Notes on Chicano Theatre

What is Chicano theatre? It is theatre as beautiful, rasquachi, human, cosmic, broad, deep, tragic, comic, as the life of La Raza itself. At its high point Chicano theatre is religion—the huelguistas de Delano praying at the shrine of the Virgen de Guadalupe, located in the rear of an old station wagon parked across the road from DiGiorgio’s camp #4; at its low point, it is a cuento or a chiste told somewhere in the recesses of the barrio, puro pedo.

Chicano theatre, then, is first a reaffirmation of LIFE. That is what all theatre is supposed to be, of course; but the limp, superficial, gringo seco productions in the “professional” American theatre (and the college and university drama departments that serve it) are so antiseptic, they are antibiotic (anti-life). The characters and life situations emerging from our little teatros are too real, too full of sudor, sangre and body smells to be boxed in. Audience participation is no cute production trick with us; it is a pre-established, pre-assumed privilege. “¡Que le suenen la campanita!”

Defining Chicano theatre is a little like defining a Chicano car. We can start with a lowriders’ cool Merc or a campesino’s banged-up Chevi, and describe the various paint jobs, hub caps, dents, taped windows, Virgin on the dashboard, etc. that define the car as particularly Raza. Underneath all the trimmings, however, is an unmistakable product of Detroit, an extension of General Motors. Consider now a theatre that uses the basic form, the vehicle, created by Broadway or Hollywood: that is, the “realistic” play. Actually, this type of play was created in Europe, but where French, German, and Scandinavian playwrights went beyond realism and naturalism long ago, commercial gabacho theatre refuses to let go. It reflects a characteristic “American” hang-up on the material aspect of human existence.

European theatre, by contrast, has been influenced since around 1900 by the unrealistic, formal rituals of Oriental theatre.

What does Oriental and European theatre have to do with teatro Chicano? Nothing, except that we are talking about a theatre that is particularly our own, not another imitation of the gabacho. If we consider our origins, say the theatre of the Mayans or the Aztecs, we are talking about something totally unlike the realistic play and more Chinese or Japanese in spirit. Kabuki, as a matter of fact, started long ago as something like our actos and evolved over two centuries into the highly exacting artform it is today; but it still contains pleberras. It evolved from and still belongs to el pueblo japonés.

In Mexico, before the coming of the white man, the greatest examples of total theatre were, of course, the human sacrifices. El Rabinal Achi, one of the few surviving pieces of indigenous theatre, describes the sacrifice of a courageous guerrilero, who rather than dying passively on the block is granted the opportunity to fight until he is killed. It is a tragedy, naturally, but it is all the more transcendent because of the guerrilero’s identification, through sacriifice, with God. The only “set” such a dramatic-rital needed was a stone block; nature took care of the rest.

But since the Conquest, Mexico’s theatre, like its society, has had to imitate Europe and, in recent times, the United States. In the same vein, Chicanos in Spanish classes are frequently involved in productions of plays by Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca, Tirso de Molina and other classic playwrights. Nothing is wrong with this, but it does obscure the indio fountains of Chicano culture. Is Chicano theatre, in turn, to be nothing but an imitation of gabacho playwrights, with barrio productions of racist works by Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams? Will Broadway produce a Chicano version of “Hello, Dolly” now that it has produced a Black one?

The nature of Chicanismo calls for a revolutionary turn in the arts as well as in society. Chicano theatre must be revolutionary in technique as well as content. It must be popular,
subject to no other critics except the pueblo itself; but it must also educate the pueblo toward an appreciation of social change, on and off the stage.

It is particularly important for teatro Chicano to draw a distinction between what is theatre and what is reality. A demonstration with a thousand Chicanos, all carrying flags and picket signs, shouting CHICANO POWER! is not the revolution. It is theatre about the revolution. The people must act in reality, not on stage (which could be anywhere, even a sidewalk) in order to achieve real change. The Raza gets excited, simón, but unless the demonstration evolves into a street battle (which has not yet happened but it is possible), it is basically a lot of emotion with very little political power, as Chicanos have discovered by demonstrating, picketing and shouting before school boards, police departments and stores to no avail.

