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Chicano Theater and Luis Valdez's Mitos

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Spanish language theatre has a long history in the New World as Elizabeth C. Ramírez points out: "When the conquistadores arrived in New Spain they also brought their interest in dramatic literature" (Ramírez xvii). Through theatrical performances the conquistadors relived and demonstrated to the local indigenous populations past victories of the Spanish Empire thus asserting their military power. They also showed interest in the narratives relating the lives of the Saints taken from both historical and biblical sources. They used these narratives for socializing and evangelizing the Native American populations. The missionary priests incorporated theatre as an excellent vehicle through which Catholic doctrine could be taught to the peoples around them (i.e. the indigenous communities). This instructive ideology was used through the enactment and performance of passages from the Bible, and the tradition of using theatre for cultural and religious purposes later formed an important part of Chicano theater.

Early Spanish religious and medieval dramatic performances called *autos*[1], or dramatic plays, were amateur performances enacted for and by the community. "Clearly, an integration of both Indian and Spanish traditions is evident in religious performative activity…" (Ramírez 8). These early religious plays were the foundational works highly instrumental in the development of the *teatro* tradition in Mexican American communities in the Southwestern region of the United States; an area comprised of what today are the states of Texas, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, New Mexico and Colorado. In addition to the *autos*, secular plays also appeared in the Southwest at the very beginning of the 19th century. These were mainly historical plays reflecting the exploits of the Spanish conquerors over the communities in the Southwest such as *Los Comanches*.

However, after the United States annexed the Southwestern territories in 1848 the Spanish speaking population became isolated from both Mexico and Anglo American societies and this helped produce a "social and cultural" distinctiveness (Carey 63). Since then, the Mexican population in the United States has developed as a distinct regional community and has cultivated its own customs and traditions. Under such circumstances they have tried to manifest their distinctive culture and folklore through artistic production. Theatrical performance was one venue through which this could be achieved. Other venues include wood carving, painting, music, story telling, architecture, food, and so forth. "The development of culture is nowhere clearer than in their theatrical history" (Brokaw: *Mexican-American Theatre*, 338). Performances in this period reflected the religious and ethical norms of Mexican Americans and thus served to record the folk and common beliefs systems

of this community. It is, in fact, their rich cultural traditions that make Chicano theater attractive to theatre historians and literary scholars today.

Touring theatre companies from Mexico were another important factor in the development of Chicano theater. The Spanish-language acting troupes that came from Mexico, aided in the construction of a rich theatrical tradition by bringing classical Spanish theatre dramas to the Southwest. These troupes served as cultural bridges between Mexico and the U.S. as immigration laws were not strictly enforced until 1917. "Professional Mexican theatre companies touring in northern Mexico prior to its ceding to the United States had become resident companies in Los Angeles and San Francisco as early as the 1860s, and by the turn of the twentieth century, touring from Mexico and Spain had been established along the border" (Ramírez 9). Although their main goal was entertainment, these troupes brought a wide range of ideas and values from European cultures. They also exposed the theater audiences to more secular and sophisticated drama and in this manner raised the aesthetic quality of the plays. La Campania Dramatica de Hernandez Villalongin[2] (1849-1924) is reported to be the longest lived of all these troupes, which included representative plays of European theatre from Spain, Germany, France, England, and other countries in its repertoire. The Villalongín family troupe performed plays as a resident company in San Antonio under the name of La Campanía de Carlos Villalongín from the early years of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 until the Great Depression in the 1930s.

The close relationship between Mexican and Mexican American[3] theaters was diminished due to the Mexican Revolution of 1910 which "forced large numbers of Mexicans to flee their homes for refuge in the United States" (Brokaw: *Mexican American Drama*, 247). Nevertheless, several acting companies emigrated to the Southwest and continued the theater tradition. In spite of being Mexican in nature, these Mexican theater companies turned to local themes (devotion to God's will, heroic incidents from mythology, sentimental narratives of strong family ties and so forth). The actors and writers soon became adjusted to Mexican American culture. Another important reason for the disconnection extant between Mexican and Mexican American theatre was the economic downturn in the years of the Great Depression.[4] Mexican American theatre went into decline in the 1930s—1960s decades. Nevertheless, Mexican culture continued to influence Mexican American communities through motion pictures, radio and T.V. programs and vaudeville performances imported from Mexico up to the present.

