

## Performance Reviews

### *Abolición de la propiedad*

In the fall 1974 issue of *LATR*, Juan Bruce-Novoa observed that the inherent difficulties and expense in staging *Abolición de la propiedad* by José Agustín made it a risky undertaking for the professional theatre, and concluded that "perhaps in the future some North American university will seize on this exciting new experiment in Mexican theatre and realize its presentation" (p. 9). That opportunity was in fact seized recently at the University of Denver, when, from May 17 to 20, 1978, *Abolición de la propiedad* was staged both in the original Spanish and in English, on alternate nights (the present writers were responsible for the translation). The excitement of the production was heightened not only by the complex technology involved, but also by the fact that José Agustín directed the production himself.

Agustín's tremendous energy and professional experience, coupled with the enthusiasm of his able student casts, led to excellent performances in both languages. The casts were drawn from the members of a seminar on Contemporary Mexican Theatre taught by José Agustín at the University during the spring quarter. In the Spanish version Luis Collignon (a Mexican student at the University) played the male role, while Cindy Cass, a Spanish major, was his antagonist. Their counterparts in the English version were Lee Mays and Debra Rivera. Both casts were supported by an excellent team of "técnicos" (also from the author's seminar) consisting of Noel Edghill, David Graham, Cole Miller and several "unsung heroes," who did a fine job in coordinating the varied battery of equipment.

To readers of the novelized *Abolición*, the technical features of the stage production are likely to be of particular interest, since the book calls for a baffling array of equipment, including film, recorded tape, slides and television cameras to be synchronized with the actors' performance. In transferring *Abolición* to the stage, the rock band from the novel was replaced by tape recordings (using a wide variety of music, from Schubert's Sixth Symphony to works by the Beatles, and even by Andy Warhol), which was probably good, since the band's presence on stage might have been too distracting. For reasons of economy, television cameras were also deleted from the stage equipment. Nothing else of consequence was forsaken in the transfer to stage, and the precision with

which the complex multimedia project was orchestrated attests both to its adaptability to the stage and to the skill and practice of the technicians. Unfortunately, not even the technicians' skill was able to overcome entirely the drawbacks of the Buchtel Chapel (the only location for performance that the University could make available at the time), which is an acoustical chamber of horrors, but the audience seemed not to mind.

Problems of staging, however, were never the sole reason why *Abolición* was not performed much sooner. When the book was first written some ten years ago, it simply was not allowed to be performed in Mexico, presumably because the dialogue between Everio and Norma—the play's only characters—is sometimes spicy, and in it the Mexican Establishment and its values are challenged. While this particular dimension of the work might be disconcerting to a bureaucratic censor, it is only one among many of the play's dimensions.

Besides politically conservative and liberal views, respectively, Everio and Norma also represent the macho and liberated female stereotypes. Closely related to these stereotypes is the fact that both also are disappointed lovers "on the rebound." In this regard they are defensive, yet quite vulnerable in their need for acceptance and love. Both casts at the University of Denver must be credited with effectively portraying the shifting nuances of this ambivalence, which inevitably becomes intertwined with social and political currents, in a love-hate relationship that develops from good-natured banter into a climactic homicidal attack from which Norma barely manages to escape.

The escalating conflict between Norma and Everio is relieved only by the latter's hyperactive kidneys, which force him into a number of brief exits. It is during these respites that the electronic media are most important, particularly in their role as oracle; the film and recorded tape portray scenes between Norma and Everio that invariably take place after his return from the bathroom. In coordinating the film and tape, a slightly asynchronous match is programmed between them, to highlight the lack of communication between Everio and Norma. In the book this is not a problem, but without prior knowledge that it was intentional, some members of the audience at the University took it to be an equipment failure. In view of this, it might be well either to synchronize the tape and film, or to inform the audience by program note about the matter.

At any rate, it is through the electronic oracle that the play achieves its most universal appeal. For instance, the suggestion that all this has happened before calls into question the relationship of past, present and future. It also raises the philosophical question of free will versus destiny. Since Norma is the only one able to hear the taped voices—and only while Everio is out of the room—the issue of fantasy and reality is also dramatized. Although the play is in every way Mexican, these themes make it accessible to any audience, and, in fact, at the University of Denver the audiences for the English version were fully as enthusiastic as those at the Spanish performances.

