

W.F. HISPANIC Americans performing Artists



PHOTO BY DEBRA DIPOALO  
 'As American as rolling a hotdog in a corn tortilla': (l.-r.) Herbert Siguenza, Richard Montoya, and Ricardo Salinas of Culture Clash.

VERTICAL FILE MISSION  
**BORN IN THE U.S.A.**

San Francisco's Latin American theater group, Culture Clash, attacks the stereotypes of its bicultural roots with uninhibited satire and wit

By Robin Kennett-Hart

**P**ERHAPS YOU'VE seen them around town in the last seven years, performing their plays at local theaters, opening for music groups, or doing benefits. You might have heard about their particular brand of humor, social satire at its finest — no icon too sacred, subject matter too touchy, or stereotype too volatile to dismantle and blow up. Now, if all goes according to plan, TV viewers across America will be able to laugh at a comedy trio as American as they are Latino. As Ricardo Salinas, a member of San Francisco's Culture Clash, puts it: "You've heard of the Brat Pack; well, we'll be the Wet Pack."

Culture Clash was founded at Galeria de la Raza, an art space in San Francisco's Mission District, on Cinco de Mayo, 1984. Before that, members Salinas, Herbert Siguenza, and Richard Montoya gained their acting chops via community theater and touring groups; all three are former members of Luis Valdez's El Teatro Campesino, the theater company that rose out of the farmworkers union struggle in the 1960s. The trio's work in nonprofit theater has earned them a commendation from the State of California for their educational contributions.

Culture Clash's subject matter is almost always controversial, dealing with issues of racism, sexism, and general urban blight. But the three members claim their foremost objective is to entertain. Indeed, Culture Clash's militant brand of humor has proven broad-based in appeal — from Latino audiences to the mostly Anglo realm of subscriber-based the-

ater, from teens and seniors to hip urbanites. They continually play to sold-out houses on extended runs. Now shooting a sitcom pilot for Fox Television based on their successful play *The Mission*, the members of Culture Clash could expand their popularity to a venue of millions. Few entertainers have come to TV with such a political background; still fewer have come with a proven ability to appeal to the bicultural, bilingual world of millions of Latin Americans.

The question now arises: What effect will "going mainstream" have on one of the finest Latino comedy groups in the country?

Culture Clash was created when the trio realized there was little, if any, theater addressing the urban reality of many Latin Americans. Siguenza grew up in San Francisco and originally studied to be a visual artist. Salinas, brought to America from El Salvador at age 3, has degrees in broadcasting and speech. Montoya is the son of poet/artist/educator José Montoya, one of the mainstays of the Chicano movement. Some of Richard's earliest memories are of visiting United Farm Workers' camps in Delano, marching on picket lines, and watching El Teatro Campesino performances in the fields or on the backs of flatbed trucks. "Chicano theater of this time [the '60s and '70s] was important and had its place in history, and still does," says Montoya. "But there came a time when you could no longer come out with a mask on and a sign around your neck, portraying the white man as the devil and [Chicanos] as the victims. That's a simplistic nutshell of where a lot of those plays were coming from. When touring the country, your work has to have a certain viability to it that those earlier pieces don't have any-

more. They didn't age well."

"Not only that," adds Siguenza, "culturally, these plays weren't really addressing who I was — there's millions of Latinos like me who are bicultural, bilingual, who are as proud of their American roots as they are of their Latino roots. I watched *Leave It To Beaver*, I know as much American trivia as anybody else. A lot of the time, [El Teatro Campesino] plays deal with a farm-worker reality, and I'm no farmworker. Nobody was addressing urban issues."

