

Séptimo Festival de los Teatros Chicanos

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The Séptimo Festival de los Teatros Chicanos this past summer saw Chicano theatres criss-crossing the nation to reach festival sites in Seattle (June 24 to July 4), Denver (July 10 to July 17), San José (August 6 to August 8), and Los Angeles (August 22 to August 29), along with a slight detour to New York's First Latin American Popular Theatre Festival hosted by the lower east side's Teatro 4. TENAZ (Teatros Nacionales de Aztlán) decided to multiply the festivals this year in order better to inform people and to counter the chauvinistic effects of this country's bicentennial celebrations. Over forty teatros were involved in this massive effort to bring theatre to the Chicano grass-roots in the West. And indeed, thousands of people were exposed to the revolutionary messages of Chicano, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and other Latin American groups from coast to coast.

Unfortunately, the inaugural festival got the summer's activities off to a poor start. Seattle's Teatro del Piojo, which proved true to its name, was responsible for extremely poor planning. Only three teatros attended: Teatro Desengaño del Pueblo from Gary, Indiana; Teatro Alma Latina from Camden, New Jersey; and Teatro Espíritu de Aztlán from Placentia, California. They found upon arrival horrid accommodations, no publicity and an unbelievably inadequate performance site. The whole affair was a blemish on TENAZ's record for serious and professionalized labor, for discipline in theatre and politics.

But the disorganization was even more tragic for the people of the State of Washington, who were deprived of what could have been an outstanding opportunity for a region so far removed from the mainstream of Raza activities. Moreover, due to the lack of publicity, for instance, many missed the Teatro Desengaño that, in spite of the hardships, presented a splendid show consisting of short *actos* that dealt with inflation, exploitation of labor, and the bicentennial. Fortunately, the Gary Mexicans and Puerto Ricans found other audiences for themselves in such places as Boulder, Colorado.

The Denver festival, on the other hand, was reminiscent of earlier TENAZ successes. Hosted by Denver's Su Teatro, the festival brought together many new and developing groups with three veterans, Teatro de la Gente of San José, Teatro Urbano of Los Angeles, and Teatro de los Niños of Pasadena. The ten groups that participated lived together in a halfway house and performed each night in community parks before audiences of over two hundred people. The exchange between groups was revitalizing for the veterans and motivational for the apprentices. Veteran directors like Adrián Vargas (Gente), Rosemary Soto and René Rodríguez (Urbano), Vibiana Chamberlin (Niños), and Nicolás Kanellos (Desengaño) conducted workshops on body movement, stage blocking, working with children, culture, and teatro history.

Of the developing theatre groups, most noteworthy were Teatro de la Sierra from Chama, New Mexico, and Teatro Causa de los Pobres from Denver.

Sierra performed *Narangutang*, a satire of Sheriff Naranjo and local politics in Chama, New Mexico. Teatro Causa de los Pobres, a group made up of welfare mothers and their children, dramatized their personal fight for welfare rights. Another group, Teatro de la Revolución from Greeley, Colorado, presented a series of traditional short *actos*, one of which was a hilarious but deadly take-off of Colorado beer-baron, Coors, whom they portrayed as a goose-stepping Nazi. Of the greatest impact, however, was the dramatic story of the destruction of Auraria, one of Denver's oldest Mexican neighborhoods, recounted by Su Teatro. *El corrido de Auraria* examined a cross-section of the barrio's society before being razed by Urban Renewal to facilitate the construction of a local college.

El Teatro de la Gente executed its usual flawless performances, even with a basically new cast. *El corrido de Juan Endrogado*, written by director Adrián Vargas, is the outstanding example of the *corrido* as a dramatic form, i.e., a running narrative through folklorish ballads with the action developed through mime and dance. *Juan Endrogado* is the story of an archetypal Mexican who becomes addicted to the highs and wish-fulfillments that American society fosters in poor people: high paying jobs, classy cars, fast women, drugs, etc. The only weakness is the play's slightly contrived ending which appeals to family unity as the unprepared-for solution to the problem.

But all in all, the greatest visual impact was provided by Teatro Urbano's performance in front of a ten-foot American flag for a backdrop. The first part of their *Anti-Bicentennial Special* was by far the zaniest take-off on the bicentennial this writer has ever seen. To patriotic music from old Dick Powell and James Cagney movies, Urbano paraded across stage Washington, Franklin, Lincoln,



Teatro Desengaño del Pueblo (Gary, Indiana)

Custer, and others, fully costumed and uttering transparent statements that comically underline the contradictions between high-sounding, American ideals and the all too ugly practices of slavery, genocide, and discrimination. Unfortunately, the second half of the *acto* changed tone and mood abruptly, slowed down in pace, and generally was too ambitious and poorly staged.

