Paso!**" in about eight years but said he and his wife Irma would like to see some of the changes, especially the inclusion of the Mexican Revolution.

"That's something that would definitely interest me," he said. "I would also like to see the show updated chronologically, but that might be difficult. How would you decide how recent to go?"

Already, Wells is talking about eras he'd like to include in next year's show, perhaps even a sequence on the 1930s and 1940s of **El Paso**.

Wells said he hopes audiences embrace the changes, but he is prepared to hear anything, even if it's negative.

"Who knows, a lot of my friends might say, 'Craig, that was very interesting,' and I'll know what they mean," he said.

Wells is aware that the new "**Viva**" will inevitably be compared with the Hector Serrano "**Viva**," but that's understandable since it was Serrano who created the show and established it as a summer staple for the city.

"He established a wonderful tradition, and no one can deny that," Wells said. "Hector got people excited about coming to the canyon and seeing aspects of **El Paso's** history."

But Wells also said it was time for the show to evolve.

"Nothing can be the same for 25 years," he said.

Other significant changes include a more historically accurate account of the Spanish sequence, which portrays how conquistadors invaded the Native Americans in this region. Wells said the previous "**Viva**" romanticized what was a very brutal era in history.

"It will be the most historically accurate it's been in several years, and I think that's a step in the right direction," Wells said.

In addition to "**Viva El Paso!**," **the El Paso** Association for the Performing Arts also presents the Shakespeare on-the-Rocks summer series and the "The Dark Virgin" production every December. However, "**Viva**" remains the best-attended show for the association, as an average of 60,000 people see the show each summer.

Layle Chambers, the association's executive director, said she expects the show's attendance to rise dramatically because of the changes.

"I expect greater attendance than we've seen in recent years," Chambers said. "Ticket presales are going better than they have in many years. We already have three or four times the sales of tickets for this year's show compared to ticket sales from this time last year. We're encouraged."

But one El Pasoan who will wait to see the show is Westsider Cynthia Gamez. She said she's heard rumors of some of the changes and is concerned the new directors will tamper with the show's tradition of telling **El Paso's** history.

"I hope it's still representative of (Serrano's) '**Viva El Paso!**' because I really want to see the show continue and for it to be a showcase for the city," Gamez said. "We should have another 25 years of '**Viva**' so that it remains an institution in the city."

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But having said that, Gamez said she is still wary about the new show and will wait for the reviews or feedback from friends.

Wells said he understands people's concerns about the changes in the show but hopes that doesn't discourage people from seeing it.

"I don't know if people will understand some of the changes, but I will be the first to defend those changes," Wells said. "But, by the end of the end of the show, I hope they understand this new journey."

Make plans

"**Viva El Paso!**" will open June 12 and run through Aug. 16.

Performances are at 8 p.m. every Thursday through Saturday at McKelligan Canyon.

Tickets cost \$10 to \$19. Discounted tickets are available for children, senior citizens, active military personnel and students with a full-time identification. Groups with 15 or more people also qualify for discount but must buy tickets at least 48 hours in advance.

A Mexican-style dinner is served before each performance from 6 to 7 p.m. in the amphitheater patio. Dinner tickets cost \$10 for adults and \$7 for children ages 12 and younger. Advance purchase is required.

Information: 565-6900.

Maribel Villalva may be reached at mvillalvaelpasotimes.com.

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GRAPHIC: New "**Viva El Paso!**" director Craig Wells works with performers Ericka Aguirre and Luis Ordaz for one of the dance numbers in the coming season of "**Viva El Paso!**" The show opens Thursday. Rudy Melendez and Belinda Saenz rehearse at McKelligan Canyon.

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