

An Interview with Carlos Morton

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Carlos Morton, who has been writing plays for twenty years, is the most widely produced of the Chicano playwrights and stands out as one of the leading figures of the contemporary Chicano stage. Dr. Morton agreed to grant me this interview on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin on the day he received his Ph.D. Morton, who is a speech and drama instructor at Laredo (Texas) Junior College, is the recipient of several drama prizes such as the one he received in the summer of 1986 at the Second National Latino Playwriting Contest. This award also included a staging of his play, *The Many Deaths of Danny Rosales*. Another of his works, the musical comedy titled *Pancho Diablo*, was staged in the summer of 1987 at the New York Shakespeare Festival Theatre.

Would you explain your last name that seems to be Anglo more than Hispanic?

Yes. My grandfather, Carlos Pérez, left his home in Pachuca, Hidalgo, Mexico in 1917 for the United States to begin a new life in Chicago. After repeatedly failing to get a job, when he knew jobs were available, he decided to use a name he had seen earlier on a billboard as he left an employment office. Interestingly enough, he got the first job where he signed his name Carlos P. Morton--a name inspired by a Morton Salt billboard. The name on my birth certificate is Charles but I changed it to Carlos at age 21. I wanted my name to reflect my bicultural duality and "Carlos Morton" does. Also, it had to be something that would look good on the marquee and one that people would remember.

When did you begin to write plays?

When I was with the improvisational theatre company The Second City in 1966 or 1967. I was in the Children's theatre. Actually, I started out as an actor in high school and junior college productions. What I learned later at The Second City, apart from the rules of improvisation, was that the actor could also be the playwright. Besides, I was always interested in writing, since I was 13 or 14--I wanted to be the Mexican-American Clark Kent. So it was only natural, since I was studying theatre, that I would write drama.

Do you enjoy writing plays? That is to say, is there joy in expressing yourself, in seeing your abstract ideas come alive on stage, or is it something you are driven to do?

Writing is an absolute joy, a complete unadulterated joy. There is nothing else in the world I would rather do. The author is the creator--he creates the work, he gives it to the director who in turn passes it on to the set designer and the costumer. The lines ultimately go to the actors and then finally there is the public. When I go to see my plays for the first time, especially the premiere, it is just like having a religious experience.

Are you ever surprised when you see one of your plays staged?

Sure, most of the time. Sometimes you think they are not doing it right and there is a certain disillusionment. On the other hand, you see things that they have done and that is the beauty of the "collective process." An analogy that I can use to explain the relationship between the author and the director is that I am the Mother and the Father, I create the child. The director, producer, actors and others will then take my child and raise it. In a period of time--6 weeks, 6 months or whatever--they are going to raise the baby, and then as we say, "the play is up." I give it willingly to the director, trusting in him and the producer, and then from there it is a collective thing that sometimes, despite everyone's best effort, comes out an abortion.

Your plays that I have seen and read are either in English or they are bilingual. Have you written plays that are all in Spanish?

I started to write one but I didn't finish it. Probably because I feel I don't dominate Spanish enough. I'm going to apply for a Fulbright and go to Mexico to study the contemporary Mexican theatre. I feel certain that, once I'm in the milieu for six to nine months, I will begin to write in Spanish.

I have a related observation. I know that you are interested in both U.S. and Latin American audiences, and that you also advocate the exchange of ideas and techniques among dramatists on both sides of the Rio Grande.² Therefore,

writing a play totally in English, or even a bilingual work, would seem to limit, if not outright exclude, any Mexican, Central or South American audience.

Oh sure, but that has always been a problem with teatro chicano. Where do you balance the use of English and Spanish? Because in some areas like San Antonio it would work perfectly well because the people are for the most part bilingual. Or if they don't understand all the Spanish *sentido, entienden el sentido en inglés, ¿no?* And I try to balance it so if someone asks a question in Spanish it is answered in English or at least I try to have the action signify what the actors are saying. There is no way you can make everybody happy. I would like to be able eventually to perfect my writing skills to the point where I could write a play in English or in Spanish or both. I still have a lot to learn. What I need to do is spend more time in Mexico. That is one of my goals. We're trying to buy a home in the city of Oaxaca so we can live there during the summers. My wife is from the area.

How many plays have you written to date?

I have written eight one-act plays and four that are full-length plays.

Which one of the several plays that you have written do you prefer? Do you have a favorite?

Not really because they are all so different. I have some favorite themes--Christianity, good and evil--but I don't really have a favorite play.

The Spaniard, José María Valverde, in an interview once said of the essayist, "el ensayista sugiere, no da soluciones."¹ Does the dramatist, or more specifically, do you suggest rather than provide solutions in your dramatic works?

That's a difficult question. I've been criticized for providing too many solutions. It's part of my political theatre background. You must remember that aside from The Second City which was my first real professional theatre influence, I then was influenced by the Teatro Campesino which I saw for the first time in 1970 in El Paso, Texas. This was the period in which I was beginning to rediscover my cultural and linguistic roots. From there I went to work for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, another political theatre. A tenet of the political theatre is that you not only have to expose problems but you have to provide solutions. So this experience of the late sixties and early seventies influences me even now. I realize that approach today is counter-productive because the audience in the eighties wants to make up its own mind. The dramatist needs to provide both sides because ultimately they make their own decisions. Before, you had an audience of followers, today people don't follow.

