

**Grove Talk: Richard Montoya's *American Night*
For California Shakespeare Society, June 2013
by Takeo Rivera**

Hello, everyone! My name is Takeo Rivera and I am your grove speaker for today. Just a little about myself: I am a playwright, spoken word poet, and currently am enrolled at UC Berkeley as a PhD in Performance Studies. I am here at the generous invitation of Philippa Kelley to talk a little bit about this magnificent play you're about to say today/tonight.

Ladies, gentlemen, and gender non-conforming folks, you are in for a treat of the most exquisite order. Montoya's *American Night: The Ballad of Juan Jose* is a play that is radical as it is raucously funny, as witty as it is wise, as historically specific as it is universal. *American Night* is a play about new immigrants and old narratives, about carving out a people's history from the granite of oppression and subjugation. It is living proof of art's capacity to enlighten, entertain, enliven, and empower all at once; one part vaudeville, another part ethnic studies historiographic praxis, simmering in the melting pot of performance and begging to be savored. Thus, it is possible to enjoy and to critically engage *American Night* from a nearly limitless number of vantage points. However, seeing how *American Night* is staged here, at the California Shakespeare Theater, a company committed to both enduring and new "classics" and thus implying universality, it is worth considering *American Night* as a piece that does not challenge but augments this commitment to classic, universal narratives. Although *American Night* is both a relatively new play – first written and staged in Oregon in 2010, and has thus far had six major productions – and a quote-unquote "culturally-specific" work, it achieves universality *precisely* through its specificity, for perhaps no experience is as quintessentially "American" as the Chicano/a one from which this play derives.

The progenitor of *American Night* is the brilliant writer/performer Richard Montoya, whose work is best known and understood through the great Chicano comedy and theater triumvirate Culture Clash, of which he is one of three members along with Herbert Siguenza and Ricardo Salinas. The great playwright Philip Gotanda declared Culture Clash "a national treasure." And for good reason – for twenty nine years, Culture Clash has been one of the most cutting-edge, politically insightful, and outrageously hilarious performance groups in America, an indispensable voice in performance in conversations about race, power, and oppression, particularly in relationship to Chicanos and Chicanas in the United States. I quote Gotanda at

length here: “[Culture Clash holds] the mirror, albeit tilted at times, to show us who we are right now. These aren’t museum pieces they are giving us, made from yesterday’s Eurocentric aestheticisms. Rather, their work is living cloth they are continually reinventing as they pull from the threads of social fracture and cultural schism that is the world we live in” (ix). Perhaps most excitingly of all, they’re local: founded on Cinco de Mayo in 1984 in San Francisco’s Mission District, Culture Clash is by all means a product of the Bay Area.

But Culture Clash is also an inheritor of both the politics and aesthetics of Chicanismo, or loosely, “Chicano-ism”. To give a little Chicano Studies 101, the word “Chicano” is not merely a signifier of Mexican identity in the United States, but a political term, one that indexes not just a subject position, but an orientation towards a radical non-white identity. The word Chicano, and by extension Culture Clash, cannot be understood without the Chicano Movement that coalesced in the radical 1960s and 70s, an era remarkable for the development of radical progressive identity politics informed by the initial formations of the Black Power Movement. Along with the Asian American Movement and the American Indian Movement, the Chicano Movement sought to produce a resistant ethno-racial identity against dominant white narratives, manifesting in organizations such as El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) and the Brown Berets and actions such as the LA Student Strikes. The Chicano Movement was of course also deeply informed and inspired by the widely-known work of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta of the United Farm Workers (UFW) in California’s Central Valley. It was in the labor mobilizations of the UFW that the theater of the Chicano Movement had its modern origins in the form of Luis Valdez’s El Teatro Campesino. Originating as an activist theater troupe, El Teatro Campesino would perform at UFW farmworker strikes on the beds of flatbed trucks, performing humorous yet revolutionary low-budget *actos* for the strikers on the picket line, often mocking the racist and exploitative agribusiness bosses and imbuing the workers with the agency and courage to continue their struggle against economic and racial oppression. Crucially, however, these *actos* were quite hilarious; Yolanda Broyles-González argues that El Teatro Campesino’s mobilization of humor draws from a longstanding Mexican tradition of *relajo*, “a humorous practice perfected within the Mexican popular performance tradition,” a “popular Mexican culture of laughter” with an “oppositional relationship to imposed values and to the seriousness of officialdom, and... affirmation of the possibility of freedom.”

