

Community theatre and indigenous performance traditions

An introduction to Chicano theatre, with reference to parallel developments in South Africa¹

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Abstract

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This article will focus on the theme of community and on the forms stemming from oral literature and musical tradition in Chicano theatre, while drawing comparisons with similar developments in South Africa.

I will argue that the reappropriation of traditional modes and their integration into stage performance replaced the formerly "Eurocentric definition of theatre" with a more indigenous specificity, a development that has been observed in South Africa as well (Hauptfleisch, 1988:40). We can thus speak of a certain divergence from standard contemporary Western traditions in both the Chicano and the black South African community theatre, a trend that is notable in both their themes and forms.

1. "Community theatre": topic and terminology

1.1 Community theatre

This article deals with community theatre. The concept "community" is usually meant to emphasise the political purpose of this type of theatre; in some instances, it is also used to draw attention to the presumed grassroots background of the theatre practitioners themselves (Vargas, 1973:20-24). "Community", however, identifies *all* the participants in the communicative event that is community theatre. It defines the target audience (not just the sender, but the

¹ This article is based on a paper originally presented during a conference in 1994 at the UNISA Centre for Latin American Studies

receiver of the “message” as well), and thus both parties in the encounter taking place in a theatre performance.

In one way, the term is inclusive – accommodating members of different ethnicities – in another, it functions as a defining, and thus delimitating factor. The theatre which is the topic of the following discussion is thus not the professional, exportable theatre, but a grassroots phenomenon. Hence I will not refer to international successes abroad, but to the current community theatre that predominately targets its *own* audience on the home turf.

The theatre discussed here comes closer to Steadman’s (1990:307 ff) concept of “popular theatre” than to his notion of “community theatre”. Since the boundaries between the four types of theatre he describes are fluent, his definitions must remain inconclusive. Rather than confining myself to a definition of limited usefulness, I will draw on the wider notion of “community theatre”, applying it in a more inclusive sense to what has been labelled elsewhere as workshop, committed, popular, black, trade union, or people’s theatre (Fleischman, 1990; Tomaselli, 1981; Steadman, 1990:317 ff; Huerta, 1982:3 ff).

1.2 “Chicano” and “Chicano theatre”

The term “Chicano” has not only political, but also grassroots connotations and differs in this respect from the earlier “Mexican-American”, and the recently more fashionable “Hispanic” epithet.

Historically, Chicano artists, writers, and performers have been operating mostly outside the mainstream. Although the artistic, literary and dramatic traditions of the Southwest were all established well before the region’s annexation by the USA in 1848, the subsequent substitution of Spanish-language institutions by Anglo-Americans led to the Chicanos’ exclusion from participation in all public spheres. When by the mid 1970s, ten years after the birth of the Chicano movement, the doors to the institutions finally opened, it was not long before commercialisation became a viable option for Chicano artists in general, and theatre practitioners in particular. But because of its refusal to accommodate to the fashion of the dominant (Anglo-American) market, Chicano theatre has continued to operate outside the establishment theatre – although there have been some exceptions, most notably the Teatro Campesino’s appearances in Hollywood and on Broadway during the last decade (Rahner, 1991:115-117).

1.3 South African community theatre

In South Africa, “the first mass black theatre audience” was created in the 1960s (Fleischman, 1990:97). Whether part of the black South African theatre has since

been appropriated by establishment theatre has been debated elsewhere (Steadman, 1990:307 ff; Willoughby, 1995:18), and will not be discussed here; the examples chosen will be plays that have addressed primarily their own communities.²

Although in the first instance an imported entertainment form, adapted for the black population on the European model, it gradually started to fuse with indigenous African performance elements. Whilst the “Eurocentric definition of theatre” had become “the paradigm for all subsequent creative work” – even the “African musical” of the 1960s having its roots, in fact, in the “American style musical ...” (Hauptfleisch, 1992:75) – indigenous forms were progressively reappropriated and readapted to change this alien import to “something like a separate tradition” (Hauptfleisch, 1988: 37, 40).³ The Chicano theatre saw a comparable development.

