

Performance Review: *El Garden* (12/1/76)

We're in a garden, yes? We can tell because of all the hanging plants. And a lot of animals (animals!) are here with us too, yes? Look at the stuffed bear, right down there—or that monkey climbing on the pole up stage. But this is no ordinary, run-of-La Jolla garden, yes? See the head of that serpent high and cloud-like against the sky blue scrim? You know that snake—that's "La Serpiente"! The evil one! Now you recognize where we are, yes? We are in *El Garden* about to witness the fall of Man as interpreted by Carlos Morton. . . .

The opening of *El Garden* established a milestone in the history of the UC San Diego theatre, and in the history of one Chicano playwright, Carlos Morton. I glanced at Morton several times during the performance last night. He balanced on the edge of his chair, fidgeted with his hands—in short, he expressed all the anxiety one expects from a playwright on opening night. They fear failure, as you know. However, this was not just "another opening, another show" for Morton. This was his first major opening, and the first time Chicano theatre has been produced by the UCSD Department of Drama as part of their theatre season. A group at Harvard put together a reading of *El Garden* a year ago under the direction of the playwright. Other of Morton's works have been produced in the street theatre style, various times, various places. From the reactions I observed to *El Garden*, it would seem that I was not alone in wondering, "Why not before?" for the "whole works" production.

Opening night I was surprised to see so little of the usual La Jollian opening night audience. In fact, they were conspicuously missing. The house only filled to about half. This apparent avoidance of a new theatre style incensed me. But I suppose one must reserve harsh judgement until a community has had the chance to learn what a jewel they have in their midst. Morton reminded me following the performance, "*Teatro* as an art form is less than ten years old. We haven't even reached puberty yet!" Maybe not, but then again, maybe. . . .

The play opens with Adán and Eva lounging peacefully in Eden. The dark image of the serpent hangs above them. Eva is bored. She demands of Adán, "How come we never go dancing?" Adán attempts to pacify her, "We've got it pretty good here." Eva cuts him short with, "You've never had anything to compare it to!" Adán admits, "I'm taking the Man's word for it." Is this really Eden, or is it L.A.? You choose.

La Serpiente appears up stage, illuminated behind a blue screen, standing atop a platform of oil barrels, plywood and Coke bottle tops. It's like watching

movies—and nearly “X” Rated. He undulates suggestively, bare-chested, skin-tight gold pants, and a huge viper hood of blue and green mosaics on his head. Serpiente slithers down to Eva. She throws up the defenses, “Don’t you tough me!” He grins her a sly one, “Why? Don’t you dig my movida?”

We all know the story that follows. At least parts of it. That is, until it begins to coil around on itself in a way that would make even La Serpiente envious. Eva bites the apple, gives a slice to Adán: the awakening. Dios appears, dressed in a Fiesta-white suit and riding in an oil drum elevator. He gives the fallen couple a paternal boot to Earth, where La Serpiente fools them into thinking he is their friend. Of course, Serpiente, being the clever rogue he is, disguises himself—as a radical Chicano activist, as a priest, as ex-President Nixon. . . . Adán drops into some heavy revolutionary trips, and Eva, well, she gets religion. Dios gets heavy handed with moralistic narrative, as for example, “That scene was absurd, but isn’t the Christianity we practice today just as ridiculous!” La Serpiente gets overworked trying to play all the bad types on Earth (but not badly). Even the musician who supplies percussion and guitar accompaniment throughout the show gets into the act as Columbus and La Muerte. In the end, Adán and Eva come back together, make up with Dios, and swear, “No more violence, . . . only the picket line!” The play finishes with the company on stage singing an up-beat tune with Dios as the lead vocalist, lyrics to the effect of “Let us fly. . . !”

