

Jorge Huerta talks about Chicano theater in his first book

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Chicano theater was born in 1965 in the California farmlands and in 1978 it made it to Broadway with the play "Zoot Suit." Despite the rapid growth, Chicano theater has been one of the best kept secrets in North America, according to a University of California, San Diego drama professor.

"What I once termed the best kept secret in North America is no longer a secret, but it is certainly not a household word," said Dr. Jorge A. Huerta, a UCSD associate professor. Huerta, the only Chicano with a Ph.D. in drama, doing teaching and research, has written the first book on Chicano theater.

The book, "Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms," chronicles the rise of the movement which began with Teatro Campesino, or Farmworker's Theater, in Delano in 1965 and has grown to a diverse number of theater groups. The book also examines the dominant themes expressed by the various Chicano playwrights.

"When I first began to investigate the theater of the Mexican American in 1970, I discovered that very little had been written about the current rise of Chicano theater groups," said Huerta. "Teatro Campesino published its first anthology of plays dealing with the Chicano experience in 1971. Included were the plays, or actos, that Teatro Campesino had collectively written under the direction and guidance of Luis Valdez."

Valdez, the author of "Zoot Suit," is the founder and leading playwright of Chicano theater. It was Valdez who suggested to Cesar Chavez that the farm labor union sponsor a street theater to educate and entertain the farmworkers.

Huerta first saw Teatro Campesino in the late 1960s when he was teaching high school drama in Riverside, California. He later taught at Pasadena City College and eventually enrolled in the graduate theater program at UC Santa Barbara.

At Santa Barbara, Huerta founded El Teatro de la Esperanza in 1971 which today is the only full-time Chicano theater group dedicated solely to theater. He received his Ph.D. in 1974 and left El Teatro de la Esperanza and UC Santa Barbara for the San Diego campus in 1975. For nearly a decade he has been one of the few scholars studying Chicano theater.

"Our dramatic literature is just being born. It has been a people's theater, rooted in the oral tradition, and many of the plays have not been scripted," said Huerta.

"Now we have eight anthologies of plays and one book on Chicano theater. My book includes a bibliography that is very extensive, as I tried to compile everything I could find which addresses Chicano theater: newspaper articles, journal articles and articles in books," he added.

Huerta has edited three anthologies and has written articles for "Aztlán," "Latin American Theatre Review," "Textual," "The Drama Review" and "The Oxford Companion to the Theatre."

Among the plays he has directed are "Los Vendidos," "Guadalupe," "A View From the Bridge," and "Las dos Caras del Patroncito." He is the author of the dramas "El Renacimiento de Huitzilopochtli" and "La Llorona, The Many Faces of a Legend" and a participant in the collective creation of the docudrama "Guadalupe."

"I keep asking myself if I should be a director or a writer," said Huerta. "The answer is I must be both. We don't have trained scholars and directors. What I am is a teacher, someone who imparts knowledge. Writing and directing both help me teach."

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