

Chicano Agit-Prop: The Early *Actos* of El Teatro Campesino

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There has probably not been any more unifying force for the Chicano than Cesar Chavez's United Farmworker's Organizing Committee. After centuries of working another man's land for pitiful wages and under miserable conditions, *campesinos* said "Ya Basta!" in 1965 to begin the famous and effective Great Grape Boycott. In the very birth-pangs of this revolution, Luis Miguel Valdez formed the Teatro Campesino.

As the Teatro Campesino approaches its twelfth year, one of the longest-lasting theatre collectives of our time, an analysis of its early works seems appropriate. Valdez's troupe is still the leading Teatro Chicano, moving beyond its early *acto* style, yet the *acto* remains the basic form for most *teatros*. Until recently El Teatro Campesino's anthology, *Actos*,¹ was a basic source for many *teatros*, providing texts of the group's works from 1965 to 1971, and remains the finest collection of the genre available to date.

Born to a migrant farm working family in the San Joaquin Valley of California in 1940, Valdez underwent the usual sporadic education given to migrants. Unlike the majority of young Chicanos, however, Valdez managed to graduate from high school, and earned a scholarship to San Jose State College. During his sophomore year in San Jose, Valdez wrote a one-act play entitled *The Theft*, followed by his first full-length play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*. Upon leaving college, Valdez joined the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1964. "When I discovered the Mime Troupe," said Valdez, "I figured if any theater could turn on the farmworker, it would be that type of theater—outside, that lively, that bawdy."² Valdez worked with the Mime Troupe until the *Huelga* broke out in 1965. Anxious to contribute to the Union's efforts, he went to Delano to see if he could start a *teatro*. Everyone liked the idea, so in November of 1965 El Teatro Campesino began its long and continuing career.

At the first meeting of the embryonic group, which had no real members yet, Valdez relates what happened:

I talked for about ten minutes, and then realized that talking wasn't going to accomplish anything. The thing to do was to do it, so I called three of them over, and on two I hung "Huelgista" [striker] signs. Then I gave one an "Esquirol" sign and told him to stand up there and act like an "Esquirol"—a scab. He didn't want to at first, because it was a dirty word at that time, but he did it in good spirits. Then the two Huelgistas started shouting at him, and everybody started cracking up. All of a sudden people started coming into the pink house from I don't know where; they filled up the whole kitchen. We started changing signs around and people started volunteering, "Let me play so and so," "Look, this is what I did," imitating all kinds of things.³

From that first meeting on, exciting *actos* began to emerge. The basic *acto* can be defined as a short, improvised scene dealing with the experiences of its participants—a conversation between a boss and his striking worker; a situation involving a Chicano and the social forces around him. "We could have called them 'skits,'" related Valdez, "but we lived and talked in San Joaquin Spanish (with a strong Tejano influence) so we needed a name that made sense to the Raza" (*Actos*, p. 5).

The *acto* is certainly not new, nor is it uniquely Chicano in form. What makes an *acto* Chicano, however, is simply that it deals solely with Chicano experiences, addressing itself to the particular needs of the Chicano. Probably the most unique feature of the *acto* is its bilingualism, which will be discussed within the context of the *actos* to be covered later.⁴ As in other socio-political or radical theatre, the *acto* should "inspire the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at a solution. Express what people are thinking" (*Actos*, p. 6).

Because the *acto* is arrived at through improvisation, Valdez feels that "the reality reflected . . . is thus a social reality" (*Actos*, p. 6). The *acto* often employs group archetypes, which Valdez believes "symbolize the desired unity and group identity through Chicano heroes and heroines. One character can thus represent the entire *Raza*, and the Chicano audience will gladly respond to his triumphs or defeats" (*Actos*, p. 6). Thus, what may seem like oversimplification to an Anglo audience in an *acto* is to the Chicano a true representation of his social state, and therefore reality. Having participated in the *Huelga*, the Teatro's members were all farmworkers. When Valdez asked his actors to improvise a situation that might occur in the field, these actors had lived that experience and knew only too well its truth.

Valdez had discovered very early in working with the *teatro* that comedy was their best asset, ". . . from the fact that humor can stand up on its own. . . . We use comedy because it stems from a necessary situation—the necessity of lifting the morale of our strikers. . . . This leads us into satire and the underlying tragedy of it all—the fact that human beings have been wasted in farm labor for generations."⁵

An important part of the Chicano experience, be it urban or rural, is in the language. The Chicano is basically bilingual, and his every act reflects that duality. In many instances, Chicanos speak a third, subculture language, *caló*, which has developed in barrios all around the country to give each region its

own particular idioms and phrases. The first problem a non-Chicano encounters viewing a *teatro* performance is this "trilingualism"—even people who have studied Spanish as a foreign language have difficulty following the quick transitions from English to Spanish to *caló*. When we analyze *actos* we have entered the realm of Chicano culture in no uncertain terms, and must be prepared to follow closely the double entendres and non-translatable phrases which give Chicano theatre its unique flavor.

