

Introduction

Brief overview of Chicano theatre prior to *Zoot Suit*

This is a book about Chicana/o drama from 1979 to 1999, the last two decades of the twentieth century. My point of departure is 1979 because that was the year Luís Valdez's play with music, *Zoot Suit*, was produced on Broadway, marking a turning point not only for Mr. Valdez, but for an entire generation of Latina and Latino theatre artists.¹ Also, I wrote my first book about Chicano theatre in 1980, in the wake of the *Zoot Suit* phenomenon in New York and Los Angeles. In the twenty years that have passed since that first book, much has changed in Chicana/o theatre and some of those developments are the substance of this book. I write this book as a scholar but also as someone who has been intimately involved in many of the plays I discuss, as an audience member, as director of a reading or a fully staged production. I know all of the directors and playwrights, some as ex-students, others as collaborators and fellow travelers in the peripatetic world of the theatre.

In reality I could not have written this book in 1980 because the majority of plays I am writing about had not yet been scripted. Yet, although I focus on the plays and playwrights that have emerged since 1979, these playwrights all call themselves Chicana or Chicano, recognizing the political ramifications and history of such a conviction. By continuing to call themselves Chicana/os they are claiming an identity that is neither Mexican nor Anglo-American, but a synthesis of both. As self-proclaimed Chicanos they recognize a history of struggle in the barrios that continues to this day.

¹ I use the term, Latina/o when the reference can be applied to all people of Latin American descent, whether Cuban, Puerto Rican, Chicano, etc. When a reference applies to only one of the many Latina/o populations, I will be specific. Although this introduction is about Chicana/o theatre, often what I say can apply across Latina/o cultures.

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Finally, these playwrights acknowledge that they did not spring out of a void, writing plays in isolation. Several of the playwrights I discuss were directly influenced by individuals such as Luís Valdez, Estela Portillo-Trambley or Carlos Morton, or they were inspired to act or write because of a Chicano teatro they had seen. Therefore I would like to give the reader a brief overview of the events that preceded *Zoot Suit*, the evolution of a Chicano Theatre Movement.

As I will discuss in Chapter 1, Luís Valdez founded the Teatro Campesino in 1965 as the cultural and performing arm of the farm workers' union being formed by Cesar Chávez, Dolores Huerta and others. The Teatro Campesino immediately became synonymous with the farm workers' struggle and later, with the Chicano Movement. By 1968 the Teatro Campesino had gained national and international recognition and had also spawned many other teatros, seemingly wherever they had performed. Noting the growing number of teatros, Valdez and his Teatro members decided to host a Chicano Theatre Festival in 1970 in Fresno, California, the company's home base. Several Chicano teatros attended, as well as a Puerto Rican group from New York City, The Third World Revelationists, and Los Mascarones, of Mexico City, establishing a sense of international struggle and inter-American cooperation. The first festival led to another the following year.

During the Spring break of 1971 the second Chicano theatre festival was sponsored by the Teatro Campesino on the campus of the University of California, Santa Cruz. Soon after the 1971 festival a group of representatives from various teatros met at the Teatro Campesino headquarters and founded TENAZ, *El Teatro Nacional de Aztlán* (the National Theatre of Aztlán). "Aztlán" is the Nahuatl (Aztec) word for "all the lands to the north, the land from whence we came." The Chicanos interpreted Aztlán as the Southwestern United States, home of the largest concentration of Mexicans and Chicanos in the country. By adopting a Nahuatl term as part of their name, the members of TENAZ were proclaiming their Native American roots, celebrating their indigenous heritage as encompassing all of North (and South) America. The word, "Tenaz" means "tenacious" in Spanish and the acronym was intended to honor the tenacity of all Native peoples, despite centuries of European colonization.