Mexican American theatre experienced a remarkable event in 1965 with the farm workers' strikes (*la huelga*) and unionization movement led by their leader César Chávez in Delano, California. It was Luis Valdez, the pioneer of the *teatro* Chicano with his theater group called Teatro Campesino who actively supported Chávez via theatrical productions. These one-act productions were called *actos*[5] and depicted the strikes of the farm workers (campesinos); the blatant discrimination practiced by Anglo[6] Americans against Chicanos/as and issued a call for social action. The repertory of the Teatro Campesino consisted mainly of *actos* in the first few years. "During the first years of his career, Valdez was at pains to set his actos

in a political, rather than an aesthetic context" (Brokaw: *Mexican-American Drama*, 250). The purpose of these performances was similar to those of the agitation propaganda (agit-prop) plays of the 1930's in the U.S. "Chicano theatre originated in the works of Luis Valdez and a few of his friends, who attracted by the events at Delano, brought guerilla theatre to the picket lines and base camps during the strike" (Brokaw: *Mexican-American Theatre*, 346). In this theatre, i.e. El Teatro Campesino (The Farm Workers' Theatre), the actors were strikers (*huelgistas*), farm workers (campesinos) and students. "The effect of the early actos on the huelgistas de Delano packed into Filipino Hall was immediate, intense, and cathartic" (Valdez, *Luis Valdez--Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensamiento Serpentino*, 12).

After the success of the *actos* in El Teatro Campesino, Valdez transferred his performing group from Delano to a cultural center in San Juan Bautista, California where he developed his plays. In California, the impact of the *actos* became so important and useful that they began to be utilized by other *teatros* such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, in which Valdez himself worked for a year before founding El Teatro Campesino, Bread and Puppet Theatre and numerous amateur theatre groups in the Southwest. "Modeled on Campesino, they used Valdez' *actos*, improvised on themes of local importance, and gave voice to numerous grievances they had concerning injustice, discrimination, and exploitation by American society in general" (Brokaw: *Mexican-American Drama*, 249). El Teatro Campesino supported these troupes with sources, scenarios and other theatrical materials.

Valdez has tried to fight against the negative treatment given the Mexican American community in the United States throughout his career via his theatrical works. Although in the beginning the goal of Valdez' *actos* was mainly political and was used as a means to encourage people to join the strikes, later the *actos* developed into vehicles directed at social change. Inscribed in them were messages against the discrimination and the injustices Anglo American society inflicted upon Mexican Americans. In his *actos* Valdez also advocated for equal rights for Mexican Americans. He articulated this uncompromising position in the 1971, in an anthology of Chicano drama, *Actos: El Teatro Campesino*[7] which consisted of nine different *actos* written between 1965 and 1971. In this anthology he also discusses his experiments with a new type of drama which reflects a more refined and aesthetic quality than agit-prop form of *actos*. Compared to the *actos* this new type of drama necessitates more developed artistic skills such as trained performers, professional actors, and elaborate stage designs. "Not a teatro composed of actos or agit-prop but a teatro of ritual, of music, of beauty and spiritual sensitivity (Valdez, *Luis Valdez--Early Works: Actos, Bernabaé and Pensamiento Serpentino*, 9). In the early 1970's, in search of a theatre which would challenge negative attitudes towards Mexican Americans and send a message of social importance to the community through theater, Valdez gets inspiration from history, religion and rich indigenous culture although he continues to inscribe political messages in his new dramatic performances.

Valdez connects the accumulated expertise of the Chicano theater; religious belief systems, Christian doctrine, folk memory and the popular oral traditions of

the Mexican American community (as reflected in *autos*), traditional ballads, (*corridos*)[8], and his political views such as the previous themes first seen in the Teatro Campesino, (as represented in *actos*) towards the production of his new type of drama. A critical distinction between *autos* and *actos*, however, should be made clear at this point. Whereas the former "concentrated upon the normative values shared by the whole community", (Brokaw: *Mexican-American Theatre*, 348) and religious values, the latter sometimes startled and challenged fatalistic views such as absolute devotion to God's will, and even questioned the mores of the community, such as the devotion to strong family ties. Valdez's works intended to replace these views with the collective will of the community. The tensions in value systems may stem from the necessities of the community extant in the second half of the 20th century, such as the need to stimulate a lively social movement to improve the economic position of the community, and the need for collective action to strengthen the voice of Mexican Americans in the face of serious problems of poverty, unjust treatment, and discriminatory practices. Most importantly, there was a need to raise Mexican American political consciousness vis-à-vis their position in the political and economic structures of the U.S. society. The most striking example to such tensions is to be found in one of Valdez's early *actos*: *Las dos Caras del Patroncito* (*The Two Faces of the Boss*) in which loyalty to family and responsibility to the community are shown to be in contradiction with each other. Those who continued working during the strike for the sake of their families (the most respected institution among Mexican Americans) are denigrated as sellouts (*vendidos*) and betrayers of the community in the play. What *autos* and *actos* have in common, on the other hand, is that both are amateur productions, depend on improvisation to develop much of their action, and are more concerned with rhetorical effect than poetics or aesthetics which Valdez's new experiment was striving to achieve.