2. The background of Chicano theatre

“Chicano theatre” is the theatre by and for the Mexican-American minority in the United States, irrespective of whether this minority is Spanish or English speaking, or bilingual. Although the term “Chicano theatre” has only been current since the mid sixties, the phenomenon itself is in fact not new. Ever since the Spaniards colonised Mexico and the northern borderlands, now part of the United States, Spanish language theatre, or *teatro*, has played an important role in the cultural life of the inhabitants of the Southwest (Kanellos, 1983; Gipson, 1967; Johnson, 1930). Having evolved not only from Spanish theatre, but also from precolumbian performance forms (Rahner, 1980:80ff), it developed into a separate distinctive tradition.

Much has been made of the fact that *teatro* has had an even longer history than that of the Anglo-Americans themselves, the first performance having taken place in 1598 in what is now the United States (Johnson, 1930:125). Documents show innumerable records of theatre productions by resident and travelling companies

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- 2 My examples of South African community theatre had to be based to a great extent on secondary literature, since my personal observations of this theatre in action have been limited to few performances in more or less elitist venues, among them, for example, the University of Natal campus, the Natal Playhouse, and the very much institutionalised Grahamstown Fringe. The audiences were no doubt limited to those who could afford both transport and ticket price.
 - 3 With Fleischman (1990:104) the emphasis is not on the “hybridization” (Hauptfleisch) and – obviously conscious – borrowing from different sources, but on a natural continuation of older forms. Writing about contemporary performance elements being related to the structure of traditional oral literature, he states that this did not “necessarily” come about as “a conscious decision on the part of the people making the plays”.

up until the thirties of this century (Ybarra-Frausto, 1983; Brokaw, 1975; Englekirk, 1940; Miguélez, 1983). At this point, however, the tradition died and although for some time plays continued to be performed before or after the showing of a film, as a sort of double bill, Hollywood eventually won the battle and plays were phased out.

One area where the theatrical tradition managed to survive was that of religious theatre: mainly Nativity plays and *autos sacramentales*, which had made their way from Spain to New Mexico during the 17th century (Steele, 1978; Abelardo Gonzales, 1972-1973; Ribera-Ortega, 1968; Pearce, 1956; Gillmor, 1957; Campa, 1934; 1931; Stone, 1933). However, these only survived in some isolated hamlets in New Mexico and Colorado, and probably would have disappeared altogether, had it not been for the Teatro Campesino's rise in the 1960s and the revival of Mexican-American theatre in the wake of the American civil rights movement.

The Teatro Campesino started out as the artistic arm of the United Farmworker's Union which in the early sixties began to organise Chicano farmworkers in California. After a few years it separated from the Union, and with independence came a responsiveness to different audiences. For a short time it turned into a political student theatre, but in the early seventies, at the height of the Chicano movement, it distanced itself from its radical base (Diamond, 1975:110 ff.)

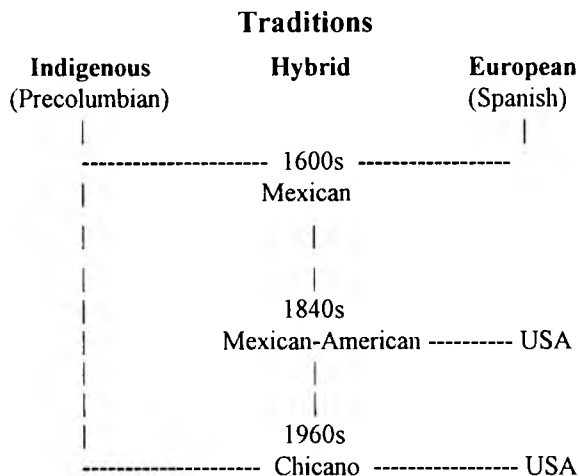
After a more inward-looking phase of exploring Chicano myth and religion, it metamorphosed into a full-time, professional company (Rahner, 1991:220-280). In fact, from the early eighties onwards, it has been increasingly criticised for having become commercial and mainstream (Goldman, 1980:2-7; Robles Segura, 1983:9).

The importance of the Teatro Campesino lies in that it did not remain a unique isolated case but inspired the founding of countless other groups throughout the country. From the end of the 1960s onwards, Chicano theatre groups have been mushrooming all across the States wherever there is a sizable community of Mexican-Americans.

