

Chicano Drama
Performance, Society and Myth

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Contents

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	page ix
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
	Introduction	I
1	Mythos or <i>mitos</i> : the roots of a Chicano mythology	15
	Unseen spirits of the Southwest	20
	Re-claiming Aztec and Maya mythology	26
2	Mystery or miracle: bodiless heads and conversations with the dead	56
	Challenging notions of reality: bodiless heads	56
	Conversations with the dead	71
3	Redemption: looking for miracles in a man's church	100
	Irreverent visions of God, the Devil, Heaven and Hell	102
	Reinscribing the miracle play	107
	Priests and nuns in a restrictive church	118
4	Rebelling against damnation: out of the closet, slowly	140
	The discussion of homosexuality in Chicano literature and theatre	140
	Early representations of (homo)sexual characters	142
	Plays with secondary gay Chicano characters	146
	Plays with gay/lesbian central characters	159
	<i>Afterword</i>	183
	<i>Bibliography</i>	193
	<i>Index</i>	203

Illustrations

- 1 *Heroes and Saints*, by Cherríe Moraga. Brava! For Women in the Arts, San Francisco, California. Directed by Albert Takazauckas. L. to R. Hector Correa and Jaime Lujan. Photo: © David. M. Allen Photography, 1992, San Francisco, California page 65
- 2 *Heroes and Saints*, by Cherríe Moraga. Brava! For Women in the Arts, San Francisco, California, 1992. Directed by Albert Takazauckas. L. to R. Juanita Estrada, Jennifer Proctor, Viola Lucero. Photo: David M. Allen Photography, San Francisco, California 66
- 3 *My Visits With MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, by Edit Villareal. Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, 1993. Directed by Norma Saldívar. L. to R. Maricela Ochoa, Renee Victor, Feiga M. Martinez. Photo: Avery Photography, Milwaukee 75
- 4 *My Visits With MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, by Edit Villareal. Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, 1993. Directed by Norma Saldívar. L. to R. Feiga M. Martinez, Thaddeus Valdez, Maricela Ochoa and Renee Victor. Photo: Avery Photography, Milwaukee 76
- 5 *Santos & Santos*, by Octavio Solis. Campo Santo in Association with Thick Description, San Francisco, California, 1996. Directed by Tony Kelley. L. to R. Deena Martinez, Michael Torres, Luis Saguar, Maria Candelaria and Sean San José Blackman. Photo: © 1996 Stephen Mitchell 91
- 6 *Santos & Santos*, by Octavio Solis. Dallas Theatre Center, Dallas, Texas, 1995. Directed by Richard Hamburger. L. to R. Jennifer Griffith, Richard Chaves, Rene Moreno, Vilma Silva, Al Espinosa, Dolores Godinez, Bob Burrus, Toni Allen, Jimmie Ray Weeks. Photo: Carl Davis 92

- 7 *Real Women Have Curves*, by Josefina López. Chingona Productions and Rasquachi Rep, Los Angeles, California, 1998. Directed by Corky Dominguez. L. to R. Julia Vera, Rosalinda Morales, Teresa-Michelle Ruiz, Tina Taylor, Miriam Peniche. Photo: Josefina López 126
- 8 *La Guadalupe Que Camina*, by Beverly Sanchez-Padilla. Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, Texas, 1990. Directed by Ruby Nelda Perez. L. to R. Beverly Sanchez-Padilla, Ruby Nelda Perez, Sonia Salazar, Nancy López. Photo: San Antonio Express News 133
- 9 *Blade to the Heat*, by Oliver Mayer. New York Shakespeare Festival, 1994. Directed by George C. Wolfe. L. to R. Maricela Ochoa, Paul Calderon. Photo: Michal Daniel 169
- 10 *Deporting the Divas*, by Guillermo Reyes. Miracle Theatre Company, Portland, Oregon, 1998. Directed by Michael Menger. L. to R. Andrés Alcalá, Jason Maniccia, Dan Palma, Rob Harrison, Jack Lozano. Photo: Autumn Simon Photography, Oxford, Massachusetts 174

I

Mythos or mitos: the roots of a Chicano mythology

“El indio baila
He DANCES his way to truth
In a way INTELLECTUALS will
Never understand.”

Luis Valdez, 1971¹

“It is indeed impossible to understand many Chicano literary works without a knowledge of Nahuatl [Aztec] and Mayan mythology.”

Herminio Rios-C, 1974²

“The linkage of indigenous thought to contemporary reality gave the Chicano Movement mythic and psychic energies that could be directed towards its political and economic goals.”

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, 1979³

“I hope they still relate to seasons and to plants and to colors and to the wind, and to the Indian in them, or the element that is closest to the earth.”

Estela Portillo-Trambley, 1981⁴

Introduction: looking for a Chicana/Chicano mythos

A mythos, by definition, means that a group of people, a culture, depends on myths which help them to explain the inexplicable, what some would

¹ Luis Valdez, *Early Works: Actos, Bernabe Pensamiento Serpentino* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1990), p. 177.

² Herminio Rios-C (ed.) “Introduction,” *El Grito* 7 (Berkeley, CA) (June–August 1974), 4.

³ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Alurista’s Poetics: The Oral, the Bilingual, the Pre-Columbian,” in Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (eds.) *Modern Chicano Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 119.

⁴ Richard A. Abrams, “Chicana Playwright Struggles with 2 Cultures,” *Austin-American Statesman*, December 6, 1981, A24.

call the supernatural. A mythos also gives a people a place in the cosmos, describing and recalling their ancestors, giving them a “from the beginning,” as it were. For the believers these myths are no longer myths but doctrine. To the outsider, however, that doctrine is just another myth. When students in the United States are asked to identify mythical heroes and their narratives, they usually refer to the Greeks and the Romans, for these are their legacy through any number of Western European representations in art, philosophy, literature and theatre. Indeed, to understand many of the Renaissance, neo-classical and even twentieth-century artists and writers we must know their referents in the Euro-classical world or we are not fully educated, we are told. But when do we learn about the Aztec God of the Sun, Huitzilopochtli or the Mother Goddess Tonantzin?