TENAZ became a national coalition of teatros, Chicano theatre groups that were initially composed mainly of individuals more motivated by politics than by "art." TENAZ was an important part of a Chicano Theatre Movement, indeed a driving force, sponsoring annual festivals, workshops, symposia and publications in efforts to assist groups with their aesthetic and

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political growth. Because the Teatro Campesino was the only full-time teatro in the early days, with an office and a (modestly) paid staff, that organization took on much of the administrative duties of TENAZ. Luís Valdez was the undisputed leader of the Chicano Theatre Movement and he and his fellow Teatro Campesino members were looked up to as role models by the younger, emerging *teatristas* (theatre workers). Although the Teatro Campesino was very well known in theatre circles, few people outside of the Chicano Movement knew that there were many other teatros, from Chicago to San Diego, San Antonio to Seattle, in operation during the 1970s.

Many of the early teatros emerged from community organizations as well as from college and university Chicano student groups. With names like Teatro M.E.Ch.A. (Chicano slang for match)² and Teatro Justicia (Justice), it was clear that these theatre groups were more intent on bringing about social justice than following any traditional rules of aesthetic theory. Metaphorically, at least, they wanted to light fires of social justice wherever there were Mexicans and Chicana/os being oppressed. In other words, the message was much more important than the medium. The Teatro Campesino's *actos* became the standard model for these young troupes because the *acto* form is easily emulated and adaptable to any socio-political motive or situation. Anyone with a cause can collectively create an *acto*, but the cause is essential.

The *acto* was the perfect form for those teatro members who were not experienced in performance techniques. The *actos* can be characterized as brief, collectively created sketches based on a commedia dell'arte model of slapstick, exaggeration, stereotypes and allegories poking satiric jabs at any given enemy or issue(s). The targets of the *actos* ranged from institutions to individuals, elected officials or organizations such as a Police Department; targets that were easily recognizable to the delighted audience members. Unlike Valdez, who had studied theatre in college, most of the other people involved in the early teatros had little or no experience in theatrical techniques. What the incipient *teatristas* lacked in formal training, however, they compensated for in sheer vitality and commitment. And their audiences, like the first striking farm workers, were totally in tune with what they were seeing on stage. One of the most important premises of the theatre, that critical connection between performer and audience, was unwavering in the initial stages of teatro Chicano.

² "M.E.Ch.A." is also the acronym for Movimiento Estudiantil de Aztlán (Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán) a student movement which continues to this day on high school, college and university campuses all across the country.

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Even from the beginning of what we can call contemporary Chicano theatre, this was a theatre movement based on the need to make a difference in the community, not through Art but through Action. Social action, political action – any kind of action and activism that could educate and motivate first the community members themselves, and then, if possible, members of the broader society. However, this was a developing movement and the membership of the teatros was in constant flux, gaining and losing members constantly. Despite the transient nature of the field, some individuals persevered, intent on making teatro their way of life, regardless of the sacrifices. By the mid-1970s some teatros had offices and some even had performance spaces, but the members of these teatros were still often students or community workers who had to study as well as work to get by financially. Professional theatre training was a luxury to which few, if any, early teatro members could aspire, even if they wanted such training.

Early *teatristas*, including Valdez, were unabashed in their disdain for traditional theatrical practice and purposes. At a time when the regional theatre movement was being infused with foundation monies and the National Endowment for the Arts was beginning to recognize a growing professionally oriented regional theatre movement in the Anglo communities, most *teatristas* purposely avoided any connections to these funding agencies. If they did not take monies from the establishment they felt they would be free of any controls those agencies might impose upon them. Representing a community that had been ignored by the government and most of its agencies anyway, these *teatristas* were virtually snubbing their noses at the System as they openly criticized it.

This was a period of intense volunteerism in the theatre when few, if any, people were paid for their cultural work. Instead, these dedicated individuals, who called themselves “cultural workers,” were eager to challenge the status quo any way they could. They were not interested in a “A Life in the Theatre,” as much as they were intent on using theatre to change people’s lives. For them, the theatre was an obvious and accessible platform for sharing ideas with their communities. Their stages were not civic auditoriums or fully equipped theatres, but rather, community-based spaces such as schools, churches, parks and community centers. “If the Raza [the people] will not come to the theatre,” Valdez wrote in 1971, “then the theatre must go to the Raza.”³ And the teatros did, indeed, go to the people.

