

Kat Avila

1992-1993 CALIFORNIA THEATER SEASON SUMMARY

How does one even begin to document the activity of Chicano and U.S. Latino *teatros* within California and, by association, the Southwest? It is a theater usually pushed off the page, or just plainly ignored, in favor of reviews about European and Euro-American drama. Though much of the blame for this lack of coverage can be attributed to this nation's narrow view—by both dominant and minority groups—of its quilted cultural heritage and history, some *teatros* have contributed to their invisibility through poor season planning, short and sporadic production runs, lack of a strong commitment to delivering a quality product to their audiences, and unsophisticated publicity efforts. This 1992-1993 theater summary does not pretend to cover all that has happened in California. It heavily favors southland, English-dominant Chicano theater and performance artists that the author has

seen, and those groups who because of their uniqueness and aggressive publicity demand to be written about.

The theatrical activity of Chicanas/os and U.S. Latinas/os can be examined in several different ways. I choose to explore the theater through its playwrights, performance artists, and comedians, rather than by *teatro*. By focusing on individuals, special recognition can be given to the emerging voices of Chicanas and Latinas, lesbians and gays, and a new generation of social commentators that are guiding the theater into the 21st century. The old vanguard represented by *Teatro Campesino* in San Juan Bautista, *Teatro de la Esperanza* in San Francisco, and other long-standing community *teatros*, such as 15-year-old *Teatro de los Pobres* in San Jose, have helped to maintain the health of the theater, as well as to reaffirm the spiritual and cultural values of the communities they arise from. The Bilingual Founda-

tion of the Arts in Los Angeles is celebrating 20 years of presenting international-level productions to both English- and Spanish-speaking audiences. By the persistent existence of these *teatros*, the door has been kept open a crack to provide some opportunities for theatrical Chicanas/os and Latinas/os to develop their craft.

One Angeleno playwright whose work has been especially supported by the *teatros* is 24-year-old Chicana feminist Josefina Lopez. *Teatro Campesino* in their first tour in 12 years, starting in Feb. 1992, chose to produce Lopez's autobiographical *Simply Maria, or the American Dream*, a play that reflects the struggle of many young people to reconcile the values of their immigrant parents with those values that they have adopted from dominant U.S. culture. *Simply Maria* was adequately directed by Luis Valdez's sister, Socorro Valdez, as part of a double bill (the play co-produced with it changed depending on the venue). The tour continues in 1993 with other women directors. *Simply Maria* is again teamed up with Evelina Fernandez's *How Else Am I Supposed to Know I'm Still Alive* (these two plays had a combined short engagement at the *teatro*, Jan. 28th-Feb. 7th, before going back on tour), both directed by Amy Gonzalez, and Luis Valdez's *Soldado raso* and *Balle de los gigantes*, directed by Rosa Maria Escalante. Meanwhile, Teatro de la Esperanza finished a

two-year tour (spring 1990-fall 1992) of Lopez's *Real Women Have Curves*, set in a cramped sewing factory with an all-women cast. "It was not a well-realized production," opined Chicano theater expert Jorge Huerta. He preferred the production mounted by the ASOLO Center for the Performing Arts in Sarasota, Florida, Sept. 26th-Oct. 25th. Esperanza's lead actress was annoyingly shrill, and Kate Boyd's set, in particular the pivotal restroom area, needed further clarification. In the TENAZ International Quincentennial Playwriting Competition, Lopez's work-in-progress *Unconquered Spirits*, which updates the legend of *La Llorona*, was the runner-up to *Cronica* by Enrique Buenaventura, snow white-haired leader of the internationally respected Colombian troupe *El Teatro Experimental de Cali*. *Unconquered Spirits* was given a quick reading by *Teatro del Valle* at the 16th TENAZ festival (Nov. 10th-15th) hosted by festival coordinator Jorge Piña and the landmark Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas.