Cultural anthropologists have expanded our knowledge of myths beyond Mount Olympus, exploring other cultures, current and past. Extinct cultures are investigated through hieroglyphs, artwork or other visual artifacts, while contemporary cultures are also revealed by their arts as well as through careful interpretation of the peoples’ stories. But always, these other cultures’ tales remain in the realm of the mythical as opposed to the actual; legend rather than historical fact. We know that the feats of Hercules or Theseus are exaggerations, but somehow, those heroes and their super-human exploits remain accessible to descendants of a Western European tradition. But where do the accomplishments of the Aztec prince Cuahtemoc come into play? What of his acts of bravery in the face of Spanish brutality? And reaching even farther back in pre-Columbian time, who knows about the gifts of Quetzalcóatl?

Carl Jung claimed that we all have a collective unconscious that unites us through universal archetypes, just as Joseph Campbell demonstrated that all cultures have a hero-quest-myth. The plots remain the same while the names and places change. But one culture’s mythical hero is another culture’s nemesis. Thus, like all colonizers, the Spaniards had to eradicate the spiritual beliefs of the indigenous peoples in order to truly conquer them. Early missionaries fought valiantly and indiscriminately in their attempt to replace indigenous gods and origin “myths” with one Almighty God and *Old Testament* accounts of The Creation and Fall from Eden.

Noting that the natives relied heavily on theatrical spectacle in their daily rituals, the Church fathers employed theatre to proselytize the natives a few years after the Conquest. The *auto* titled “*Adan y Eva*,” was the first Spanish religious drama to be produced in Mexico when the natives mounted it in

Mexico City in 1532, just eleven years after the collapse of the Aztec empire.⁵

The 1532 version of Adam and Eve's Fall was produced with such sincerity and reverence by the neophytes that "all who saw it broke into tears," according to the chroniclers (Campa, "Spanish Religious Folk," p. 10). Thus biblical accounts became the legacy of the indigenous peoples and their mestizo descendants to this day – one myth replaced by another. The Mesoamerican redeemer figure, Quetzalcóatl, was conflated with the Christ figure and, of course, the Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzin, was supplanted by the Virgin Mary/Guadalupe. But to the Christian believer, the Virgin Mary is Truth while Tonantzin is a myth. Yet, how true are the indigenous myths for Chicana and Chicano audiences? What do they know about indigenous history, factual or mythical?

To be a Chicana or a Chicano in the United States – which is to say to have been educated in this country – means that your indigenous history and myths have basically been ignored, suppressed or denied altogether. Mechicana/o school children are given few indicators that the United States is really *their* country; leaving them feeling marginalized, invisible and, in some states, entirely unwanted. And as these brown-skinned children search for historical or mythical role models from their community, there are few people prepared or even disposed to teach them about the early Californian or Texan heroes such as Tiburcio Vazquez or Gregorio Cortez. Or what of New Mexican folk heroes and the centuries of Spanish-language traditions in that unique state?⁶

To be a Chicana/o, it must be understood, is not to be a Mexican, either. The history of Chicano/Mexicano relations has been full of contradictions since the Southwest became a part of the United States. Many of the Mexicans who fled to the north during the Revolution of 1910 undoubtedly had plans to return, and some did. But many more stayed, married and had children: the first Chicanos. When these newly hybridized Mexicans born in the United States traveled to their parents' homeland, they were not necessarily embraced by the Mexicans. For one, there was the issue of class: many of these Chicanos were from the working class and were thus perceived

⁵ Arthur L. Campa, "Spanish Religious Folk Theatre in the Spanish Southwest," *The University of New Mexico Bulletin (First Cycle)* (1934), 8.

⁶ It is another sad reality that as I enumerate historical figures that might be recognizable to readers, not one *Mexicana* or Chicana (read: woman) comes to mind. Certainly, women have always been active in the Mechicana/o communities of the United States but historical figures remain virtually unknown.

as inferior. They were often called “pochos” – a derogatory term for those Mexicans who had “deserted the homeland” and moved to the north.

Many United States-born Mexicans did not speak Spanish properly since that language was taken from them in the schools or because some parents chose not to teach their children Spanish for fear of the discrimination this would generate. Also, since little or nothing about Mexico was taught in the schools, the Chicanos did not really know Mexico. In the words of noted Chicano historian, Juan Gomez-Quiñones, “. . . ironically, they [Chicanos] were also penalized in the homeland for being Mexican . . . [Anglo] domination had deprived them of solidarity with their trans-border kin.”⁷ Chicanos knew about the Great Pyramid at Giza, but who was teaching them about the glories of Teotihuacan?

Thus when our playwrights began to resuscitate Mexican legendary figures along with Aztec and Mayan gods and concepts, they challenged both the Mexican and North American hegemonies. Ironically, students in Mexico are taught very little about their indigenous roots aside from the historically negative (Church and state) narratives, a continuation of the dominant discourse demonizing the colonized peoples. And if Mexicans know very little about their indigenous heritage, Chicana/os have little hope of learning anything in early childhood education in the United States. Chicanos who travel to ceremonial sites in Mexico hear what tour guides tell all of the tourists: riveting accounts of virgins being thrown into deep wells or people having their hearts torn from their bodies in savage rituals of human sacrifice. But who tells them to read the poetry of King Nezahualcoyotl or the book of origins called the *Popol Vuh*? Who teaches them about the accomplishments of those people who are also a part of their mythico-cultural history?

The problem, when inventing a mythos, is that you are compressing time. Myths are created through generations of story-telling and cultural logic which gives those stories mythic significance, not through plays or murals on barrio walls. And yet, that is what the Chicana and Chicano writers and artists, composers and poets began to do in the 1960s: create or re-create a Chicano mythos based on Mexican and pre-Columbian heroes and myths. But, apparently lacking historical knowledge of the narratives, some of these artists would conflate images from distinct cultures and time periods. Thus you see a sixteenth-century Aztec god atop a Classic Mayan pyramid (c. AD 500) painted without apologies or explanation. The

⁷ Juan Gomez-Quiñones, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940–1990* (New Mexico, 1990), p. 203.

important thing was to get the images onto those walls, transforming drab buildings into billboards of an emerging Chicano mythos. Cesar Chávez and the United Farm Workers' Union flag, Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata and the Virgin of Guadalupe were the most recognizable icons. It was up to the viewers to find out who the indigenous figures were and what they represented.