Writing in 1970, Valdez said that the major emphasis in the *acto* is the "social vision, as opposed to the individual artist or playwright's vision" (*Actos*, p. 6). Therefore an analysis of the works produced by the Teatro Campesino will define a group process, finalized by the director-playwright, Luis Valdez.

One of the first *actos* the *teatro* presented was *Las dos caras del patroncito*. This *acto* grew out of the first stages of the *Huelga*, the product of an improvisation in the old pink house in Delano. Due to the expediency of the moment, the *teatro* performed wherever it could, with little or no scenery at all. Often, the scenery was real: the edges of the grape fields where the *teatro* would perform to try to get the scabs out of the fields. Therefore when the character stepped into the acting area he had to identify the setting as soon as possible. The idea of the signs used in the old pink house carried over to the fields and helped the audience grasp the situation quickly.

The first character to enter this *acto* is the Farmworker, who carries a pair of pruning shears. His opening lines immediately set the stage: "(To Audience) *Buenos días!* This is the ranch of my *patroncito*, and I came here to prune grape vines. My *patrón* bring me all the way from Mexico here to California. . . ." (*Actos*, p. 9). Because many farmworkers had left Delano to work elsewhere, the growers had begun bringing Mexican *braceros* from across the border, and this is immediately reflected in the Farmworker's first lines. He becomes the archetypal scab, brought in from another community (in this case, another country) to break the strike.

When the *patrón* comes on he wears a yellow pig face mask, and is pantomiming driving a large car. He wears a sign, although the pig mask is enough of an indication of who he is. The idea of wearing masks had influenced Valdez in his work with the Mime Troupe, and here he put it to his own use to represent more vividly the hated grower. The *campesino* audience can at once respond with anger and laughter at such a representation. Charlie, the hired guard, is characterized by ape-like movements, and these antics, too, release the audience's laughter. The irony of watching a Chicano imitating an ape-like guard when the real "officers of the peace" are within shooting distance can create quite an effect. When the *patrón* tells Charlie to go back to the road and watch for union organizers, the irony is complete.

The basic point of this early *acto* was to illustrate the hypocrisy of the growers and the ridiculous working conditions of the farmworkers by having the grower invite the *campesino* to exchange roles. By showing the transformation of a farmworker into a grower, the *teatro* demonstrated how easily one can get carried away with material gain at the expense of others. When the farmworker becomes the *patrón* he even reduces the hourly wages of his workers and becomes more oppressive than the "real" grower.

In this role reversal, the *patrón* exchanges hats and signs with the *campesino* as preludes to the cigar, whip and coat which seem to transform the farmworker into a grower. But something is missing, and suddenly the *patrón* takes off his pig-like mask and shoves it at the *campesino* to complete the metamorphosis. The mask is the last object in the elimination of the farmworker's identity and he is afraid to take it. When he finally does, he sees that the *patrón* looks just like a Mexican: "*Patrón*, you look like me!" (*Actos*, p. 16). Valdez wrote that it seemed the growers were "trying to destroy the spirit of the strikers with mere materialistic evidence of their power" (*Actos*, p. 8), and thus his group chose to create an *acto* which negated that myth, and showed that everyone is equal underneath the masks.

The novice to Chicano theatre might blanch at this simplistic method of presenting a message, but *campesino* audiences were often moved to leave the fields and join the strike. The acting was broad and farcical; there was no attempt at stage realism in the *actos*, for they arose from a problem that was all too real for the audience. Thus the use of signs and masks; the imaginary props and sets; and the straight-forward manner of presentation brought the actors closer to the audience and made them feel that this was, indeed, *their* theatre, concerned with their commonly shared grievances.