The theatre that has evolved in the last thirty years has a complex provenance: on one side it is the immediate offspring of political American street theatre – Valdez had previously trained with the San Francisco Mime Troupe (Davis, 1975:199 ff) – and hence a direct descendant of agit-prop and European theatre practice. On the other side, it also derived much input from the older Mexican theatrical tradition, already itself a hybrid. With the passing years, and especially since the early 1970s, Chicano theatre has not only continued to tap this earlier tradition, but has also drawn on precolumbian ritual performance. This has been

a conscious decision on the part of many theatre practitioners in an attempt to go back to their Indian roots (Valdez, 1971:3).

A simplified diagram of the “lineage” of Chicano theatre demonstrates the various phases of cross-fertilisation:



A similar process of hybridization took place in South Africa, where two distinctive traditions, the indigenous and that of the colonizer, have brought about a theatre “which is uniquely South African” (Hauptfleisch, 1992:77).

3. The parameters of South African and Chicano theatres

As a recent arrival to South Africa, I could not help but notice the similarity between Chicano and South African community plays. Although one being a minority theatre and the other one a “majority theatre”, with different backgrounds and histories, both regard their work as oppositional cultural practice and seem to follow similar aims by operating apart from the establishment theatre.

3.1 Theatre of social protest

In both instances, theatre is often used for the purpose of social protest. It can address both its own ethnic community and groups of “outsiders” and hence fulfil

separate functions.⁴ On the one hand it aims to rouse critical awareness and to provide political education, whilst at the same time serving as a way of ethnic group bonding. On the other hand, when addressing the outsider audience, it has frequently tried to find support by serving an informative function. In the United States, many Anglo spectators simply did not know anything about the problems of Mexican-Americans.

Most Chicano plays do not mince words and quite ferociously attack the economically dominant sector of society, often playing *against* the traditional white liberal audiences. But unlike the black American theatre the *Teatro Chicano* did not develop into an “angry theatre”, never intending to alienate its outsider audiences.⁵ In this respect it also differs from the black South African theatre, which in its militant phase did not shy away from making white spectators uncomfortable.⁶

However, it seems that grievances of both Chicanos and black South Africans against their respective governments have created artistic outlets in the last three decades that have many points in common. Frequently multilingual, performed by people who have had no professional training, the plays are more often than not the outcome of a group effort rather than the product of an individual artist (Huerta, 1982:12 ff; Fleischman, 1990). Moreover, the themes treated by African groups show up just as regularly in Chicano plays: the justice system, police brutality, exploitation, discrimination, and education policies.

3.2 Theatre of cultural consolidation

One element that occurs constantly in both theatres is the representation of their own respective communities. The stories of individuals are always the stories of the collective as well.

In both instances the theatre addresses ethnic groups which find themselves at loggerheads with the dominant wider socio-cultural system. Recognising the need to further the unity of their public by consolidating its particular norms and

4 In this paper, the terms “in-group” and “outsider” (an individual not regarded by an ethnic group as belonging to it), will exclusively refer to the problematic of ethnic group boundaries. See Limón (1981:197-225); Barth (1969)

5 For information on the black American theatre, see Fabre (1983). In its initial stage, the black American theatre was organised by and targeted to whites. Only after the civil rights movement had created the preconditions for the development of a black audience, could black theatre start to address its own community, and afford to play *against* the white public.

6 An example would be the play *Survival* by the Workshop 71 Theatre Company

values, community theatres continuously stress the ethnicity of their own population group, clarifying those cultural marks that are common to the group as a whole. The immediate aim is to create a positive consciousness of ethnicity, which is reflected in the ever-recurring theme of "the community".

4. The theme and role of community

The theme of community runs counter to most Western preconceptions of dramatic plot, where the focus traditionally has been on the individual. Rather than following the fate of one main character, in quite a number of plays it is the Chicano community as such which occupies the central role; the spectators' attention is often equally divided amongst a variety of protagonists, who present a cross section of the Chicano population.

