

## Concerning Teatro Chicano

JORGE A. HUERTA

Teatro Chicano is perhaps one of the best kept secrets in North American theatre today. And due to the nature of some of these teatros, it is probably best to keep them a secret—from the Gabacho, at any rate. For while Broadway is dying an unnatural death and off-Broadway emulates its mentor, teatros are sprouting-up all over Aztlan from Seattle, Washington to San Antonio, Texas. Indeed, teatros come and go so quickly that it is impossible to get an accurate count of them. But numbers, in this case, are irrelevant; what matters is that Chicanos everywhere are coming to realize the importance of teatro as an educational tool.

Some people believe the present “movimiento de teatro Chicano” began in 1965 with Luis Valdez and el famoso Teatro Campesino. But Luis himself sees much deeper roots in our Aztec and Mayan theatrical-ritual heritage.<sup>1</sup>

The educational theatre of the Spanish friars in Colonial Mexico also has great lessons for Chicano theatre. Whereas the Spaniards hoped to educate the *indígenas* about a new religion, Christianity, teatros are also attempting to educate the Chicano about their religion, in this case the socio-political struggle of “El Movimiento.”

Prior to 1965, Chicano theatre was mostly Christian, reflecting the teachings of the Jesuits and Franciscans who had founded missions in Aztlan and employed teatro as an educational tool. Thus, to this day, we find presentations of “Los Pastores” and other Christmas pageants throughout Aztlan. The Church gave the Chicano a tool which it undoubtedly never expected to sprout into a socio-political weapon. But sprout it did.

Not long after El Teatro Campesino began, other teatros appeared, emulating the “Campesino” style. Now, seven years later, I believe it is safe to say that Teatro Chicano is a living, viable weapon in the struggle against Gabacho oppression in Aztlan. Some teatros are so political, in fact, that they are underground, performing whenever possible, but trying to remain anonymous. Due

to their transient quality, these groups are the most difficult to document—nor would we want to publicize their existence.

On the whole, most teatros are not “underground.” They struggle to stay alive presenting “actos,” plays, songs and dances for the Chicano experience. The term “acto” was created by Luis Valdez to define the short scenes the Teatro Campesino was performing for the farmworkers and other audiences. The acto combines characteristics of various dramatic genres: it can be performed most anywhere, props are usually pantomimed, the action can move from one geographic point to another without scene changes, masks are often employed, and it is bilingual. The actos arose out of political expediency. The Teatro Campesino needed material which was relevant to the farmworkers’ struggle, so, employing those very same farmworkers, Luis guided them through improvisational scenes which resulted in actos of the Huelga experience. The actos were a very important tool in the organization of the farmworkers, and in educating the general public about the “Great Grape Boycott.”

Most teatros are connected in some way with educational institutions and must work within the confines of student pressures and responsibilities. A major problem in the organization and structure of teatros is the lack of Chicanos trained in some form of theatre. There are too few Chicanos in theatre programs in colleges and universities, and it is therefore difficult for neophyte groups to organize and perfect their art, since the task requires some sense of theatre. The naive attitude that “anybody can write a play” or “we’re having a political rally tomorrow, make up an acto that you can present” persists. This frustrates newer groups, who see the Teatro Campesino perform with the ease and grace of any professional troupe and then wonder why they cannot do the same after two weeks of rehearsal.

Realizing the necessity for theatre-trained Chicanos, Luis Valdez led us in the establishment of TENAZ, El Teatro Nacional de Aztlán. The name was suggested by Mariano Leyva, director of Los Mascarones, at the first Teatro Directors’ conference in Fresno, California, in the Spring of 1971. The meeting was called one week after the Second Annual Festival de los Teatros in Santa Cruz, California. There were representatives from nine teatros at that first historic meeting, and under the guidance of Luis Valdez and other directors, TENAZ became a reality. The goals of TENAZ as stated then, were as follows:

- 1) establish communication between Teatros;
- 2) provide a means for sharing materials, i.e., actos, songs, etc.; and
- 3) establish a summer workshop for representatives from as many teatros as possible.

The first TENAZ summer workshop was held in July and August of 1971 in San Juan Bautista, California. The summer was divided into two workshops, with a small changeover in the participants from July to August. Fifteen teatro members worked on Chicano theatre techniques under the tutelage of Luis and his brother, Danny. The Teatro Campesino members worked side-by-side with other teatro members for the first month and then toured the border states during August while Luis directed the workshop members in a program of actos to be presented at the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles. The

performances were billed as a production of TENAZ and El Teatro Campesino, and were highly acclaimed. The first TENAZ summer workshop was a success. Some members of the workshops stayed in San Juan to become members of El Teatro Campesino, but most returned to their respective groups eager to share all the exciting experiences and fresh ideas they had learned from Luis.