A mural or painting can only tell the viewer so much about its message(s). And even though "a picture is worth a thousand words," those words may be lost if the person viewing the image has no references, no connections to that image. Study a painting of Quetzalcóatl, and you may only see what appears to be a snake with feathers. The snake as symbol has many meanings, of course, but what of the feathers? Where are the wings? What does it all mean to a contemporary Chicana/o who has probably been taught through Church narratives that indigenous religions are pagan and that the snake is a symbol of evil?

Given the various re-creations of indigenous symbols I have seen on many murals in barrios throughout the United States, it becomes clear that if the visual artists do not provide a narrative (should they?), it is up to the writers, poets and playwrights to give those images and concepts a place in the Chicano imaginary. In his introduction to a special issue of *El Grito* dedicated to Chicano drama in 1974, Herminio Rios-C wrote: "It is indeed impossible to understand many Chicano literary works without a knowledge of Nahuatl [Aztec] and Mayan mythology. Many Chicano writers are exploring this part of our history and are actualizing it in terms of contemporary realities."⁸

Something strange happens when the Mechicana/o playwright has to educate her or his audiences about their Mexican history and mythologies, substituting Aztec, Maya or Hopi beliefs for the more familiar western European myths. As Herminio Rios-C stated a generation ago, Mechicano audiences did not and still do not automatically recognize or identify with Aztec and Maya gods and goddesses. Indeed, most people cannot pronounce names like Quetzalcóatl, Itzamná or Coyolxhaqui, much less identify with them. But that was the challenge to those playwrights who wanted to bring the gods back to their contemporary Mechicano audiences: to transform Zeus into Itzamná, substitute Guadalupe with Tonantzin and replace Mount Olympus with Teotihuacan. That is what the two pioneers of Chicana/o dramaturgy, the late Estela Portillo-Trambley and Luís

⁸ Herminio Rios-C, "Introduction," *El Grito* (Berkeley, CA) (June–August 1974), 6.

Valdez, chose to do, setting a mythico/historical quest for themselves and their communities.

Unseen spirits of the Southwest

Estela Portillo-Trambley's magicians

Estela Portillo-Trambley is regarded by most Chicana/o critics and scholars as the woman who inspired and opened the doors for all the Chicana writers that followed her. Yet, despite college, university and community-based productions of most of her plays, there have not been any fully mounted professional productions to date. This does not diminish Portillo-Trambley's importance, however, for she has left us some very important statements about who the Chicano and especially, the Chicana, really is. Portillo-Trambley passed away in late 1998, a loss to the literary and theatre communities that will be felt for a long time.

Portillo-Trambley's writings reflect her bicultural upbringing in the desert city of El Paso, Texas, where she was born in 1936. She spent most of her life in El Paso, a city in which the majority population is Mexican and Chicano; a city in which working people have to be bilingual to survive, yet a city which is still a part of the United States. In 1953 Portillo-Trambley married Robert Trambley, with whom she had five daughters.⁹ Always a pioneer, Portillo-Trambley received her B.A. in English in 1956 from the University of Texas at El Paso at a time when few Chicanos and even fewer Chicanas were graduating from high school in California. From 1957 to 1964 she taught high school English and was Chair of the English Department of El Paso Technical Institute.¹⁰

Portillo-Trambley had a varied professional career in El Paso, from hosting a radio talk show from 1969 to 1970, to writing and hosting a television program, "Cumbres," from 1971 to 1972. This led to a full-time writing career and the position of resident dramatist at El Paso Community College from 1970 to 1975 where she also taught classes and produced and directed school productions. In 1971, Portillo-Trambley published a collection of haiku poetry, *Impressions*, and the following year she became the first Chicana to publish a play when *Day of the Swallows* was first published in

⁹ The Trambley's also had a son, who died at an early age – one of the catalysts for Portillo-Trambley's creative writings.

¹⁰ Suzanne Bennett and Jane T. Peterson (eds.), *Women Playwrights of Diversity* (Westport: Greenwood, 1997), p. 276.

1972. In 1973, she edited *Chicanas en literatura y arte* for *El Grito*, the first all-women's issue of a major Chicano journal.

Also in 1973, Portillo-Trambley attended a summer workshop in the University of Mexico's Escuela de Arte Dramático, studying modern Mexican playwrights such as Octavio Paz, Hector Azar and Vicente Leñero – all well-known playwrights in their own country and abroad. This experience was significant in the formation of Portillo-Trambley's understanding of theatre within a Mexican context. In a letter to me dated February 5, 1982, she described her experiences there:

It included a symposium with Emilio Carballido. *Tales dramaturgos y compañía me dieron vista para comprender el tejido de artista, actor, y audiencia. El cuerpo total de teatro como taller humano . . .* It was an experience of inspiration. [Such playwrights and company gave me the insight to understand the interweaving of artist, actor and audience. The total body of teatro as a human workshop.]

In 1975 she published *Rain of Scorpions and Other Writings*, which was the first collection of short stories to be published by a Chicana.¹¹ Her novel, *Trini*, was published in 1986.¹² But she was always working on a play as well as her fiction. In the period between 1974 and 1977 Portillo-Trambley had four of her plays produced at the Chamizal National Theatre, on the border between El Paso and Juarez: *Morality Play* (unpublished) in 1974, *Blacklight* in 1975, *Sun Images* in 1976 and *Isabel and the Dancing Bear* in 1977 (unpublished).¹³ The years between 1974 and 1977 were a time of intense writing for the playwright, who was certainly encouraged by the productions at the Chamizal, but who also knew that each of these plays still needed to be developed. Always interested in education, Portillo-Trambley received her M.A. in English from the University of Texas at El Paso in 1978. In 1983, the playwright published *Sor Juana and Other Plays*, which included the title play and three others: *Autumn Gold*, *Puente Negro* and *Blacklight*.¹⁴

¹¹ Estela Portillo-Trambley, *Rain of Scorpions* (Berkeley, CA: Tonatiuh International, 1975).

¹² Estela Portillo-Trambley, *Trini* (Binghampton: Bilingual Press, 1986).