Soon after the *teatro* began touring, Valdez offered the following succinct description of his group:

In a Mexican way, we have discovered what Brecht is all about. If you want un-bourgeoise theater, find unbourgeoise people to do it. Your head could burst open at the simplicity of the *acto* . . . but that's the way it is in Delano. Real theater lies in the excited laughter (or silence) of recognition in the audience, not in all the paraphernalia on the stage. Minus actors, the entire Teatro can be packed into one trunk, and when the Teatro goes on tour, the spirit of the Delano grape strikers goes with it.⁶

Valdez's reference to Brechtian theatre is significant. In another article, he stated that Chicano theatre was "somewhere between Brecht and Cantinflas."⁷ Cantinflas, Mexico's greatest comic for years, has come to represent the Chaplinesque underdog, somehow surviving each new onslaught, just as the Chicano has had to do for generations. Valdez's reference to Brecht underlines the socio-political aspect of his *teatro*; *actos* are Chicano *lehrstücke*.

In *La quinta temporada*, created in 1966, the *teatro* added a new dimension to the *acto* by including allegorical figures. The situation called for the seasons to be presented, so this *acto* did just that. Continuing the tradition of the medieval morality play, ideas became visual and the audience was told in the simplest way what the problem was and the subsequent solution: join the Union. When an actor walks onto the platform and announces that he is "Summer," his shirt is covered with play money and the audience of *campesinos* responds with a knowing laugh. The reasons are all too real for the migrant worker, and he knows that summer is his pot of gold. But in this *acto*, the farmworker is reminded of the brutal reality that he is not going to get rich off a summer's earnings no matter how hard he tries.

In keeping with the broad farce their audiences love, the *teatro's* stage busi-

ness makes the show. When the farmworker begins to pull the money off "Summer," the *coyote* or farm labor contractor, is right behind him pulling the same money out of the *campesino's* rear pocket, while the *patrón* is doing the same to the *coyote*. When the time comes to count the profits, the farmworker is left with nothing, but both the *coyote* and the *patrón* have made a sizeable amount—at the obvious expense of the poor farmworker.

By the time "Fall" comes around, the Farmworker is forced to continue working for the same grower and once again the same business with the money occurs. "Winter" soon follows, and the *patrón* and *coyote* leave for plush vacations while the Farmworker remains to suffer the consequences of a lean winter season. After taking a severe beating from "Winter," the Farmworker is greeted by "Spring," who promptly dismisses cold "Winter" until next year.

It is "Spring" who assures the Farmworker of his rights and tells him to join the Union and fight. "Spring" offers the Farmworker hope for a better way of life and better working conditions because she represents the spiritual rebirth of the people. Indeed, the actress who plays "Spring" comes back as the "Churches"; "Summer" returns as the "Unions"; and "Fall" is transformed into "La Raza." Together, these forces ward off the onslaughts of "Winter" and with no cheap labor to pick his rotting crops the *patrón* is forced to sign a contract and the *acto* ends triumphantly.

Campesino audiences loved this *acto* with its direct message of hope and salvation, perhaps subconsciously recognizing the symbolism in the Spring/Resurrection which brings about the expulsion of the evil. *La quinta temporada* is a modern morality play which will remain a classic in the minds and hearts of those Chicanos who have seen it.

The *teatro* left Delano and the Union in September of 1967 to establish El Centro Campesino Cultural in Del Rey, California. Not tied to the cause of the farmworker alone, the *teatro* began to express other problems confronted by the Chicano. Thus, their next *acto*, *Los vendidos*, broadens its focus to include non-campesino characters. As the title implies, this *acto* addresses itself to the old problem of assimilation; a situation which confronts most Chicano families.

In *Los vendidos* the setting is no longer out in the fields, in the open. Now we find ourselves in "Honest Sancho's Used Mexican Lot and Mexican Curio Shop" in which the *teatro* investigates some of the more recognizable Chicano archetypes: the farmworker, the Mexican-American, the *Revolucionario Mexicano*, and the enigmatic *pachuco*. When Miss Jimenez (pronounced JIM-enez) comes to Sancho's shop looking for a Mexican type for Governor Reagan's office, the problem is set. The business of demonstrating the various Chicano "models" available gives the *teatro* an excellent opportunity to poke fun at the Chicano himself, but most specifically at the hyphenated Mexican-American; that Chicano who refuses to acknowledge his heritage and tries to "pass" in this white society.

In their attempt to get away from the strictly rural problems, the *teatro* found no easy solutions. Earlier *actos* called for immediate action: "Join the Union"; but to change the minds and attitudes of so many Chicanos who have been programmed to think that Chicano culture is inferior and therefore try to become something they are not, is no easy task. *Los vendidos* tackles the problem through satire, but it does not propose solutions.