The individual roles are, more often than not, types rather than characters, as they serve as paradigms of whole sections of the community. This is not only true for the depiction of victimised Chicanos and of the enemy, namely the caricature Anglo or Chicano sell-out, but also for the strong positive role models. In some instances, masks are used in order to emphasise that what we witness is not the particular misfortune of one single individual, but that of a whole section of the population.⁷

Writing about South African workshop theatre, Fleischman (1990:89) states that it too "has more to do with the collective subject than with the individual subject of Western drama". Moreover, black South African community theatre shows the same preoccupation as Chicano theatre in its attitude towards type casting. Not only the exploited housemaid or the desperate township dweller, but also the idealist schoolteacher and the young feminist tenant who puts up a fight with her landlady embody the typical historical and social contradictions of their time. They do not have any individual traits, and so stand for thousands of others.

What often underscores this message is the large cast and the episodic structure of the plays. This enables many different characters to take centre stage for a few minutes and share their situation with the spectators.

In *Target*, the different participants in the action that revolves around a school dispute all stand in for the representative sections of the community. The gamut of characters runs from the militant supporting the teachers' strike, to the student

7 The use of masks was seen for example in Teatro Campesino's *Las dos caras del patroncito* (1965), in some performances of their *No saco nada de la escuela* (1969), Teatro Desengaño del Pueblo's *El alcalde* (1973), Teatro de la Esperanza's *Guadalupe* (1974), and in *Trampa sin salida* by Jaime Verdugo (1971).

critical of her teachers and to the more conservative older citizen; it ranges further from the conscientious educator to the permanently absentee teacher, the pompous headmaster, and the corrupt instructor taking bribes.⁸

In a comparable Chicano scenario, as in *No saco nada de la escuela* (Valdez, 1971), the range of characters might span from the angry militant via an assortment of half-assimilated students, to the ultimate “sell-out”, the redneck Anglo bully, and the Anglo-American professor or teacher.

Both theatres also have a tradition of *exclusively* focusing on their own communities, dealing with topics that exclude the outsider or economically dominant society. I will refer to this kind of play by using the term “introspective play”. One can distinguish two basic types of performances: those of a backward looking, retrospective nature, that quite uncritically celebrate the community’s own culture and traditions, and those that problematize certain areas of ethnic culture.

4.1 Retrospectives

Examples of the first type seem to be very common in South Africa, but by now have become relatively rare in Chicano theatre. Whilst plays like *Ubuntu Bomhlaba* paint a picture of a mythical and idyllic African past which – although including practices like child sacrifice – is beyond any criticism,⁹ some Chicano plays look back to the 19th century or idealise the *barrio* life of the forties and fifties.

These kind of plays usually do not consist of a tightly scripted plot. Instead, the narrative might be loosely organised around the life of a particular hero, such as “El Louie”, a Zoot Suiter of the fifties, immortalised by the poet José Montoya (1970:173-176) and portrayed by Teatro Mestizo in a play based on the poem. The narrative would be situated in a particular locality, and then perhaps consist of a string of episodes, with the focus on the music, dance, and fashions – including low riders – of the time.

8 *Target* (1994) by the Bachaki Theatre. Other South African examples are *Emakishimi*, *Ke Bophelo*, *Devil’s Den*, and *Kwa-Landlady*, all performed at Grahamstown in 1993 and 1994.

9 *Ubuntu Bomhlaba* by the Sibikwa Community Theatre Project. Other examples for nostalgic retrospectives would be *Uphumthakathi*, *Phathizwe*, and *The Legend of Murumba* (1993 and 1994 festivals). *uNosimilela* by Credo V Mutwa belongs to this category as well, in spite of Kavanagh’s claim that the play is a “re-evaluation of black culture and history” (Kavanagh, 1992:xviii – reprinted in 1992).

This type of play was quite popular in the late sixties and early seventies, when the outward demonstration of ethnicity and otherness was in itself seen as a political statement. By the end of the decade, however, it received widespread criticism for not offering anything besides a rosy retrospective.¹⁰ It had outlived its original function. What in 1970 was regarded as politically useful and even progressive – namely to inform audiences about and instil pride in their culture by showcasing a specific aspect of it – had become an embarrassment ten years later.

4.2 Critical re-evaluation of cultural tenets

Plays that critically examine certain parts of Chicano culture and history are much more common. Often this is achieved through comedy, just as in South African theatre of this type. *Kwa-Landlady*, one such play performed at the Grahams-town festival in 1994, attacked the public's complacency towards a range of what was felt were homegrown problems.

