

GODFATHER OF CHICANO THEATER

Luis Valdez, prolific creator of 'Zoot Suit' and 'La Bamba,' urges young Chicanos to take up his torch

BY BLANCA ESTHELA CASTAÑEDA GARCÍA

Playwrights often joke that they worry an unhappy theater audience might throw tomatoes. Luis Valdez worried about being shot at. America's pioneering Chicano playwright and filmmaker said gunplay was not the only thing that made his early work with the United Farm Workers dangerous. His intended audience often watched his 15-minute *actos* in 100 degree heat, sun stroked, thirsty, hungry, scared and tired. Gun toting landowners and the local police they had in their pockets were a near-constant menace.

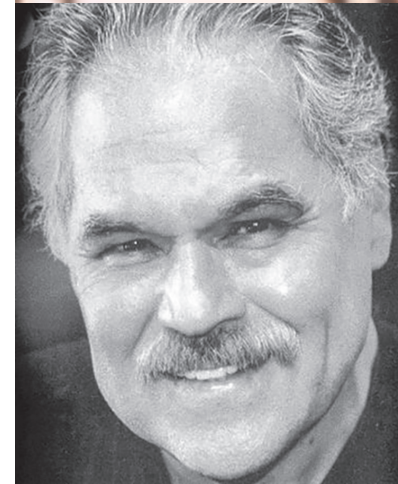
"That's why *actos* were so short," he said with a chortle. Valdez paid a visit to Southwestern College recently to meet with theatre arts students and social justice activists. The Peabody Award-winning and Golden Globe nominated writer, director, actor and university professor formed El Teatro Campesino (the farmworker's theater) in 1965 to support the work of UFW leaders Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta. He and a small cast of 2-4 actors would roll flatbed trucks up the edge of farms in the Central Valley and perform *Actos*, short one-act plays. He had learned street theatre during his time with the revolutionary San Francisco Mime Company and took it from the bustling sidewalks of The City to dusty off roads near out backs like Delano, Del Rey and San Juan Batista.

Actors taught the farm workers that they had the right to water, decent housing, breaks and school for their children. They also had the right to put their money in a bank.

El Teatro Campesino also performed in towns and cities to teach the broader population about the abuse and deprivation of the hard-working, long-suffering laborers who harvested their food. Sometimes Teatro Campesino used real *campesinos* as actors. That was challenging.

"I just had to get people on their feet to begin to improvise their own reality," he said. "Rather than impose something, we encouraged people to speak for themselves. That became really important and continues to be a

VALDEZ • PG 15



'ANOTHER WAY TO SAY MEXICAN'—Valdez created the edgy character El Pachuco as the simmering inner voice of conflicted U.S. Navy recruit Henry Reyna in "Zoot Suit," the first Chicano play performed on Broadway. The film version was a hit, leading to the massively popular movie, 'La Bamba,' the tragic story of Ritchie Valens, the first Chicano rock star.



Photo Courtesy of Annenberg Media

VALDEZ

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Theater pioneer urges Chicanos 'to get busy'

principle for us today.”

Southwestern marked the visit of Valdez and his wife, Lupe Trujillo Valdez, by raising the UFW's iconic red flag with a black eagle. As the eagle rose into a pearl overcast sky, students honored Mother Earth with the Salute to the Four Winds, an ancient Mesoamerican rite. Valdez, a 1999 Southwestern College Honorary Degree recipient, smiled nostalgically.

Valdez first met César Chávez in Delano when he was just 6 years old. Delano was a hardscrabble town of about 10,000, barely more than a grape and cotton picking labor camp. Segregated Mexican and Filipino immigrants lived in shoddy sheds when they were not laboring in triple digit heat under the relentless San Joaquin Valley sun.

Teatro Campesino and its mobile messages found success.

People began to notice. His flatbed truck/portable stage drew crowds when it rumbled into farm areas striped with verdant rows of strawberries, onions and celery. Most viewers were the farmworkers they sought to educate, but many were gun toting plantation owners, their thuggish private security and local cops who did their bidding. Shots were occasionally fired, though Valdez said he does not think an actor was ever hit by gunfire.