You have already stated why you write, that you enjoy it, but for whom do you write?

Traditionally, my audience has been the Mexican-American audience, the Chicanos. Also my plays attract those who are interested in Latin American studies or who are interested in Mexican and Chicano issues. Other Spanish-speaking peoples come also. Playwrights are like politicians in that they have constituencies. The base, the nucleus of my constituency, is Mexican-American, Chicano. I will never deviate from this central theme in my drama; however, I write for everybody. You don't do Chekhov with a Russian accent and you don't need Russian actors doing Chekhov in English to understand his work. So now I'm trying to build my audience so that it will include anyone who wants to listen. That's why I write.

Do you approach writing a play the same way each time?

It depends on the situation. In the case of *Johnny Tenorio*, the director of the Centro Cultural de Aztlán of San Antonio in 1982 was interested in someone who could write a Don Juan play. He asked if I were willing and I agreed to do it. Sometimes I'm asked, other times it's something that strikes my fancy, or it can be something I read about like Danny Rosales or Oscar Romero--stories that need to be told.

How would you classify your plays?

I don't know if I could. I like epic figures like Don Juan or the Devil and the use of fantasy, and these have a role in my writing but I really couldn't classify my plays.

In your opinion, what are the essential characteristics of good drama?

A play should educate and entertain.

Who has been an influence on your work? Is there any one person?

No. There are many influences on my work. Edward Albee is one. I was reading his plays when I first began writing. Other influences would include the Teatro Campesino, The Second City, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. All these groups use the process of improvisation, which is a technique--the collective process--all these groups used because there was no one playwright. In the early days, everybody sat around and hashed over for days, weeks and even months not only what they were going to write about but what they were going to say. And then, of course, I'm a product of the academic world. In the last ten years I've earned a Master of Fine Arts degree and a Ph.D from

U.C. San Diego and UT Austin respectively. So all the plays I've read plus the theories of Artaud, Aristophanes, Plato, Socrates and Aristotle have been influential. Finally, my own family experiences have influenced my writing. The "Día de los muertos" was something I saw at Oaxaca during a celebration of the Day of the Dead at the cemetery with my wife and her family. This experience was useful later in writing *Johnny Tenorio*. So, there is a mixture of influences from various areas and from different stages of my development.

Do you consider yourself a Chicano dramatist and do you consider your drama to be a part of Chicano theatre?

Yes, very definitely so. However, I think that not only me, but other Chicano dramatists, are beginning to enter the mainstream of US/American letters.

What is the future of Chicano theatre?

Chicano theatre is going to be more sophisticated, there will be more specialization, and a tendency away from the collective process that was so important in the past. The themes are open to the imagination. Right now for me Central America is the big thing. I identify with what's going on there. My latest play, *The Savior*, is a case in point.

Why did you write Johnny Tenorio? Why, of all the possible themes and topics did you choose to write a refundición of José Zorrilla's Don Juan Tenorio?

Okay, why does a writer write? The other day, for example, the Pacifica News Service called and asked me to write a couple of columns for them about the border. So, a writer writes because he is commissioned to do so. Because he is going to be paid. Also, an author writes because he has something to say to the audience, there is something the community needs to deal with such as *machismo* or *donjuanismo*. Therefore, I write based on a need, I have to have a reaction, it has to be "please do this" or it has to be something I feel we need to discuss. The audience not only can but needs to laugh or cry about their own lives. On the stage these areas, *machismo* or *donjuanismo*, can be put on the table and examined--get it out in the open. This needs to be done because many people don't want to talk about it, they hide it, ignore it. However, when it is placed on the stage they can't help dealing with it and that's part of my political theatre training. I don't write just to make money or to get laughs although I don't mind getting laughs or making money. But these reasons are not why I write. I wrote *Johnny Tenorio* because it has to do with *machismo* and *donjuanismo* and the Chicano needs to face these issues.

Celestino Gorostiza wrote a play titled La malinche in 1958 and you also have a work titled Malinche. First, are you familiar with the Mexican play and second, what is your Malinche about?

Yes, Gorostiza's work influenced mine. I must admit that when I write a play, I research the topic, and if possible, I read plays that deal with the theme. This particular play is about Malinche and Cortés, however; I followed the model of *Medea* and it didn't work. I tried to adapt it to Euripides' *Medea* because of the analagous characters, situations and themes. For example, both women help their men conquer their own people. The big difference is that Medea tried to get even. She killed the children to get even with Jason while, on the other hand, La Malinche acquiesced. She didn't kill her child Martín. She was the "Mother of Convenience" and that's why today a *malinchista en México* is someone who is known as *un vende patria, alguien que se entrega al enemigo*. What I did in my *Malinche* was to follow the model of *Medea* and it didn't work. So what I'm going to do now is rewrite it and tell the "real" story. What I did originally was a mistake.