¹³ *Sun Images* is published in Jorge Huerta and Nicolas Kanellos (eds.), *Nuevos Pasos*, a special issue of *Revista Chicano-Riquena* 7 (invierno 1979), 18–42.

¹⁴ Estela Portillo-Trambley, *Sor Juana and Other Plays* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1983). *Sor Juana* is discussed very briefly in chapter 3.

Desert magic as mythos: Day of the Swallows

Of the several plays that Portillo-Trambley published, the two that attempt to create a Chicano mythos by incorporating indigenous icons and concepts are *Day of the Swallows* and *Blacklight*. As mentioned above, *Day of the Swallows*, was Portillo-Trambley's first published play and it is written in a traditional realistic form – a style of realism that the playwright never abandoned.¹⁵ I would describe this play as poetic realism due to the often heightened language and the romantic setting.¹⁶ The playwright follows an Aristotelian model in which all of the action takes place in one setting, in the course of a day. However, although the play is true to a realistic mode of representation, it is grounded in the playwright's belief in nature gods. Although the people in this play are Roman Catholics, the playwright combines Christian ritual with indigenous myth; the power of unseen spirits permeates the central character, Doña Josefa's, world.

The playwright describes Doña Josefa as: "a tall, regal woman about thirty-five. Her bones are Indian's; her coloring is Aryan" (Garza, *Contemporary Chicano Theatre*, 210). Thus Doña Josefa is a Mestiza, a woman in touch with both her indigenous and her Spanish cultural and spiritual roots. Although everyone perceives her as devoutly Roman Catholic, Doña Josefa has other forces that speak to her, her "magicians," magical powers that we do not see. The tension between her Christian devotion and her magicians symbolizes a Life Force that only Josefa can reconcile. In the metaphorical struggle between the old gods and the newer, Christian faith, the indigenous gods win, immortalizing Josefa in an animistic belief in life after death.

Day of the Swallows takes place in Doña Josefa's nineteenth-century parlor, a refuge from the harsh world of men. The action of the play begins the morning before the Day of San Lorenzo, when the virgins of the town wash their hair in the lake "and bathe in promise of a future husband," a ritual tradition that will honor Josefa this year (Garza, *Contemporary Chicano Theater*, 207). But Josefa will never participate in the ritual, for her destiny has been sealed long before this day. From the moment the play begins we know that something is terribly wrong in Josefa's household. Alysea, a young woman who lives with Josefa since she rescued her from a

¹⁵ *Day of the Swallows* is also discussed in chapter 4.

¹⁶ Portillo-Trambley's *Day of the Swallows* is published in the following: Herminio Rios and Octavio Romano-V. (eds.), *El Espejo* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1972), pp. 149–93; Philip D. Ortego (ed.), *We Are Chicanos* (New York: Washington Square, 1973), pp. 224–71; and Roberto J. Garza (ed.), *Contemporary Chicano Theatre* (Notre Dame, 1976), pp. 206–45. All references to this play will be to the version published in Garza, 1976.

bordello, is obviously very upset and nervous as she begins her daily chores. But Josefa maintains her composure as other characters come into their refuge. This seemingly moral woman is hiding some dark secret, and as the action unfolds we discover that the previous night she had cut out the tongue of the boy who lived with them because he witnessed Josefa and Alysea in an act of passion. The boy represents the outside world of “¿qué dirá la gente?” – what will people say? – and Josefa’s immediate response to the horror on the boy’s face is to cut out his tongue while the horrified and confused Alysea holds him down.

Nobody knows about Josefa and Alysea’s relationship but Josefa’s alcoholic uncle, who suspects something and threatens to blackmail her. After Josefa confesses to her only male friend, the parish priest, Father Prado, she feels that she has no other recourse but to commit suicide. The final scene of the play, the climactic moment, is when Josefa, defeated in this world but not in the realm of her magicians, the light and the lake, dons her white gown and becomes one with these powers by drowning herself in the lake. The image of Josefa’s body floating in the lake is a literary one, narrated by one of the village women who is staring out of the window towards the lake since the image is virtually impossible to depict on the stage. Nonetheless, the mental picture is powerful and enhances the playwright’s notions of indigenous thought when she describes the return of Josefa’s spirit following her suicide: “the almost unearthly light streaming through the windows gives the essence of a presence in the room” (Garza, *Contemporary Chicano Theatre*, p. 245). In the words of Louise Detwiler, at this moment, “Josefa has returned,” as she had predicted she would.¹⁷

Although Detwiler’s project is to demonstrate how Portillo-Trambley has created characters and situations in which cultural differences (indigenous vs Spanish) exacerbate gender oppression, she carefully articulates the mythic base upon which Portillo-Trambley constructs her vision. Detwiler believes that by “tapping into the collective consciousness of her indigenous heritage in the midst of the prevailing patriarchal consciousness of the Roman Catholic legacy within her community,” Josefa represents “a nexus between animism and Roman Catholicism” (Detwiler, “Cultural Difference,” 147). Further, Detwiler feels that “Josefa identifies with an animistic symbol system while she rejects the patriarchal symbols of Roman Catholicism” (147). In other words, the playwright has created a world in

¹⁷ Louise Detwiler, “The Question of Cultural Difference and Gender Oppression in Estela Portillo-Trambley’s *The Day of the Swallows*,” *The Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe* (1996), 151.

which indigenous, female powers prevail. Detwiler sees Josefa's belief in "Earth as Mother" as a direct contrast to the Judeo-Christian concept of God the Father: "Through the worship of fertility goddesses, i.e. life-giving symbols, Josefa creates a universe that offers her those things that the life-taking patriarchal cosmology surrounding her within the community lacks: sexual passion, life, freedom, sisterhood and rebirth" (151).

Detwiler's argument is important here for her interpretation of the transcendence of indigenous thought over Roman Catholic doctrine in this play. Although the playwright admitted to an interviewer that she wrote the play "to make money" (she assumed that a play about a closeted lesbian suicide would generate popular interest), her desert upbringing and her fascination with indigenous concepts prevailed.¹⁸ But she was also restricted by her lack of playwriting experience. As a writer of fiction, the playwright was better at describing Josefa's world in her stage directions rather than in the dialogue itself. The first words the playwright gives us are for the reader and production staff only: "The tierra [land] of Lago de San Lorenzo is within memory of mountain sweet pine. The maguey thickens with the ferocity of chaotic existence. Here the desert yawns. Here it drinks the sun in madness" (Garza, *Contemporary Chicano Theatre*, 207).