In the theatre that aims to re-evaluate Chicano culture, the *barrio* or neighbourhood is not an idyllic haven offering cultural comfort from the aggressive white world either. Instead, it is depicted most often in its worst colours and features unemployment, drug abuse, gang fights and violence.

In many early plays Chicano culture was emphasised as a protection against the destructive power of Anglo influence. Acculturation or selling out was seen as the ultimate crime. But critical introspective theatre makes clear distinctions. It demonstrates that certain cultural tenets can be destructive. In this way, even the family, elsewhere regarded as the supposedly ultimate safe haven and source of Chicano culture, was uncovered as a breeding pool for negative cultural beliefs.

Theatres started to dismantle previously unquestioned concepts, holy cows like loyalty, honour, or being *macho*. The exclusively positive Chicano role models, so common in performances that attack the Anglo enemy, are a rarity in the plays concerned with the critical re-evaluation of cultural norms and values. The characters, although still broad social types, show a lot of ambiguity. For example, an otherwise likeable father figure might be shown as an authoritarian brute. This is a characteristic of black community theatre as well. One of the

10 As witnessed by the author in 1979 during the panel discussions at the TENAZ 10th National Chicano Theatre Festival in Santa Barbara, when the "message" of plays like *El Louie* by Teatro Mestizo was declared obsolete.

self-made women in *So What's New* is also shown as a drug dealer, who recognises her business for what it is and is ashamed of it.¹¹

5. Target audiences in Chicano Theatre

Whilst these critical plays are targeted specifically towards a Chicano public, some groups have chosen to perform them also in venues with mixed audiences. This has sometimes given cause for alarm for some people within the Chicano theatre community.

Although self-criticism might have been encouraged, exposure before outsiders was not (Robles Segura, 1983:8; Morton, 1984:3 ff). Concerned voices have warned that by depicting Chicanos as murderers, drunks, and drug addicts, the Chicano theatre only confirms Anglo preconceived notions about ethnic culture and therefore does more harm than good to its own community (Goldman, 1980-1981:7).

In South Africa, criticism of negative self-portrayal by black theatre had a different emphasis. The concern was not so much the projection of in-group concerns to outsiders, but the belief that the theatre had to have the "moral duty ... to instil ... a sense of pride" in its own people (Khumalo, 1974).

In an interview with the script writers and directors of a number of contemporary self-critical plays, I received the impression that this criterion has ceased to be binding, and that audience *targeting* itself is not perceived as an important aspect of performance, at least for this kind of introspective play.¹² The importance of aiming at a specific audience has, however, been acknowledged in the case of militant plays.¹³

The controversy revolving around the target audience grew to massive proportions when the Teatro Campesino finally went mainstream in the early eighties, by putting on shows in San Francisco theatres that were patronised by an exclusive Anglo audience. At the time, it was producing plays that looked back

11 *So What's New* by Fatima Dike, performed in Grahamstown, 1994.

12 Short interviews were given by Magi Noninzi Williams (*IKwa-Landlady*) and by members of the Bachaki theatre and the Zakheni Cultural Group in July 1993 and 1994.

13 For example. Kavanagh's anthology of *South African People's Plays* contains some notes on alternative versions for black and white spectators respectively and makes mention of the varying impact of Shezi's *Shanti* on different audiences (Kavanagh, 1992:65-66). In general, there seems to be little information available concerning the constitution of theatre audiences before 1976 (Orkin, 1992:35), not to speak of the conscious targeting of such audiences

to the last century, like *Bandido!* and *Los Corridos*. To evoke the right feel for the past, the Teatro Campesino chose to make use of traditional borderland *corridos* or folk ballads such as *Rosita Alvarez* and *Cornelio Vega*. But in doing so, it stirred up a hornets' nest. Insiders, mainly those from the old vanguard, fumed :

Not everything produced by the folk is valid and progressive culture, it is often impregnated with regressive values. Chicano artists should be selective about what they integrate into their own art forms (Goldman, 1980:3).

The problem was of course that the *corrido*, the early 19th century news and entertainment vehicle for the isolated villages north of the border, always carried lurid stories of villains and faithless women. To have a play based on such ballads, meant having to adopt the less than savoury characters as well. But these did not correspond to the acceptable self-image of the Chicano. Critics hence accused Luis Valdez, the director, that by showing "Mexicans as murderers, drunks, adulterers and liars," he was "appealing to the Anglo prurient interest" (Morton, 1984:3).