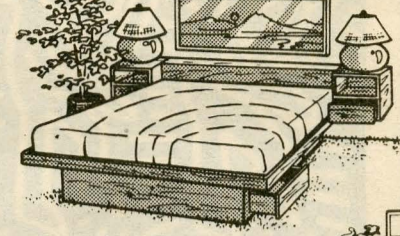
With comedy, the trio realized that they could address socially relevant issues but disguise them through wit. Their play *The Mission* lampoons street violence (with *cholos* that fight each other with giant forks), satirizes the negative stereotypical roles of Latinos that Hollywood often perpetuates, and skewers religious icons like Junípero Serra and his deadly influence on early Indios (Mexican Indians). *Yo Frankie*, a piece written for the Berkeley Repertory Theater's school touring program, highlights and addresses the "acid-washed, big-haired, MTV'd-out, Mazda-mini-truck generation," a segment of the Latino community that Culture Clash feels is over-assimilated as well as preyed upon by commercialism, and which is rapidly replacing the *cholo* in Latin youth culture. A benefit performance called *Stand and Deliver Pizza* pokes fun at recent cultural heroes, such as math teacher Jaime Escalante.

"With *The Mission*, some people were very concerned that we were actually perpetuating stereotypes," says Montoya. "What we try to do is to set them up as high as they can be by

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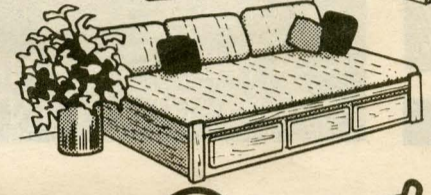
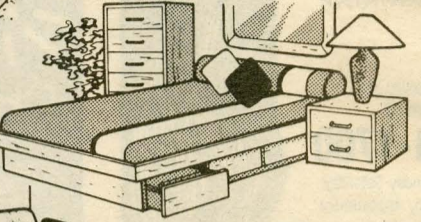
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**LITERARY EVENTS**

**APRIL 28. SUNDAY. 2:00 P.M. PAUL MONETTE**

Paul Monette, author of the celebrated *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* and a warrior in the battle against the AIDS holocaust that has been raging on American soil for ten years now, will read from his dramatic, yet darkly comic new novel, *Halfway Home*. Here he tells the story of two Irish Catholic brothers, one gay and one straight; one living with AIDS and one living in fear; a novel of families— those we are born into and those we select.

**APRIL 29. MONDAY. 8:00 P.M. SUE GRAFTON**

Best-selling mystery writer Sue Grafton will read from and sign her newest, wittiest and funniest book to date, "H" is for Homicide. Kinsey Millhone returns for another highly suspenseful mystery, her most complex and dangerous case yet...

**APRIL 30. TUESDAY. 7:30 P.M. MICHAEL DORRIS AND LOUISE ERDRICH**

America's greatest literary couple, Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, will read from their new novel, *The Crown of Columbus*. This work promises to be the literary event of the year and is filled with unforgettable characters, humor, suspense, passion and even a page-turning search for a lost treasure. We loved this book!! Please note the time.

**MAY 1. WEDNESDAY. 8:00 P.M. SANDRA CISNEROS**

Award-winning Latina poet Sandra Cisneros author of *The House on Mango Street*, will read from her new book *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. These stories, breathtaking in their precision and filled with unending moments of infinite and intimate wisdom, depict the depth and variety of life around the Mexican border while bringing us to an awareness of the commonality of our fears, desires, and dreams.

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# CLASH

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using them, and then just exploding them, shattering them. What replaces them, hopefully, is something that has just a little bit more truth, something that people can identify with. For instance, they're watching *cholos* with big boom-boxes and Pendeltons, and before you know it, those low riders are singing opera, or dancing ballet, or doing something silly. It's a tricky proposition. It's trying to portray on stage something that neither romanticizes nor denigrates the people that are caught up in that gang situation, who have never really seen themselves mirrored on the stage."

Montoya feels that the domination of "magical realism" in Chicano theater is also over. "The individual playwrights who are dabbling in the magical realism thing are writing largely apologetic pieces that are talking to a middle-class audience that loves the cockfights, the macho man just out of prison who is raping everyone, and the Don Juan themes. I can think of five magical realism plays where this is the theme ... and there's always some guy named Hector! [These plays are] not really talking to us right now."

**I**F ALL goes according to plan, Culture Clash will be doing battle in the television arena. They hope to reverse the current paucity of brown faces on TV via their sitcom, which they're developing with Cheech Marin. "We're trying to re-image all those years of the Bandito, the Indian killer, the rapist, and the Latin lover. But those characters are all there for us to play with, to put satirical topspins on if we can," says Montoya.

