

Teatro Chicano: Two Reports

Punto de Partida

TOMÁS YBARRA-FRAUSTO

The bourgeois conception of art, with its stress on rationalism, materialism and frequent escapism runs counter to the life style of the Chicanos, the second largest ethnic minority within the United States. As Chicanos assess and absorb their history, they are less willing to accept the cultural patterns of a racist society; they no longer tolerate American traditions which fail to acknowledge them as generators of and contributors to those traditions. They no longer believe in art forms that toy with philosophies of revolution but are too tepid to be examples of change. La Causa, the Chicano struggle for self-determination, is the action in life which is reflected in the Chicano theatre.

Chicano theatrical history is one of the oldest in the continent, with roots which date back to the pre-hispanic indigenous dramas like the *Rabinal Achí*. After the conquest, theatre in the European sense was inaugurated in Mexico in the 1500s with performances of plays like *Coloquio de la nueva conversion y bautismo de los cuatro últimos reyes de Tlaxcala en la Nueva España*. Of special significance were the rituals and ceremonies of the Christian church which were transformed into public fiestas and in effect became a people's theatre.

From the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, the major form of theatrical expression was the allegorical mime dramas of the *mascaradas*. Paralleling the fantastic plots and staging of the *mascaradas* was the historical drama of the exploration and colonization of what is now the American Southwest.

Juan de Oñate in 1588 enacted this first real life drama in our country on the shores of the Río Grande. Later as the Indo-Hispano people of the Southwest developed settlements, traditions and a way of life, they maintained a rich and varied tradition of religious and secular drama. *Pastorelas*, *posadas*, and *autos sacramentales* furnished didactic and poetic experience. Although theatre companies from Mexico crossed the border in the latter half of the nineteenth century, performing the standard repertoire for Chicano audiences along the *frontera*,

the most vital expression was provided by the roving bands of *carpas y maromeros*. These raggle-taggle troupes performed brief topical sketches and condensed versions of folk drama, intermingled with poetic recitations, music, and dance.

In the urban *barrios*, the *Chicanada* was entertained in the early part of this century by *tandas de variedad* performed by musical theatre companies. Great vaudevillians like El Chaflán and La Chata Nolesca acted out tales embodying the pain and beauty of Pocho life in the urban jungle. Dialogue was a hybrid, beautiful mixture of English, Spanish, and Pachuco *caló*; the style was fluid, improvisational and spontaneous, content was mordantly satirical, often poking fun at the mechanical inhuman world of the *Gavacho*, the automaton-like white man. Integral parts of the *tandas* were indigenous folk singers like Lydia Mendoza and Chelo Silva, who sang songs of life and protest to Chicano audiences from Texas to Nueva York.

Within this long-standing and vibrant theatrical tradition, El Teatro Campesino was founded in 1965 by Luis Valdéz as an adjunct to the Farmworker's labor movement. Whether performing in dusty, agricultural communities of California and Texas, or world capitals like New York and Paris, it has carried the human message of the Chicano as he re-affirms himself and his historical destiny.

Just as La Causa encompasses a multi-faceted, contradictory people with multiple histories, leaders and ideologies, so does the Teatro Campesino reflect diverse orientations. It is a theatre of social protest that becomes ritual theatre, it is guerrilla theatre destroying established theatrical custom, while at the same time maintaining and re-defining the tenets of Chicano dramatic traditions. It examines the contemporary reality of the Chicano by mining the rich vein of mythology and archetypal memory of La Raza.

El Teatro Campesino has spawned a whole generation of *teatros* throughout the country: from El Teatro del Piojo in the state of Washington to El Teatro Bi-lingüe in Texas. Like individual pieces of a larger resplendent mosaic, the *teatros* in their confrontations with art are maintaining the militancy of the Chicano and are a vital, even-indispensable component of La Causa.