After a full page of describing the natural surroundings and giving a history of San Lorenzo, Portillo-Trambley begins Act 1, scene 1 with more stage directions: "Josefa's sitting room; it is an unusually beautiful room, thoroughly feminine and in good taste; the profusion of lace everywhere gives the room a safe, homey look . . . it is flooded with light, the lace, the open window all add to the beauty of the room, a storybook beauty of serenity" (208).

This play is a series of scenes between Josefa and other characters in her life, each character bringing her/his own tone to the rising tension. With the exception of the priest, the male characters represent confrontations, with dialogue that reflects the anxiety they create: from the threatening uncle to the powerful Don Esquinas, whose family virtually owns the village. But Josefa's real nemesis is the only full-blooded Native American in the play, Eduardo, who tells Alysea he is taking her away to ". . . a wilderness . . . mountain, pines. My Squaw . . . living and loving in the open" (216). Eduardo does not know about the women's relationship or the truth

¹⁸ In the late 1970s, Portillo-Trambley said that *Day of the Swallows* was "a play I wrote in a very short time and for a terrible reason. I was just being mercenary." Juan Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview* (Austin: Texas, 1980), p. 170.

about David's misfortune but he is in love with Alysea and knows that he has to live on the land to be truly happy.

Eduardo becomes a link between Josefa, the indigenous man and *La Tierra*, inspiring the most poetic dialogue in the play. In the conversation between Eduardo and Josefa the playwright equates the native people with the land and the poetry that Mother Nature can inspire. But Eduardo is also a man and Josefa flatly declares that she is not interested in the love of a man: "I did not want the callous Indian youth . . . with hot breath and awkward hands . . . a taking without feeling . . . no, not that! I wanted so much more . . ." (222). Yet, there is also a mystical/sexual tension and connection between Josefa and Eduardo. It is in her first and only meeting with Eduardo that Josefa describes her magicians:

There by the lake, I felt the light finding its way among the pines . . . to me . . . It took me . . . then . . . perhaps it was my imagination . . . it said to me: 'We are one . . . make your beauty . . . make your truth.' Deep, I felt a burning spiral . . . it roared in my ears . . . my heart . . . [Pause] It was too much to bear . . . so I ran and ran until I fell, opened my eyes, and found myself calmly looking up at the stars . . . sisters of my love! The moon had followed me; it lay a lake around me, on the grass . . . (222)
[ellipses are the playwright's]

Thus, although the Indian male may have been a threat to Josefa's sense of sexual beauty, he also represents her indigenous roots, her love of the land, *La Tierra, Nuestra Madre* (Mother Earth). Eduardo represents the best and the worst of humanity in Josefa's world, for he is Nature personified as Man. Eduardo had previously been Clara's lover, but he abandoned her (she is, after all the wife of Don Esquinas) and Josefa sees this betrayal as unforgivable. And yet, Josefa tells Eduardo "You are easy to fall in love with," for he is the rebel Indian she would like to be (200). Eduardo has had his way with the wife of the hacienda owner and will now take Alysea away from the barrio and into a natural surrounding, ostensibly free of the Spaniards' control. Eduardo's "temple" is the forest, an allusion and illusion that complements Josefa's belief in nature gods. Both Josefa and Eduardo worship in the same temple, although their gods may be distinct.

Day of the Swallows remains the only play of its kind in the annals of Chicano drama, a visionary, troublesome play that tackles issues and themes that remain as "forbidden" as they were when the author first wrote it. Although this play has not been produced widely, it retains its importance as Estela Portillo-Trambley's attempt to challenge the hegemony of the

Mechicano belief system, both in terms of Christian thought and Mexican/Spanish patriarchal practices. It is a paean to the peoples who were in "America," long before the Europeans came and laid claim to it all. Josefa may be dead in the "reality" of western thought, but in her indigenous vision, she lives on. In Detwiler's words, "Josefa's suicide results in the creation of a more perfect union with what she believes to be divine" (Detwiler, "Cultural Difference," p. 152).

Re-claiming Aztec and Maya mythology

Luis Valdez

Luis Valdez is indisputably the leading Chicano director and playwright who, as the founder of the Teatro Campesino (Farm Workers' Theatre), inspired a national movement of theatre troupes dedicated to the exposure of socio-political problems within the Chicano communities of the United States. More than a generation later, no other Chicana or Chicano playwright or director has generated the amount of critical interest, both positive and negative, as Valdez. His eclectic work includes plays, poems, books, essays, films and videos, all of which deal with the Chicano and Mexican experience in the United States. Further, Valdez's work has inspired many articles, theses, and dissertations, as well as a major critique and analysis of his early work with the Teatro Campesino by Professor Yolanda Broyles-González, published in 1994.¹⁹ The following brief overview of Valdez's career cannot do justice to all that he has attempted or accomplished, but will hopefully serve to introduce Mr. Valdez before I discuss his contributions to a Chicano mythos through indigenous myths, concepts and philosophies.

Valdez was born to migrant farm worker parents in Delano, California, in 1940, the second in a family of ten children. Although his early schooling was constantly interrupted as his family followed the crops, Valdez managed to do well in school. By the age of twelve he had developed an interest in puppet shows, which he would stage for neighbors and friends. While still in high school he hosted his own program on a local television station, foreshadowing his work in film and video which would later introduce him to his widest audience. After high school, Valdez entered San José State College where his interest in theatre fully developed.

¹⁹ Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: Texas, 1994).

Valdez's first full-length play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (to be discussed more fully in chapter 2), was produced by San José State College in January of 1964, setting the young student's feet firmly in the theatre. After graduation, Valdez worked with the San Francisco Mime Troupe for a year before founding the Teatro Campesino in the fall of 1965. He became the Artistic Director as well as resident playwright for this raggle-taggle troupe of striking farm workers, guiding them in the collective creation and performances of brief commedia-like sketches called "*actos*" which dramatized the need for a farm workers' union.