Media reaction to the play has also been very good. The performances were favorably reviewed by the *Denver Post*, *La Voz de Colorado* and the *Denver Clarion*, the University's student newspaper. Scenes from the play were videotaped for the television programs "Mi linda raza" and "Quinto sol," the latter to be aired nationally. Indeed, audience and media responses here have encour-

aged José Agustín to look forward to the possibility of staging the play in Mexico. Perhaps now that the ice has been broken amid cheers in Denver—and the Rocky Mountains did not crumble—Mexican officialdom will now feel emboldened to risk the same at home.

John Kirk  
*University of Denver*

Donald L. Schmidt  
*University of Colorado at Denver*

## The Many Masks of Teatro Chicano

There were people crying in the house after the last performance of a ten-day run of *Zoot Suit* at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles last April. It was hard not to cry, especially if you were of Mexican descent, which half the audience was. This chapter in the persecution of our people in this country, even though it had taken place in the 40's, still hurt in the 70's.

But it was a much needed release, a story that had long been buried in the back pages of our history and that needed salty tears to cleanse it. Author-director Luis Valdez had to yank the pain out of our unconscious and hold it aloft, as in an Aztec ritual, before it could be healed. I am speaking of the infamous "Zoot Suit Riots" of 1943 in Los Angeles during which U.S. Marines were given free reign to hunt down and beat anyone caught wearing that outrageous style of clothing known as a "Zoot Suit," which in Pachuco slang was known as *garas*, *trapos*, or *tacuches*.

The set was a huge composite—a backdrop—of the scare headlines in the *L.A. Times* and the *Herald Express* which screamed "WEB OF ZOOT SUIT GANG SPREADS" and "ZOOT SUIT FANS FIND THAT LIFE'S GETTING TOUGH!" The play opens with a bigger-than-life character called "El Pachuco," who slits open the front pages of the day with his gigantic switch blade. Shortly afterwards, a cardboard character called "The Press" enters to help narrate the action.

For those of us who did not live in that era, it was the time of the Axis intrigues, of the Japanese interment camps, of the purging of anything that was not 100% "American." What began in L.A. that summer swept across the nation in a wave of race riots that left 34 dead in Detroit and 43 dead in Harlem—mostly blacks.

The play focuses on an incident, the Sleepy Lagoon murder of 1942, which set the stage for the riots one year later. A Mexican-American youth was found dead near an East L.A. swimming hole called the "Sleepy Lagoon," after the Harry James recording. Seventeen other Mexican-American youths, which the author turns into a symbolic four, were subsequently indicted and found guilty of murdering the youth and of lesser charges and sentenced to long prison terms. The play is the story of their release, thanks mainly to loyal white supporters.

All was not tears, however, for the mask of laughter and song often appeared. Even after the bitter climactic moment when the American sailors and marines run into the audience after El Pachuco and strip him naked in the aisles to a wild 40's melody, it is quickly followed by two spinning Pachuco couples dancing

gaily to a torrid boogie-woogie. Other parts of the show all feature song as well as couples dancing to swing, mambo, danzon, and cha-cha-cha.

Then there was the language, a mixture of English and Spanish, or, *Calo* as the Pachucos called it, that tickled the audience to laughter. Words like “watcha” and “bironga” (beer) or “orale carnal, bute al alba que vamos al borlo con unas rucas” (All right, bro, get sharp—because we are going to the dance with some babes).

Bertolt Brecht, the great German playwright, would have loved this audience, who not only reacted with tears and laughter and applause, but also with yells, hoots, whistling, hissing, and interjections of their own between the actors’ dialogue. Valdez himself has been quoted as saying that his teatro “is a mixture of Brecht and Cantinflas.”

There was a lot of laughing at ourselves as well. When one *compadre* remarks to another, “Perhaps we should go back to Mexico!,” the reply is, “No, compadre, this is Mexico. Don’t forget that the gringos stole half the national territory.” This is followed by, “Yes, and they had to steal that half with the paved roads!”

The acting, a mixture of the realistic with the exaggerated, was very credible, with sterling performances by Danny Valdez, as Henry Reyna the Pachuco leader, Sheila Larken, the white activist, Edward James Olmos, the bigger-than-life Pachuco, Domingo Ambriz, as Henry Reyna’s younger brother Rudy, and Evelina Fernández, as Della.