TENAZ continued to give the Movement continuity and a sense of

³ Luís Valdez, *Actos* (San Juan Bautista: Cucaracha Press, 1971), p. 4; and in Luís Valdez, *Early Works: Actos, Bernabe and Pensamiento Serpentino* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1990), p. 10.

something much larger than the individuals and the teatros in which they participated. By 1976 the Teatro Campesino stepped out of TENAZ, and Teatro de la Esperanza assumed many of the administrative responsibilities, along with other teatros that were still operating. TENAZ continued to be a national coalition and teatros from all over the nation were involved in the yearly festivals, workshops and meetings.⁴ With time, many teatros dissolved or transformed into new teatros with former members of other groups. Most people found full-time employment in other fields, some continued to work with their community-based teatros. Then “*Zoot Suit fever*” hit Los Angeles.

Why would a Chicano take a play to Broadway?

I can still picture the moment. The year was 1977 when Luís Valdez told me he was going to write and direct a play about the infamous Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial, produce it in Los Angeles and then move it to New York’s Broadway. “Why do you want to do that?” I asked incredulously, knowing that there were two reasons they called Broadway the “Great White Way.” One reason has to do with the brightness of the (white) lights. But to theatre artists of color, there is another, more subtle reason for that description. Although serious African-American plays had been produced on Broadway, their numbers were (and still are) few. And a play written, directed and performed by Chicana/os or Latina/os had never been produced on Broadway. Never. But Luís Valdez decided that he was going to be the first Chicano writer/director on the Great White Way.

What could the Chicano Theatre Movement possibly gain by a Chicano play on Broadway, I thought. In response to my original question (“Why?”), Luís said simply: “They won’t take us seriously until we succeed on their turf, on their terms.” “They” were the New York Establishment. “They” were the regional theatre producers who only seemed to value plays that had come from Broadway or at least New York. “They” were the New York theatre critics who still looked down their noses at most plays that had come from west of the Hudson River. And, of course, “they” were not Latino or even Chicano. But they did, in fact decide what was “Great” or even “Good Theatre.”

I didn’t know what to say to Luís. But I knew that this man was a

⁴ I was one of the founding directors of TENAZ, but stepped out of the organization in the mid 1980s due to other commitments. In 1992 I attended the Chicano Theatre Festival in San Antonio and was drawn back into the organization as President of the Board of Directors.

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visionary and that if he said he was going to do something, he did. This was the charismatic leader who had gathered together a group of striking farm workers and created the ever-evolving Teatro Campesino. And this was the man who, along with his Teatro Campesino members, had inspired an entire movement of Chicano theatre groups all across the country. The “Father of Chicano Theatre” was going to Broadway.

Zoot Suit opens doors

Valdez did write that play, titled it *Zoot Suit*, and it was co-produced by the Teatro Campesino and the Center Theatre Group of Los Angeles at the Mark Taper Forum in the heart of the city. *Zoot Suit* opened in Los Angeles in 1978, breaking all previous box office records for any theatrical production in that city. When the producers understood that audiences could not get enough of *Zoot Suit*, they moved the production to the larger Aquarius Theatre in Hollywood and the people kept coming. Another production went to Broadway in 1979, both productions directed by the playwright. As we will see later in this book, *Zoot Suit* closed in New York after four weeks of attempting to overcome negative reviews. Still, a Chicano and many other Chicanas, Chicanos, Latinas and Latinos, had taken a play to Broadway and although they had been “rejected” by the East Coast Establishment, they had made their mark. Like the play’s central figure, the ubiquitous Pachuco, the production team walked proudly out of what had been for those months of rehearsal and production, *their* theatre, on their terms. The play was still selling out in Los Angeles and it would soon be made into a motion picture, directed by the playwright.

The success of *Zoot Suit* in Los Angeles became a watershed moment in the history of Latino theatre and of all theatre in the United States. With his very conscious move into the so-called mainstream, Valdez opened the doors to other professional venues, for himself and for other Latina/o theatre artists as well. Producers and artistic directors across the country saw the huge profits generated by the production of *Zoot Suit* in Los Angeles and began to seek ways to tap into the Latino market. They also wanted to expand their audience base beyond their traditionally white, upper-income patrons. *Zoot Suit* proved popular across ethnic, class and cultural lines in Los Angeles but most importantly, while that play was being performed in the theatre, while El Pachuco strutted nightly across that stage, that space belonged to La Raza. Luís Valdez had ushered-in the era of professional Chicana/o theatre and the theatre would never be the same.