"When we told everyone we were going to be on Fox," says Salinas, "they said, 'Oh, a Chicano *In Living Color!*' But that's not what it will be like. We've been doing *In Living Color* on stage for six years."

Montoya continues: "People should know that 'gee, it's not all gonna be in Spanish,' or 'gee, they speak English so well!' It's *Gilligan's Island*, Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs, the Partridge Family. But it's also little kids listening to 'Trios Los Pancho' and mariachi music — to all the things our parents listened to when we were kids. We want to mix it up with black writers, Jewish, Chicano, women — not just white males writing another bad sitcom with cartoon characters, like Norman Lear's Chicano show, *AKA Pablo*. That rang really false. A lot of people pointed unjustly to [actor Paul Rodriguez], but his charisma carried that show." It was the writing, says Montoya, that made the show feel false.

"What's sad," says Salinas, "is that there are 23 million Latin Americans in the U.S., but when you talk to kids, and you ask them, 'Don't you realize that there haven't been any Latinos on TV, or any Latino this or that,' and they're so used to *not* seeing it, that they go: 'Oh yeah! I didn't even notice!'"

What has happened in the past to other Latinos who have tried to present their visions through the mainstream media? Consider Luis Valdez, originator of El Teatro Campesino, author of plays like *Zoot Suit* and *I Don't Have To Show You No Stinking Badges*, and director of the film *La Bamba*. "Luis is considered the father

of Chicano guerilla theater," says Siguenza, "and then he made a megahit like *La Bamba*; that's two different extremes. You have people who prefer him as an agitator at the grassroots level, and then there's the others, who say, 'We need more Latinos on the big screen.' What is better for La Raza right now? Staying true politically and not reaching as many numbers? Staying poor and continuing to do nonprofit theater?"

"There's always someone self-righteously pointing the finger at you and calling you a sellout," says Montoya. "Luis is no more a sellout than anyone else, but he's one Latino who has made it to Hollywood and who has taken his plays to Broadway, so people can look at him and say, 'Look, he doesn't want to do his plays in the barrios anymore.' Why *should* he do his plays in the barrio anymore? You *have* to go Broadway, you have to come and play ball in Hollywood, 'cause that's where it's happening."

"Ultimately," says Siguenza, "Luis isn't the beginning and end of Chicano culture. We like to think that maybe Culture Clash can shoulder some of that. If we depend on just one guy, that's a lot of pressure to promote the whole Latino experience. He's at the forefront of all of us, and if he's having trouble getting it done, it's just an indication of how far away we really are."

Montoya answers a question that might be lurking in the minds of some of us: "Why are we carrying all these issues? Why do this when there are some rap artists making millions a year talking about female body parts? Wouldn't it be easier if we went for that?" Montoya continues: "There are times when I'd like to leave this all behind, but then you're always brought back to the reality of the situation — that part of our agenda is to politicize TV. We don't see any brown faces on TV, and that's very upsetting. In theater, it's a constant battle to get your plays produced, so we're always kind of brought back by that — kind of grounded by that. There are so many doors, so many barriers to be opened or torn down, that we can't possibly turn our back on that. We're not here to ask anybody for anything; we're here to just claim it. In a sense, you have to claim your part of the American experience. A lot of people got upset when Luis would claim *Zoot Suit* or *La Bamba* as a new American film or play: 'Gee, Luis, why do you have to always keep throwing that in?' Because it *is* an American thing. It's as American as rolling up a hot dog in a corn tortilla and putting some Grey Poupon on it — *that* is a culture clash that you eat. That's what we grew up with, and we're here to claim that stuff, not to ask for it humbly.

"Realistically, the Fox project could go nowhere. There's always the tendency to be hot today and not tomorrow. But we're not worried about it, 'cause we're so firmly rooted in where we come from, and because we have people like my dad [José Montoya] to remind us. I think we'll be in good shape to go into a medium like TV and make it as meaningful and hip and witty as we can." ■

*Culture Clash performs Bowl of Beings Fri/26 and The Mission Sat/27 at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts. Call 903-6000 for ticket information.*