*Zoot Suit* is still a work in progress, however, and there is need for a condensation of not only the confusing incident at the Sleepy Lagoon, but also of the court room scene, both of which suffer from too much talk and not enough action. The lover’s triangle between Henry Reyna, his girlfriend Della, and the white activist Alice Springfield is forced beyond belief and led one audience member to spontaneously remark, as Henry Reyna was trying to make up with Della, “Ay sí!”

The best thing about the play was that the author took it beyond the 40’s. Valdez knows his audience well and lets them see their reflective side, that calm, neutral self, which is neither tears nor laughter. Besides the arguments, contradictions, biases, grief and joy, he also shows us ourselves as we are at rest and thus gives us that third mask called reality. Because what we really are is something that is rarely seen on American television or cinema.

Although Luis Valdez has never been recognized as a great American playwright by the traditional theatre (he is known more as the director of El Teatro Campesino), with the penning of *Zoot Suit* in his own indelible hand our Chicano playwright is now ready to take the center stage. *Zoot Suit* was sold out every night and over 6,000 phone calls were received inquiring about the production. For this reason *Zoot Suit* is to be revised and to open the regular Mark Taper Forum season August 17 to October 1.

Carlos Morton  
*La Jolla, California*

*Los dorados* (8/2/78)

How southwesterners are to understand their historically complex and morally befuddling heritage is a question that California Pacific Theatre is dramatizing for its public in staging Carlos Morton's *Los dorados* in the San Diego area. Peppared with choice anachronisms and verbal acrobatics, *Los dorados* does its fair share to turn a few stale historical archetypes inside out for reexamination. The setting is the lower California coast during the first three centuries of conquest and colonization. Sergeant Solana (Mark Yavorsky), Capitan Escondido (Gregorio Flores) and Padre La Jolla (John Wesley Houston, Jr.) are the Spanish expeditionaries who land near what is present-day San Diego in the year 1542. The three Diegueno women they meet—Tupai Tuman (Claudia Swerdlove), Simcoli Simcola, chieftess (C. J. Bharaka) and Simuhau, medicine woman (Barbara Muir) seem, in their zany costumes, to strike a happy medium between Morton's research on the Dieguenos and what the Spanish chivalric literary fantasies of the times had envisioned. At any rate, the clashes that ensue over matters of religion, land possession, racial difference and peaceful co-existence are so many keystones for an always rapid didactic treatment of these questions, which are the ones the playwright was most interested in exploring.

In the spirit of the *actos* that have been one hallmark of contemporary Chicano theatre, *Los dorados* freely skips back and forth between dramatic plot concerns and the presentation of a history. For example, much of the action centers around sub-conflicts such as follow: medicine woman Simuhau must endure belches and other uncavalier approaches from the swaggering Sergeant Solana; virginal, Bo-peep princess Tupai Tuman gets more than she bargained for when she allows herself to be converted by the now lecherous, now devout Padre La Jolla; Simcoli Simcola, a proud huntress, finds herself trapped into a run-of-the-mill petit-bourgeois marriage after Capitan Escondido woos her into the traditional wife's second-place standing. Meanwhile, these stories feed the historical narrative which unfolds as factual commentary on each conflict. With the audience still laughing at (and sometimes silently interpreting) this or that *acto*, *Los dorados* makes the quick shifts into the strictly didactic narrative. There is an account of cruel submission of the Diegueno Indians to conversion by the Spanish missionaries. The inter-marriage theme becomes serious as suddenly the actors are discussing *mestizaje* in Mexico in a direct statement to the audience. The gold fever of the Spaniards more than once surfaces as material for the narrative element of the play. As a backdrop to all this hangs the ever-present, wall-size map of the hill and coastal areas of San Diego, many of which take their names from the Diegueno names they already had when the Spaniards arrived. Along with the instructive breaks, the map serves to sustain the strong consciousness-raising intents of this serious-minded farce.

However, as though to constantly undermine anything too serious, Morton throws in the catchy visual supports everywhere in *Los dorados*. The appearance of a frisbee as a gift offering from Sergeant Solana to the Indian medicine woman; a visionary mention of condominiums and another of Hollywood Boulevard; an allusion to a controversy surrounding San Diego's Chicano Park; visual puns such as a roll of red tape that tangles up both the chieftess, Simcoli Simcola and Capitan Escondido, who unravels it—these are the instruments of

amusement that offset the more sober content underlying them.