6. Music

Much has been written on the subject of music in the South African community theatre. Hauptfleisch (1988:45) argues for a development of the original African tradition, through "popular urban adaptations" of African performance elements, in particular dance and music. Gray (1993:68) gives yet another reason for the prominence of traditional forms: "Because of fluency problems, much black (and other) South African theatre stresses extra-verbal elements, ... which – to put it baldly – even illiterates may readily comprehend and enjoy ..." as if the dance and music somehow were stopgap measures to prop up the faulty script: "When in doubt, sing ... as a rule of thumb this has pulled many less inspired South African scripts through." Judging from performances of plays like *Ubuntu Bomhlaba* and *Life in the Hostel*, however, the emphasis on song and music seems to be not peripheral, but fundamental to their structure.

Whether the reliance on music brought about a development towards episodic forms, or whether the episodic structure of the plays "... is related to the structure of the traditional oral folk-tale", has been debated elsewhere. Arguing not for a reappropriation, but for a continuation of indigenous forms, Fleischman (1990:104) maintains that the use of episodic forms "is not necessarily a conscious decision on the part of the people making the plays ... It is probably ... an integrated element of verbomotor cultural expression". In any case, episodic forms, in which songs and dances structure the performance, predominate. Narration, short vignettes then link the musical sections. One feels that the

coherent basis making for unity is the music, not the spoken word or acting, even in plays that intend to convey an urgent message, as *Life in the Hostel*.¹⁴

Music plays a similarly strong role in Chicano culture, and many Chicano plays show an episodic format as well. Often, as in African communities, performers might be called upon to play music and generally entertain at a wedding or other local festivity. They see themselves both as musicians and actors. In this way, some theatre groups have revived the old borderland tradition of the *carpas*, or travelling performers, whose shows would include something of everything: plays, sketches on current topics, dances, music, and even acrobatics (Ybarra-Frausto, 1978:xii-xiv; Ybarra-Frausto, 1971:51-52).

There is hardly a play that does not feature at least a couple of musicians. Apart from the traditional *corrido*, there are other types of music which are regularly performed, depending on the play. The Teatro Campesino had since its inception written its own strikers' songs, both music and theatre being put to use in their rallies and protest marches. Their *banda calavera* was for many years a familiar sight; it fulfilled multiple functions on and off stage: it advertised performances, announced and participated in particular events of mass action, keeping up the spirit of the strikers and supporters. During performances, often on the picket line, it helped to bridge the gap between actors and audience.

Songs, just like the plays themselves, were not regarded as intellectual property. Many groups regularly performed original Teatro Campesino material. Others would use well known or otherwise powerful Latin American tunes and write new lyrics for them. This was for example done by the Teatro de la Esperanza, which rewrote the Chilean *Cantata de Santa María de Iquique*¹⁵ for a docudrama attacking the local government. Many Chicano groups feel a spiritual alliance with political groups in Latin-American countries, for which the numerous cultural exchanges between north and south provide a concrete basis.¹⁶

14 Performed by the Zakhcni Cultural Group (1993).

15 *The Siege of Santa María de Iquique – A People's Cantata* by Luis Advis (Paredon Records). The lyrics describe the 1907 miners' strike in Chile. The song was popularised in Europe and the USA by exiled Chileans after the 1973 coup.

16 The exchange with Latin-American groups started with the Mascarones of Mexico City and the Nuevo Teatro Pobre de las Américas of Puerto Rico. Mariano Leyva from the Mascarones was one of the founding members of El Teatro Nacional de Aztlán, a coalition of *teatros* that included Mexican groups. Some of the now regularly occurring Pan-American events are the National Festivals of Popular Theatre organised by CLETA (Mexico) and the biennial National Chicano Theatre Festivals, where groups like La Mama, the Teatro Experimental de Cali, and La Candelaria regularly participate. In the past, Latin-American theatre practitioners such as

7. Oral tradition

The oral tradition of African culture, reinforcing the community orientation of theatre, is reflected by the structure of stage performances. Various links have been suggested between story telling traditions and contemporary South African community theatre (Morris, 1989:95-100; Fleischman, 1990:88-117).