Montoya himself was raised on this combination of radical activism and theater, having grown up with parents involved with the UFW. In an interview, he states: “I think the one thing that undeniably influenced by was United Farmworkers Union, the theatre, the art and the literature that the movement spawned. I remember as a young child watching Teatro Campesino—Luis Valdez, Daniel Valdez, Smiley Rojas. And back then they were redefining or defining, Chicano Teatro, on the spot, on the back of pickup trucks. And as a child, I watched that firsthand... I got to observe that as a child and soak it up, because not only was the theatre happening onstage, but you might find yourself as a child in Cesar Chavez’ office, or Filipino Hall in Delano” (xiii).

If El Teatro Campesino comprised the “origins” of modern Chicano theater, Montoya, along with Salinas and Siguenza, were a crucial segment of the “second wave” of Chicano theater through his work in Culture Clash. Some artists in the “second wave” took a more serious turn and very importantly critiqued the heterosexism of the Chicano Movement and of El Teatro Campesino – queer feminist Chicana writers Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa were prime examples of this route, with Moraga writing plays such as *Heroes and Saints* and *Mexican Medea*, and Anzaldúa the now-canonical feminist book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. However, Culture Clash chose instead to focus on and refine the satirical and carnivalesque *relajo* potential of the El Teatro Campesino aesthetic. One can argue that Culture Clash has at this point far surpassed El Teatro Campesino in this regard, having achieved a level of mainstream iconicity. Antonia Nakano Glenn describes the three as follows: “The three members of Culture Clash have honed engaging stage personalities and familiar performative signatures: Richard is acerbic and lewd, and recites spoken word poetry; Ric is sweet and earnest, and does rap and a variety of dances, from break dancing to salsa; Herbert is more serious, and is known for his comical impersonations, including Julio Iglesias, Edward James Oloms and Che Guevara. Reminiscent of great comedy teams of the 1920s and 1930s such as Laurel and Hardy, the characters of Richard, Ric and Herbert are somehow always themselves, even when undertaking celebrity impersonations or gender or ethnic drag” (414). Culture Clash’s early work is structured around thematically linked comedic skits that the three would collaboratively write and perform, in which they would skewer a wide range of sociopolitical actors, sparing no one on the political or racial spectrum, although ultimately committing to a progressive politics of social justice. Their skits are profoundly irreverent: Che Guevara rises from the dead to wage war on Domino’s Pizza

("One by one, the dominos will fall!"). The men serve tacos from a Father Junipero Serra "Heavenly Tacos" taqueria. At a certain point, it becomes delightfully unsurprising should Scarface, Carlos Santana, Jaime Escalante, or an emotionally sensitive border patrol officer should grace the stage. However, Culture Clash's work has rarely come across as politically pedantic; Herbert Siguenza explains that their politicality is somehow organic: "When people describe us as this political, satirical, comedy, theatrical, theatre group, the label itself... to me anyway, it's totally natural what we're doing. I'm not, we're not consciously writing political theatre. You know what I'm saying? It's just really in our blood. It's just in our history, in our bones, and our art is.... If it doesn't say anything, then why do it?" (qtd. in Kondo 91) To Siguenza – and arguably Montoya, as well – the politicality of their performance is not so much a calculated attempt to work in a political message, but rather that their art practice itself is never not understood political. That is not to say that their political decisions aren't conscious, however; Montoya has expounded upon what he calls a "Culture Clash point of view" that equally privileges the voices of the subaltern with the well-worn narratives of the Great Men of history: "We are fighting superficiality with superficiality... I don't need to know what two old white fathers of the city were thinking... Our Culture Clash point of view is that today they're no more important than the people who scrub the floors and clean the toilets" (qtd. in Kondo 94). The visual display you witnessed walking up to the grove today, entitled "Fronterland" and created by local artist Jennifer Wofford in collaboration with the Triangle Lab, also performs this Culture Clash point of view; it is satirical, darkly funny, but deeply serious in its implications.

Which finally, at long last, brings me to the work at hand today, *American Night*. The play is Montoya's, not Culture Clash's, and calls upon a massive cast to carry out its epic narrative, but nevertheless continues the irreverent yet revolutionary *relajo* spirit of Culture Clash, and by extension, its ancestor El Teatro Campesino. This is evident in both the aesthetics and narrative content of *American Night* throughout. To summarize, *American Night: The Ballad of Juan Jose* focuses on the title character, Juan Jose, a Mexican man on the verge of taking his citizenship test, and thus furiously studying the history of the United States in order to pass. However, during his studies, Juan nods off and dreams, proceeding to have an epic dream of US American history, inserting himself in a wide range of historical experiences.