Others noticed, too, including theatre professionals in New York City who in 1968 presented Teatro Campesino an Obie Award — off-Broadway's highest honor — for its courage and service to a vulnerable population. Valdez's *actos* became popular fare at progressive colleges and universities.

“They gave us the Obie for demonstrating the politics of survival,” said Trujillo Valdez. “It was after they saw the theater's national tour in 1967. We were in New York promoting the (table grape) boycott.”

Teatro Campesino stayed in the fields and clearings of the Central Valley for many years as Valdez worked on other projects, including one of his masterpieces. His edgy musical “Zoot Suit” explored the mostly-forgotten Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 when military recruits and Los Angeles police attacked Latinos who wore flashy zoot suits. Navy sailors and Marines beat and stripped Latinos wearing peacoats, feathered hats and other stylish clothes, accusing the Mexican-Americans of being disrespectful of the war effort by wasting fabric.



Photo Courtesy of Cheriss May

PRESIDENTIAL HONOR—In 2015 Luis Valdez received the National Medal of the Arts and the National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama.



Photo Courtesy of Library of Congress

POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP, LASTING FRIENDSHIP—Cesar Chavez and Luis Valdez shared a lifetime of friendship starting from their roots in Delano and the United Farm Workers union until the end of Chavez's life in 1993. Valdez wrote and performed short *actos* to teach farm workers about their rights.

“Zoot Suit” ran for nearly a year at the Mark Taper Forum in L.A. and was lured to Broadway in 1979. It was the first (and still only) Chicano production ever produced on the Great White Way. Valdez directed a film version starring his brother Daniel Valdez and the great Edward James Olmos released in 1981. It was nominated for a Golden Globe Award and in 2019 was selected

by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Film Registry for its cultural significance.

In 1987 Valdez wrote and directed the motion picture smash “La Bamba,” the story of the first Latino rock and roll star Ritchie Valens (Ricardo Steven Valenzuela). Valens' demise in a plane crash with music superstar Buddy Holly was immortalized in the Homeric Don

McLean song “American Pie.” “La Bamba” was a Golden Globe finalist, one of the most popular films of the year and a cultural touchstone for American Latinos.

SC theater arts major Xóchitl Ramos, 20, said it was an honor to meet Valdez because he paved the way for Latino performing artists.

“The very first professional theater production I ever saw was ‘Zoot Suit’ at the Cultural Center in Tijuana,” she said, “I believe his work gives a voice to the underdog. In this case, the underdogs are quite literally us. Especially at the border, where you have the huge contrast of two different cultures. Chicano culture has always had to fight for its ideals and rights both in Mexico and the U.S.”

Like Delores Huerta during her recent visit to the college, Valdez called for students and young Chicano/Latinos to take the torch from his generation of activists. He also encouraged talented writers, actors, signers and directors to take control of the narrative and tell Latino stories with truth and purpose.

“At the same time Chicano and Puerto Rican cinema has kind of dipped, the Mexican cinema has risen internationally, with Alejandro Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro,”

he said, “The American experience has been relegated to second place in the minds of Los Angeles movie producers. They are corporate representatives. They represent the money.”

Valdez said storytellers should write about what they know from their own experiences.

“Local stories told about us are a very difficult game,” he said. “It's going to take a whole new generation of artists. These new movies are more personal. The quality is there, but they're not political in the same way, due to financing (from conservative sources).”

Now in life's third act, Valdez said he wants to make sure his work is available for future generation. His plays are now available in book form. He said he believes his films and scripts still have something to offer.

His wife Trujillo Lopez agreed. “We've been around the block,” she said. “The stories of our generation have meaning, but we need new generations to tell theirs.”

Chicano artists have an outsized responsibility to represent their culture and enormous opportunities to have impact, Valdez said.

“If we don't tell our stories they may be lost,” he said. “We are a storytelling people. Time for Chicanos to get busy.”