University of Washington

Notes on Chicano Theater

LUIS VALDÉZ

What is Chicano theater? It is theater as beautiful, *rasquachi*, human, cosmic, broad, deep, tragic, comic as the life of La Raza itself. At its high point Chicano theater is religion—the huelguistas de Delano praying at the shrine of the Virgin de Guadalupe, located in the rear of an old station wagon parked across the road from DiGiorgios's camp #4; at its low point, it is a cuento or a chiste told somewhere in the recesses of the barrio, puro pedo.

Chicano theater, then is first a reaffirmation of LIFE. That is what all theater is supposed to do, of course; but the limp, superficial, gringo seco productions in

the "professional" American theater (and the college and university drama departments that serve it) are so antiseptic, they are antibiotic (anti-life). The characters and life situations emerging from our little teatros are too real, too full of sudor, sangre, and body smells to be boxed in. Audience participation is no cute production trick with us; it is a pre-established, pre-assumed privilege. "Que le suenen la campanita!"

Defining Chicano Theater is a little like defining a Chicano car. We can start with a low-rider's cool Merc or a campesino's banged-up Chivi, and describe the various paint jobs, hub caps, dents, taped windows, Virgin on the dashboard, etc. that define the car as particularly Raza. Underneath all the trimmings, however, is an unmistakable production of Detroit, an extension of General Motors. Consider now a theater that uses the basic form, the vehicle, created by Broadway or Hollywood: that is, the "Realistic" play. Actually, this type of play was created in Europe, but where French, German, and Scandinavian playwrights went beyond realism and naturalism long ago, commercial gabacho theater refuses to let go.

It reflects a characteristic "American" hang-up on the material aspect of human existence. European theater, by contrast, has been influenced since around 1900 by the unrealistic, formal rituals of Oriental theater.

What do Oriental and European theater have to do with teatro Chicano? Nothing, except that we are talking about a theater that is particularly our own, not another imitation of the gabacho. If we consider our origins, say the theater of the Mayans or the Aztecs, we are talking about something totally unlike the realistic play and more Chinese or Japanese in spirit. Kabuki, as a matter of fact, started long ago as something like our actos and evolved over two centuries into the highly exacting art form it is today; but it still contains pleberias. It evolved from and still belongs to el pueblo japonés.

In Mexico, before the coming of the white man, the greatest examples of total theater were, of course, the human sacrifices. *El Rabinal Achí*, one of the few surviving pieces of indigenous theater, describes the sacrifice of a courageous guerrillero, who rather than dying passively on the block is granted the opportunity to fight until he is killed. It is a tragedy naturally, but it is all the more transcendent because of the guerrillero's identification, through sacrifice, with God. The only "set" such a drama-ritual needed was a stone block; nature took care of the rest.

But since the Conquest, Mexico's theater, like its society, has had to imitate Europe and, in recent times, the United States. In this same vein, Chicanos in Spanish classes are frequently involved in productions of plays by Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca, Tirso de Molina and other classic playwrights. Nothing is wrong with this, but it does obscure the indio fountains of Chicano culture. Is Chicano theater, in turn, to be nothing but an imitation of gabacho playwrights, with barrio productions of racist works by Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams? Will Broadway produce a Chicano version of "Helly, Dolly" now that it has produced a Black one?

The nature of Chicanismo calls for a revolutionary turn in the arts as well as in society. Chicano theatre must be revolutionary in technique as well as content. It must be popular, subject to no other critics except the pueblo itself; but it must

also educate the pueblo toward an appreciation of social change, on and off the stage.

It is particularly important for teatro chicano to draw a distinction between what is theater and what is reality. A demonstration with a thousand Chicanos, all carrying flags and picket signs, shouting CHICANO POWER! is not the revolution. It is theater about the revolution. The people must act in reality not on stage (which has not yet happened but is possible); it is basically a lot of emotion with very little political power, as Chicanos have discovered by demonstrating, picketing, and shouting before school boards, police departments, and stores to no avail.

