

San Antonio will represent at the Texas Medal of Arts awards

By Elaine Ayala, San Antonio Express-News

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This week's Texas Medal of the Arts Awards will have a distinctly San Antonio flavor, despite its Austin setting and, if you're attending, the inherent risk of overhearing someone describe what Austin calls a breakfast taco as a national culinary treasure.

The prestigious medal will go to the Tobin Endowment and CBS newsman and San Antonio native Scott Pelley. The honorary chairs are philanthropists and businessmen Peter Holt of the Spurs and Guillermo Nicolas, whose family is rooted in Spanish-language TV history. These honors, by the way, were the idea of San Antonian Jocelyn Straus.

But for me, another award winner — public intellectual John Phillip Santos — will underscore the power of San Antonio's influence on arts.

It's not easy to offer a simple biography of the 59-year-old Renaissance man whose day job is university distinguished scholar in mestizo cultural studies at the UTSA Honors College.

Santos was the nation's first Latino Rhodes Scholar. He's a poet, author, opera librettist, documentary filmmaker and television producer. Some of his words, like those given to Moses on Mount Sinai, will be committed to stone to tell the story of the city's origins on San Pedro Creek.

For a man who has been thinking big all his life, all those descriptors fail to fill the wide canvas that his work requires. Santos, the descendant of *campesinos* and *mineros*, whose roots are both indigenous and Spanish, has lived several lives, it seems.

His formal education came from the Northeast Independent School District, the University of Notre Dame, St. Catherine's College at the University of Oxford and Yale University, where a Ph.D. remains incomplete. He counts a stay at Mount Sacred Heart School, which he left by "agreement," he says. You could say his education also included a stint at the San Antonio Express-News.

Another part of his life was New York, where he made documentaries at CBS News, some 40 films that aired before Sunday morning programming.

When he sold his first book, "Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation," a memoir about his indigenous, mestizo ancestors that was nominated for a National Book Award, Santos was working at THIRTEEN, PBS' flagship station. He produced a nightly live news program and some of Charlie Rose's early specials.

In New York, he also worked for the Ford Foundation, helping build public interest media in the Third World.

At some point, he says, "the gravity in my life began to shift," and eventually it would pull him back to San Antonio. He married and had a child. She's now 6. To hear him speak of her, she may be the real reason Santos resides on planet Earth.

Santos' second memoir, "The Farthest Home is in an Empire of Fire," traces his maternal ancestry back to the 1600s in Mexico and Spain.

His writing has been described as “hallucinated autobiography,” a cosmic, time-traveling search for roots. He once said his work grew out of a family in which “the conquest ran like a fault line right through the living room in the suburban house I grew up in in San Antonio.”

More recently, he has undertaken a libretto of an opera, “Las Fundaciones de Béjar,” that honors the origins of the city. It’ll debut in 2018 for the city’s tricentennial.

Amid all this, he and Harvard University scholar David Carrasco are studying the “Rosetta stone” of the Mesoamerican world, the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2. It’s a 16th-century pictorial document about the journey of Aztecs from the 12th century to their contact with the Spanish. The two got a Corporation for Public Broadcasting grant and want to make a documentary.

In all he does, Santos is telling and retelling a story America has to hear — the story of “America’s becoming,” he says. The Mesoamerican project “tells the story of an immigrant people ... and how migration is essential to how we reveal ourselves to the world,” he says. “That *mestizaje* is about transforming into something new.”

His papers are already in UTSA’s archives, 32 boxes measuring 28 linear feet of his records, notebooks, manuscripts, reviews, videotapes and audio recordings.

Work by Santos and poet Carmen Tafolla. went into a cantata, “Ballads of the Borderland,” that will debut in San Antonio on Feb. 27.

“A writer needs to have a considerable audacity in a literary world,” Santos says. He tells those who aspire to it, “to regard yourself in that way. You have to save everything you write and produce.”

Cold call your literary heroes, begin conversations, engage in correspondence, he says. Imagine yourself at the very center of that world. Because, he adds, *you* could be the voice we’ve been waiting to hear.

Santos gravitated to his old hometown, in part, because he sees it as a literary place. “San Antonio is the capital of what the nation will be,” he says. “San Antonio is at the crossroads of histories, creating a literary culture unlike any other in the United States.”

His ancestors bequeathed him the stories he has told, so this award in Austin is really for them.

eayala@express-news.net

Twitter: @ElaineAyala