Thanks to L. Swerdlove's judicious directing job and to a snappy performance by the actors, *Los dorados* comes off as more flippant than ponderous. At the performance this reviewer saw there were a good number of native Americans who, it may be, do not often get exposed to theatre. Morton's play went over well with them as it has in other performances—and for much larger numbers—in this area. Its flaws—mainly, a far too sweeping attempt to cover vast spans of history within the drama—seem to pass unnoticed. Morton reportedly plans a follow-up to *Los dorados* which will cover the ethnic and historical encounters of the San Diego area from 1848 to the present, a mere 130 years. There exists material for five plays of the scope and character of *Los dorados*. What the playwright chooses to confront the Mexican-American, Anglo-American and Native American audiences with will be interesting to see.

Mark McCaffrey  
La Jolla, California

## *La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe 1977-78*

### *Highlights*

Unlike the previous season, which was spectacular in that many awards and honors were attained, this season was marked by a solidification of itinerary and a strengthening of the company's artistic position. We returned to many places where we had performed previously, and many new places were added to our itinerary.

In the United States we gave workshops at Arizona State University, at San Benito, Texas and at home to demonstrate techniques for bilingual production. We performed at the Southwest Theatre Conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; in Tempe, Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona; at the Chamizal Festival in El Paso and at El Centro College in Dallas, and about twenty other places in South Texas.

Abroad, in Mexico for our Fourth Annual Grand Tour, which lasted seven weeks at a clip of between one and two performances per day, we played at the University of Monterrey twice, the Escuela Normal in Saltillo, the Medical School in Torreón, and the Universidad of Durango, all under the sponsorship of the American Consulate in Monterrey; and then we performed in Aguascalientes on our way to Mexico City. In Mexico City we had to extend our performances to six solid weeks to meet increased demand. We performed, in chronological order, six times for the Universidad Metropolitana, once for the Sindicato de Obreros de Teléfonos, fourteen times at UNAM in various locations, eight for the Instituto Politécnico Nacional de México in various locations, eight for the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes at the Teatro Jiménez Rueda, and did three hour-long programs for Channel 11.

Of great significance to us was our venture into Chicano literature with the adaptation of a story by Margarito Rodríguez of Alice, Texas—*Las piscas de algodón*—for the stage. This short piece was so successfully received that we have decided to follow through with many pieces of similar format.

Of special interest to us was that several of our performers had graduated and moved on into professional theatre with surprisingly little difficulty.

*Grants:*

La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe was aided by grants from the Texas Endowment for the Arts and Humanities and the Alice G. K. Kleberg Foundation. It was sponsored in its Arizona performances by grants from the Arizona Endowment for the Humanities and the Arizona Arts Council.

*Visitors:*

As part of a Cultural exchange with the Instituto Politécnico Nacional de México, Texas A&I University hosted for ten days El Grupo Chicahaustle, folk singers under the direction of Adrián Nieto. These singers performed at Texas A&I and toured South Texas under the aegis of La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe.

*Repertory:*

1. *Historias para ser contadas/Stories for the Theatre*—Osvaldo Dragún. Translated by Joe and Graciela P. Rosenberg. Directed by Joe Rosenberg in Spanish and English.

2. *La pancarta*—Jorge Díaz. Translated by Joe Rosenberg. Directed by Joe Rosenberg in Spanish and English.

3. *A View from the Bridge/Panorama desde el puente*—Arthur Miller. Directed by Joe Rosenberg in Spanish and English.

4. *La cueva de Salamanca*—Miguel de Cervantes. Translation by J. Ed. Araiza. Directed by J. Ed. Araiza in Spanish and English.

Joe Rosenberg  
Texas A&I University

## *Yo también hablo de la rosa,* **A Unique Bilingual Production**

ROMULUS ZAMORA

(*Yo también hablo de la rosa*, by Emilio Carballido; English translation by William I. Oliver; adapted for bilingual production and directed by Romulus Zamora; produced by the Theatre Arts Department, California State University, Sacramento, Nov. 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, and 19, 1977. Set design by Larry Shumate; lighting, sound, and media design by Rod Weeks and Dean Busick; costume design by Don Fibiger and Carolyn Elder; choreography by Antoinette Cakouros.)

In November, 1977, the Theatre Arts Department of California State University, Sacramento, presented Emilio Carballido's *Yo también hablo de la rosa* (*I, Too, Speak of the Rose*) as part of its 1977-78 University Theatre season. What was unusual about this production was that it was neither in Spanish nor in English translation, but in a sensitive blending of both languages.