Such guerrilla theatre passing as a demonstration has its uses, of course. It is agit-prop theatre, as white radicals used to call it in the ‘30’s: agitation and propaganda. It helps to stimulate and sustain the mass strength of a crowd. Hitler was very effective with this kind of theatre, from the swastika to the Wagenesque stadium at Nuremberg. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Huelga march to Sacramento in 1966 was pure guerrilla theatre. The red and black thunderbird flags of the UFWOC (then NFWA) and the standard of the Virgen de Guadalupe challenged the bleak sterility of Highway 99. Its emotional impact was irrefutable. Its political power was somewhat less. Governor Brown was not at the state capitol, and only one grower, Schenley Industries, signed a contract. Later contracts have been won through a brilliant balance between highly publicized events, which gained public support (marches, César’s fast, visits by Reuther, Robert and Ted Kennedy, etc.), and actual hard-ass, door to door, worker to worker organizing. Like Delano, other aspects of the Chicano movement must remember what is theatre and what is reality.

But beyond the mass struggle of La Raza in the fields and barrios of America, there is an internal struggle in the very corazón of our people. That struggle, too, calls for revolutionary change. Our belief in God, the church, the social role of women, these must be subject to examination and redefinition on some kind of public forum. And that again means teatro. Not a teatro composed of actos or agit-pop, but a teatro of ritual, of music, of beauty and spiritual sensitivity. This type of theatre will require real dedication; it may, indeed, require a couple of generations of Chicanos devoted to the use of the theatre as an instrument in the evolution of our people.

The teatros in existence today reflect the most intimate understanding of everyday events in the barrios from which they have emerged. But if Aztlán is to become a reality, then we as Chicanos must not be reluctant to act nationally. To think in national terms: politically, economically and spiritually. We must destroy the deadly regionalism that keeps us apart. The concept of a national theatre for La Raza is intimately related to our evolving nationalism in Aztlán.

Consider a Teatro Nacional de Aztlán that performs with the same skill and prestige as the Ballet Folklórico de México (not for gabachos, however, but for the Raza). Such a teatro could carry the message of La Raza into Latin America, Europe, Japan, Africa—in short, all over the world. It would draw its strength from all the small teatros in the barrios, in terms of people and their plays, songs, designs; and it would give back funds, training and augmented strength of national unity. One season the teatro members would be on tour with the Teatro Nacional; the next season they would be back in the barrio sharing their skills and experience. It would accommodate about 150 altogether, with 20-25 in the National and the rest spread out in various parts of Aztlán, working with the Campesino, the Urbano, the Mestizo, the Plojo, etc.

Above all, the national organization of teatros Chicanos would be self-supporting and independent, meaning no government grants. The corazón de la Raza cannot be revolutionized
on a grant from Uncle Sam. Though many of the teatros, including El Campesino, have been born out of pre-established political groups, thus making them harbingers of that particular group’s viewpoint, news and political prejudices, there is yet a need for independence for the following reasons: objectivity, artistic competence, survival. El Teatro Campesino was born in the huelga, but the very huelga would have killed it, if we had not moved sixty miles to the north of Delano. A struggle like the huelga needs every person it can get to serve its immediate goals in order to survive; the teatro, as well as the clinic, service center and newspaper, being less important at the moment of need than the survival of the union, were always losing people to the grape boycott. When it became clear to us that the UFWOC would succeed and continue to grow, we felt it was time for us to move and to begin speaking about things beyond the huelga: Vietnam, the barrio, racial discrimination, etc.

The teatros must never get away from La Raza. Without the palomilla sitting there, laughing, crying and sharing whatever is onstage, the teatros will dry up and die. If the raza will not come to the theatre, then the theatre must go to the raza.