Within a matter of months, the Teatro Campesino was performing away from the fields educating the general public about the farm workers' struggle and earning revenue for the Union. By 1967 Valdez decided that he and the Teatro had to leave the ranks of the Union in order to focus on his theatre rather than on the demands of a struggling labor organization. As a playwright, Valdez could now begin to explore issues relevant to the Chicano beyond the fields: the experiences of the urban Mechicanos. As a director, he could begin to develop a core of actors no longer committed to one cause and one style alone. He needed the full attention of his company if the Teatro was to evolve both artistically and politically.

The separation from the Union proved auspicious. In 1968 the Teatro was awarded an Obie²⁰ and the following year Valdez and his troupe gained international exposure at the *Théâtre des Nations* theatre festival in Nancy, France. In only four years, the Teatro Campesino had become an international symbol of the Mechicanos' rural and urban struggles. In 1971 the troupe moved to its permanent home base in the rural village of San Juan Bautista, California, where the Teatro established itself as a resident company, producing plays as well as films and publishing some of Valdez's writings about his vision of theatre. In 1973 Valdez scripted and directed *La gran carpa de los Rasquachis* (*The Great Tent of the Underdogs*) in collaboration with his Teatro. This is an epic "*mito*" which follows a Cantinflas-like (read: "Mexico's Charlie Chaplin") Mexican character from his crossing the border into the United States and the subsequent indignities to which he is exposed until his death.²¹

²⁰ The "Obie," the off-Broadway equivalent of the Broadway Tony (Antoinette Perry) Awards, is sponsored by *The Village Voice*.

²¹ See Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, Ch. 1, for a very detailed analysis of the Mexican carpa and popular performance tradition as source and inspiration for the early Teatro Campesino aesthetic. See also Nicolas Kanellos, *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940* (Texas, 1990), pp. 95-103.

For the next few years, Valdez continued to write and direct plays, leading to his most commercially successful play to date, *Zoot Suit*,²² which opened in Los Angeles in 1978 and in New York, on Broadway, in 1979.²³ The play was subsequently adapted into a motion picture written and directed by Valdez and released in 1981. In *Zoot Suit* Valdez combined elements of the earliest Teatro Campesino street theatre aesthetic with *Living Newspaper* techniques, professional choreography, and Brechtian narrative that kept the action moving forward. Although the play did not win sufficient critical acclaim in New York to survive there,²⁴ it continued to run in Los Angeles and the film became an art film to the cognoscenti.²⁵ *Zoot Suit* made a major impact on the professional Latina/o talent pool, launching the careers of a number of professional theatrical and film artists, most notably, Edward James Olmos. Other actors who participated in either the Los Angeles or New York versions of *Zoot Suit* and who continue to work professionally include: Evelina Fernández, Alma Martínez, Angela Moya, Lupe Ontiveros, Tony Plana, Rose Portillo, Diane Rodríguez and Marcos Rodríguez, to name a few.²⁶

Re-writing a historical California myth: Bandido!

Never one to work on a single project at a time, in 1981 Valdez also directed a workshop of his next play, *Bandido!* in the Teatro Campesino's theatre in San Juan Bautista.²⁷ In this play Valdez attempts to revisit and revise a historical and mythical figure by dramatizing the life and death of Tiburcio

²² *Zoot Suit* has generated more critical discourse than any other Chicano play. For an overview of the critics' responses to *Zoot Suit* in New York, see: Broyles-González, *Teatro Campesino*, pp. 189–205; Carlos Morton, "Critical Response to 'Zoot Suit and 'Corridos,'" (El Paso: University of Texas, El Paso, Occasional Paper Series, No. 2, 1984); Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Zoot Suit y el movimiento Chicano," *Plural* (April 1980), 49–56.

²³ See Broyles-González, *Teatro Campesino*, for the most thorough analysis of five versions of this controversial play. See also, Huerta, *Chicano Theater*, pp. 174–84.

²⁴ Broyles-González *Teatro Campesino*, p. 195, points out that the following publications published positive reviews of *Zoot Suit* on Broadway: "... *Wall Street Journal*, *Variety*, the *Washington Post*, *Daily News*, *Newsweek*, to name a few." On page 204, Broyles-González states: "But the [New York] critics are not omnipotent and many plays are successful in spite of negative critical opinion." History has proven otherwise in most cases, especially when the play is a costly Broadway musical. The power of the *New York Times* theatre critics over the years is legendary and frightening.

²⁵ For years after its initial release of the film, since it did not generate impressive box office numbers, MCA, parent company of Universal Studios, refused to release the film on video. It is now available on video.

²⁶ *Zoot Suit* is in Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit and Other Plays* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1992), pp. 23–94.

²⁷ The revised version of this play is in Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit*, pp. 95–153.

Vazquez, the last man to be legally, publicly executed in California when he was hanged in 1875. Thus this play is another Valdezian attempt to create a Chicano mythos by reviving a historical figure who is a part of the Mechicanos' early presence in California. Although this play focuses on a member of the Californio ruling class, by virtue of his resistance to Anglo encroachment, Vazquez is a mythical, larger than life figure to Valdez.²⁸ And, like the mythical indigenous figures that Valdez investigates and brings to life in his mitos, Tiburcio Vazquez is not a well-known figure in California or other states. Therefore *Bandido!* also serves as a history lesson, bringing to life an unknown but important man in order to give his Mechicano audiences their own heroes.

Known in his time as a "bandit" to the Anglos, Vazquez was a hero to many Californios who followed his exploits with great interest between 1853 and 1875. In the playwright's words:

Although hailed as *resistance fighters* by their own people, both men [Murrietta and Vazquez] are unquestionably part of the American mythology of the Old West, for they share the distinction of having had their lives staged professionally on the melodrama stages of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Yet their claim to fame rests on their notoriety, and their enduring memory owes much to their incorporation into Western conquest fiction as *stereotypes*.

... The contrast between photographic portrait and melodramatic stereotype is all that survives of Vazquez in history books.

