

By LAURA WIDES

LOS ANGELES - California is home to 12 million Hispanics, about one-third of the state's population. What if they all disappeared?

In Sergio Arau's new comedy "A Day Without a Mexican," the answer is chaos.

Cafes lose waiters, vegetables rot in the fields, schools are left without teachers and elected officials, including the lieutenant governor, vanish.

"The idea of the film was to make the invisible visible," said Arau, a native of Mexico and the son of actor-director Alfonso Arau. "It's like a car. If you take away a tire, you will notice."

The movie, which debuts Friday in Southern California, is scheduled to be released nationwide over the summer. It's being distributed by Spanish-language media conglomerate Televisa.

Filmed in a documentary style for nearly \$2 million, it pokes fun at almost everyone in its effort to highlight the roles of Hispanics in U.S. society.

"So many films about immigration are very serious or tragic," said Arau, the film's director and co-writer. "But humor is the best way to talk about serious themes because people relax and are more open."

Arau's wife, Yareli Arizmendi, who appeared in his father's film "Like Water for Chocolate," stars as TV reporter Lila Rodriguez, California's last Hispanic, whose search for the missing becomes the latest in reality TV.

As she searches, low-riders bounce driverless along the street and the Los Angeles Dodgers must cancel games because they don't have enough players - while the National Basketball Association remains unaffected. UFO fanatics insist the Mexican sombrero is a replica of the spaceship that whisked the missing back to their planet.

The film has particular meaning in the nation's most-populous state.

California has no majority ethnic population, with whites making up about 45 percent of the population and Hispanics 34 percent.

According to 2000 Census figures, Hispanics represent nearly a quarter of the state's kindergarten teachers, 20 percent of the state's police officers and 88 percent of its agricultural workers.

Yet the economic and social contributions from Hispanics are often ignored, Arau said. He said that's especially true for immigrant laborers, whose cheap labor provides inexpensive goods and services.

Arau and Arizmendi, who co-wrote the script, came up with the idea in 1994, when former Gov. Pete Wilson was running for re-election on a platform that included a referendum barring illegal immigrants from receiving many social services. Proposition 187 was approved but was challenged in court and never took effect.

Last month, a similar anti-immigrant initiative failed even to qualify for the November ballot. And although Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger helped repeal a law that would have given driver's licenses

to illegal immigrants, he said he would approve a similar law if it provides for more security checks.

Still, illegal immigration remains a flashpoint.

U.S. Rep. Dan Rohrabacher recently proposed a bill requiring doctors to report patients' immigration status to federal authorities; and President Bush has angered many members of Congress, including several in his own party, over his proposal for a guest-worker program that would allow many who illegally have entered the country to receive temporary work visas but limit the number who could apply for permanent residency.

The film's own advertisements have caused a stir, too. Billboards based on the title were pulled down after passers-by, unaware of the film's subject, complained that they were offensive.

Arizmendi said many of the sentiments about Mexican immigrants that fueled support for Proposition 187 remain.

"Prop. 187 may no longer exist, but there's still these feelings of immigrants using and abusing services they don't deserve," she said.

Immigration issues are more complex than a film such as "A Day Without a Mexican" can explore, said Louis DeSipio, an associate professor of political science and Latino studies at the University of California, Irvine.

For example, California attracts a disproportionate share of immigrants but doesn't receive enough federal money to offset associated costs for education, health care, law enforcement and other services.

The film's greatest fault may be in attempting to tackle too many issues in one story, but Arau and Arizmendi said their goal is very simple.

"People ask us, 'What do you want people to do when they walk out of the theater?'" Arizmendi said. "All we want is that people go to dinner ... and just keep your eyes open. See the complexity of the different people who are out there."

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