Los vendidos is an attempt to begin defining who and what the Chicano is, and how he got this way. Each archetype is explained simply to Miss Jimenez and therefore to the audience. Along with the ethnic humor directed at the characters, the *acto* also gets its political comments across. In reference to the Farmworker, Sancho remarks:

. . . You know those farm labor camps our honorable Governor Reagan has built out by Parlier or Raison City? They were designed with our model in mind. Five, six, seven, even ten in one of those shacks will give you no trouble at all. (*Actos*, p. 38)

The Farmworker is not appealing to Miss Jimenez because he does not speak English, so Sancho demonstrates his urban model, Johnny Pachuco. To anyone raised in or near the *barrio*, the *pachuco* is a readily recognized symbol. The dress, the walk, the mannerisms, spell out "punk" to many, and this alienation immediately turns off any chance for communication. Sancho demonstrates some of the *pachucos'* better-known, though most unsavory traits: "Anything and everything needed for city life. For instance, survival: he knife fights" (*Actos*, p. 40). This, and the fact that Johnny gets arrested are not at all appealing to Miss Jimenez. But she shows some interest when Sancho points out the fact that Johnny is bilingual. When his first words are "Fuck you!" Miss Jimenez is shocked, and Sancho reminds her that he learned that language in her schools.

The *pachuco* is a product of this society, this *acto* is reminding us, and he cannot be ignored. The information given by the *acto* is peripheral; the problems are being exposed. Each gesture is significant of a social role and the attitudes reflected in that role. When given the opportunity to use Johnny as a scapegoat, Miss Jimenez gets carried away kicking this character who is repugnant to her even though he is a part of her culture. After Johnny tries to steal her purse, Miss Jimenez remarks: "We can't have any *more* thieves in the State Administration" (*Actos*, p. 42), and the comment is complete.

In direct reference to a current television commercial which portrayed a cartoon version of the Mexican Revolutionary who eats Fritos, the *Revolucionario* asks: "Is there a Frito Bandito in your house?" (*Actos*, p. 43). The Latin Lover stereotype is demonstrated with a passionate kiss which almost persuades Miss Jimenez that this is her model, but when she discovers that he was made in Mexico, he will not do: "It's more important that he be American," she emphasizes (*Actos*, p. 44).

The first three models having failed to please Miss Jimenez, Sancho brings on the ultimate: The Mexican-American, otherwise known as Eric Garcia. This model is exactly what the governor's office needs. He is bilingual, college educated, functions on boards, and can even give political speeches. But his rhetoric is not aimed at the Chicano. Instead of dispelling the myths about the Chicano, he supports them, to the delight of his female counterpart.

Eric is the proverbial sellout; totally insensitive to the real problems of his people and merely reflects the misguided opinion of the ruling class. He is, of course, completely satisfactory for the position, so Miss Jimenez purchases him for \$15,000. "The Governor is having a luncheon this afternoon, and we need a brown face in the crowd" (*Actos*, p. 47), she informs us, and begins to take

Eric with her. But something goes wrong and Eric starts yelling all sorts of things about Chicano power, demanding social justice, and Miss Jimenez is frightened away. After a few moments the models come to life and we discover that Sancho is the real puppet. This entire operation was simply a means of "ripping-off the Man," and the real Chicanos leave for a party, their business \$15,000 richer.

This *acto* revealed the common practice of turning anything possible into profit. It was the season of the "brown face in the crowd," so the system paid for it. There were, and still are, many public officials, teachers, and other professional Mexican-Americans who do indeed have the attitudes displayed in this *acto*. By revealing these foibles, the *teatro* continued the Chicano struggle for identity.

The *teatro's* workshops in Del Rey had expanded, and they were now teaching classes in English, Spanish, history, drama, puppet-making, music, and practical politics. A product of these workshops was the puppet show entitled *La conquista de Mexico* in 1968. This work is a very effective piece of theatre which demonstrates far better than live actors could, one of the major causes of the Conquest: disunity among the Indians. Because of the heavy demands upon the technical aspects of production, it was natural that a play dealing with an event of such magnitude should be written for puppets. The *teatro* was still touring, and life-size costumes and props would have been impossible to manage on their limited budget.

The major purpose of this puppet show is to demonstrate the parallels between the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and the Gringo conquest of the Chicano. The historical events and characters are continually brought back to contemporary realization with the use of "Spanglish" and *caló*. The Indians speak Spanish, but every so often a popular English phrase comes out, drawing a distinct connection between the historical characters and current events. Moctezuma tells the others: "¿Que no miran que tengo una migraine headache?" (*Actos*, p. 51), and the audience responds to this reminder that they, too, speak in this manner. These bits of "Spanglish" are interspersed throughout the show and add a marvelous touch of comedy to the overall effect.