(Valdez, *Zoot Suit*, p. 97)

Taking his cue from his own metaphor of realistic photograph vs. melodramatic stereotype, Valdez states in his introduction to the published version that this is a "play within a play", an "anti-melodrama" now titled *Bandido! The American Melodrama of Tiburcio Vazquez, Notorious California Bandit*. However, I would argue that this play is a "melodrama-within-a-realistic play," because the playwright contrasts differing realities of theatrical representation in this piece. Whatever the construct, Valdez attempts to revise our perceptions of Tiburcio Vazquez (if we have any) and contrast the "real" man with the Anglo historians' (and Hollywood's) misperceptions. Valdez sees Vazquez as emblematic of all early Californios who have been

²⁸ The upper-class Spanish-speaking people who lived in the territory of Alta California called themselves "Californios." For an informative discussion of the distinct types of Spanish-speaking peoples and communities in the Southwestern United States, see Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico* (New York: Greenwood, 1968), pp. 81-97.

relegated to stereotypical “greaser” roles and thus tries to rescue him (and all Chicanos, ultimately) from that onerous fate.

The construct of *Bandido!* is that we are watching two versions of Vazquez’s exploits: an Impresario’s distorted, romanticized version and Vazquez’s own re-creation of who he thinks he really was and is – Valdez’s “photographic portrait.” The “real” Vazquez is Valdez’s (re)vision; the “murderous *bandido*” is the Impresario’s depiction. Thus, the play starts on a melodrama stage, and then shifts to Vazquez’s (realistic) jail cell, in which he awaits his trial and eventual execution with the calm assurance of an archetypal hero. The scenes then shift from one reality to another as we witness two versions of Vazquez’s story. When we are with Vazquez in the jail cell, we are observing the real man; when the action shifts to the melodrama stage we are sometimes watching the Impresario’s visions and sometimes we are actually watching Vazquez’s interpretation. It is a construct that can be confusing on the stage, especially if the acting style is not clearly distinct from one reality to the other. As even the elongated title indicates, the melodramatic acting is exaggerated, while Vazquez’s “reality” should be as real as possible.

By shifting the action between Vazquez’s reality and the Impresario’s objectification of the man, Valdez plays on our own perceptions. The playwright is striving to show us how much we, as audiences, are influenced by the media’s representations of who Chicana/os are. As W. B. Worthen states, “In *Bandido* (and to a lesser extent in *I Don’t Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!*), Valdez examines the function of popular performance genres – melodrama and television situation comedy – in the construction of identity politics and the history they present onstage.”²⁹ Most importantly, the playwright also gives the Chicana/o a history, a presence in the state of California in this play just as he did with *Zoot Suit*. In the case of *Bandido!*, however, Valdez has taken the Chicanos further back in time to the previous century, placing them firmly in a position to proclaim: “We didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us!”

Vazquez is a man on the run from the law and Pico tells him: “. . . I admit you’ve given all of us Californios twenty years of secret, vicarious revenge.” Moments later, Vazquez urges Pico to join him in a revolution against the Gringos: “With a hundred well-armed men I can start a rebellion that will crack the state of California in two, like an earthquake, leaving the Bear Republic in the north, and Spanish California Republic in the south!”

²⁹ W. B. Worthen, “Staging *America*: The Subject of History in Chicano/a Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* 49 (1997), 115.

(Valdez, *Zoot Suit*, p. 137). These are heroic ideals that place Vazquez above the common thief many historians have described. I see his character and his situation as symbolic of all Chicanos in struggle against oppressive forces. The villains in Valdez's play are both Anglo and Latino but the hero is a mythico-historical precursor of today's Chicanas and Chicanos.³⁰

Invisible Mexicans: I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!

Valdez's next major play, *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* was co-produced by the Teatro Campesino and the Los Angeles Theatre Center in 1986 under his direction. After so many years of battling the insensitivity of Hollywood it was inevitable that Valdez's next major stage play would expose the problems of stereotyping in tinseltown.³¹ While he had tackled melodramatic portrayals of Chicanos in *Bandido!* and stereotypical representations throughout his playwriting career, this new play addressed a community with which he had now become all too familiar. *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* is unique in the development of Chicano dramaturgy as the first professionally produced Chicano play to deal with middle-class Chicanos rather than the usual working poor and working-class characters and situations that concerned most Chicana/o playwrights. The play centers on Connie and Buddy Villa, the self-proclaimed "King and Queen of the Hollywood Extras," who have forged a comfortable life for their two children and themselves playing (silent) maids and gardeners and other stereotypes for Hollywood. The major conflict arises when their son, Sonny, a Harvard honor student, drops out of the Ivy League to pursue a career in Hollywood. The parents, whose daughter is a medical doctor, are appalled and try to dissuade their brilliant son from "ruining his life," but he is intent (as is the playwright) to break through the wall of Hollywood racism and indifference. In typical Valdezian fashion, Sonny (and the audience) begin to hear voices and he imagines events that take us into a surreal or even expressionistic mode as we ponder whether this is all a dream/nightmare he is having. The set (and, if possible, the theatre) must look like a sitcom setting, complete with working appliances and running water in the sink, but with the inevitable television monitors and illuminated signs used for a live studio audience. There is even a laugh track under Sonny's "visions," to enhance the feeling that this is all a sitcom gone awry.

³⁰ As I was finalizing this book, Valdez was directing *Bandido!* for the San Diego Repertory Theatre with his brother, Danny, as the Musical Director. The play began previews in September of 1999.

³¹ *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* is in Valdez, *Zoot Suit*, pp. 156–214.

Sonny is the central character in this play, a young, confused Chicano searching for his identity with parents that have lived invisible, silent identities all their professional careers. When Sonny chides his mother for always playing maids she counters with: "As Hattie McDaniel used to say: 'I'd rather play a maid than be one'" (Valdez, *Zoot Suit*, . . . p. 174). As if in response to the types of roles he will be offered, Sonny robs a fast-food restaurant dressed as a "cholo," or Chicano street punk. Sonny's response to Hollywood is to give producers what they expect and he fulfills their fantasy/nightmare by becoming a thief rather than a lawyer. When the police try to communicate with Sonny through megaphones outside, we do not know if this is real, although his girlfriend, Anita, also hears their voices. But the initial set-up, the theatre-as-television-studio, has left all options open and we soon find ourselves on another level of reality with the director's face and voice coming on over the monitors as it would in a real studio situation. But the Director looks and speaks exactly like Sonny.