Valdez, in creating the new theatrical performances which he called *mitos*, took the original form of *actos* and impregnated them with history and mythology (Aztec and Mayan roots), Pre-Columbian philosophy, folk beliefs, traditional music and *corridos* (ballads). He gathered all these styles and blended them into contemporary situations in order to create his new type of drama--the *mito*, defined as "a mythical depiction of Mexican Americans' past, present and future as seen in a microcosm of a play" (Brokaw: *Mexican-American Drama*, 251). The first Valdezian attempt to create a *mito* is in his play *Dark Root of a Scream* (1967) which depicts the catastrophic consequences of the Vietnam war. It depicts the dead body of a young Chicano soldier, Quetzalcoatl nicknamed Indio, who is killed in the war and his lifeless body is brought home and lies in a coffin while family and friends attend his wake. The audience is informed of his past life through the stories told by his family, his mother and his girlfriend Dalia, and his friends standing on a street corner. Indio's tragic sacrificial death links him to the mythical figure of Quetzalcoatl,[9] and the bleeding, beating heart in the coffin provides the connection to the indigenous philosophy of the cyclical nature of life. This constitutes the mythical side of the play. The resemblance of Indio's friends on the street corner to their own

nicknames, such as Gato, who is cat-like, the reptilian features of Lizard and the rabbit appearance of Conejo, also constitutes another level of reality. The audience not only learns about Indio's life through conversations at home, and on the street corner through the street youths (*vatos*) but they also find themselves transported to the higher world of myth when blood starts to drip from his coffin. The play ends as Lizard rises Indio's beating heart from out of the coffin and shows it shining as if glowing in the sunset.

The *mito*, *Dark Root of a Scream*, can be seen as both: myth (on spiritual level), and reality (sets up material level), and the ending is liable to provoke confusion in the mind of contemporary audiences. But it is also the ending of the play that provides the mythical reference whereby we are led to understand Indio/Quetzalcoatl is not dead at the spiritual level, and that he will rise up just like the sun rises up each morning and will protect his community from "darkness". Thus death (in Aztec and Mayan mythology) produces new life in the universal circle of birth, growth, death and rebirth common to all living creatures. On the material level, however, the young soldier Indio is "a sacrificial victim of late Capitalism and what was called the military-industrial complex in the1960's" (Huerta 39). By blending indigenous culture and his political stance in contemporary situations, Valdez accomplishes several goals in his *mito*: He teaches his audience about Mesoamerican indigenous mythical figures, criticizes American policies related to the Vietnam War, and also warns his audience regarding the injustices and uselessness of war in general. The play seems to be a dramatized lecture and as Jorge Huerta notes, "signals the beginning of Valdez's fascination with Aztec and Maya mythical iconography re-configured within a contemporary Mechicano setting" (40).

Following the success of *Dark Root of a Scream* in 1967, Valdez decides to veer El Teatro Campesino toward an increased focus on artistic and aesthetic demands of the theatre, and performs his plays to a larger audience above the farm workers' union. The Teatro won "Obie" Award-the highest honor granted by Off-Broadway Theatre-the following year, and Valdez, in collaboration with his Teatro, produced *Bernabé*, which is generally held to be his second *mito*, in 1970. In the stage directions included in the play, we, as audience, are introduced to a world that is blend of myth and reality:

> "…Bernabé (is) a mentally-retarded farm worker in his early thirties touched with cosmic madness. The world of man he inhabits judges him insane but harmless – a source of amusement and easy stoop labor. In his own world, however – a world of profoundly elemental perceptions – he is a human being living in direct relationship to earth, moon, sun, and stars. The set, then; is necessarily abstract – a design that blends myth and reality…" (Valdez, *Luis Valdez--Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensamiento Serpentino*, 134-5).

In the story of this one act play, Bernabé meets the Moon (La Luna, portrayed as a zoot suiter who resembles El Pachuco in Valdez's most famous play *Zoot Suit*)

who introduces him to his sister, the Mother Earth (La Tierra, also presented as one of the women warriors who supported the troops during the Mexican Revolution of 1910), and Bernabé falls in love with her. When her father, the Sun (El Sol), accepts the proposition, Bernabé and Mother Earth unite. In the final scene Bernabé is found dead in a hole in the ground, his relatives retrieve his dead body. On the spiritual level, however, his dream comes true and he reaches his goal by marrying the Mother Earth or Death. *Bernabé*, similarly to the *mito Dark Root of a Scream*, incorporates symbolically the meaning of rebirth[10]. Valdez tries to give his audience a message about the relationship between Chicana/Chicanos and nature or Chicana/Chicanos as being close and even part of the nature. The people around Bernabé laugh at his love for the Mother Earth and consider him crazy throughout the play. By doing so, Valdez is arguably providing another dramatized lecture to his audience about the close connection between nature and his ancestral community in the past, while also criticizing the loss of harmony between man and nature and the loss of simplicity among Chicanos as he sees in the 1970's. He reminds his audience of their past and confronts them with a double message both of how Bernabé as a wise character, symbolically represents his ancestors who love and respect the earth, and how they, as an audience, are implicated in the problems of a contemporary society alienated from nature.