San Francisco-resident Cherrie Moraga is another well-respected voice for Chicanas and, additionally (reinforced through her non-theatrical writings), for lesbians of color. Her work, *Heroes and Saints*, symbolically opened up the biennial TENAZ festival—a play by a Chicana lesbian directed by a Latina. Less than 15 years before it had been necessary for a group to

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form, called *Women in Teatro*, to agitate for Latina *teatrística* issues and needs, and their activities influenced TENAZ to include a women's seminar at its 10th festival (1979) and women's groups at its 11th festival (1981). *Heroes and Saints* was directed by Susana Tubert and performed by *Los Actores de San Antonio*, the Guadalupe's resident theater company, who had been performing *Heroes* the previous three weeks (Oct. 23-Nov. 7). *Los Actores* jumpstarted the play by rushing the dark stage with their flashlights, then scattering into the wings. Lights gradually came up on the beautiful, intelligent Cerezita, a mere head propped on a mobile lectern. (Pesticide poisoning had retarded the development of a body.) In a prison of a house, situated in a field of deformed grape vines sickeningly twisted into themselves, Cerezita's sexual feelings are stirred to a boiling point by a hovering town priest and she discovers purpose to her life as a community activist. Video monitors, positioned on either side of the stage, periodically ran footage of crop dusters dropping their deadly rain of pesticides. During one scene, a hooked-up video camera was used to frame the sincere actors live as activists protesting horrible living and working conditions. This heightened the documentary-like feel of the play. Indeed, as the protesters paraded up and down the theater aisles, they handed out fliers for Lorena

Parli's video *The Wrath of Grapes* (*No Grapes* is the updated version)—an actual documentary about a poisoned California town whose children paid the price (the United Farm Workers of America distributes the video for free).

Yet another major Chicana playwright is UCLA-based Edit Villarreal. *My Visits with MGM* (*My Grandmother Marta*) was consecutively produced by the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts (May 19-June 7, 1992); *Centro Su Teatro* in Denver, Colorado (May 27-June 27, 1992); San Jose Repertory Theatre (June 17-July 9, 1992); and Milwaukee Repertory Theatre (Sept. 19-Oct. 4, 1992)—an impressive track record for a play within a compressed time period. *MGM* is a sentimental journey into the past looking back at how one woman's grandmother affected her life choices as she grew up. *La Compañía de Teatro de Albuquerque* completed readings of two versions of *MGM* in March before staging it from April 30-May 9, 1993.

Chicano playwrights in California who have been produced this season include Octavio Solis, Roy Conboy, director Jose Cruz Gonzalez, performance artist Luis Alfaro, and University of California professor Carlos Morton. First, Octavio Solis's *Man of the Flesh*, featuring a contemporary Don Juan, was done by Planet Earth in Phoenix, Arizona, Oct. 30-Nov. 21, 1992, and by Latino Chicago Theater, Feb. 6-March 7,

1993. "A remounting of our most successful production," crowed Latino Chicago's season flier. *Man of the Flesh* had had a previous run at Latino Chicago in 1991. Also, Solis directed a well-received production of his newly revised play *Prospect*, performed at *Teatro Campesino*, April 2-18, and at University of California, Berkeley, April 22-25, 1993. It is not an easy play to watch with its characters caught in a stomach-turning earthly version of hell filled with smoke, drugs, garbage, disease, but Solis's artful direction with specific attention to the use of space, and the play's poetry and far-side humor, keep the audience in their seats. *Prospect* is another remounted production, having been directed by Tony Curiel in a 1991 workshop production for *Teatro Campesino*. This year, one fortunate result of Solis's investment in playwriting has been his commission with the Tony-award winning South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California, to create a Christmas musical with composer Marcos Loya that will draw Latino audiences to the theater.

Oct. 23-Nov. 8, 1992, *Teatro de la Esperanza* did a highly stylized, gender-bender version of Roy Conboy's cat-and-mouse *Dancing with the Missing*, directed by Roberto Gutierrez Varea, at San Francisco's Mission Cultural Center. It was this version that they packed with them to the TENAZ festival. Strong casting choices made the production a pleasure to

watch. At the festival, *critica* of the production: while Susana Tubert said "she did not get the story" and thought the tone of the production was affected, Colombian-born theater scholar Beatriz Rizk celebrated the play and said it was the first play she saw at the festival that could travel beyond the Latino community.