Chicanos in California, like Latinos throughout the United States, are a bilingual people. With that bilingualism comes a new phenomenon—biculturalism, a consciousness steeped in the souls of two distinct cultures. We are fully fluent in Spanish and English, and often intermingle the two in the same sentence.

To deal with this growing bilingualism, California State University, Sacramento, created the Chicano Theatre Program and housed it within the Theatre Arts Department. Now students at CSUS have a unique opportunity to become actors, directors, playwrights, teachers, and theatre technicians fully capable of working and communicating in most of the Western hemisphere.

When I selected Emilio Carballido's surrealist play for production, I set about transposing it from its Mexican setting to one more Californian in language and atmosphere. The play's adaptability had already been proven in various productions in France, Switzerland, and Israel. I began the job of intermingling Bill Oliver's fine translation with the Carballido original, beginning by relocating the action to a town on the border of California and Mexico so as to justify the co-existence of English and Spanish and capture a particular Chicano style.

I turned the character of Polo into an English-speaking Paul, struggling through his Spanish to keep up with his Chicana companion Toña. Certain characters I made exclusively Spanish-speaking, such as the Peddlers, the Scavengers, and Toña's mother. Those that spoke only English were the Psychology Professor, the Politics Professor (played by a woman), the Announcer, the Newsboy, the Lady, the Schoolteacher, and Paul's mother. Those that interspersed their English and Spanish, as most of us Chicanos do, were Toña, Maximino, Don Pepe, the University students (played by members of M.E.C.H.A.), the Gentleman (married to the English-speaking Lady), the people who rob the train, and Toña's sister.

Here is part of an early scene between Maximino, Paul, and Toña as performed in our bilingual production:



*Yo también hablo de la rosa:* Ernesto Calvillo, the Psychologist; Mark Holmes, Polo (Paul); Beatriz Rosas, Toña; Richard Rodríguez, Maximino.



PAUL: Hi!

MAXIMINO: Quihubo.

TOÑA: We got ten cents out of the telephone. Este lo alzó y salió solito.

PAUL: And I got ten more out of it with a wire!

MAXIMINO: Andenle y que les caigan.

TOÑA: Qué nos hacen?

MAXIMINO: They'd lock you up for five years . . . more!

TOÑA: For a dime?

MAXIMINO: Sure!

TOÑA: All I did was to stand guard.

MAXIMINO: Cómplice. Cuatro años.

Another example is the following excerpt from the prison scene between Toña and Maximino:

TOÑA: En la noche me da miedo. I wake up . . . I don't know where I am! Y mi colchón huele a pipí, porque allí dormía una niña que se orinaba. They won't tell me when I'm going to get out of here. Some of the girls say I'll be here for years! Fíjate.

MAXIMINO: Te vamos a sacar, vas a ver. No se ponga así. Anyway, you're famous now. Your picture's been in all the papers and everything. If you're lucky they'll give you a job in the movies!

TOÑA: Ay, sí, tú, cómo crees. Salí re fea, ni me parezco.

The Medium presented a slightly different problem—how to shift between Spanish and English without jeopardizing the poetic images. In those passages where she appears principally as a visionary, where the poetry is paramount, I used either Spanish or English all the way through the individual line. Later on in the play when she was more coquetish, I interspersed both languages, much like in the previous examples, to achieve just the right degree of personal candor.

Our audiences consisted of great numbers of Chicanos and non-Chicanos alike. One standing-room-only matinee consisted entirely of Chicano high school students, taking advantage of our production to deepen their understanding of their own language and culture. After each performance I held an informal discussion with the audience to gather their responses to our bilingual production. By and large, even the monolingual English-speaking audience members were able to understand and follow the play with little difficulty. Apparently their long experience in California has made them more sensitive to Spanish than they realized. Also, the opportunity for Chicanos and non-Chicanos to share a common bicultural experience helps to improve communication and understanding.

Our 1978-79 University Theatre bilingual production will be Alfonso Sastre's *Muerte en el barrio*, scheduled to be performed March 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, and 11, 1979. In the spring we will likewise produce one-act plays entirely in Spanish in association with the Department of Spanish and Portuguese for presentation on campus and on tour in the Sacramento community. Our activity here certainly seems to reflect the growing movement towards bilingual theatre and is synonymous with work in Texas, the Midwest, and the East Coast. That Spanish is

the second most-spoken language in the United States and our culture one of the richest in history gives bilingual theatre a bright future to look forward to.

*California State University, Sacramento*