In 1971 Valdez moved his troupe to San Juan Bautista, California, where the Teatro established itself as a resident company. There Valdez experimented with the possibilities suggested by the use of musical forms (mainly based on traditional *corridos*, or ballads, which drew on song and dance) on the stage. The company produced several plays including Valdez's *Soldado Razo* (1970, Buck Private) which resembles *Dark Root of a Scream* in subject matter, and is characterized by a distinctly Brechtian epic style; *La gran carpa de los Rasquachis* (1973, The Great Tent of Underdogs), the style of which involves "combined elements of the *acto*, *mito* and *corrido* with an almost constant musical background" (Huerta: Introduction to *ZOOT SUIT and Other Plays* 10), and *El Baile de los Gigantes* (1974, Dance of the Giants), a ritualistic dance drama (Pre-Columbian rituals). Of these three performances, *El Baile de los Gigantes* deserves a special note here because;

> "Perhaps the most symbolic and non-western piece performed by the Teatro Campesino was *El Baile de los Gigantes* ("Dance of the Giants"), which was first presented publicly in 1974 at the inauguration of the TENAZ "*Quinto Festival de los Teatros Chicanos: Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano*" ["Fifth Chicano Theatre Festival: First Latin American Encounter"], at the pyramids of Teotihuacan outside of Mexico city" (Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth*, 42).

Valdez was actively engaged in workshops and performances, writing poems, scenarios and directing plays until he moved on to his great experiment in drama with his Broadway musical play, *Zoot Suit* in 1978. *Zoot Suit* was co-produced by El Teatro Campesino and the Centre Theatre Group of Los Angeles in 1978 in Mark Taper Forum and after breaking all previous box office records in Los Angeles it

moved to a larger Theatre (Aquarius) in Hollywood, still attracting large audiences. Finally the play was transferred to Winter Garden Palace on Broadway on March 25, 1979.

Zoot Suit is a blend of *auto*, *acto*, *mito* and *corrido* which combines dance and music with a strong and sensitive dialogue in the depiction of an actual historical event which took place in Los Angeles, California in 1942 and yet which is shown also to be of contemporary importance since the injustices exposed in the play still continue to haunt Chicano-Anglo relations in the United States in one way or another. The play incorporates traditional elements of Spanish morality plays (*autos*), in Pachuco's (Zoot Suit wearer) cynical advices and diabolic behaviors to Henry in jail, and aspects of political *actos*, in representation of the injustices of the system together with a representation of the innocence and at the same time defiance of the *pachucos* against the unjust judicial system. It incorporates the *mito*, with indigenous images of Aztec mythology, and the *corrido* with the setting and portrayal of events through music, ballads, songs and dances. In addition to these aspects, Valdez also makes occasional use of newspapers as an icon and symbol of mass media's racism toward the Chicano population. For example, the setting is described in the Prologue as: "The giant facsimile of a newspaper serves as a drop curtain. The huge masthead reads: LOS ANGELES HERALD EXPRESS Thursday, June 3, 1943" (Valdez, *Zoot Suit* 24). The newspaper icon is used in various scenes and veers the play closer to the form and structure of documentary drama (the Living Newspaper style). The play also serves flashback technique to describe the past, backgrounds of the characters, and employs a narrator or a commentator to create a sense of direct contact with the audience.

The *Zoot Suit* narrative revolves around the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial involving the brutal beating of several Mexican American youths at a ranch due to an error in identification. The play starts with a Prologue; El Pachuco speaks both as a commentator and an actor throughout the play. The first scene opens with the Chicano/Chicana youths; members of the 38th Street gang led by Henry Reyna in their characteristic outfits (famous clothes)-zoot suit- performing a typical barrio dance while El Pachuco sings in a mixture of English and Spanish. Another group, the Downey gang with their leader Rafas enters the stage and their faster dance steps represent a challenge to the 38th Street gang. As soon as the two leaders face off, the police rounds them up and brutally arrest almost all the members of the 38th Street gang, mainly because of their long hair and zoot suits they are wearing. The police convict Henry Reyna and his twenty-two friends of the murder of José Williams, a Chicano kid killed at the party taking place on the night of August 1, 1942. "And all the rest has been circumstantial evidence, hearsay and war hysteria" (Valdez, *Zoot Suit* 62).