When the Spaniards arrive, they speak English; a juxtaposition which again relates this situation to the present. In fact, these Spaniards sound curiously like Texas Rangers with their heavy draws. The costumes and names are Spanish, but these puppets talk like Gringos. Teomama tells Moctezuma: "¡Se me hace que son Gavachos!" (*Actos*, p. 54) but Moctezuma responds that they haven't been invented yet. The show takes place on several levels of reality: 1) these are puppets, not real men; 2) the Indians speak like Chicanos but are dressed as historical figures; 3) the Spaniards look Spanish but sound Texan; and 4) the narrator is a human face surrounded by the Aztec Calendar Stone, continually in view, commenting upon the action.

A different interpretation of history is presented in *La conquista de Mexico* from that which we have always been taught. The friars are shown as greedy gold-seekers, as are the Spaniards; a revelation few high school texts care to admit. The Yankee concept of "Manifest Destiny," an attitude which somehow made westward expansion of this country an honest deed, is here compared to the Spanish expansion of her empire. Yet neither is there an idealization of the

indigenous occupants of Mexico. The conflicts between the imperialistic Aztecs and their enemies are compared to the factional discord among the Chicanos. Even the ubiquitous *vendido* appears when Malinche remarks: "Yo no soy india, I'm Spanish" (*Actos*, p. 64).

This work begins a return to the Chicanos' deepest roots: prehispanic America. Yet it is a pointed statement showing how the Chicano is allowing himself to believe what Madison Avenue and the media are telling him; false ideas of what beauty and culture really are. In the words of Cuauhtemoc: ". . . *perdimos porque no estábamos unidos con nuestros carnales de la raza y porque creíamos que esos hombres blancos eran dioses poderosos y porque nunca nos pusimos abusados*" (*Actos*, p. 65). This call for unity makes the moral much more universal, yet the solution is not as easily defined as in the earlier *actos*.

In January of 1969, the *teatro* made a second move, this time to a semi-urban neighborhood in Fresno. The group continued to tour in order to stay alive, and was invited to the Seventh World Theatre Festival at Nancy, France in April. The group was very well received, impressing European audiences with their vitality and unsophisticated talents. The following excerpt is from a translation of a review of the *teatro* in Nancy:

What one discovers, astonished, as they perform their *actos* . . . , is that they do not appear to be acting at all. They express their own reality; they themselves announce their epic condition. There is no need to develop a character, no need for costumes or props. . . . They do not go to the people; they come from the people.⁸

Continuing what was an extremely busy year for tours, the *teatro* performed at the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles in September of 1969. Dan Sullivan, Drama critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, was moved to write a glowing review:

. . . Their rambunctious sketches go back to the very roots of theater, and beautifully fulfill the twin tasks the medium has always set for itself: to delight and instruct. And in that order.

. . . They hold up their heads as proudly as they want all Chicanos to, and when they make a white audience laugh, it is not by being peon-cute, but by being superior farceurs.⁹

In their quest to deal with all aspects of the Chicano experience, the group developed an *acto* on the most degrading arm of the System: the educational process. Significantly titled *No saco nada de la escuela*, the *acto* exposes the hypocrisy of the educational system in this country, as it follows five archetypical students from their first day in elementary school through college graduation. There is, again, no attempt at subtlety here; every comment is as straightforward as a report card. However, in this case, the schools are being graded and they fail miserably.

The contrast between cultures is quickly noted as we find two Chicanos, a Black, and an Anglo playing in an imaginary schoolyard. Portrayed by *teatro* members acting like children, the farce is heightened and we are reminded that this is an *acto*, not a play. In keeping with the spirit of the *acto* and the necessi-

ties of a touring company, the props are generally pantomimed, also keeping the audience aware of the theatricality of the event. Like Brecht, the *teatro* does not want its public lulled into complacency. By allowing the audience members to use their collective imagination, they, too, become a part of the creative spirit and can better see themselves in these universal types.

The overriding message of *No saco nada* is the firm belief that our schools do nothing to give minorities self-confidence and pride in their respective cultures and themselves. We watch helplessly as the teacher quickly degrades Francisco because he cannot speak English. Her impatience and total insensitivity to her non-white students bring back unpleasant memories to many Chicanos who witness this *acto*. The enactment is certainly oversimplified, but this is one of the fundamental tenets of the form: get the basic message across.