Marisol's Christmas, by Jose Cruz Gonzalez, found a place for itself at South Coast Repertory during the holidays, Dec. 12-20, 1992. South Coast Repertory is home to the annual Hispanic Playwrights Project, now in its eighth year, managed by Gonzalez. Gonzalez's *Harvest Moon*, directed by Jose Guadalupe Saucedo, also enjoyed a run at the American Southwest Theatre in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Feb. 10-21, 1993.

Out of the closet and going where no Chicano has gone before, Luis Alfaro premiered the full-length version of his sensual solo-performance work *Downtown*, directed by Tom Dennison, at the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco, Sept. 24-27, 1992, as part of the *Sole Mio III* Festival for individual performers. In the past several years, he has consciously woven questions about gender and sexuality into his material. *Deep in the Crotch of My Latino Psyche* is a show he did with Monica Palacios and Beto Araiza at Josie's Cabaret in San Francisco, Dec. 2-13, 1992. (Monica Palacios took her entertaining *Latin Lezbo Comic* to the *Centro Cultural de la Raza*

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in San Diego on Feb. 26-27, 1993.) Alfaro's *Bitter Homes and Gardens*, directed by Peter Cirino, was finally produced by Planet Earth Multi-Cultural Theatre (Jan. 8-Feb. 6, 1993). About an eccentric and severely dysfunctional family, *Bitter Homes* was showcased last summer at SCR's 7th annual Hispanic Playwrights Project and would have been produced by the Burbage Theatre in Los Angeles last November except that Alfaro cancelled the run at the last minute in order to work more on the script.

Miracle Theatre in Portland, Oregon, performed Carlos Morton's *The Miser of Mexico*, April 2-17, directed by Mel Fletcher. *The Many Deaths of Danny Rosales* was done at University of California, Santa Barbara, in March and April, directed by Paula Caballero, and was also produced by Teatro del Valle, May 7th-30th, directed by Trini Yanez Hale. Morton's newest play, *The Child Diego* (Diego Rivera), received readings in Hollywood; Portland, Oregon; Santa Barbara; and San Diego. *Diego* is still very much a work-in-progress. Morton's work is popular with student groups, which make the productions difficult to find out about unless one attends the college or university where a play is being presented.

All based in Los Angeles, three comedy troupes have continued to shake up things in the land of perpetual sunshine. They are

Culture Clash (Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas, Herbert Siguenza), Chicano Secret Service (Tomas Carrasco, Lalo Lopez, Elias Serna), and Latins Anonymous (Cris Franco, Luisa Leschin, Armando Molina, Diane Rodriguez). Culture Clash's latest show, *Culture Clash Unplugged* (Greatest Hits and New Works), sold out an extended run in Los Angeles. Chicano Secret Service is getting more artful about how their messages are conveyed, reflecting an emerging professional aesthetic. They continue to be very popular on the college circuit. Latins Anonymous is having a little bit of trouble with their new show, *La La La Awards*, a parody of awards shows with a running joke involving the award show's caterer and guests dying of food poisoning. *La La La* has its moments, but one leaves the theater feeling that Latins Anonymous has allowed itself to get sloppy with their writing and acting after the success of their last show. Hopefully, they will develop a show that uses to better advantage their collective knowledge and experience.

It is impossible to acknowledge all the productions that have been done in California or by Californians. As was pointed out earlier, information about upcoming productions can be difficult to obtain for a variety of reasons. Some individuals, who live in the Southwest but outside California, whose names and produced works should be quickly mentioned in

passing are: Terry Tafoya Earp and *Laura's House (Teatro del Valle)*, Rudolfo Anaya and *Matachines (Compañía de Teatro de Albuquerque)*, Alicia Mena and *Las nuevas tamaleras* (Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center), Ruby Nelda Perez and her one-woman show *Women's Work* (various locations), Belinda Acosta and her one-woman show *Machisma*, and media artist David Zamora Casas and his work-in-progress/multimedia performance piece

titled (try to say it in one breath) *One Hundred Love Letters, Confessions of a Douche Bag, The Reformation Through Education and Communication of a Chicano Sexist* (supported by Mexi-Arte and Diverse Works in Houston grants).

While this summary has not been exhaustive, it definitely does point to a great deal of activity by *teatristas* toward the continued support of Chicano and U.S. Latino culture and the arts.