The police, specifically Lieutenant Sam Edwards and Sergeant Smith, proclaim the existence of a "Mexican Crime wave", and the press announces Mexican boy gangs operating in Los Angeles. By exaggerating everything about these boys the press whips up racist sentiments in the Los Angles Anglo American population. Later in the play we learn more details about Henry Reyna, his family and his past

life through his dialogue with El Pachuco and through successful flashback techniques. The more we learn about Henry and his friends, the more we feel sympathy for "the criminals", and more importantly for Mexican Americans and their way of life. Henry and his friends first convince George Shearer, the People's Lawyer, and Alice Bloomfield, a reporter from the *Daily People's World* (in Act One: part 6-8-in which the audience is also convinced of their innocence), although they are found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment by an Anglo judge, Charles. It is apparent that justice was not meted out and that what transpired was more of a mockery of justice in the racist judge's court (Act One: parts 9-11).

The racist ideology of the Anglo American authority toward Chicanos is demonstrated through the negativity expressed against the youths wearing zoot suits and against the cultural traditions of Mexican Americans. The representatives of Anglo authority set about shredding not just the material clothes of the boys, of course, but the ideological resistance that is symbolized by the wearing of zoot suit. The prejudicial ideology of zoot suit in appearance, tradition of Mexican Americans in reality is to be 'annihilated'; "tear it, strip and kill" (Valdez, *Zoot Suit* 80) as the Press and Servicemen do to Pachuco's zoot suit just as the riots begin all over the country:

> El Pachuco is overpowered and stripped as Henry watches helplessly from his position. The PRESS and SERVICEMEN exit with pieces of EL PACHUCO's zoot suit. EL PACHUCO stands. The only item of clothing on his body is a small loincloth. HE turns and looks at HENRY, with mystic intensity. HE opens his arms as an Aztec conch blows, and HE slowly exits backward with powerful calm into the shadows. Silence. HENRY comes downstage. HE absorbs the impact of what HE has seen and falls to his knees at center stage, spent and exhausted (Valdez, *Zoot Suit* 81).

This is both the turning point and an image that provides a condensed summary of the play. It is a turning point, in a sense, because it triggers the series of riots, and the efforts of militant activists convince a higher court of the innocence of Henry and his friends. They are subsequently set free. It also sums up the play in that it implies the secret and sacred overpowers of EL PACHUCO in person, *pachucos/pachucas* in essence. Thus, Henry as well as the audience understands that the source of power comes from the ancient indigenous *mitos*; from an indigenous past through which the playwright articulates his message directly to his people, and from which the play mystically produces a sense of mythical insight to the audience.

In his next play, *BANDIDO! The American Melodrama of Tiburcio Vásquez, Notorious California Bandit*[11], Valdez turns to the myth of the Old West, an American mythology consisting of part fact and part fiction. The historical facts of the play include the representations related to the history of the Old West with its ethnic groups and the original inhabitants (Native Americans) with their social values and ethical norms. This is done in a manner contrary to stereotypical Hollywood productions. Factual data of "what Americans called the Old West occupied a vast

landscape which was once half the national territory of Mexico, and before that, open Indian land" (Valdez, Introduction to *Bandido! An Anti-Melodrama*, 97). Following the U.S. War with Mexico, Westward movement and The Gold Rush in California, the West became the stage of those "lucky and disappointed lives", or rather a stage for the unfolding of melodramas involving people of every race as well as bandits, desperados, cowboys and so forth. This cliché fictional view of western conquest was sold to the world as an American mythology; indeed, the cliché while it may have lost its power at the beginning of the 21st century was still alive in the minds of larger audiences. *Bandido!* is a Valdezian attempt of rewriting this history as he himself sees it, "the latest revision of the History of the Old West" (Valdez, Introduction to *Bandido! An Anti-Melodrama* 98).

Bandido! is a blend of *acto* (with its didacticism), *mito* (the myth of Old West), *corrido* (with its songs and dances), and a melodrama (a play within a play). It is an *acto* as it examines and reflects in historical terms the alternative perspective on the old West as "…a little pueblo by the bay" (Valdez *Bandido!* 103). The play represents a stark contrast with the stereotypical view of Indians and Mexican Americans received from stories, dramas and newspaper accounts, and through wild-west shows with the predictable assortment of bandidos, gringos, frontiers people, cowboy battles, shootings, etc., preferred by Hollywood producers (Impresario's depiction in the play) and the Anglo mythologizing process, the standard representation of "Hotels, restaurants, theaters, saloon--a delicate swamp of carnal delights" (103). By so doing, Valdez questions reality relying on Impresario's and his way of look. In fact, the author includes these "given" stereotypes in his story to remind his audience of Hollywood's penchant for distorting and romanticizing Mexican Americans (hidden satiric nature of the play). Theatrically he succeeds in producing a subtle satirical revision of the received and his own version of mythology through the use of rich musical introductions and dances that recast the story as corrido, through the reflection of the multiple perceptions of the characters, and through the deployment of setting and stage design:

> "The Courthouse Jail and The American Melodrama Stage. The design of the set must support a play within a play. Downstage, in the foreground, we see the flat realistic interior of a tall brick jailhouse, lit with gas lamps. The realistic framework of the jail, featuring TIBURCIO's cell downstage, and an area up left separated from the rear corridor by a wall of bars, serves as the infrastructure for the gilded melodrama stage into which it transforms. The action of the play thus alternates from the jail to the stage… Their combined reality must be a metaphor-and not a facile cliché—of the Old West" (Valdez, *Bandido!,* 100-1)

The setting of the play well serves the theme of the play, and helps the audience observing characters from different view points since they act realistically in the jail scenes and stereotypes in melodramatic scenes, two versions of the story.

Bandido! is the story of Tiburcio Vásquez, a California bandit who "was the last man to be legally and publically executed in California; hanged in San Jose in 1875"

(Valdez, Introduction to *Bandido!*, 97). Vásquez is portrayed through the lens of a multiplicity of viewpoints in the play; one may find him a sympathetic character as a chicano, heroic as legendary icon, stereotypical as bandido, depending on the perspective one assumes. More importantly, however, he is portrayed as an Everyman who is forced to become a bandido by the inequities suffered in life, injustices and misperceptions suffered by living in a prejudicial environment. "Valdez knows that nobody can change the inequities of the past but offers the suggestion that the future can be altered for the better, if misrepresentations of the Chicano are altered" (Huerta, Introduction to *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*, 17). The same message is present in both *Zoot Suit* and *Bandido!*. It seems that Valdez has devoted himself to this task of challenging the prejudices of American society towards his community on the one hand, and to that of teaching his community what it means to be a Chicana/o, both historically and in contemporary America on the other. This he attempts to do while avoiding pessimism. By combining *mitos* with the history of the last 100 years, Valdez's intention is probably to indicate that there have always been heroes within the chicana/o community who have struggled against the forces of oppression. Thus the hero in the play is, in Huerta's interpretation, "a mytico-historical precursor of today's Chicanas and Chicanos" (*Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth* 31). This might be perceived as an optimistic point of view; this optimism is continued in the next play, *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* (1986).[12]

"*I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* is unique in the development of Chicano dramaturgy since it is 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" (Huerta, *Chicano Drama* 31). The story revolves around a seventeen-year-old: a brilliant, handsome, "one in a million" Chicano, Sonny Villa, an honor student who is attending Harvard Law School. His parents Buddy and Connie Villa[13] are actor and actress, playing silent bit parts as Hollywood extras or as Buddy puts it, "I am the Silent Bit King and you're my Queen! No more, no less" (165). Although they cannot go beyond "the Silent Bit King and Queen" of Hollywood extras, they manage to have a comfortable life for themselves and their two children (making reference to their "children's future"); their daughter Lucy is a medical doctor and Sonny has high potential to become a Harvard graduate Judge or a Lawyer. Yet, Sonny drops out of Harvard, and comes home "to follow his own destiny," to prove to himself and have a successful career as to "become a newest superstar in Hollywood". The other part of the reason of his return from Harvard, however, as he himself declares to his Japanese girlfriend, Anita Sakai, from Brooklyn, is to "…vindicate the silence of his folks, his roots and heritage" (183).

Sonny, in fact, as an intelligent and promising young person, is in search of an identity not only for himself, but which would encompass also his roots and heritage. His destination in Hollywood is meaningful, here, since it is the most symbolic place which presents Chicana/os, Latina/os with stereotypical images to the larger society. Thus, his "high ambitions go beyond the marginal and often

silent roles his parents have performed" (Tekinay 193-4). He well knows, however, that he cannot achieve his goals within this environment (i.e. Hollywood) where he can only be expected to perform as a street punk, playing in bit parts as a thief, "with rape in mind". So, he dresses as a "cholo" (a street punk) for the first step, and plans to rob a fast food place in order to attract the attention of Hollywood only capable of perceiving him in these terms. Chased by the police, he finds refuge at home and threatens his parents and his girlfriend with suicidal irony. The whole stage is transformed into a television studio at this point and the audience is confused as to whether they have been watching a play or a sit-com (situation comedy).