This, in the long run, will determine the shape, style, content, spirit and form of el teatro Chicano. Pachucos, campesinos, low-riders, pinto, chavalonas, familias, cuñados, tios, primos, Mexican-Americans, all the human essence of the barrio, is starting to appear in the mirror of our theatre. With them come the joys, sufferings, disappointments and aspirations of our gente. We challenge Chicanos to become involved in the art, the life style, the political and religious act of doing teatro.

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The Actos

Nothing represents the work of El Teatro Campesino (and other teatros Chicanos) better than the acto. In a sense, the acto is Chicano theatre, though we are now moving into a new, more mystical dramatic form we have begun to call the mito. The two forms are, in fact, cousins that complement and balance each other as day goes into night, el sol la sombra, la vida la muerte, el pajar la serpiente. Our rejection of white western European (gabacho) proscenium theatre makes the birth of new Chicano forms necessary, thus, los actos y los mitos; one through the eyes of man, the other through the eyes of God.

The actos were born quite matter of factly in Delano. Nacieron hambrientos de la realidad. Anything and everything that pertained to the daily life, la vida cotidiana, of the huelguistas became food for thought, material for actos. The reality of campesinos on strike had become dramatic, (and theatrical as reflected by newspapers, TV newscasts, films, etc.) and so the actos merely reflected the reality. Huelguistas portrayed huelguistas, drawing their improvised dialogue from real words they exchanged with the esquiroles (scabs) in the fields everyday.

“Hermanos, compañeros, salganse de esos files.”
“Tenemos comida y trabajo para ustedes afuera de la huelga.”
“Esquirol, ten verguenza.”
“Unidos venceremos.”
“¡Sal de ahí barrigón!”

The first huelguista to portray an esquirol in the teatro did it to settle a score with a particularly stubborn scab he had talked with in the fields that day. Satire became a weapon that was soon aimed at known and despised contractors, growers and mayordomos. The effect of those early actos on the huelguistas de
Delano packed into Filipino Hall was immediate, intense and cathartic. The actos rang true to the reality of the huelga.

Looking back at those early, crude, vital, beautiful, powerful actos of 1965, certain things have now become clear about the dramatic form we were just beginning to develop. There was, of course, no conscious deliberate plan to develop the acto as such. Even the name we gave our small presentations reflects the hard pressing expediency under which we worked from day to day. We could have called them "skits," but we lived and talked in San Joaquin Valley Spanish (with a strong Tejano influence), so we needed a name that made sense to the raza. Cuadros, pasquines, autos, entremeses all seemed too highly intellectualized. We began to call them actos for lack of a better word, lack of time and lack of interest in trying to sound like classical Spanish scholars. De todos modos éramos raza, (quién se iba a fijar?)

The acto, however, developed its own structure through five years of experimentation. It evolved into a short dramatic form now used primarily by los teatros de Aztlan, but utilized to some extent by other non Chicano guerrilla theatre companies throughout the U.S., including the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bread and Puppet Theatre. (Considerable creative crossfeeding has occurred on other levels, I might add, between the Mime Troupe, the Bread and Puppet and the Campesino.) Each of these groups may have their own definition of the acto, but the following are some of the guidelines we have established for ourselves over the years:

Actos: 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 feeling.

So what's new, right? Plays have been doing that for thousands of years. True, except that the major emphasis in the acto is the social vision, as opposed to the individual artist or playwright's vision. Actos are not written; they are created collectively, through improvisation by a group. The reality reflected in an acto is thus a social reality, whether it pertains to campesinos or to batos locos, not psychologically deranged self-projections, but rather, group archetypes. Don Soto, Don Coyote, Johnny Pacheco, Juan Raza, Jorge el Chingón, la Chicana, are all group archetypes that have appeared in actos.

The usefulness of the acto extended well beyond the huelga into the Chicano movement, because Chicanos in general want to identify themselves as a group. The teatro archetypes symbolize the desire for 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. What to a non-Chicano audience may seem like oversimplification in an acto, is to the Chicano a true expression of his social state and therefore reality.

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