I must briefly mention here that this production at CalShakes presents *American Night* both humbly and extravagantly, in all the right ways. Its outdoor staging speaks immediately to

the populist ethos of El Teatro Campesino, and unlike most of the prior productions of *American Night*, CalShakes does not utilize a wide array of video screens to switch settings. Rather, under the deft direction of CalShakes Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone, CalShakes' *American Night* relies on a combination of powerful performances of its actors – headed by the illustrious Sean San Jose in the role of Juan José - and a staggering number of flamboyant costume changes to produce its effects. Actor Richard Ruiz notes that he has sixteen costume changes throughout the course of this piece! You will be impressed with this production's capacity to balance spectacle with the kind of intimate humanity to which only live performance can do justice.

But back to the play itself... Since Juan is taking a citizenship test, we are to understand his studies as a kind of “canonical” overview of US history. Of course, to represent the sum total of US American history in one play is, needless to say, an impossibility, so Montoya's choices of which moments to focus on are absolutely critical. Importantly, the first historical sequence of Juan's dream is not the arrival of the Mayflower or signing of the Declaration of Independence, but the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the infamous agreement that ceded Mexican territory and peoples to the United States at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1848. To begin the historical narrative here exhibits a crucial political decision on Montoya's part, as it privileges the Mexican/American experience, moving that perspective from the margin to the center within a larger historiographic project that viciously yet hilariously critiques the white capitalist US nation-state. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is arguably the moment that most affects Juan, and by extension one of the most disenfranchised groups in the United States, namely Latin@ immigrants, and thus sets the precedent for a Chicano historiography that unravels US American history at large.

Directly contrary to the triumphalist and often-exceptionalist mainstream narratives we can usually associate with the American history of citizenship exams, *American Night* presents a United States rife with racism and disenfranchisement, but also hope. Juan's historical dream tour is a kind of political *Nutcracker*, except instead of sugar plum faeries and dancing mice we see anachronistic and brilliantly perverted moments of American oppression, all within the humorous Chicano/Mexican carnivalesque aesthetic of *relajo*. Although I maintain that Montoya remains committed to a Chicano historiography, Montoya chooses to examine a panethnic history of disenfranchisement within the United States. Antiblack lynch mobs and Japanese American internment camps make crucial appearances within Montoya's narrative, all unfolding

before Juan's newcomer eyes. Yet despite the grave seriousness of the issues at hand, Montoya never ceases to infuse the *relajo* humor throughout the piece.

One of the most distinctly hilarious scenes of Chicano *relajo* is that of the Manzanar Japanese American concentration camp. Juan's entry in this scene is through Ralf Lazo, the historically real Chicano teenager who joined his Japanese American friends in solidarity at the camp. However, Juan also meets the presumably fictional Johnny Yamamori, a Japanese American teenager distinct in his performance of Chicano pachuco masculinity; stage directions describe him clad in "zoot pants, leather bomber jacket, white T-shirt, cross and chain he can swing from his pocket. Johnny sports a bad ass D.A. hairdo – he IS the Camp Bad Ass" (66). Both Ralf and Johnny, having grown up in the unique multicultural milieu of East LA, are cultural hybrids, though Johnny is arguably even more hilariously jarring, combining Japanese and pachuco Spanish slang in the phrase "Arigato ese vato," which translates loosely from the two languages as "thank you, my homeboy." For anyone even remotely familiar with aesthetic representations of the Japanese internment camps – such as *Farewell to Manzanar*, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, *Come See the Paradise*, et cetera - this is an unusual depiction of the camps to say the least; in the mainstream Japanese American imagination surrounding the camps, the last thing one would expect is a Japanese American assuming a Chicano bad boy masculine gender performance. The scene reaches a moment of triumphantly self-referential absurdity when all of the characters in the scene simultaneously assume the emblematic pachuco pose immortalized by Edward James Olmos in Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*, and say coolly in unison: "¡Órale!" It is a moment that references Olmos and Valdez, but also *Culture Clash*'s previous parodying of this precise gesture in works such as *Bowl of Beings*. It is a gesture that simultaneously conveys cross-cultural alliance and a hint to not take this play *too* seriously. Yet, the *relajo* humor itself performs a kind of critique, a kind of politics. First, it productively reinforces Chicano subjectivity as the epistemic and aesthetic center of the piece. Secondly, the *relajo* humor destabilizes the fixity of narrative conventions in general; in effect, queering history by dressing it in Chicano drag, but also pointing to how history itself is social construction, is never unbiased itself. Thirdly, this reference, like many of the references in this piece, remains relatively untranslated, decontextualized, caught only by cultural insiders and dramaturgs familiar with *Culture Clash*. The untranslatability of the moment is perhaps what is most crucial; it imbues Chicanismo with a kind of canonicity, assuming the specific to be universal. The chorus of

“Órale” may put a non-Chicano audience in a space of discomfort, but it is a discomfort that is experienced everyday by people of color in a country that still ultimately privileges whiteness. Thus, this discomfort is productive, and enables possibilities of connection and healing.