The sense of the author's note that "the entire set sits within the confines of a TV studio…to a live studio audience at a taping" (157) before the play begins, and the question, "Is it real or is it Memorex" at the beginning of the play, is reflected and reinforced by the ending of the play. The Director interrupts the ending in the Epilogue and announces to "live studio audience in the taping of this show" (210) the happy ending in which Sonny decides to return back to Harvard to finish his education. At the end of the play, Sonny and Anita travel to New York by a spaceship that is described as "the Flying Saucer sombrero" designed by "Aztechnology, Mayan Solar Lord stuff" (213). Thus, the play, like *Zoot Suit* and *Bandido* offers a view of multiple levels of reality without resolution that would produce a distinct ending, and in this lack of neat resolution it might be seen as a reflection of life: "Chicano theatre, then, is first a reaffirmation of LIFE" (Valdez, *Luis Valdez--Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensamiento Serpentino*, 6).

In *Badges!* Valdez sums up his previous experiences in theatre, his dissatisfaction with Hollywood and his sense and observations of his community as a neglected part of American society. He criticizes Hollywood's prejudicial ideology which is detrimental to Chicano/as since it is very discriminatory against people of color, and its primary concern for "decent ratings", above all else. By means of Sonny's story, Valdez implies that it is more difficult to abolish prejudices than it is to rise to the top of the society in the United States. The difficulty of concealing the label of marginalized "other" is at the core of the problem in the play. When Anita tells Sonny, "it is time to grow up", she also delivers Valdez's message, "we are all human" (208), the message that we should all "grow up" and comprehend that we are all human-beings.

On the surface, Valdez questions what happens when a young Chicano with potential sets out to have a career in Hollywood. The broader context of the question, however, is what a Chicano in this society is, a matter of question he continuously asks in his plays. Sonny Villa, then, struggles to find out where he belongs, as a Chicano with all his potential, and what his role is in the larger society, in this respect. Sonny tries to find an answer to these questions in Hollywood like his creator, Luis Valdez, who actually, achieved the dream of such a trial.

Born in Delano, California, in 1940, the son of immigrant farm worker parents, and the second in a family of ten children, although he was not as privileged as his

character Sonny Villa, young Luis Miguel Valdez, has managed to do well in school, is majored in English with a special emphasis on playwrighting, at San Jose State College where he later produced his first full length play, drawing on the *mito* (myth) form, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1964).

> "Valdez has gone from the fields of Delano to the migrant labor of a theater artist, to the even more complex world of Broadway and Hollywood. But he has never forgotten his roots, has never abandoned the beauty of his languages, both Inglés and Spanish. Nor has he forgotten about his people's troubles and triumphs" (Huerta, Introduction to *Zoot Suit and Other Plays* 20).

As we have seen, in his drama Valdez creates a connection between indigenous past, the rich heritage of Spanish Language Theater[14], and the history of the Southwest on the one hand and contemporary issues on the other, creating and re-creating Chicano myths relying on mythico-historical heroes and actualizes them in contemporary terms again. "As Valdez delved more and more into the project of connecting an indigenous past to the present, he began to integrate the cultural heritage of Chicanas/Chicanos with the *mito* form" (Ramírez 87). The rise of *mitos* in his plays offered Valdez a new way to educate his audiences and to incorporate new relevant material at will, material that he can use within his "poetic freedom". He created entirely new myths in order to motivate the Mexican American community to unite as a community and to newly appreciate their history and their culture. Thus, the political goal in the structuring of the *mitos* was to find strategic ways to eliminate discrimination against Mexican Americans and deflect Anglo American assimilation policies. In most of his plays we find characters constructed as contemporary figures or historical icons who serve these multi-functional purposes. They were meant to bring myth and history together. Indio/Quetzalcoatl in *Dark Root of a Scream*, Bernabé, Henry Reyna and El Pachuco in *Zoot Suit*, Tiburcio Vázquez in *Bandido!*, and Sonny Villa in *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* are all examples of such characters.

Since *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1964), Valdez has remained the dominant major force in the Chicana/chicano theatre movement with his group El Teatro Campesino. Founded by Luis Valdez in 1965, El Teatro Campesino broadened its scope from early *actos* to *mitos*, embracing the mythical, cultural and social issues of Chicana/Chicano community, from one act plays to full length, well equipped professional performances, and from small audiences of farm workers to a national and even international reception. While Huerta comments that "The Valdezian *mito* is a very personal inquiry into Aztec, Maya and Native American philosophy that the author has maintained to this day" (Huerta, *Chicano Drama* 36), it is also true that most of the theatre groups in the field imitated the same movement, the style of performance, the use of images and symbols forged by Valdez and his leading theatre group, the ETC. "No other individual has made as important an impact on Chicano theater as Luis Valdez" (Huerta, Introduction to *Zoot Suit and Other Plays* 7). There are, of course, other Chicano playwrights, but Valdez provides the leadership with his group, the ETC, as acknowledged by the

younger generation of Chicana/Chicano theatre groups. Valdez has been a maestro and a mentor not only to Chicana/os but to Latinas and Latinos and has inspired them to create their own voice on the American stage. Valdez continues to evolve and to contribute in other areas of artistic production such as poetry, essays, interviews, and most recently films and videos. He has earned the right to be called an original and outstanding dramatist/director. What has aided Valdez in achieving national stature and to be one of the most respected Mexican American dramatists today is the creation of the *mito* form; this has been a significant contribution to American drama. **(Although he has also contributed poems, books, essays, interviews, and recently films and videos as a dramatist/director, an author, and a poet, what justifies Valdez's national stature, who is no doubt deserves to be, the most respected Mexican American dramatist today is his creation of *mito* form as his major contribution to American drama.)**

