

Luis Valdez

Self-Invention

“The reason that I began working in the theater was because I loved the art form, and I wanted to be a playwright . . . Also . . . it was an opportunity for me to address my whole life style, my whole family's life style when I was growing up. And I found that telling stories and writing plays was a very direct way to address some of my feelings about the whole experience . . . Mixed up in that are all the stories of growing up, and all of the dreams and visions that come with just being a poor kid.

I had no expectations that my work, you know, would take me where it has taken me. What I wanted to do was to participate in a life style that gave me the opportunity to express my feelings honestly, and by writing plays, by setting stories in motion, it offered me the opportunity. It gave me the chance to talk about things that were obvious, but which nobody discussed in polite society.

When I went to school, I discovered that there were no books, no stories dealing with the history of Latinos in the United States, that none of our historical figures were ever mentioned in the books. It was a totally all-white, all-European-based orientation, and I felt that this was ultimately wrong . . . I wanted to do something about it, and so I ended up writing plays about my own people, writing plays about our culture, writing plays about our history. The way to do this eventually--as I became schooled--was to organize my own theater company. I realized that I was very outside of the mainstream, that there was no way that I was going to be able to get into those books and into those movies and on those pages without a lot of thrust and a lot of momentum. And I saw that possibility only in terms of social movement.

When I came of age in the 1960's and the civil rights movement was growing, I became an organizer for civil rights right away--when I got into college in 1958. So, I cut my political eye teeth in the civil rights movement--marches and sit-ins and demonstrations. So, I was completely politicized by the struggle for civil rights in America and racial equality. I had also seen how African-Americans were mistreated, and I identified with them, and I wanted to do something. All of this came together and gelled for me when I met César Chávez. César--above all the people [whom] I have met outside of my family--has been a role model for me. I not only admired what he was, I followed him, and so in 1965, I went back to Delano, California, where I was born, and I pitched him the idea for a farm workers' theater.”

Latino America

“I think that in terms of who we are, and what we are, it is important that America look at us as a mirror--that when they look at us, they see themselves. And we're not there yet in terms of the run of current events, but we're struggling to get there. We are not an immigrant group. We're not an alien group. We are indigenous to this land, and I can see a day coming when everybody in America will be part Latino. Everybody will be part Hispanic because it's inevitable that love blows like the wind . . . It blows in the wind. And what will happen is our great grandchildren, you know, will be composed of all the

various rivers of humanity that have poured into this America. There will be none of us in any family that can say anything bad about any particular group because we'll all be related. I think that is inevitable, and I feel that the sooner that Americans become sophisticated about who they are, and who they are becoming, the more peace and progress there will be.”

Cultural Layers

“Well, one of the things that I love about traveling around and going to different cities in America is that you really see the layers of humanities that have come through. In Chicago you have the Pilsner district--you know, which have these enormous eastern European stone fronts on the buildings . . . now inhabited by Latinos. You're talking Chicano and Puerto Rican, and the language on the street is Spanish, and the music that you hear in the air, and the food that you smell walking in the breezes, is now Latino. But you can see how in the past it had also been Jewish. It has been Polish. It has been Irish. It has been so many things. The same thing goes for the Boyle-Heights District in Los Angeles, for instance. That's a perfect example. You still have old synagogues in the area, but the many, many generations of immigrants that have come through have all left layers. And I think that's where the richness lies--in the layering.

If we were all just one thing, life would be a lot less interesting than it is. And as an artist, as a playwright, one of the things that I look for in great works of art is the layering because that's what happens in life. When you get an impression, it isn't just one thing, it's a number of things that hit you at once, and it's that in terms of stories. It's that in terms of reality. As a film maker, when I go and look for locations, I'm looking for a place that will evoke, not just one thing, but many things. Inevitably when you go to the barrios in the United States, you are really looking at the ghettos of the past, and they're still the ghettos of today. These are places of transition, and in some cases, they're very old and in some cases, not so old. But the fact is that the stream of humanity pouring through them is the roots of every one of us again. You can relate to it because it is you in every conceivable way.”