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Hollywood turns focus to immigration

Arizona's controversial law brings issue to forefront

By [TED JOHNSON](#)

Jon Stewart last week called Arizona "the meth lab of democracy," putting a 21st century twist on Justice Louis Brandeis' famous dictum and in turn, coining a catchphrase for the state after it passed its restrictive immigration-enforcement law.

It's not the kind of attention the state wants, but among showbiz activists who've long championed immigration reform, it's the kind of attention they will take, even as satirical as it was about the law's passage.

For years, immigration has been the subject of memorable storylines in shows like "Ugly Betty," and reform has been championed by many a celebrity in the Latino community, but the message has so far failed to translate into government action.

As dismayed as they may be about Arizona, activists see it as a turning point.

Colombian singer Shakira, who in a visit to the White House earlier this year pushed the Obama administration to take action, trekked to Arizona on April 29 to appear at a press conference with Phoenix mayor Phil Gordon, an opponent of the state's new law, and to meet with immigrant families.

On May 3, advocacy group the Opportunity Agenda and the Paley Center for Media are co-hosting a forum on immigrants, a call to action of sorts seeking to engage the creative community via storylines. The event was in the works before the law was passed, but that's likely to make it even more of a draw.

Among those scheduled to attend are Bruce Evans, senior vice president of drama at NBC; "Gran

Torino" writer Nick Schenk; and Ligiah Villalobos, screenwriter of "Under the Same Moon."

"There is a lot of energy from the entertainment community to really participate," says Angelica Salas, exec director of the Coalition of Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, who also will be on the panel. "My goal is to let them know all the options to how they can contribute and to highlight the importance of getting the message out to a national and an international audience."

She's unsure yet how threats of boycotts will play out -- and if they will spill over into film and TV production in the state, which boasts locales such as the historic vistas of Monument Valley. As of last week, a spokesman for Arizona's film commission said they have had "no indication" the law has affected production, and added that there would be no difference in the type of documentation required of producers hiring their crews.

As performers press the issue -- like "Ugly Betty's" Tony Plana, appearing in spots on Univision -- Salas and others hope that they can corral support beyond the most directly impacted communities.

"There is a need ... to engage more of this celebrity community and also to bring it to the mainstream purview," Salas says.

But they'll be working against powerful rhetoric, particularly during the recession, as champions of more restrictive laws have been disciplined in characterizing the issue as one about jobs, security and safety.

John Carlos Frey, director of the documentary "The 800 Mile Wall," sees his work -- and those of others -- as a counterpoint to the way the issue has been "ginned up by politicians," resulting in an Arizona law "that is not going to work, and more importantly it is not going to go into effect," given the expected legal challenges. His documentary, produced by Jack Lorenz, highlights the construction of the new border fence and, as a result, the greater peril of migrants still trying to cross.

Rather than rely on talking heads, his doc includes interviews with undocumented immigrants -- a point he says is missed in the media. In fact, he assisted "60 Minutes" in doing just such interviews for a segment on border-crossing that's scheduled to air May 2.

What remains to be seen is whether these works really can help change hearts and minds if Congress takes up the issue soon. As was evident through much of the health care debate, the townhall and Tea Party shouts and volleys overshadowed all else, including the relatively few celebrities who waded in and rallied on Capitol Hill to push reform. To put it mildly, passions on both sides of the immigration debate are no less inflamed, probably more so.

In that regard, in the coming weeks filmmakers Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini will be screening their multipart "How Democracy Works Now" series in Washington. They spent six years capturing, in cinema verite style, the last concerted effort on Capitol Hill for immigration reform. A portion was shown on HBO in March.

Their project's narrative culminates with the defeat of that reform in 2007. Depending on how you look at it, it's either a roadmap for what not to do, or the shape of things to come.

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