Often a play puts the focus on the *telling* of the story. *Sheila's Day*, for example, started with all the women characters introducing themselves as story tellers and protagonists of their respective stories.¹⁷ Very similar is the approach of Chicano theatre which often makes use of narrators who are not only stage figures but inhabit the space between audience and stage. Whilst this has a distinctly Brechtian effect, it is nevertheless a separate development that can be traced back to traditional forms.¹⁸

In *Los Corridos*, it is a master of ceremony who provides the link with the audience. Here, the oral tradition of the early *carpas* whose performance would have included also jokes and *cuentos*, continues and stresses the episodic format already provided by the music. In the case of *Chicana*, by the all-women group Las Cucarachas, the narrators ensure that what we see on stage – a procession of historical and legendary Chicana women – is seen from their own perspective – that of women. As the play progresses, the women are constantly switching in and out of their roles, assuming the parts of different storytellers.¹⁹

Another way of emphasising the oral tradition is the Chicano theatre's way of making use of the still popular *corrido*, or ballad. As already mentioned, the *corridos* had been the carrier of news in the borderland between the southwestern States and Mexico. Since the composers of new melodies could not always catch up with the day-to-day events, the tunes of an older story were often re-used for the newest news. This oral tradition was alive up until the beginning of this

Augusto Boal, Rodolfo Santana, Emilio Carballido, Osvaldo Dragún, Humberto Martínez and Enrique Buenaventura have offered workshops and participated in discussion panels during the festivals.

17 *Sheila's Day*, written by Duma Ndlovu and directed by Mbongeni Ngema, both South Africans, was performed with a mixed South African and American cast by the Crossroads Theatre Company at the Grahamstown Festival, 1993.

18 For a different point of view, see Goldsmith (1979:167-175).

19 *Los Corridos* by Teatro Campesino (1982); *Chicana* by Dorinda Moreno and Las Cucarachas (1974/5), programme notes in the Chicano Studies Library, Berkeley. Other, more recent plays in the storytelling format are *Voz de la mujer* by Valentina Productions (1981), *No me callarán, no me llamaré* by Electra Arcnal (1982), and *I am Celso*, by Ruben Sierra (1986).

century. At this stage the *corridos* did not die out, but their function was changed to one of pure entertainment. When the Teatro Campesino started to explore this new medium in the early seventies, plays would begin with a *corrido* in quite the traditional way. The melody – known to most of the audience – was fitted with a new text.

Often this *corrido* then formed a frame for the whole performance, as in *Bernabé*, a mythical journey leading the spectator from the present back into the world of the Nahuas through the mediation of the ballad singer, the narrator. This figure is an old Mexican who in the end will pass on his guitar and with it the *corrido* tradition to a younger man. The didactic aspect of the story-telling is particularly noticeable in this play, where, through oral traditions, the older generation is seen to pass on its own experience and wisdom.²⁰ A similar effect is created by the South African play *uNosilimela*, where the storyteller is at the same time a teacher, passing on the culture of his forefathers to the next generation.

The Teatro Campesino experimented further with its *corridos* and became hugely successful with this new kind of performance. *La carpa de los rasquachis* was probably the most popular of a long list of *corridos*.²¹ The *corrido* now shaped the play to such an extent that each scene, introduced and concluded by a stanza of the ballad, became a part of it. In the mid seventies, a huge wave of new plays taking up the new craze of the *corrido* was produced by groups all over the country. In fact, the importance of the *corrido* was such that the term was used from then on to designate a completely new genre, where the *corrido* always provides the structure for the play.

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A thematic concern with community and the importance of oral and musical traditions inform both the Chicano and black South African community theatre. At times these traditions have been adapted for staging and have been integrated into a theatrical performance, and in many cases they are the basis out of which the play grows.

Either way, the outcome is quite different from European traditions of theatre. In some cases this might have been due to other, non-traditional European influences. However, in general, in both the Chicano and the black South African

20 *Bernabé*, by the Teatro Campesino (1970)

21 *La Carpa de los Rasquachis*, by the Teatro Campesino, original version 1972, further versions since 1973, one with the title *El Corrido* in 1976.

community theatres, it is the result of a reappropriation of traditional elements, a return to an indigenous ethos exemplified by non-European performance forms.

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