



Culture Clash

Culture Clash withstands the test of time

—by Sal Panuco

The unique California-based Chicano/Latino comedic troupe is going home to celebrate its 15-year anniversary. In San Francisco, the talented trio, will be staging a benefit performance and reception to honor one of its original members, the late multimedia artist, José Antonio Burciaga. In "Culture Clash Anthology, A Fifteen-Year Retrospective," they will perform a compilation of their award-winning work and introduce new acts at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, on March 11. Proceeds will go to the Burciaga Artist Trust & Fund, which Burciaga, an author, muralist and journalist, established to help struggling Chicano Artists.

The trio — Richard Montoya, of Mexican parentage, and Ric Salinas and Herbert Siguenza, of Salvadoran descent — began performing together in their early 20s. They have built full productions on the idiosyncratic behaviors of Latinos and others who contribute their distinctive cultures to help define U.S. cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Miami. They have now been commissioned by Arena Stage in Washington D.C., where they recently concluded a two-month engagement of their Miami show "Radio Mambo," to create a production about life in the nation's capital. The new show will be based on the D.C. culture and politics and is slated for the 2001-2002 season.

Known early in their careers for their Chicano-centric comedy, they have expanded greatly their array of characters. Critics praise their precision and flair in portraying the full social strata — black, white, Asian and Hispanic, young and old, rich and poor, bigots and

saints of all shades and ethnicities.

In their interview with Hispanic Link's Oswaldo Zavala and Roberto Ericksen-Mendoza, Culture Clash members speak about their transformation throughout the years and their dedication to work in creative and personal sync for a decade and a half.

Q: Can you define your art, your style?

Montoya: As Latinos, we're redefining our role in this country. We're retelling history. Whoever tells history is in charge. People tend to think of this country as black and white. We Latinos live our lives in many shades of gray — and some very bright colors, too. Radio Mambo has been doing well for the past 5 years because we're really speaking to the whole country.

Q: While Radio Mambo had been very successful elsewhere, you played only one night in Miami.

Montoya: There was a safety issue there. Extremists have bombed art galleries there. Artists won't chance risking lives. The Buena Vista Social Club can't perform there.

Q: You're famous for the months of preparation you spend in developing your shows. How do you do it?

Montoya: Preparing in Miami, we'd get 20 people together. That led us to 60. We ended up interviewing 70. People with the most interesting things to say rise to the top.

Salinas: We're part journalists, part artists. We're becoming more documentarian. We go to the library,

talk to historians, talk to people, read the papers. In the '60s and '70s, Chicano (ITAL) teatro (END ITAL) vilified the white Border Patrol. For our show in San Diego, we interviewed Border Patrol agents first — and eight times out of ten they were Chicanos, Tejanos just as gung-ho as the white guy.

Siguenza: Every city has a different tale, a different feel. In Washington, you have middle-class blacks, but you also have a whole bunch of disenfranchised blacks. Eight of our first 12 presidents were slave owners. When you do Washington, how can you avoid that?

Q: How do you choose what to use?

Siguenza: Some people — their stories — just touch us.

Salinas: It's a real editing process. We may morph three people into one because they're saying basically the same thing.

Q: How have you seen Latino humor change in the past 15 years?

Salinas: When we first started out, the political correctness thing was happening. We crossed that line. We would make fun of Che Guevara. In performances at Berkeley, we would get hissed. Then, somewhere down the middle of our career, the whole p.c. thing disappeared. Audiences are tired of p.c. New Latino comics are disregarding p.c.

Q: So many ethnic comedians now use stereotypes constantly to disparage their own people, to make mainstream audiences accept

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them. Is that a fair statement? To be successful, is it necessary?

Siguenza: It happens. I see it coming back with new comedians. Too often, when you are starting out, you write your humor to do that. I think it's age. The younger you are, the easier it is to write those direct hits and not care.

Q: Your humor plays on cultural distinctions, but not to the point of cruelly ridiculing your characters...

Montoya: Our characters are based on people we've interviewed and interacted with at great length — genuine, appealing people, whatever their foibles. We try to be universal, to reach everyone.

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While it's Chicano humor, at the core of Chicano sensibility, it's also American humor. It's just a little more specific.

Q: What does it mean to be Chicano?

Siguenza: It's a spiritual and political point of view. Most of all it's a state of mind, more left than centered, a stubborn kind of non-conformity.

Salinas: I say that I'm

Chicano through osmosis. (ITAL)yo soy Salvadoreño cien por ciento(END ITALIC), but when you grow up with Chicano theater, Chicano posters, Chicano music, Chicano aesthetics... It exists and it's strong.

Montoya: It's a mentality, a frame of thought, an aesthetic. We're going to continue to question its meaning, but we want to make sure it survives into the next century.

Q: Do you see broader receptivity for Latino humor coming now?

Salinas: It seems like it now, a little bit. It was supposed to happen in the '80s — the decade of the Hispanics — when Ritchie Valens and La Bamba was out, the number one movie; Los Lobos had the number one song and Eddie Olmos was on Miami Vice. Latinos had great expectations in the '80s, but not that much happened.

Q: You've done non-Latino material like the Birds. What made you take on that play?

Montoya: In our 15 years, it was our first adaptation of a piece already written — written over 2000 years ago. We read Aristophanes's comedy and saw the parallels. He spoke out against the government, spoke out on topics of the day — a real radical of his time. And we're the same thing. So it was a Greek comedy a la Culture Clash, and it worked.

Q: After D.C., what

do you see happening next with you?

Salinas: It's taken us a long time to get where we are. Certainly, we're not quitting. I look forward to our writing for other people. Maybe that's the next step for us — to do film and television.

Montoya: I don't think we are obsessed with crossing over to a mainstream audience. They need to meet us half way. A lot of Hispanics get caught up — especially in Hollywood — with this crossover idea. Ninety percent of our D.C. audiences weren't Latino. But by the end of the night, they were on the bus with us. They wanted to dialogue about race with three Latin brothers, not just three whatever guys — three Latino guys up there playing this array of black, white, Asian, Jewish characters.

Q: How long do you think you can keep it going?

Richard: We're always assessing, a couple of us are 40 now, and Rick just got married. Herbert is engaged.

Siguenza: We are going through a transformation next year. We are kind of like pioneers and it's taking us a long time to get there. But I can't wait 'till we write for other people in film, when you have young people's voices coming out of us and our experience. So definitely, the next step is to do film and television.

For now, Culture Clash members will continue gathering data on Washington D.C. for their coming production. As in Miami, they will intertwine the written and oral history, geography, politics and people of D.C. to tell their story from a philosophically Chicano point of view. A play about D.C. can be overwhelming since there's so much potential material. The hard part will be the narrowing and editing process. It'll be interesting to see how they handle the nation's capital, a town that connects to every nation on earth. And where all the world turns to for humor. (Hispanic Link)