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Notes

[1] Standard reference works which treated religious subjects and later served to strengthen cultural values of Mexican Americans include works on mythology, history, and religious folk drama.

[2] The detailed information about the activities such as repertoires, organization and operation of the troupe can be found in Latin American Collection, (the archive of the Campania Dramatica de Hernandez-Villalongin), University of Texas at Austin.

[3] Mexican American is used here instead of Chicano Theater because the term Chicano denotes political awareness or consciousness from the 1960's on.

[4] In the first two years of the Great Depression, twenty six Broadway theatres were closed and throughout the first four years of the 1930's, new theatre organizations, amateur and professional, with their strike flag in agitation propaganda plays all around the U.S. were in great favor. Especially the younger generation dramatists devoted themselves and their plays to proletarian struggle with didactic purposes. (See for example, Sam Smiley. *The Drama of Attack: Didactic Plays of the American Depression*. University of Missouri Press: Columbia, 1972.)

[5] Collaboratively produced, one act, political sketches based on comedy with social vision. For more on actos see: *Luis Valdez--Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensamiento Serpentino*, pp. 11-13. These comedia-like sketches also formed a type of broad, farcical and presentational political theater based on improvisations of socio-political issues. See Introduction to *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*, pp. 7-8.

[6] Anglo is used here to indicate all the people in the U.S. outside Mexican American community.

[7] *Actos: El Teatro Campesino* is the first published anthology of Chicano drama. It includes variety of subjects from strikes of farm workers, assimilation of Mexican Americans, Aztec and Mayan culture to rural, urban and even international issues in nine plays: *Las Dos Caras del Patroncito, Quinta Temporada, Huelgistas, Los Vendidos, La Conquista de Mexico, No Saco, Nada de la Escuela and the Militants, Vietnam Campesino, Soldado Razo*. There are currently numerous anthologies of Chicana/o drama published in the United States, but Valdez' importance comes from his leadership.

[8] The use of corridos in the Teatro Chicano is multi-functional. They are the link between past and present. They help the Mexican American audience to become closer to the play since corridos are familiar folk songs and ballads in the community, and they make the play lively and enjoyable.

[9] Quetzalcoatl, the helper god and savior-King of Aztecs, was a god of corn. He was known as the feathered serpent god of the Aztec and Toltec cultures, combining attributes of a sky god and an earth god, of eternity and of the death-defined world. He is often considered a hero rather than a god. He is a "once and future king" whose return to earth is expected. See Leeming, *The World of Myth*, p.157 and p.307.

[10] For more information on mythological level of the play, see: Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth*, pp. 40-42.

[11] All the references to this play are taken from Luis Valdez *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*, pp. 99-153.

[12] *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* is in Valdez, *Zoot Suit and Other Plays,* pp. 155–214.

[13] Including the names that refer to American middle-class rather than Chicano community, there are a lot of satirical and ironical images, motifs and symbolic meaning throughout the play. To give only a few examples; "stinking badges", "round Aztec calendar stone…hanging above the fire place", "Messican", "Med-Sican Americans". When Anita, Sonny's Japanese girlfriend from Brooklyn, joins the family Sonny says, "Come on--we're all Americans" (181). The choice of Buddy's first movie, *Jaws*, "He was one of the first guys to get eaten", and Sonny's reason of return from Harvard, "to vindicate the silence of his folks, his roots and heritage…" (183), Sonny's exclamations, "The world is a stage…of entertainment", and "I am going to make stars out of all of us. All American, All Stars!" (184), and the Director's warning to Sonny, "The only Latins our audiences care about are

those who dance and sing and stamp their feet…and say funny things, crossover value, Sonny!" (210).

[14] Spanish language theatre in the Southwest has continued to produce plays from the 16th century to the 21st. The companies have developed new styles and types of drama, yet they never lost their ties with the past, with history and culture of their community. The Teatro Chicano shares distinctive features with this rich theatrical heritage, the most important of which is the use of *corridos* or ballads along with dance and music in the plays that have also been a part of Mexican American tradition. For further information, see Charles Gibson, ed., *Spanish Tradition in America*. University of South Carolina Press. Columbia, 1968.