At a certain point in this play, it becomes clear that Juan is not the only one on trial as the American Dream is exposed for the farce that it really is. I posit that *American Night* poses not so much the question of whether or not Juan is ready to become a US American citizen, but rather whether or not the United States is worth desiring at all. In other words, as the United States tests Juan, Juan tests the United States.

Importantly, however, Montoya’s historiographic project displays not just instances of oppression and racism, but of resistance to it. There are not just victims, but heroes, in Montoya’s historical narrative. Sometimes, *American Night* is recuperative and redemptive: the invocation of Sacajawea is a strong example of this. Juan points out that later racial justice activists would perceive Sacajawea as a traitor to her people, and I quote: “A sell-out. A traitor who only facilitate[d] the onslaught. Like *la Malinche* and Cortéz.” But Juan decides to recuperate her humanity, replying: “I would say that your youthful laughter around the campfire with your little son must have meant so much to these brave and lonely men” (35). His redemptive position echoes the sentiment of Chicana feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, who have read *la Malinche* – Cortez’s indigenous guide and lover whose assistance was crucial to the massacre of the Aztecs – not as a traitor, but as someone who responded naturally to patriarchy and warmongering of the Aztec empire, and indicating the need for a mestiza feminism. Similarly, *American Night*’s kind reading of Sacajawea as “Girl Who Kicked the Original Hornets Nest” positions her not as accommodating and submissive, but empowered and imbued with agency, operating the best she could from her social positioning.

Other historical figures are excavated; *American Night* enacts a kind of archaeology of knowledge in portraying more historically obscure figures such as Viola Pettus, the Black nurse whose community health practice treated everyone, including Ku Klux Klansmen; and Ralph Lazo, the Chicano teenager at Manzanar mentioned earlier. These are figures who, as *American Night* directly states, have only recently been acknowledged in historical scholarship; at best, consigned to the margins of history, or at worst, forgotten altogether. But Montoya chooses to give them airtime, crucially over the hundreds of more “canonical” US American figures; performatively, Montoya enacts a Culture Clash historiography that represents such actors as not

marginal but central to the formation of contemporary “America.” Thus, in the tradition of the likes of Ron Takaki, Howard Zinn, and Studs Terkel, Richard Montoya charts out a people’s history, one that is politically efficacious for a contemporary moment still mired in the racism and xenophobia like that so blatantly exhibited by the Minutemen, Arizona’s SB1070 racial profiling law, the murder of Trayvon Martin, and so on. And Montoya’s decision to chart out a panethnic history, not just a Chicano one, points to a desire for coalition, writing into being the political possibility for a broad-based anti-oppression positionality.

The question, however, remains, of whether the United States has passed Juan’s test. Embedded within this question is a simpler one: what *is* the United States of America? Montoya seems to answer that it is equally the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Klansmen, and mass incarceration, as it is the resistance of Viola Pettus and Bob Dylan. Montoya’s vision for America is perhaps best summarized as *optimistic despite*, that is, optimistic despite its historical violence. When Juan teeters on the brink of giving up on the test altogether, declaring “I don’t think I will make a good American. So right now, I’m going to burn my US Constitution pocket book!” Joan Baez responds, “in a single toker breath,” “You burn that book man you burn our First Amendment, our individual right to come together and collectively express our outrage against the machine, man. To question authority. Our political freedoms, our civil liberties... They come at a cost, man. And it’s the most grooviest most beautiful thing about being an American. And that is why those great men died...” The figure of Baez appears to point to the most redeeming aspect of the US state, that is, the First Amendment, the one thing that allows Montoya to offer the critique that he does.

I will not spoil the ending of the play here – perhaps Juan attains his citizenship, perhaps he does not. But for all of us in the audience so privileged to experience this work, we must ask ourselves whether the United States is worth being dreamed about, and if not, what we can do to make it more deserving. This is the challenge that *American Night* poses to us, a play that is quintessentially American by being undeniably Chicano. So please, enjoy and ponder, and laugh radical laughter throughout the evening.

Works Cited

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