The Third Annual Festival of Chicano Theatre was held in the Spring of 1972. Attended by more than twenty-five groups, this festival showed a growing awareness among teatros for a more professional type of presentation. The groups varied considerably in ability, but the festival affirmed the existence of many teatros working toward the same goal: unity of the Chicano. Once again, the Teatro Campesino stood out as the leader of the teatros, but the quality of other groups was definitely on the rise.

After the Teatro Campesino's spring tour to France, the second TENAZ summer workshop was held in July and August, 1972, with eighteen teatro members representing almost as many teatros. While most of the workshop members held classes with Luis and other leaders, the Teatro Campesino members rehearsed and performed an adaptation of Lope de Rueda's *Los olivos*, directed by Ron Davis. Davis, formerly of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, was a very important early influence on Luis before he formed El Teatro Campesino. Under Davis' direction, the Mime Troupe employed a broad, commedia dell'arte style of acting, using masks and stock characters. We can see the influence of this style in Valdez's actos such as *Las dos caras del Patroncito* and *La quinta temporada*.<sup>2</sup> The production Ron directed in San Juan was a strange mixture: a Spanish *paso* adapted by Gabachos into an Italian style, acted bilingually by Chicanos, directed by a Gabacho. The outcome, though highly enjoyable, did not emerge as Chicano theatre, but proved the importance of employing talented theatre resources, *even if they are Gabachos*. Davis' direction was excellent, and the commedia dell'arte technique is very valuable for Chicano theatres.

The basic mistake in producing *Los Olivos Pits*, as it was renamed, was that the adaptation was written by Gabachos, and did not give a socio-political message to the Chicano in particular. It can be argued that oppression is universal, and that violence in Colombia is the same as in Aztlan. I cannot disagree in general, but in particular, there are certain elements of the Chicano experience which cannot be properly related by someone wishing to make a general comment on oppression. I believe the experiences of the Chicano, as related through teatro, must address themselves to the needs of the Chicano. The actos of Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino, for example, relate specifically to experiences a farmworker, a pachuco, or a militant, can relate to. The subtle nuances in "Spanglish," that dialect called "caló" or "Pocho" which we are famous for, cannot be translated, for like any other literature, "it loses in translation." And what it loses is its distinctly Chicano flavor.

There have been no studies made yet, as to the theatre-going habits of the Chicano. But given the nature of professional theatre, its cost, subject matter and other variables, it would be safe to say that Chicanos are not avid fans of Miller, Williams, or Beckett. Not being theatre-goers, then, Chicanos are not accustomed to theatrical symbolism. This is not to say that Chicanos will never

understand symbolic plays, but I believe we must first train our audiences to accept a form of theatre which is very often alien to them.

At the recent First International Latin American Theatre Festival in San Francisco, we witnessed a production of Grupo Alicia's *Conejo Blanco*, and wondered how a Chicano audience would respond to all the symbolism. The production style was excellent, if drawn out, but the subject matter seemed so "far-out" our group believes the audiences we have experienced would not last through three hours of theatrical gymnastics.

I believe that Chicano audiences want a simple, direct message, just as we have in Valdez's *Actos*. For politically expedient reasons, the *actos* developed by Valdez and El Teatro Campesino were uncomplicated and explicit. There is no misunderstanding of the message or lesson in any of the works. The Chicanos in the audience can react to their reality, to a representation of "la vida cotidiana." We see reflections of ourselves, our relatives, and our enemies. And, like all religious drama, the distinction between good and evil is clearly drawn. From the beginning, as in Brecht, we know who the villain is.

After witnessing a play which our teatro performed at the aforementioned festival in San Francisco, Enrique Buenaventura, of Colombia, stated that it was "beautifully simple and direct in its message." He appreciated the simplicity, but cautioned us to move into the complex: "As you grasp the *complexity* of *la vida chicana* your teatro will reflect that complexity in its productions." Mr. Buenaventura recognized what many Chicano teatros do not. Though we have very complex roots in our Aztec, Mayan, Spanish, Mestizo *and* Gabacho experiences, our teatros are still groping with the simple, everyday experiences which to us at this point in history are all important.