The audience is thus plunged into what appear to be multiple realities, similar to the juxtapositions discussed in reference to *Bandido!* But while *Bandido!* transposed melodrama with realism, here we have the "real" in contrast to and in negotiation with the video "reality," which is, of course, not real at all. Yet, there are live actors on that stage and live audience members sitting next to you in the auditorium-cum-studio. All of this is designed to confuse and conflate realities we live with daily. Early in the play Sonny asks: "Is it real or is it Memorex?" A question that reverberates throughout the play.

Once the play becomes a live taping, anything can happen and it does. As the play/sit-com comes to a close, off-stage, Sonny and Anita are lifted in a space ship that is described as a giant Mexican *sombrero* (hat) as Connie and Buddy revel in their Son's decision to return to Harvard. In reality, the "Happy Ending" is neither. Having entered the realm of the sit-com, we are left to ponder whether any of this represents real people in real situations and the intrusion of the fantastical exit leaves more confusion than conclusion.

Still, Valdez's play raises issues that are ultimately crucial to him and, by extension, to any other Chicanas and Chicanos – Latinas and Latinos who are fed-up and frustrated with Hollywood's indifference to Latina-themed programming and Latino characters. By giving Sonny an existential moment of angst, the playwright raises themes that do not go away. Sonny tells his parents he did not belong at Harvard because he doesn't know where he belongs. In a major monologue on identity Sonny tells his parents:

“You see, in order to ACT TRULY AMERICAN, you have to kill your parents: no fatherland, motherland, no MEXICAN, Japanese, African . . . old-country SHIT!” (207) Sonny is speaking metaphorically, but the declaration is real to many people struggling with their place in this society. Survival has always been at the core of Valdezian dramaturgy, whether economic, cultural or spiritual, and this play is no exception to that commitment.

Going Hollywood: La Bamba

In 1987 Valdez’s most successful motion picture to date, *La Bamba*, was released, making him the most visible Chicano director in Hollywood at the time. In response to criticism that he was selling-out to Hollywood, Valdez told an interviewer, “I’m not selling out – I’m buying in.”³² That same year he adapted an earlier piece, the *Corridos* for public television, re-titled “Corridos: Tales of Passion and Revolution.”³³ Valdez described this project thus:

What the program is attempting to do is open up new possibilities with respect to theater. Much of what theater is, is still locked in 19th century approaches. The whole idea of adapting theater for a mass audience is an artistic one that can push the limits of the way [stage] images are presented, which is what we have tried to do.³⁴

Valdez’s extensive interview with Ken Kelley in 1987 appears to signal a turning point for the playwright-turned-film maker. Early in the interview Kelley had asked Valdez if it had been difficult to make the transition from stage to screen. Valdez’s response was telling: “It’s hard to contain what I want to do in the box of the proscenium stage. And the theatre is one permanent long shot, camera-wise, whereas with film, you can do so much more . . . When I hit the movies, I thought, This is what I am. This is what I’ve been trying to *do* . . .” (Kelley, “The Interview,” p. 53).

When Kelley asked Valdez about his commitment to the theatre, he answered: “I’ll never abandon theatre. But I feel always constrained by the

³² Ken Kelley, “The Interview: Luis Valdez,” *San Francisco Focus* (September 1987), 52.

³³ Valdez’s staged and televised productions of *Corridos* created much controversy, especially for its depiction of women. See Yolanda Broyles-González, “What Price ‘Mainstream’? Luis Valdez’s *Corridos* on Stage and Film,” *Cultural Studies* 4 (October 1990), 281–93; and her later, revised version of this article in her *Teatro Campesino*, pp. 154–63. See also, Carlos Morton, “Critical Response to ‘Zoot Suit’ and ‘Corridos.’”

³⁴ Victor Valle, “‘Corridos’ moves from stage to KSET,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1987, n.p.

kind of tastes that prevail in theatre in America today. Europe is a lot more free. Consequently, Teatro was a hit in Europe for many years, but never here" (53). Despite the critical and especially the financial success of *La Bamba*, Valdez was still swimming upstream in Hollywood. He continued to work on other Hollywood projects while the Teatro continued to produce the Christmas pageants and sporadic productions during the rest of the year. In 1994 Valdez's adaptation of "The Cisco Kid" aired on the TNT television network. Valdez wrote and directed this movie which starred Jimmy Smits and Cheech Marin as the hero and his side-kick.

In 1995 Valdez began to divide his time between the teatro, his film career and a full-time position as head of the Performing Arts Department at the newly founded California State University, Monterrey Bay. He hoped that this position and the support from the university would enable him to develop a new form of dramatic event which he calls "tele-dramatics," combining the latest cyber-technology with living performers.³⁵ Still managing several projects at a time, Valdez was working on the screenplay of the life of Cesar Chávez while also developing his pilot program at Monterey Bay. He then took a two-year leave from teaching between 1997 and 1999 in order to focus more on his film work.

But Valdez's decision to work in Hollywood had affected his ability to effectively run his theatre company and it had also impeded his playwrighting. In effect, by 1999, no completely new play had come from Luis Valdez's pen since the premiere of *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* in 1986. Frustrated by the slow-moving Hollywood machine, Valdez had told me in 1997 that he was eager to work on a play he had been developing for several years. The following year the San Diego Repertory Theatre received a major grant to commission Valdez as an Artist-in-Residence for two years, while he wrote that play, titled *The Mummified Fetus*. According to the Theatre's newsletter, the play would "explore five hundred years of California history through the lives, issues, and day-to-day decisions of a contemporary family."³⁶

Regarding his trajectory to 1998, Valdez commented:

For me, it's always a question of the path less traveled. I have to be, like

³⁵ In an interview for "Necessary Theatre," my UCSD-TV television series, taped November 20, 1997, Valdez discussed his idea of "tele-dramatics," as live theatre beamed via the internet to audiences at their computers wherever they were. A kind of cyber-interaction employing the technology of cyberspace and digital imaging with live actors.

³⁶ From "The Reporter," Fall, 1998, p. 3. [The San Diego Repertory Theatre's subscriber newsletter].