

Plays in Performance:

I Don't Have To Show You No Stinking Badges in San Diego

After a highly successful five-month run in Los Angeles in 1986, Luis Valdez' *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges* played in San Diego in April-May, 1987. *Badges* focuses on several themes: the Chicano family and the generational split; a young Chicano's identity crisis; Chicanos as part of a multi-cultural American society; and the theme of "all the world's a stage" with the emphasis here on television and the situation comedy as basis of and influence on art and behavior patterns. In a sense, the basic metaphor is Chicanos as bit players in the larger context of American culture and society. Also, the play embodies, parodies, and seeks to transcend the sit-com format of American television in a manner roughly analogous to Cervantes' *Don Quijote* in relation to the *Libros de caballería*. Indeed, *Badges* is richly humorous and yet profoundly metaphysical.

The central character is Sonny Villa, portrayed by Robert Beltrán, who played the title character in Paul Bartel's off-beat black-humor film *Eating Raoul* (1983). The central conflict is Sonny's return to Monterey Park, a suburb of Los Angeles, after dropping out of Harvard Law School. Sonny brings with him an aspiring actress-dancer, Anita, a Japanese-American born in Brooklyn.

Sonny's parents, Buddy and Connie, have managed to send a daughter through medical school by means of bit parts, as gardeners, maids, prostitutes, and extras in Hollywood films. Valdez' sit-com jokes and broad characterizations fit into the picture of a show business family that represents marginalized minorities. The audience in the theatre serves as a "live" studio audience, with the addition of a laugh track, and Valdez' voice as the director/God giving instructions. Thus, sit-com slapstick and wisecracks are a part of a self-reflective work which contains interior duplication. The play is supposedly life up on the stage, but it is also a situation comedy being taped. As in Pirandello, there are several layers: life, the stage, a situation

comedy for television, all reflective of Sonny's nervous breakdown condition and his feelings of irreality as a farce.

The fourth character in the play, Anita, Sonny's Japanese-American girlfriend, is essentially a fifth wheel. She is representative of a multi-cultural American society, but her principal function is mechanical, as a shadowy presence for Sonny to confide in.

Although there are soap opera histrionics in Sonny's nervous breakdown scenes, *Badges* is essentially a seriocomic exploration of psychological and philosophical issues, tempered by Valdez' richly comic vein. Serious considerations of the meaning of life and of individual and Chicano identity are smoothly blended with uproarious satire of minority stereotyping or the emergence of a Chicano middle class and the price of assimilation.

Valdez at times seems to be "explaining" Chicanos and minorities to a majority audience, while still focusing intensely on the Chicano experience in a vivid, authentic way, unafraid of ambivalence and contradictions. Ultimately, Valdez expounds on a theme that can be briefly summarized: A funny thing happened to Chicanos on their way to assimilation from a state of alienation. *Badges*, it should be clear, is a contemporary consideration of the Chicano middle class. In some of his other plays, such as *Zootsuit* (1978) and *Corridos* (1983) Valdez has opted for historical depth and has not focused on the Chicano middle class. *Badges* is a probing and biting study of the Chicano family, as well as of general issues such as assimilation and the Chicano identity crisis from an internal, subjective perspective.

Characterizations are vivid and striking. The protagonist, Sonny, is mercurial, manic-depressive, on the edge of suicide, grasping for order and meaning, deriving black humor from desperation and despair. The parents, played by Leon Singer, a veteran Mexican actor now residing in San Diego, and Anne Betancourt, are living Chicano sit-com characters, bit players who here play leading roles, proud of what they have managed to accomplish in spite of discrimination and marginalization. Patti Yasutake portrays Anita, the play's weak link, meant to offer a more generalized, broader view of multi-cultural America. This shallow characterization does provide a foil for the volatile, complex, multi-layered Sonny.

The director of the play, Tony Curiel, Assistant Artistic Director of El Teatro Campesino, has skillfully mounted an intense, yet hilarious production. Also of central importance is Russell Pyle's richly-detailed sit-com set, with TV monitor, stereo, and VCR to show a scene from the film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, where the title line is uttered by a Mexican bandit to the Humphrey Bogart character. In fact, however, there are no greater "badges" than an MD (which was earned by the Villa's daughter who does not actually appear in

the play) and a law degree from Harvard Law School. It is this kind of contradictory irony and ambivalence that Valdez exploits to capture an outrageously larger than life vision of Chicanos that rings true while simultaneously entertaining and also probing the essence of art, being, and reality. Valdez works on several levels; he is ambitious, complex, and metaphysical, yet also hilariously funny.

Badges is largely in English but with a substantial use of Chicano Spanish as well as cultural references that point to a unique Chicano context of the 80's.

Clearly, *Badges* is another successful demonstration by Luis Valdez of the shape, status, and form that he sees defining contemporary Chicano theatre.

Arthur Ramírez
San Diego State University



I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges by Luis Valdez. San Diego, CA. Anne Betancourt, Leon Singer, Patti Yasutake, Director Tony Curiel, Playwright Luis Valdez.