Luis Valdez is our greatest playwright to date, and his most impressive work, in my estimation, is *Dark Root of a Scream*. Luis is very aware of his ancestral beliefs and has written a work which takes place on several levels of reality, taking us through time and space from the days of Quetzalcóatl to the present. This play followed naturally from *Soldado Razo*, written collectively and scripted by Luis. It is the beginning of that complexity Buenaventura speaks about. Luis has expressed the feeling that from the *acto* we must go into the "mito." We must grasp our indigenous heritage as a spiritual key to our existence and purpose in life. Luis understands the myths, and we hope that through teatro we can educate La Raza about such basic concepts as the Mayan "In Lak'ech": "tu eres mi otro yo." The Chicano movement is in need of some sort of spiritual guidance, and teatros may be the source of that guidance for many Chicanos. The concept of In Lak'ech is a beautiful metaphor for unity. If you are my other me, then I must respect you as I do myself; we must draw energy from one another in order to be able to survive the daily onslaughts of negative experiences. Teatros have attempted to portray this concept in an effort to re-educate La Raza about social unity. This drawing from our ancestors is an important means of giving the Chicano a stronger hold on his roots; of helping us identify ourselves in the cosmic world.

Teatros have given themselves another immense purpose: to educate La Raza about social injustice, and the rights Chicanos should enjoy in Aztlán. This is no easy task, for many Chicanos prefer to call themselves Mexican-

Americans, or even worse, Spanish-Americans, negating their Mexican heritage. In many instances our audiences are indignant when we present such realities as the pachuco to them. There are too many Chicanos who aspire to becoming Gabacho, and who are consequently offended by anything Chicano. As teatros, we must understand the historical roots for such thinking and try to work with it, rather than against it. Madison Avenue is a powerful tool in the assimilation process of the North American minorities. We are continually told by the media that white is beautiful, and we are "quaint." Anything that does not fit the melting-pot pattern is foreign and must be gotten rid of if it cannot make a buck. Anything remotely Chicano or Mexican that is not saleable is considered vulgar, not only by the Gabacho, but by many of our own people.

An acto we present deals with the murder of an East Los Angeles pachuco by two deputy sheriffs. Written by a young Chicano from East Los Angeles, this acto expresses his reality: police brutality. The dialogue in the acto is harsh and real, full of "shits," "goddamns," and "fucks" in English *and* Spanish. It took only two performances of the acto to realize that our general Chicano audiences were not ready for such reality. The actual killing of the pachuco in his cell was acceptable because it was innocuous: thus have the media trained their audiences to accept violence. But the language was too much for most audiences. We found ourselves confronted by a difficult problem: should we perform the acto and turn off the majority of our audiences, or tone-down the language at the expense of reality? We decided to perform the acto as written, at a local high school in their Cinco de Mayo celebration. We informed the sponsoring Chicano organization of the strong language, and they felt we should keep it. After seven minutes and an equal number of "fucks," the principal of the school charged onto the stage and announced that the program was cancelled because of the "vulgaritys" they were being subjected to. We had not even gotten to the murder, the truly obscene message in the acto, but we were forced to stop. If we had not offended so graphically, we could have gotten the important message across: the pigs are killing our people in their jail cells and calling it suicide.

We expected the principal to stop the program, but we did not expect the "vanguard of America," the youth, to comply with the older generation's demands. Yet, for whatever reasons, more than half the audience (including Chicanos and Mexicans) cheered when the principal made his announcement, and they quickly filed out of the auditorium like the proverbial sheep. About three hundred Chicanos and a handful of others stayed behind, demanding that we be allowed to continue. To avoid an unnecessary riot, we continued with the second part of the program which was free of vulgarities in English. There were a few choice words in Spanish, but how could the "culturally deprived" Gabacho, who speaks only one language know this?

The lesson we learned from this experience was important for us: why give your audience such an easy excuse for tuning you out? Few people in this antibiotic age can face up to reality. If the simple substitution of a few harsh words will keep the people in their seats, it seems to me that they will then be exposed to the real message: social injustice.

The Chicano, like the middle class Mexican, aspires to all the worldly goods

this society can offer him. And given this false prosperity, he is quick prey to the loan sharks, furniture stores, and car dealers who make economic slaves of him. It is not easy to combat Madison Avenue, but Chicano theatre has taken on the responsibility of educating our people and giving them new values such as In Lak'ech and social justice.

Looking at the history of world theatre beginning with the political satire of Aristophanes and continuing to the present, one could get discouraged. While Aristophanes wrote and the people laughed, the Peloponnesian Wars raged on and eventually caused the downfall of Greece. History has repeated this lesson, but we believe there is hope for La Raza because teatro is a *religion*. Teatros are converting Chicanos who used to be ashamed of their heritage; teatros are bringing socio-political realities to the people in a way they cannot ignore; teatros are educating the people. Who knows, we may just teach the feathered serpent to fly.

\* \* \* \* \*

El Teatro de la Esperanza was formed in July, 1971, under the direction of Jorge A. Huerta. Employed under Title I and University of California Work-Study funds, Mr. Huerta and six university students began a Summer Teatro Workshop at La Casa de la Raza in Santa Barbara, California.