The elementary school sequence lays the groundwork for what is to follow as we see the teacher's obvious discrimination and its effect on the children. This first part introduces the audience to opposite types of Chicano children in the characters of Francisco and Moctezuma. Using her oversized pencil to prod him, the teacher forces the English-speaking Moctezuma to change his name to the more Anglicized "Monty." This task completed, the assimilation process has begun for another Chicano child. It is not so easy with Francisco because he does not speak English. Rather than attempt any help for the child, the teacher simply does not pass Francisco and he has begun the road to alienation and defeat. Upset at the news that he is not passing, Francisco tells Monty: "*Entones dile a tu teacher que coma chet!*" (*Actos*, p. 74). It is significant that one of the first English words spoken by Francisco is "shit." We are reminded of the comment in *Los vendidos* that the pachuco learned his language in "your schools."

Always reflecting their own reality, the *teatro* members created characters out of their personal experiences. It is not strange, therefore, that the rich Anglo student should be the son of a grower. An urban *teatro* might have made the rich Anglo the son of a doctor or lawyer, but in this *acto* the symbol of the wealthy grower still looms overhead in the form of his son Abraham. In elementary school "Abe" was a snot-nosed cry-baby; in high school, his neck has acquired a strange reddish tint and he reminds us of a Nazi recruit. His girlfriend Florence is less obnoxious, but she is still unable to accept "those Chicanos." When she gets together with Monty, it is because he has by now denied his heritage entirely and might as well be white.

The female counterpart of the assimilationist enters the high school sequence in the form of Esperanza. Also loath to call herself Mexican, she prefers the nickname "Hopi." When asked if she is Mexican, Hopi responds: "No, my parents were, but I'm Hawaiian" (*Actos*, p. 78). Perhaps this is what Miss Jimenez was like in high school. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Francisco has turned into a *pachuco* and is only important to the school as its star baseball player. He is tolerated because of this athletic ability, not because of *who* he is, and he finally drops out of school.

The college scene opens with Francisco, custodian's broom in hand, asking the professor if he can enroll in this institution of higher learning. The graphic reality of what is left for Chicano dropouts is here presented, and Francisco is

not allowed to enroll. The main appeal to the audience is to inform them that they, too, can go to college if they assert themselves. After the Black student, Malcolm, has forced his way into college, Francisco follows suit and demands equal rights.

What is demonstrated in each of the three segments is that in order to succeed in the schools, you have to repeat what they want you to, and nothing else. It is the old adage of "regurgitation" once again, and the *teatro* used the best method they could to illustrate their point. When the teachers ask their students to recite their ABC's they are judged according to their ability to reflect the American Dream. Francisco and Malcolm are continually degraded by the teachers because they reflect their own heritage, not that of middle America. They do not relate to the Professor's book of "American Knowledge," and when the book is opened we find that it only contains a large dollar sign.

Once the doors are opened to more Chicano students in the imaginary college in *No saco* they immediately plan a party. This penetrating statement about the Chicano college student is still valid, and will bring a laugh of recognition to any student group. Once again the *teatro's* mirror is held up to nature in order to demonstrate our weaknesses. Francisco deters the group from simply having a good time and reminds them that they are there to learn about their culture and history. Significantly, when asked who will teach them, the actors point to the audience and say: "Our own people!" (*Actos*, p. 94). The *acto* ends with a rousing song, and another American myth has been dispelled. In his review of this *acto*, Sullivan declared: "It is an indictment of those responsible on both sides of the color line for the Chicano's plight, and when we laugh—as we can hardly avoid doing—we ratify the truth of that indictment."¹⁰

Out of the extreme necessity of informing the people that a disproportionate number of Chicanos were dying in the Vietnam War—an unjust war at that—the group developed *Vietnam Campesino* in 1970. Equal in length to *No saco nada de la escuela*, this *acto* tackled a monumental project and once again succeeded in holding a mirror to nature. This *acto* is divided into five sections, each designed to illustrate a different point about the war and the Chicano's relationship to it. *Vietnam Campesino* carries to the extreme the *acto* conventions, jumping from place to place, even continent to continent. In typical agit-prop fashion, one side of the stage may represent a field in Vietnam while the opposite side of the stage becomes a farm in California.

The first scene is entitled "The Military-Agricultural Complex" and portrays the machinations devised by "agribusiness" and the "military-industrial complex" to attempt to defeat the lettuce boycott that was being advocated (and continues to be) by the United Farmworkers. The two main characters in this scene are archetypes of the grower and the general: Butt Anglo and General Defense. The appellation of Butt Anglo was a modified version of a real grower who was giving the Union its hardest struggle: Bud Antle. To those in the audience familiar with the name, the connection was apparent. In this scene important facts are exposed about the relationship between the Pentagon and the growers.

