

## Latins Anonymous at the University of California Chicano Literary Awards Ceremony / May 1989

### María Teresa Marrero

Under the direction of Orange County's South Coast Repertory Theater director José Cruz González, a brand new comedy group, Latins Anonymous, kept the UC Irvine Chicano Literary Awards audience in constant laughter with their fast-paced series of sketches. These dealt with issues such as "Why Latin Men Love to Date Blonde Women," "How a Hard Core Chicana Can Make the Transition to the Era of 'thirtysomething,'" and a unique symptom called "Latin Denial."

In the irreverent tradition of Saturday Night Live, the four actors/writers, Luisa Leschin, Diane Rodríguez, Armando Molina and Rick Najera explore and explode the Hollywood Hispanic stereotypes by appropriating a well-known support group rap session by a similar name. Here the audience is invited to participate in the evening meeting. When a visiting member states that her name is "Nicolette" (Luisa Leschin) the audience is encouraged to welcome her out loud to the evening's session. When Nicolette, in a put-on French accent insists that she is "really French, my mother was French, so I am French, I am not Hispanic," we are all made aware by the group's reactions that *this* is an acute case of Latin Denial.

In one of the strongest skits of the evening, the Mayan Defense League (Najera, Rodríguez and Molina) answers an SOS call: Nicolette has taken an overdose of White Wonder bread, and other signs of "white culture" are spotted: blonde peroxide hair bleach. Utilizing cultural signs such as a simulated Mayan head-dress, tortillas, and a flute and rattle dance, the Mayan Defense League manages to administer a life-saving dosis of cultural acceptance: "Your name is really María Luisa and you are all right just the way you are."

The group's most gripping technique is the ability to manipulate cultural signs made familiar to a broad audience by television and films. In another skit they explore a familiar gang-violence theme as recently portrayed in the film "Colors." Using the same ghetto "rap" music the actors push the

stereotypes of the tough gang cholo/chola to an unexpected end: after the "reds" knock off the "blues" and all four bodies lie on the stage floor, we hear an off-stage anglo male voice giving them stage directions to repeat the action, this time with more Latin "passion," thus making us aware of the artificiality of two simultaneous situations: the exaggerated portrayal of the gang situation, and the reaffirmation of such a representation by those responsible for their public consumption.

The topic is a timely one: the June 12, 1989 issue of *Newsweek* magazine has recently dedicated a major article to Hispanic television ("The New Voice of America"). Here we are made aware that, in spite of the 21 million telespectadores, and their \$130 billion a year purchasing power, Columbia Pictures vice president Eduardo Cervantes insists that the pool of Hispanic talent is simply being overlooked: "The bottom line is that there is no commitment to develop any of that talent. Minority writers are considered outsiders." (*Newsweek*, June 12, 1989, p. 58.)

The frustration of this situation was experienced firsthand by the group members, and explains how they met at a Hollywood audition. Rick Najera was vying for the role of a "gang member," Armando Molina was reading for the role of a "Colombian drug dealer," Diane Rodríguez for Maria, "the maid," and Luisa Leschin for pregnant woman 1, 2 or 3. If this was all that Hollywood had to offer them, they would give themselves the opportunity to write, act, produce and express their own Latin views from the inside out.

The experience that the cast members bring into play is impressive: Luisa graduated from the Joffrey II Company in New York, and was a member of the Geneva Ballet in Switzerland. Currently she is on the Emmy award winning PBS series *Square One T.V.*, and she's had co-starring roles on *Hill Street Blues*, *White Shadow*, *Hart to Hart* and others.

Armando Molina studied at the Herbert Berghof Studios in New York, and while there became highly proficient at the Improvisational Theatre Games, a skill used to create many of the characters and scenes for *Latinos Anonymous*. He has worked with the New York group INTAR directed by María Irene Fornes, and in Southern California has worked at the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts and at the South Coast Repertory Theater.

Rick Najera was a member of the Old Globe Theater in San Diego, later joined the San Diego Repertory Theater where he met Ray Bradbury and was encouraged by the author to write. Rick collaborated with Whoopi Goldberg on a Second City of Chicago tape on mental health. He has also acted with the South Coast Repertory Theater in Orange County and boasts television credits.

And last, Diane Rodriguez has a unique trajectory: her acting career began while at the University of California, Santa Barbara; after graduating she joined Luis Valdez's Teatro Campesino. She travelled performing on flat bed trucks, picket lines, at rallies, marches and festivals informing the public of the emerging struggle of the Chicano Movement. She has worked with such

luminaries as Rick Link (founder of the San Francisco Mime Troupe), Carlos Mazzone Clementi (founder of Del Arte Players) and, of course Luis Valdez. Diane is proud to have designed costumes for the Peabody Award winning PBS Show, "Corridos: Tales of Passion and Revolution," starring Linda Rondstadt.

Perhaps it is fitting to perceive this group as a marker in the trend of diversity found within the Hispanic theatre in the U.S. While the militant Chicano Movement served to open doors and minds to the plight of Mexican-Americans, the recent influx of immigrants from Central and South America has expanded the notion of such generic terms as "Latino" and "Hispanic." With *Latins Anonymous* a synthesis of North American pop culture and their own Hispanic tradition mixes to deconstruct some old stereotypes, and to create first-rate entertainment.

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