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## New Ground in A Mexican Trilogy: An American Story

Chantal Rodriguez · Wednesday, September 7th, 2016

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The Latino Theater Company is not afraid to take artistic risks or to make a political statement. Rooted in the ideals and energy of the Chicano Theater Movement, the company has a long history of marrying art and activism. In celebration of their 30th anniversary as an ensemble, as well as their 10th year operating the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC), they are undertaking their most ambitious project to-date, the epic staging of Evelina Fernandez' *A Mexican Trilogy: An American Story*. This trilogy is made up of three plays – *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* which were staged individually in 2011 and 2012 at the LATC to critical acclaim. The trilogy went on to win the 2012 L.A. Drama Critics Circle's Ted Schmitt Award for a world premiere of an outstanding new play and was subsequently published in its entirety by Samuel French. But, why revive these works in 2016? Why stage all three in a six-hour format? What makes this production so epic aside from its length? The answer to all of these questions is at once political, personal and theatrical, much like the Latino Theater Company itself.

For many Latina/o communities whose stories and histories are often obscured, or ignored, the theater has long been one of the only places where histories can be revived, revised and shared in both celebration and painful remembrance. The Chicano Theater Movement of the 60's and 70's mobilized these aims, as it sought direct political action – emboldening the UFW strikes, and called for social change in many areas, while also reaffirming the beauty of Chicano identities and unearthing its untold histories.

This is tried and true territory for the Latino Theater Company as well. A few weeks ago, many people commemorated the 46th anniversary of the Chicano Moratorium on August 29th, 1970, the largest anti-Vietnam War demonstration by any minority group in the United States, during which Ruben Salazar, beloved journalist and activist, was killed. The Latino Theater Company dramatized this event in their landmark play *August 29th* in 1990 at the LATC. Twenty years later, in 2010, the company staged the 25th anniversary revival of the first play they ever presented at the LATC in 1987 – *La Victima*, written by El Teatro de la Esperanza in 1976. The play explores the cyclical history of immigrant scapegoating after periods of unrest in the United States and its effect on a family who is separated during the Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s and is reunited years later with devastating consequences. Another example of their aesthetic approach to theater, memory, and history is the company's annual production of *La Virgen de Guadalupe, Dios Inantzin*, a pageant play with a cast of over 100 community members, which stages the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to the peasant Juan Diego on the hills of Tepeyac in the 16th century. Presented free of charge for the past 13 years, and staged within the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, this bilingual production not only honors and celebrates the indigenous elements of Mexican

culture, it also bears witness to the cruelty of the Conquest and ultimately celebrates the dynamic mixture of cultures and experiences that have shaped both Mexico and the United States.

Given their artistic trajectory, it is no surprise that the roots of *A Mexican Trilogy: An American Story* are also personal and political. As a second-generation Mexican-American, Fernandez wanted to directly address and dispel the idea that Mexican-Americans were somehow not really American. Throughout her childhood, three historical figures – Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Pope John Paul II – held a sacred place on the wall of her grandparent's East Los Angeles home. Each of these figures anchors one of the plays in the trilogy; and as the members of the Morales family experience major events in U.S. history like WWII and the Cuban-Missile Crisis, they also boldly chase their dreams, fall in love, experience heartbreak and navigate the duality of being Mexican-American.

But why ask audiences to commit to a 6-hour epic experience complete with a dinner break in order to experience *A Mexican Trilogy* in full? In the era of 140-character tweets and ephemeral snapchats, it seems almost revolutionary to physically sit in a room together for a few hours and experience 100 years of one family's history. Theatrically, it also allows for history's permutations to reveal themselves as we follow multiple generations of the family. This staging is also a testament to the Latino Theater Company's desire to create community. While audiences do have the option of watching the trilogy over two nights, the full 6-hour experience includes a meal break during which audiences and artists share a meal together in the LATC's gorgeous and historic grand lobby. When a production aims to create moments of identification, empathy and understanding among the audience, what better way to let those ideas marinate and evolve than over a delicious meal in a beautiful space?