The San José experiment, coordinated by Teatro de la Gente, was a festival with a larger purpose at hand. Timed to coincide with the cannery workers' strike, the festival attracted high powered groups like Teatro de la Esperanza and Teatro Movimiento Primavera. But by far the greatest impression was left by the production of *La Cantata de Santa María de Iquique*, staged by a coalition of Teatro de la Gente, Teatro Quetzal, Teatro Mestizo and twenty cannery workers. The cantata, which dramatizes the 1907 Chilean massacre of 3,600 striking salt mine workers, their wives and children, provided moral support for the real life cannery strike which the actors were currently pursuing. Humberto Martínez, who had previously directed the piece in Argentina for Teatro Eva Perón, also directed the cantata for the San José happening. Other performances included Teatro Libertad's *Freedom Train*, a series of short *actos* on the bicentennial; Esperanza's old standby, *Brujerías*; and Teatro Claridad's musical based on the Carnaval celebration in Puerto Rico.

While the Denver atmosphere was easy-going and very community-oriented and San José was involved in the workers' struggle, the Los Angeles scene recalled the madness that characterized the 1974 Quinto Festival in Mexico City. In fact, some of the CLETA members that "organized" the Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano in Mexico City were present in Los Angeles and they proceeded to add to the disorganization already existent. Add to this attempts by CASA-



Anti-Bicentennial Special, Teatro Urbano (Los Angeles)

Hermandad General de Trabajadores, a Marxist-Leninist organization dedicated to the rights of undocumented workers, and its attempts to take advantage of the festival for furthering its own political line, and you have a festival that included the following anomalies: (1) posters advertising a "Mexican" rather than Chicano theatre festival (CASA does not believe in the existence of Chicanos); (2) no-shows by so-called "people's theatres" (Teatro Movimiento Primavera) because they reportedly preferred not to perform for the *lumpen*; (3) theatre groups (Teatros Zopilote and Zumbón from Mexico) that supposedly identify with the working classes but nevertheless create so much noise by singing and drinking until 5 a.m. that they keep the workers up in the neighborhoods surrounding the festival site; (4) "people's theatres" that create such abstract and pretentious plays—but nevertheless poorly constructed and acted—that the workers/people are bored stiff and turned off (Teatro Zopilote).

Despite the political in-fighting and manipulations by the various Los Angeles groups that were sponsoring the festival, the affair did have its moments of glory. When Teatro Movimiento Primavera did finally get around to performing their *Cochino Rodino*, it was an instant hit. A humorous but politically hard-driving satire on the effects that the Rodino-Eastland Bill would have had if passed by the U.S. Congress, *Cochino Rodino* incorporates many of the elements that still make Chicano theatre a dynamic force: the *acto* format, biting caricatures, purposeful incorporation of meaningful music, and clarity of message. Especially rewarding was the acting of Director Guillermo Loo, who was metamorphosed from one character to another before the audience's eyes.

Teatro Nanyelli of CLETA, Mexico, also sounded a different note with their two-hour, audience participation pantomime of the relationship between the



Corrido de Juan Endrogado, Teatro de la Gente (San José)

capitalists and the workers. But by far the unexpected highlight of the festival was New York's Teatro 4 and their *¿Qué encontré en Nueva York?* A piece that may be based on popular anecdotes and jokes, *Qué encontré* relates the tragicomedy of a newly arrived *jibaro* searching for work in New York's urban jungle, where streets are crowded with hookers, pimps, addicts and thieves. Technical sophistication was evident with the successful use of special lighting effects. The artful coordination of many actors in a small performance area, the performance of *salsa* rhythms and traditional songs by the group's own combo, and the stop-action that increased the impact of the street scenes underlined the extreme control exercised by Teatro 4 and the level of discipline achieved.

As new developing theatres continue to attend TENAZ festivals, forums and workshops continue to serve an important role in the festivals. The Los Angeles meeting really offered outstanding technical assistance and needed discussions on theatre practices, philosophies, and politics. Workshops on voice, body movement, beginning and advanced acting, and children's theatre were ably conducted by members of the Provisional Theatre, the Troubadour Puppeteers, Professors Jorge Huerta, and Nicolás Kanellos. The forums included lectures and discussions on culture by Professor Juan Gómez Quiñones, children's theatre by Vibiana Chamberlin (Teatro de los Niños), and politics by Raúl Noriega (Nosotros 4).

As one can see, the summer's activities brought mixed results. People's theatre *a lo chicano, puertorriqueño y mexicano* was brought to distant barrios throughout the West, Midwest, and East. But no single festival brought together all of the major *teatros* and, furthermore, there were notable absences. This was the first year that the Teatro Campesino did not attend! Teatro Mascarones, currently undergoing difficulties with CLETA in Mexico, was also conspicuous by its absence. However, of great encouragement was the appearance of new and vigorous groups in such places as Denver that had been considered to be off the beaten track. At Los Angeles, on the other hand, there was a lamentable homogeneity of styles and themes; that is, most of the area groups (Teatro Movimiento Primavera, Teatro Urbano, Teatro Laboral, Teatro a la Brava) dramatized the plight of the undocumented worker and in a style that has not progressed much from early Chicano theatre. There are certainly more issues in the barrios of the Los Angeles areas that need to be dramatized. The teatro veterans in the Los Angeles area should be achieving new technical and stylistic levels. Teatro Movimiento Primavera was really the only group from the area that has gained this needed level of professionalization. Of course, sturdy veterans like Campesino, Gente, Esperanza and now Teatro 4 and Movimiento Primavera just keep on truckin'.

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