The strongest performances came from Dios (You would have expected otherwise?) played by Gregorio Flores, and La Serpiente played by Steve Hagberg. Hagberg especially showed a tremendous versatility in his role. Adán and Eva—the humans, right?—turned in less than solid performances, particularly when required to sing. But strangely enough, the weaknesses of their performances added to the illusion of naïveté. If their voices lacked training, that fact reinforced the notion that they themselves were untampered with, pure. They epitomized primal humanity!

The play begins strongly, with a clear cut statement of ideas and story. It disintegrates, however, into a sort of vaudeville of Teatro Campesino *actos* shortly after The Fall. The players are the only link one scene has to another, and even that is sometimes tenuous considering how many disguises the character of La Serpiente assumes. I would advocate not confining the action of the play to one setting, by no means. A lot of the play’s impact comes from the fact that its scope is so broad. I would advise the playwright to strengthen the link between the scenes, to make the play more of a “gestalt” rather than a grouping of isolated incidents. I also felt that the playwright relies on the preaching of morals too heavily in the latter half of the play—certainly to the point of my distraction. However, given the context of the play, and the stage of development of Chicano theatre, I perceive that *El Garden* is a work of great innovation and even daring. It certainly entertains and has a merit I seldom find these days in any literary endeavor: brevity.

Technically, the show was a circus. The oil barrels, Coke and Pepsi bottle tops, stuffed animals, the blue projection scrims, a circle sunken into the floor—all provided a perfect resonance to the contrasting notes of the play. It was a collage of diverse media and symbolic representations. The light technician may

have been a little too busy—some sixty cues in an hour show—but then, it did not distract, so no matter. Amarante Lucero, a new member of the Drama faculty, designed the highly functional setting.

The use of live music in this production added much to the overall effect. At several points the characters broke into song. Splendid. I applaud the director's use of music, which I understand was written at his insistence. However, I think the composer "went slick" on the tunes. If the tunes had any connection to the play's roots, I missed it. The songs seemed indigenous to Broadway only—"show tunes." They just did not fit. If *El Garden* were to be restaged, I would recommend that the director begin again with the music.

I spoke with Jorge Huerta, the director of *El Garden*, prior to the performance. Huerta himself represents a sort of milestone in the development of Chicano theatre in the United States. He is apparently the only Chicano with a Ph.D. in Theatre that is specializing in *Teatro* at this time. Huerta explained that Chicano theatre is so new that there are no textbooks and very few publications of any sort out on it. He explained further that only a handful of theatre companies, some in Texas, some in northern California, have attempted to take Chicano theatre beyond its beginnings in the "Agit-Prop" Teatro Campesino. "What is unique about Morton's play?" I asked. "The fact that it was written by a Chicano makes it unique," Huerta told me. "But," he added, "that doesn't necessarily make it worth doing." I agreed and asked him what did. He replied that he believed the combination of thematic elements made the play stand apart from most others—the juxtaposition of Christian cosmology and Aztec mythology, the intermixing of history and the present Chicano experience, the use of both English and Spanish.

It is more than unfortunate that *El Garden* played for only one weekend. This is out of the ordinary for a UCSD season production. From the buzz I picked up, someone panicked over the possibility of low box office receipts. A compromise was made. A shame. Also, another compromise was made on the show's title. According to Morton, he had originally named his play, *El Jardín*. But apparently the UCSD Drama Department thought the all-Spanish title would imply an all-Spanish play, and hence keep many people away. Seems to me a bit more publicity could have cleared up the problem, and made the compromise unnecessary. Again, a shame.

I hope the "success" or "non-success" of *El Garden* in terms of the box office, will not hamper the further exploration of Chicano theatre at UCSD. After all, someone must take the risks with new art. Why not the university? UCSD, it seems to me, is the perfect place to develop such innovative theatre, just as it is the perfect setting for daring experimentation in the sciences and other disciplines. UCSD should count themselves lucky to have both Carlos Morton as an M.F.A. playwright, and Jorge Huerta as a faculty member. I hope the Drama Department increases their use of these artists in the future.

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