Such guerrilla theater passing as a demonstration has its uses, of course. It is agit-prop theater, as the gabachos used to call it in the '30's: agitation and propaganda. It helps to stimulate and sustain the mass strength of a crowd. Hitler was very effective with this kind of theater, from the swastika to the Wagneresque stadium at Nuremberg. On the other end of the political spectrum, the Huelga march to Sacramento in 1966 was pure guerrilla theater. The red and black thunderbird flags of the UFWOC (then NFWA) and the standard of the Virgin de Guadalupe challenged the bleak sterility of Highway 99. Its emotional impact was irrefutable. Its actual political power was somewhat less.

Governor Brown was not at the state capitol, and only one grower, Schenley Industries, signed a contract. Later contracts have been won through a brilliant balance between highly publicized events which gained public support (marches, Cesar's fast, visits by Reuther, Robert and Ted Kennedy, etc.) and actual hard-ass, door to door, worker to worker organizing. Like Delano, other aspects of the Chicano movement, must remember what is teatro, and what is reality.

But beyond the mass struggle of La Raza in the fields and barrios of America, there is an internal struggle in the very corazón of our people. That struggle, too, calls for revolutionary change. Our beliefs in God, the church, the social role of women—these must be subject to examination and redefining on some kind of public forum. And that again means teatro. Not a teatro composed of actos or agit-prop but a teatro of ritual, of music, of beauty and spiritual sensitivity. A teatro of legends and myths. A teatro of religious strength. This type of theater will require real dedication; it may, indeed, require a couple of generations of Chicanos devoted to the use of the theater as an instrument in the evolution of our people.

The teatros in existence today reflect the most intimate understanding of everyday events in the barrios from which they have emerged. But, if Aztlán is to become reality, then we as Chicanos must not be reluctant to act nationally. To think in national terms, politically, economically and spiritually, we must destroy the deadly regionalism that keeps us apart. The concept of a national theater for La Raza is intimately related to our evolving nationalism in Aztlán.

Consider a Teatro Nacional de Aztlán that performs with the same skill and prestige as the Ballet Folklórico de Mexico (not for gabachos, however, but for the Raza). Such a teatro could carry the message of La Raza into Latin America, Europe, Japan, Africa—in short, all over the world. It would draw its strength from all the small teatros in the barrios, in terms of people and their plays, songs, designs; and it would give back funds, training, and augmented

strength of national unity. One season the teatro members would be on tour with the Teatro Nacional; the next season they would be back in the barrio sharing their skills and experience. It would accommodate about 150 people altogether, with 20-25 in the National and the rest spread out in various parts of Aztlán, working with the Teatro Campesino, the Urbano, the Mestizo, the Piojo, etc.

Above all, the national organization of teatros chicanos would be self-supporting and independent, meaning no government grants. The corazón de La Raza cannot be revolutionalized on a grant from Uncle Sam. Though many of the teatros, including El Campesino, have been born out of pre-established political groups, thus making them harbingers of that particular group's viewpoint, news, and political prejudices, there is yet a need for independence for the following reasons: objectivity, artistic competence, survival. El Teatro Campesino was born in the Huelga, but the very Huelga would have killed it, if we had not moved 60 miles to the north of Delano. A struggle like the Huelga needs every person it can get to serve its immediate goals in order to survive; the Teatro, as well as the clinic, service center, and newspaper being less important at the moment of need than the survival of the Union, were always losing people to the grape boycott. When it became clear to us that the UFWOC would succeed and continue to grow, we felt it was time for us to move and to begin speaking about things beyond the Huelga: Vietnam, the barrio, racial discrimination, etc.

The teatros must never get away from La Raza. Without the palomia sitting there, laughing crying and sharing whatever is onstage, the teatros will dry up and die. If the Raza will not come to theater, then the theater must go to the Raza. This, in the long run, will determine the shape, style, content, spirit, and form of el teatro chicano.

Pachucos, campesinos, lowriders, pintos, chavalonas, familias, cuñados, tíos, primos, Mexican-Americans, all the human essence of the barrio is starting to appear in the mirror of our theater. With them come the joys, sufferings, disappointments and aspirations of our gente. We challenge Chicanos to become involved in the art, the lifestyle, the political and religious act of doing teatro.

[Reprinted from *El Teatro* (Fresno, Calif.), Summer, 1970.]