Still, for many, the idea of dedicating an entire afternoon and evening to the theater can seem daunting. So-called durational theater is certainly not new, but for many it belongs to the realm of "theater people" and is surely not for the weak of heart, or the fidgety for that matter. But as evidenced by the success of Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz*, a seven-hour long performance of a reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in its entirety, or The Hypocrites' *All Our Tragic*, a twelve-hour production which combined all 32 Greek tragedies into a single epic narrative that spans 75 years, people are willing to go on marathon journeys with artists when the material compels them. For the Latino Theater Company, *A Mexican Trilogy* falls within the same vein as productions of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle*, both landmark productions at the Mark Taper Forum under the Artistic Direction of Gordon Davidson.

The Latino Theater Company knows that the Latina/o community is hungry to see itself on stage, with a complex humanity that doesn't reduce them to stereotypes or vitriolic political talking points. Not since the Mark Taper Forum's 1994 production of Eduardo Machado's *Floating Islands* however, has a series of Latina/o plays been collectively staged in this way. *A Mexican Trilogy* bears several similarities to Machado's *Islands*: both were inspired by old family photos and are loosely based on the playwrights' family history of migration to the United States; though *A Mexican Trilogy* takes place entirely in the United States over the course of 100 years, while *Floating Islands* begins in Cuba and follows the family's journey to the U.S. fifty years later.

In a recent article entitled "What makes a Latino Play" Dr. Brian Herrera suggests that "The making of a Latino play is about coming out of (and entering into) a distinctively American tradition of playmaking that uses theater as an expressive vocabulary for responding to the world, that explores dramatic form as a way to stage an experiential encounter, and that addresses Latinos as valued members of the work's presumed audience." I wholeheartedly agree with Herrera here, and feel this is very true for *A Mexican Trilogy: An American Story*.

In a Brechtian sense, a favorite approach of director José Luis Valenzuela, *A Mexican Trilogy*

works against dominant narratives about Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans as it dramatizes social and political turbulence in the U.S. over the last 100 years through the prism of an American family and calls upon the audience to bear witness to their political, emotional, intellectual and spiritual lives. Additionally, the play tactfully employs the music of each era not simply as a historical touchstone for audiences, but more so as a way to illuminate the emotional realities of the characters, their relationship to music and culture, and the generation gap that so many families experience over time.

Another noteworthy element in many of Fernandez' plays, but especially in this trilogy is the focus on women as the holders of memory and ancestry. Echoes of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* fill the space when the character of Esperanza/Nana is present and the human and spiritual realm coexist on stage. Reminiscent of Wilson's Aunt Ester, the character of Esperanza is the keeper of tradition and her family's history. By the third part of the trilogy, she is over 100 years old and refuses to die until she can remember and pass down the words of the indigenous ancestors to the next generation. Women's issues also play a key role in the conflicts that arise throughout all three plays, and there is no shortage of complex female characters on stage. Fernandez also takes aim at constructed notions of femininity and masculinity dramatizing their impact on the characters as they are passed down or defied over time.

In his landmark 1989 anthology *Necessary Theatre*, Chicano Theater scholar Dr. Jorge Huerta declared, "If art is essential, then Chicano theater has been more than essential, it has been a vital proclamation of the Chicano's identity, their very existence, within the broader context of North American society...Chicano theater has been a necessary theater." For some, the idea of an epic piece of theater like *A Mexican Trilogy: An American Story* may not seem "necessary;" for others it is a vital reaffirmation of their own American stories. I for one, am confident that it will be a breathtaking and theatrically transformative experience, and truth be told when you have a chance to break bread with the Latino Theater Company, it's an opportunity you shouldn't pass up!

***A Mexican Trilogy: An American Story plays at the Los Angeles Theatre Center September 8-October 9, 2017. Information and tickets here.***

*Image: Faith, Part I of A Mexican Trilogy (2013 production). From Left, Esperanza America, Olivia Delgado, Alexis de la Rocha. Photo by Ed Krieger*

*References:*

Herrera, Brian. [heremccarter.org/bathinginmoonlight/3-explore/whatmakesalatinoplay.html](http://heremccarter.org/bathinginmoonlight/3-explore/whatmakesalatinoplay.html)" target="\_blank">"What Makes a Latino Play" 1 September, 2016.

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