Zoot Suit had set a new, professional standard for Chicano theatre artists, moving some to study theatre practice, formally and informally. While few *teatristas* were able to see *Zoot Suit* in New York, during the eleven months the play was in Los Angeles, Chicanas and Chicanos from all parts of the country made their way to the Mark Taper Forum or to the Aquarius Theatre to witness this singular event. While some of the more established Chicano theatre companies had begun to develop plays written by individuals before the advent of *Zoot Suit*, more teatros began to develop plays and playwrights in the 1980s. Just as the Teatro Campesino's early *actos* had inspired people to create their own statements in that genre, now the people involved in the teatros had a totally different kind of professional production to invigorate and stimulate them.

Zoot Suit was unlike anything a Chicana/o theatre troupe had ever achieved, awesome in its theatrical force and humbling in its high professional standards. Never before had so many Latinas and Latinos been brought together to make theatre in a professional venue. Some of the cast members, like Cuban-born, Tony Plana, had been trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and others, like Evelina Fernández, had gotten her basic training in community-based Chicano teatros in East Los Angeles. Other actors, like Charles Aidman, had been on stage and screen for years, while Edward James Olmos had been a lounge singer. *Zoot Suit* changed the lives of many people both on and off the stage.

After Zoot Suit

After *Zoot Suit* closed in Los Angeles, most of the Latina and Latino actors in the cast were confronted with the sad reality that there would be few opportunities to act professionally on the stage or screen. Mr. Olmos' very successful career had been launched and other actors could be seen in (usually stereotypical) Latina/o roles as victims or victimizers, on film and television. But their real satisfaction came from acting in live theatre. Some actors who had come from the Teatro Movement continued to work with teatro groups whenever possible. These actors often brought their expertise to the TENAZ festivals and workshops during the 1980s in that organization's continuing efforts to promote and facilitate a higher performance standard. Although the film of *Zoot Suit* had not played long in the movie theatres, the actors who had been in that film were seen as role models by many of the younger teatro members. Those actors who had come from the barrios and "made it" in *Zoot Suit* knew that they still had a responsibility

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to their communities and would play-out that responsibility, literally, by acting in teatro performances whenever they could.

As the 1990s approached, the annual TENAZ festivals became semi-annual events and they were now attended by a growing number of companies that had been together for fifteen or more years. Individual directors and actors began to emerge from teatros as well as from professional training programs, all eager to work with the best scripts possible. Theatre companies such as El Teatro de la Esperanza (Santa Barbara and San Francisco, California), the Bilingual Foundation for the Arts (Los Angeles, California), La Compañía de Teatro de Albuquerque (Albuquerque, New Mexico), Su Teatro (Denver, Colorado), the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center (San Antonio, Texas), and the Chicago Latino Theatre Company (Chicago, Illinois) each had play development programs. Many of the plays these companies were producing were evidence of their efforts to reach higher levels of professionalism, even if they were not yet able to pay living wages to their artists.

Whereas the 1960s and 1970s were a period of “*rasquachismo*,” of unsophisticated performance aesthetics within the Chicano Theatre Movement, in the 1980s the teatros and individual *teatristas* became increasingly aware that there could be more to their repertoire than *actos*. TENAZ festivals had always included representative groups and individuals from Latin America who offered symposia and workshops as well as performances which visibly demonstrated their troupes’ work. People such as Emilio Carballido, one of Mexico’s leading playwrights, Argentinean director/playwright/theorist in exile Augusto Boal, and director/playwright, Enrique Buenaventura, of Colombia, brought their visions to TENAZ festivals, expanding the theatrical possibilities.⁵ And, by the 1980s there were a growing number of individuals studying in both undergraduate and graduate programs in theatre across the country. Some of those people have contributed to the core of this book through their works.

The projects

While the community-based teatros were developing plays by playwrights both within and outside of their own organizations, mainstream theatre companies also began to offer programs in script development. Due, in large

⁵ The cross-pollination of ideas was more a south-to-north pattern than the reverse, because few Chicana/o *teatristas* or teatros could afford to travel south of Mexico. Indeed, few teatros have toured beyond Mexico City to date.

