

"El Garden" is presented at UCSD

November 22, 1976

Carlos Morton's "El Garden," an explosive, allegorical "acto" with music in the Chicano "teatro" style, will open in the UCSD Theatre at the University of California, San Diego at 8 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 2.

The "garden" is Eden and the leading characters are a very contemporary Adan and Eva, pitching headlong toward the inevitable fall from grace, precipitated by the blandishments of a very alluring snake -- who is alternately an Aztec priest, Nixon, a killer/political activist -- and the devil.

Dios (God) -- a "cross between a Californio and a Pachuco," according to the play's director -- wants to keep his creations in Eden, to protect them against the dangers of "intergalactic space." But Eva is bored. The food in Eden is too starchy and she longs for some variety -- any kind of variety.

After she and the serpent engage in an Aztec ritual, which ends in the eating of the apple, Eva and Adan are cast down into the Chicago barrio, where they get a taste of oppression -- an oppression which has been foretold to Eva by the serpent in Eden.

"Dios promised us that the meek would inherit the earth," protests Eva at the terrible predictions of the serpent.

"Only the dirt, Eva," sneers the serpent, "only the miserable dirt of poverty."

Adan and Eva, desolate and despairing, redeem themselves by going toward another garden -- the strife-torn fields of the farmworkers. And the devil and Dios walk off arm in arm.

The play, according to its director, Jorge A. Huerta, assistant professor of drama at UC San Diego, is one of very few published works in the lexicon of Chicano theater, itself barely a decade old.

"Teatro Chicano," explains Huerta, is deeply rooted in Spanish and Mexican indigenous ritual and religious theater traditions, such as the Spanish morality plays or "autos."

"El teatro" emerged, in Huerta's words, "from the birth pangs of the campesino revolution in California." Its earliest exponents, El Teatro Campesino, were originally an arm of Cesar Chavez' United Farmworkers. The group, now a full-time Chicano theater company, living and working collectively, has evolved into an autonomous commune, growing its own food and exploring the "teatro" philosophy in its daily activities.

"Teatro" employs certain stock characters such as "death" or "the devil," a cajoling sort of fellow whose influence lurks behind every evil or malodorous deed. "Actos," like "El Garden," evolve through improvisational, presentational exercises among performers. They offer a political message, as well as an entertaining one.

Huerta calls Chicano theater "one of the best-kept secrets in North American theater today."

"El Garden's" author, Carlos Morton, now a first-year graduate student in playwriting in the UC San Diego Department of Drama, sees his own experiments "teatro" as a search for his roots and a struggle to provide Chicanos with "their own myths."

"Madison Avenue and Hollywood have distorted our image for such a long time," berates Morton. "I see the Chicano movement as the karma coming back to the European and American conquerors who took over our lands."

Chicano theater, Morton believes, expresses the unifying message of "la raza cosmica," welcoming all cultures and all races. But, he says, in order to restore racial pride and a sense of belonging, "teatro" for the moment does speak most directly to a Chicano audience.

The UC San Diego production will feature Gregorio Flores as Dios, Tony Curiel as Adan and Silvia Cortez as Eva. All three are undergraduate students. Steve Hagberg will play La Serpiente and Joey Garcia will perform as Columbus, Reporter and La Muerte. Hagberg and Garcia are graduate students.

Original music has been composed by San Diegan Ricardo Mendoza. Sets have been designed by Amarante Lucero and Robin Doane has created the costumes. Mendoza (guitar) and Garcia (percussion) will accompany the singers.

"El Garden" may also be seen at 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday, Dec. 3 and 4, and at 2 p.m. on Saturday, December 4. Tickets are \$2 for everyone. For ticket information, call: 452-3791.

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