The second scene in this complex *acto* takes us to the lettuce fields and establishes the grower's practice of using deadly pesticides while the workers are still in the fields thus causing sickness and death. To graphically illustrate the

process of crop dusting and its effects on the workers, Butt's son, Little Butt, plays with a model airplane and sprays talcum powder as though it were pesticide. This technique calls to mind Valdez's comments on a similar practice employed by the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1968:

. . . What really got to me in "A Man Says Goodbye to His Mother" was the use of the airplane and the little paper house. Again, that took the realistic perspective and blew it all to hell. From the infinite to the infinitesimal, you see. It was a little wooden airplane, but it got the point across so strongly because the little kid that plays becomes the pilot that's dropping all those bombs. And there's tremendous truth in that.¹¹

A significant feature of the *teatro's* work is that certain archetypes keep recurring. Little Butt reminds us of another grower's son, Abraham, from *No saco nada de la escuela*. The situations may be different, but the characters recall those experiences which make up the Chicano fabric.

The third scene is entitled "The Farmworker and the Draft" and clearly shows the then common practice of drafting the poor and the minorities, while those who could afford it found shelter in the colleges. An allegorical figure in the character of The Draft is dressed in a flag for a shroud and a death mask. No dialogue is necessary for this character as he silently takes the Chicano and leaves Little Butt behind upon the orders of General Defense. The relationship between the grower and the War Machine is made clearer with each new segment; each incident leaves a pithy comment behind. This short sequence leads naturally to the next: "Vietnam *Campesino*."

With the ease of a morality play the action now moves across the stage to "Vietnam." Two Vietnamese *campesinos* enter stage left, and the Chicano *campesinos* are seated stage right: two worlds, physically so distant, but spiritually so close. The Vietnamese *campesinos* look just like the Chicanos; another "brown culture" thousands of miles away. While General Defense demonstrates Pentagon tactics in Vietnam, the audience, too, is being educated about the duplicity of the entire war machine. The characters illustrate how the term "Viet Cong" was used to create an attitude of hate and mistrust towards the National Liberation Front. As a similar, but unsuccessful attempt is made with Cesar Chavez and the Union, the parallel provokes laughter. President Thieu is here called Ding Dong Diem and is characterized as a puppet, strings to the Pentagon included.

Soon the Chicano *campesinos* realize that their Vietnamese counterparts are just like them, and this prompts the grower and the general to take final action to curtail any sympathy on the part of the Chicanos towards the Vietnamese. The final section, "The Chicano at War," completes the ultimate deception, showing how families of Chicano soldiers are moved to hate the "dirty commies." Little Butt has become a bomber pilot reminiscent of the boy in "A Man Says Goodbye to His Mother." This time, his "bombs" are heads of lettuce polluted with deadly DDT. As Little Butt drops the heads of lettuce on the Vietnamese he also covers their faces with a symbolic black cloth denoting their deaths. The contrast of an actor pretending to be an airplane pilot dropping "bombs" of deadly lettuce on the actors playing Vietnamese peasants is calculated irony,

allowing the connection between the senseless deaths in both countries to be seen more clearly. Now that the Vietnamese War has ended, the *acto* may be held in reserve for the next exploit.

The final *acto* to be discussed here is *Soldado Razo*, the last entry in the *teatro's* published anthology. Developed in the group's sixth year, this work represents the culmination of all that was done before it. *Soldado Razo* is the exemplary *acto*, a slice of Chicano history which universalizes the Chicano war experience. In the words of Dan Sullivan:

Tragedy—comedy—realism—surrealism—the sketch put all the elements of the theater to work at once, without seeming forced or arty or false-primitive.

Agit-Prop Theater? I guess so, if we need a definition, but equally close to "Everyman" and the great medieval chronicles.¹²

John Weisman wrote of this *acto*: "*Soldado Razo* is a brilliant, incredibly deep, tantalizing work despite its simple presentation and short length."¹⁸ This work is brilliant *because* of its simplicity, not despite it. In true *acto* form, most props are pantomimed and there are no sets. The action moves on an imaginary treadmill from house to street to bus depot to Vietnam and back, with the same ease as the other *actos*. This work is a culmination of the preceding *acto*, *Vietnam Campesino*, a synthesis of the most important statement then needed: "Chicanos do not have to die needlessly in an unjust war."