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part to generous grants from the Ford Foundation and, later, the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, several mainstream (and a few, select Latino) theatres were able to launch projects to develop Latina/o audiences and plays. Two of the most important projects, both for their longevity and national outreach, were the South Coast Repertory Theatre's "Hispanic Playwright's Project" and the INTAR (International Arts Relations, Inc.) "Hispanic Playwright's-in-Residence Laboratory." The "HPP," headed by director/playwright, José Cruz González from 1986 to 1997, was responsible for the development of many Latina and Latino plays from across the country. INTAR's Laboratory was taught by director/playwright, Maria Irene Fornes in New York City from 1981 to 1992. Not coincidentally, Fornes was also invited to participate in the HPP on a few occasions. Many of the playwrights I will be discussing studied and/or collaborated with Fornes and several have had their plays read or workshopped by the South Coast Repertory Theatre.⁶

Sometimes, readings and workshops of Chicana/o Latina/o plays in the regional theatre "projects" led to fully staged productions, which then meant that the theatre companies would (usually) have to hire Latina/o production staffs. As the need for trained actors grew, the pool of actors seemed to expand as well, particularly in New York City and the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The outcome of all of this activity, in the teatros and in the mainstream theatres, was that a substantial number of plays got produced and publications of those plays often followed. All of the plays which will be discussed in this book are the products of development projects in teatros, mainstream theatres, or both.

I have focused my project on the plays and playwrights, as opposed to theatre companies or directors, because I believe that the writers are at the core of the new Chicana/o drama. With one exception, the plays that I discuss are the products of individual visions, tempered by readings, workshops and various production teams that have also contributed to each play's particular identity. I have chosen the plays in this book because I believe they tell us what it means to be a Chicana/o in the United States at the close of the twentieth century. I do not intend to essentialize a Chicana or Chicano "experience" through these plays but I do find a common thread that links them to one another; themes, ideas, even musical undertones that often invoke Indo-Hispano, Mexican sources. These plays thus form, for

⁶ See Jorge Huerta, "Looking for the Magic: Chicanos in the Mainstream," in Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas (eds.), *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality and Theatricality in Latin/o America* (Durham: Duke, 1994), pp. 37–48.

me, a Chicana/o mythos, the locus of the first chapter that keeps reappearing throughout this study. Some of the playwrights I write about are familiar; pioneers, such as Carlos Morton, Estela Portillo Trambley or Luís Valdez. But other individuals were not yet writing plays in 1980 and their voices are the voices I wish to focus on in this study.

Happy families don't make good drama

All of the plays discussed in this volume are about families, the vast majority of which would be termed dysfunctional. This is not because all Mechicano families are as dysfunctional as the characters and situations in these plays, but because they make much better drama or comedy. I say this because I want the reader to understand that although the people in these plays range from martyrs to murderers, saints to sinners, as in all drama, they are extensions of reality. Each playwright expresses her/himself differently, of course, but these writers are all conscious of the fact that happy families do not make good drama. It is the dysfunctional family that fascinates us and the most evil characters that draw our attention and our ire. Perhaps it is human nature to be more interested in the villain than the heroine, even if that villain is a product of your own community.

Community is very important to each of the playwrights and because they are interested in the betterment of their communities, they expose the sores, explore the weaknesses. The playwrights do not write these plays for sensationalistic purposes, but because they see something in their plays, the characters, the plots, that are important to them. Most importantly, perhaps, is the fact that the playwrights are writing about their people, their circumstances. These are not Hollywood's distorted pictures of the Mechicano but, rather, the Chicanos' pictures of sometimes distorted Chicanos. Therefore, as you read about these plays and the characters that inhabit their worlds, remember that they are sometimes ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances or extraordinary people in ordinary circumstances. In the best of theatrical worlds, they are extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.

On the use of the term, Mechicana/o

I will distinguish between the Chicana/o and the Mexican when the differences are important and refer to a conflation of the two as Mechicana/o, when the conditions pertain to both groups equally or similarly. In other