The group remodeled a room at the Casa into an intimate theatre, seating 70 persons, and performed a one-hour program of actos and songs. The actos (short skits presenting experiences of the Chicano), were originally written by Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino. Valdez gave the Teatro special permission to perform his works, and the program received favorable reaction from the community.

Due to the initial success the Teatro enjoyed, requests from other parts of the Tri-Counties began coming in. Happy to comply, the Teatro toured to the surrounding communities of Guadalupe, Santa Maria, Moorpark, Santa Paula, and Ventura. The performances were well attended, and began to demonstrate the university's involvement in the Chicano community. The members of the Teatro, all university Chicanos, made the communities aware of the availability of a higher education for our people.

After their successful first summer, the Casa gave a much larger room to the group, to be remodeled into a community auditorium. Under Mr. Huerta's direction, the Teatro and members of the community began the challenging task of turning a warehouse storage area into a theater. Plans called for a 15' x 24' stage, a lobby art gallery, and nine levels of seating area for 140 people. The slow, but highly rewarding project continued throughout the school year and into the following summer.

During the same school year (1971-72), the Teatro and new students worked intensely with Mr. Huerta in a three-quarter course through the Department of Dramatic Art. Mr. Huerta also taught a two-quarter course on the History of Chicano Theatre through the Chicano Studies Department, and the combined courses provided the Teatro with new material for its performances. The three-quarter course emphasized the practical application of Chicano theatre techniques, and culminated in a spring production of original actos and plays written by Mr. Huerta's students.

The summer of '72 found ten members of the Teatro working full-time at La Casa de la Raza under Title I and Work-Study programs. While working on the auditorium, the group also offered bilingual workshops in many aspects of Chicano culture including: teatro techniques, stagecraft, costuming and make-up, silkscreen poster design, guitar and song, and the folk dances of Mexico. With the help of local carpenters, electricians, architects, and construction workers, the auditorium was completed for a grand opening during Santa Barbara's "Fiesta" celebration. The show presented was a revised version of the Spring Production, and was again well received.

During the present school year, Mr. Huerta is again teaching in both the Chicano Studies and Dramatic Art departments. While he trains a new group of students in teatro techniques, El Teatro de la Esperanza performs whenever it can. The group's most recent engagement took them to the First International Latin American Theatre Festival, October 23 through November 1, 1972 at the University of San Francisco. There, the Teatro represented the United States, along with El Teatro Campesino, sharing Chicano theatre with Spanish-speaking theatre groups from all parts of Latin America. Though the Teatro de la Esperanza was the youngest group in attendance, the group received a standing ovation from such luminaries as Emilio Carballido, a leading Mexican playwright, and Enrique Buenaventura, Colombia's foremost playwright and the director of the world famous Teatro Experimental de Cali.

El Teatro de la Esperanza is not the only Chicano theatre in existence. Indeed, there are over 25 groups scattered between Seattle, Washington and San Antonio, Texas. In the Spring of 1971, Mr. Huerta and other teatro directors formed an association of Chicano theatres called TENAZ, El Teatro Nacional de Aztlán (The National Theater of Aztlán). This group serves as an arm of communication among the groups, helping to disseminate information about Chicano theatre and allowing members to share ideas and materials. The organization publishes a journal of Teatro called *TENAZ*, and Mr. Huerta is a contributing editor of that publication.

TENAZ is presently planning the Fourth International Festival of Chicano Theatre, to be held in June, 1973, at San Jose, California. This festival promises to be the most exciting yet, with international attention focused on its activities. Distinguished guests will include Enrique Buenaventura and Peter Brook, one of the world's foremost theatre directors.

On the local scene, the Teatro will host another group, El Teatro de la Gente (Theatre of the People) in their auditorium at the Casa, February 24, 1973. Bringing this teatro from San Jose will expose the local community and university members to the talents of other groups and serve as a cultural interchange between the teatros.

After two quarters of intensive training in technique, the new students will merge with El Teatro de la Esperanza and perform a program of original works at La Casa de la Raza in the Spring. This production, sponsored by La Raza Libre (a Chicano student organization), and the Department of Dramatic Art, will help further the growing relationship between the university and the Chicano community. In the words of one reviewer, "El Teatro de la Esperanza

is everything a popular theater should be—rough but vital, unfinished but very exciting, funny and fun but provocative!”

*University of California, Santa Barbara*

## Notes

1. See my article, “Chicano Teatro: A Background,” *Aztlan*, II, No. 2 (1972).
2. See Luis Valdez, *Actos* (San Juan Bautista: Cucaracha Press, 1971).