La Muerte takes a leading role in this melancholy tale of a Chicano soldier's death; a continual reminder of our individual mortality. Always looming in the background, the specter of death takes small roles necessary to move the action along its predestined course. Similar to the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, La Muerte becomes a bus depot announcer and ticket salesman, and even recites the inner thoughts of some of the characters. Death is the eternal makeup man, powdering the young soldier's face white before he even leaves for Vietnam. The comic mask of the earlier *actos* has become a change in pigmentation which foreshadows what is to come. There are no surprises in this *acto*; La Muerte assures us of that.

In what seems a direct Brechtian influence, La Muerte continually stresses the moral. In one notable instance, he actually stops the action and asks the actress to repeat a line she has just spoken:

CECILIA: He sure did. They say he's more responsible now that he's in the service.

MUERTE: (To audience) Did you hear that? Listen to her again.

CECILIA: (Repeats sentence, exactly as before) They say he's more responsible now that he's in the service. (*Actos*, p. 141)

This technique effectively communicates a reminder that this is how Chicanos think, idealizing the soldier image and thereby bringing about his demise.

The bilingualism of this *acto* reaches a new level of creativity when the soldier, "Johnny," is writing to his mother. As he writes, he speaks in English, and she responds in Spanish: a synthesis of the two cultures that have brought about the Chicano experience. La Muerte's narration is mostly in English, en-

abling the non-Spanish-speaking audience to understand what is happening. However, it is the bilingual audience that understands all the subtle nuances that make this *acto* a vivid representation of a Chicano family in crisis.

Soldado Razo comes close to being a one-act play, and might well be defined as such. But in what Sullivan termed its mixture of surrealism, realism, tragedy and comedy, it remains an *acto* in the best sense of the term. The simple staging and unabashed movement through time and space continue in this *acto* the tradition begun six years before its creation. *Soldado Razo* brought many audiences to tears with its simple pathos and poignant characterization. Some may have thought the solution presented was too simple—don't go to war—but it served an important function in the education of the Chicano and certainly made the people stop and think—the primary objective of a successful *acto*.

In the spring of 1971, the *teatro* moved to the rural town of San Juan Bautista, California, where they currently live and work. In the years they have been in San Juan, the *teatro* members have collectively created ever-evolving forms of expression which led to such works as *La gran carpa de los rasquachis*, *Las cuatro apariciones de la Virgen de Guadalupe*, *Conference of the Birds* (with Peter Brook's troupe), and the latest major *obra*, Valdez's *Fin del mundo*, his second full-length play. Under the creative guidance of Valdez, the group has grown in its expression beyond the simplicity of the first *actos*, but they remain a basic source for all of their work.

Except for the Teatro Campesino, all of the *teatros* that are currently active in the United States are composed of part-time members who are either students or workers or both. Not having the time that the Teatro Campesino has to devote to their craft, these *teatros* generally produce *actos* of their own creation. A few of the older groups have created works which express a more sophisticated growth, but they all began by producing the Teatro Campesino's *actos*, or imitations of them. As long as we have Chicanos who wish to express themselves in a manner which is direct, political, entertaining, and comparatively easy to produce, *actos* will provide the form, and the Teatro Campesino's *actos* will generate the inspiration.

Notes

1. Luis Valdez, ed., *Actos* (San Juan Bautista: Cucaracha Press, 1971).
2. Beth Bagby, "El Teatro Campesino: Interview with Luis Valdez," *Tulane Drama Review*, XI, No. 4 (Summer 1967), 73.
3. Bagby, pp. 74-75.
4. For a complete discussion of the differences between the *acto* and the realistic play, see my article: "Where are our Chicano Playwrights?" *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, III, No. 4 (Otoño 1975), 32-42.
5. Bagby, p. 77.
6. Luis Miguel Valdez, "El Teatro Campesino," *Ramparts* (July 1966), p. 55.
7. "New Grapes," *Newsweek* (July 31, 1967), p. 79.
8. *Le Monde*, Paris (April 22, 1969), from a Teatro Campesino publicity brochure, unpublished.
9. Dan Sullivan, "Chicano Group at ICC," *Los Angeles Times* (September 27, 1969), Part II, p. 9.
10. Sullivan, p. 9.

11. *Radical Theater Festival*, p. 21.
12. Dan Sullivan, "Teatros Goes Beyond Talent," *Los Angeles Times* (September 23, 1971), Part IV, p. 1.
13. John Weisman, "Chicano Pride Focus of Teatro Campesino," *Los Angeles Times* (May 7, 1971), Part IV, p. 12.