

Guerrilla Theatre with a Mexican Accent

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“We are the people from the High School,
From the Peoples’ High School.
We are people like you,
Who have come to sing
Of things we feel,
Of things we’ve observed,
And things we believe.
We’re not going to be silenced.
To people who work,
To country people,
To people employed,
Who are exploited,
Who are alienated,
Who are controlled,
With you we are ready to struggle,
For those who have died
Because of injustice,
For those who have fallen.
The struggle we will explain,
The struggle we will continue,
The struggle, we will win.
For Liberty,
Liberty,
Liberty!”¹

In such manner do the Mascarones, a Guerrilla Theatre aggregation, introduce themselves on one of their nine recordings.

The Mexican choral theatre group was enthusiastically received at the Third Annual Chicano Theatre Festival held March 26-April 1 at Orange Coast College (Costa Mesa, California) and co-sponsored by the College and by TENAZ, an

acronym for Teatro Nacional de Aztlán, a federation of Chicano theatres which have emerged since 1965 in California, Texas, Colorado, and Washington. The Mascarones were appearing as guest artists for the third year at the Festival.

Revolutionary is the thrust of the group, which employs Mexican *corridos* (ballads), choral arrangements, mime and dramatizations. Says Director Mariano Leyva:

We want to educate the people, to show them what the philosophy of the Establishment is, while offering the oppressed a means [theatre] whereby they may acquire a knowledge of life around them. We guide the people toward change, toward a world in which there will be more justice, true liberty. . . . We try to "put a rifle in the conscience of the people." . . . It is a question of art and politics, for there is no art without politics, nor politics without art. Art gives us the charity. Politics supplies the conscience. Together, they create a bomb to awaken the people. . . . Our enemy is Imperialism.

The twenty members of the Mascarones, in the 16-20 age bracket, are students from the Preparatoria Popular (People's High School) in Mexico City, who live and work together. After school, they devote long hours to preparing for the three or four performances they stage, week in and week out. They do not appear in commercial or official theatres, but rather in schools, factories, small towns, suburban centers, and in workers' quarters in Mexico City and elsewhere in the Aztec Republic.

Lacking traditional box-office support, the Mascarones depend on contributions from their mainly student and blue-collar audiences. "We receive as little as ten Mexican cents from one youngster, or as much as 200 pesos from a worker, which is about 16 American dollars," explains Leyva. "Sometimes a worker, after a performance, will empty his pockets of all the change he has, and turn it over to us."

To supplement these earnings, the group produces "revolutionary arts and crafts" for sale after their performances. Included are insignias and pins featuring a head-inset of Che Guevara, posters and illustrations with a rebel clout (Fidel Castro, Camilo Torres, Emiliano Zapata), and a series of recordings covering the major facets of their musical repertory.

That repertory evolves mainly as a result of cooperative endeavor. Inspired by events from Mexico's past or its current history, or by the revolutionary struggle in such areas as Cuba and Vietnam, the Mascarones set to improvising scenes, arranging musical accompaniment—usually with guitars—and then work out dramatizations needed to bridge their choral statements. With artistic care, they chart their human groupings, in black shirts and black trousers. Through fluid movement they create mass groupings, then peel off into smaller units, all designed to assure kinetic vitality to their free-flowing performances.

At the Chicano Festival, the Mascarones staged six numbers from their rebel song-bag. "This is a theatre for both liberation and peace," explains Mariano Leyva, "a theatre striving to give dramatic dimension to events rooted in the pain and anguish of our people. . . . We bring you a performance of revolutionary

songs and *corridos*. The *corrido* shouts out what the people feel, and it is never afraid to tell the truth."

With their first number, *Zapata*, the Mascarones restore revolutionary life and dimension to Emiliano Zapata, the colorful and incorruptible Morelos peasant who led land-hungry *campesinos* in the Revolution which began in 1910. Through *corridos*, dramatizations and declamations, Zapata dominates the stage, first as a youngster observing the injustice of the large landowners and vowing to make them return those lands. He is seen leading the *campesinos* to military victories. Later, he sits down to confer with the new President, Francisco Madero, who suggests he not press so hard for *campesino* claims. Zapata next emerges as the foremost supporter of the Plan de Ayala, a landmark document associated with his name in Mexican history. This Plan, keyed to agrarian reform, stipulates that one-third of the hacienda lands held by the *hacendados* are to be turned over to the *campesinos*.