To me it's a fascinating theme because it would have an effect even today on the Mexicano. It's not something that is strictly in the past but also it has an impact on the present and even the future. There is a tendency for the Mexicano to no longer deny the indigenous past but to accept it because it is helpful in their search for identidad. They're able to understand themselves better if they accept La Malinche. It seems to me that such a play would be beneficial for the Mexican and Mexican-American and also would be a popular play.

Sure, it's a wonderful theme, but again, the mistake that I made was to use a European model when the story is a very Mexican story. Instead of trying to do a clever academic hat trick, I should have just told the story of La Malinche that in its own way is just as heartbreaking as that of the Medea.

Well, I look forward to reading and seeing the new version of Malinche. Your first collection of plays published in 1983, The Many Deaths of Danny Rosales and other plays (Rancho Hollywood, Los Dorados, El jardín) range from topics on racially motivated injustices to historical and biblical themes that are modernized or contemporized with the use of fantasy. For example, in El jardín you have a conversation between Serpiente and Dios in which the Serpiente says "I'm sick to death of my job" to which a sympathetic Dios answers that "perhaps we can arrange a minor position for you in Purgatory . . ."

Stop there. That's exactly where the sequel *Pancho Diablo* begins. *Pancho Diablo* is the sequel to *El jardín*. The Devil has reached the point of *ya no aguantando* and he is ready to quit. He goes to Saint Peter and asks him for an audience with God and Saint Peter laughs at him. So the Devil takes off his

horns and tail, gives them to Saint Peter and quits--creating a vacuum in Hell. The men and women begin fighting among one another due to this development. Hell, for the Chicano or Mexicano-Americano, is a bordello in Boys Town because that is where all the graft is--prostitution, corruption, narcotics, alcoholism, everything and that is what the Devil has been living in. That is the Devil's Hell, our Hell. So what does the Devil want to do? He wants to go to God's country. Where is God's country? Across the river.

Will you continue to write refundiciones of older plays such as Don Juan Tenorio and continue to base them on historical, mythical, or biblical themes or will you deal with more contemporary topics such as The Savior?

I don't want to get type cast or be pigeonholed. I want my themes to be as different as day and night. *The Many Deaths of Danny Rosales* and *Pancho Diablo*, for example, are so different that if you didn't know who wrote them you would think they were by two different dramatists. So, yes, I want to write plays about contemporary figures such as Romero and also I love history, it was my undergraduate minor--I love to make history come alive on stage. I'll do historical, biblical, fantasy plays like *Rancho Hollywood* and *Los Dorados* and anything else that I read in a newspaper or that I come across anywhere that inspires me--both past topics *and* contemporary themes.

Finally, I have read that Carlos Morton is the most widely produced Chicano playwright. What do you think accounts for your appeal and success?

Okay, let's qualify that. The way my editor put it is that a lot of the works of Luis Valdez were collective in creation. They were really written in collaboration with several actors in the method of improvisation. So, therefore, it was a collective, it should have been "Luis Valdez et al" because a lot of his work came from his actors--they were collective creations. According to Kanellos, I can claim to be the most widely produced Chicano playwright because I wrote my plays by myself--at least most of them, with the exception of the time I was in the mime troupe. Sure theatre groups have helped me and other companies have helped me and I've evolved, but most of them I just wrote. I'm pretty much a loner, so I just sat down and wrote them myself. As far as my appeal, I think I've just been at the right place at the right time. I have a feeling that the kind of thing that I am writing is just representative of what the Chicano feels today. The writer is just a manifestation of what is happening, just part of the wave. By the way, this is 1987, and this has to do with what we're discussing. Do you know what the date 1987 signifies? Hernán Cortés came in 1519 and that was the year prophesied that Quetzalcoatl would return. So, according to the Aztec calendar, there were going to be nine fifty-two year Hell cycles, and each one would be progressively worse than the one before. We have now, this year, reached the end of the

nine Hell cycles. If you multiply 9 times 52 and add that to 1519 you get 1987. We are nearing the beginning of a new era. *El tiempo es ahora. Ya basta con chingar a la gente. Ya no aguantamos. Todo se está cambiando.* Some of the wealthy people in *Las Américas* are still living in the 19th Century. The corporations still think they can do what they want with us. This is no longer possible in an age of telecommunications. The culture will no longer tolerate this exploitation. See the handwriting on the wall. The poets are writing on the walls. It's the wave of the 21st Century. I'm part of it, Chicanos in the Southwest are part of it. I simply stage what the Chicano people are feeling and this accounts for the appeal of my plays.

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Notes

1. Valverde, José María. "Entrevista con José María Valverde." *Hispania*, March 1987, 137.
2. Morton, Carlos. "Primer Taller de Teatro Latinoamericano." *Latin American Theatre Review*, 11.2 (Spring 1978): 115-116.
3. Santos, Cuate. "The Death of Archbishop Oscar Romero," *Laredo Morning Times*, 8 March 1987.