METAL

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Leaf's sculptures are ubiquitous throughout San Diego County

has created iconic pieces in San Diego County including “Powering the Arts,” “South Bay Power Plant Monument,” “LOVE,” “Zero Degrees,” “Elemental,” “Tree of Life” and “From Dusk till Dawn.”

His work crosses disciplines from pictorial pieces to abstract sculptures, site specific installations and geometric furniture.

“The Last Supper” is his magnum opus.

Measuring the exact 15' 1" x 29' of the original by Da Vinci, Leaf used several inflexible materials to make the metal look soft. He employed nine types of automotive, metallic, acrylic and straight pigments to achieve the range of textures.

One of his most clever ideas was to use mirrors for the eyes of Jesus and the Apostles as a reflection of the human soul. Copper makes Jesus glow when the sun hits him. Leaf said he could feel the energy of each apostle and the frequency each gave off.

Recreating a masterpiece was like a heavy metal puzzle with 70 pieces on

four levels. It required artistic vision as well as abundant science and creative engineering.

“Thank goodness I like numbers,” he said. “It's very interesting taking a one-dimensional image and making it three dimensional with materials that are inflexible.”

Leaf's huge project started small when he was commissioned to make a calendar-sized metal replica of “The Last Supper.” It came out well and others followed. He was soon inspired to attempt the full-size replica. He started by drawing the grid dimensions on paper, then built it out of strings and screws in the walls. Leaf took great care to capture da Vinci's angles and proportions exactly as The Master had originally mapped out.

“Da Vinci was a great mathematician as well as inventor and artist,” Leaf said. “His mathematical talents definitely influenced his art in a profound way.”

Chula Vista's “The Last Supper” took about 14 months to finish, Leaf said. On the day he finished he texted his wife a photo. She let him know it was Ash Wednesday, 2023. Working on the piece gave him lots of time to think about Christianity, he said, including the revolutionary person Jesus was and the role of the apostles.

“It isn't my religious origin,” he said. “I had no understanding of what the piece represented, that's how removed from it I was. I knew Da Vinci painted



Photo By Yanelli Z. Robles / Staff

HEAVEN IS IN THE DETAILS—Leaf was meticulous in his preparation and execution of his metallic recreation of “The Last Supper.” He took a little artistic license, however, to give Judas Iscariot the core of an apple, perhaps to represent the story of original sin from the Garden of Eden.

it, as I am a big fan, but I had little information biblically and artistically.”

Artist/designer Sandra Scheller, 70, founder and creator of RUTH: Remember Us The Holocaust, said she has known Leaf since his infancy. She said he was a “super child” and “the Michelangelo of Metal.”

“He is just beyond the horizon of creativity because of his ideas and what he puts out into the universe,” she said. “Michael is a really brilliant

man.”

As a Jewish woman Scheller said she believes Leaf's metallic recreation of “The Last Supper” represents hope.

“It shows that we have always struggled to accept our differences,” she said. “The Last Supper” is about friendship, betrayal, courage and the faith that what comes next can eventually lead to something better.”

Bob Lehman, 59, Executive Director San Diego Museum Council and vice

chair of San Diego County Art Culture Commission, said Leaf's creation is “magnificent.”

“It was striking and beautiful and so large to see it at that scale,” he said. “It took me back to my childhood and was an amazing first impression.”

Lehman said he had seen “The Last Supper” in books of religious art books, but never imagined he would find such an ambitious representation on Main Street in Chula Vista.

Scheller said she would love to permanently display Leaf's creation in the Holocaust Museum she is working to create in San Diego County but does not think she can afford it. Leaf said he has had an offer of \$17 million to purchase the piece from a European buyer, but he politely declined.

“I want it to stay in the United States, at least in North America,” he said.

Da Vinci's original “The Last Supper” remains in the convent at Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, worn by age and poor stewardship by people who did not seem to appreciate what they had. Leaf's sturdier replica could, with decent care, last for centuries.

“I hope so,” he said with intentional understatement. “I certainly put a lot of work into it. I hope that someday it can be displayed someplace where lots of people can see it and enjoy it. Maybe it will help them to realize how great the original is and how amazing de Vinci was.”