Against the backdrop of a "black premonition," the Mascarones proceed to reenact events from Mexican history dating from 1919: a supposed deserter from the Federal Army informs Zapata that another *federalista*, Colonel Jesús M. Guajardo, wants to join the *zapatistas*. Wary at first, Zapata finally consents to meet Guajardo in Tepalcingo village. Guajardo graciously presents Zapata, a lover of fine horseflesh, with a spirited sorrel. After embracing the "Caudillo del Sur," Guajardo arranges for another meeting the next day at an hacienda in Chinameca. Following that amicable meeting, Zapata saddles up and prepares to leave with his escort of ten men. As an Honor Guard renders a musical salute to the Caudillo, Guajardo's men riddle him with bullets.

To this day, the Indians recall the "senseless treachery," the "Ninth of April," and the "black premonition." And they continue to mourn the death of their "Caudillo del Sur."

In their second number, *Jenaro Vásquez*, the Mascarones pay homage to the contemporary Mexican peasant leader, a school teacher-turned "soldier of the people," a companion in spirit to Zapata. Vásquez' revolutionary goal was to "liberate Mexico in favor of a better homeland, or to die in the attempt."

The venal press denounced you.
 But we, the revolutionary artists
 of the people,
 Must tell the truth about the struggle.
 Jenaro, you die [February 2, 1972] only to live
 in the conscience of those who love justice.
 We will return with you, Jenaro,
 We will be millions.
 We will triumph,
 Commander Vázquez Rojas.
 Your death has not been in vain.
 In the struggle we shall continue,
 Commander Vázquez Rojas,
 An entire life of struggle. . . .

In *Taravisión*, the Mascarones satirize the televisionization of the Mexican mentality brought on by the "infiltration of our minds by Yankee heroes." What is their answer to made-in-America-dubbed-in-Spanish-TV offerings?

By changing the channel we solve nothing.
We have to change the system.

A familiar complaint—police brutality and venality—fuels a short number, while still another in a "Salute to the Cuban People, the only one to triumph over Yankee Imperialism." For this militant musical number, bongos and rhythmic hand-clapping supply a syncopated Caribbean beat:

Martí promised it
and Fidel made it come true.
Fidel, Fidel . . .
What does he have . . .
The Yankees can't cope with him.

In their number *The Tenth of June*, the group recreates and editorializes on the tragic events of that day in 1971 when 10,000 students in Mexico City marched on the imposing Monument to the Revolution to protest against the continued imprisonment of forty students who had been arrested during the October 1968 anti-government demonstrations, which left in their wake an official death toll of more than fifty.

"Treason to the Revolution was the cause of this latest demonstration," entones the entire company, which then dissolves into individual units to mime the arrival of the Halcones (Falcons), a group of rightist, anti-student goons allegedly subsidized to work over the students ("sixty pesos a day, and more for the leaders.") Cars move in, mime-style, as the Mascarones simulate the helmeted officers, their sirens blaring, radioing information on the combatants. With the police taking a "hands-off" approach, the battle is joined. Pistols, carbines and simulated Japanese bamboo staves swing into action. Heads are cracked, students writhe on the turf.

When the choral tumult subsides, the President is heard repeating, "There are no Halcones . . . There are no Halcones . . . no Halcones." A moment later the President, now on a soapbox, shouts out hollowly, "I am maintaining my position of dialogue . . . within fifteen days, we shall apprehend the guilty."

"Almost a year has passed," chants one Mascarón, "and the guilty roam unpunished."

Besides these numbers, the Mascarones also gave a workshop performance to *Caneĸ*, a new choral arrangement which deals with Spanish colonial times, and "with the oldest philosophy of the Indians, which has remained hidden . . . a lesson for rebellion with historical, philosophical and economic bases." In *Caneĸ* the Spaniards can be "read" as surrogates for such modern imperialists as the English, Portuguese, Dutch and Americans.

According to Mariano Leyva there are about fifteen more Guerrilla Theatre groups in Mexico today, all employing the choral system, yet each tends to create numbers based on its own interpretation of pressing problems in their area. Numbered among these groups are Francisco Villa, Zapata, El 10 de Junio,

Grupo Libertad, and Grupo Héctor Jaramillo named in honor of a Mexican student assassinated in 1969.

When asked about the future of Guerrilla Theatre, Leyva states forthrightly:

Our goal is to develop more such groups, and also to change the form of bourgeois theatre. We want to take the theatre to the plaza, to centers where workers and peasants congregate. We want to popularize a "theatre without walls," a simple theatre inasmuch as the major ingredients will be the body and the voice—movement and song—without need for costuming and stage setting. . . . And, of course, there is a continuing need to write new numbers, new works, inspired in our history and our current existence.

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Notes

1. This translation from the Spanish, and all subsequent translations, are by the author.