

Recovering *La Carpa*

The Dialogue of History and Memory in José Manuel Galván's "*Las Tandas de San Cuilmas -- Los Carperos*"

by Peter Haney

Introduction

This paper is based on research that I began in 1990 as a volunteer intern at the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio on traveling Mexican American tent shows called "*carpas*." These small, family-based circus/vaudeville troupes flourished throughout the southwestern United States and especially in Texas during the first half of this century. Much of my inspiration for this work came from the pioneering research of a new generation of scholars of U.S. Latino theater history (e.g. Broyles-González 1994; Kanellos 1990; Huerta 1982; Ybarra-Frausto 1984, 1983). I sought to add textual specificity and descriptive detail to the existing accounts of *carpa* by drawing on the oral histories of performers themselves. My reasons for studying the *carpa* were expressly political and similar to those that motivate many, if perhaps not all, folklorists. Deeply concerned with the growing polarization of the United States around racial issues, I saw a remedy for this polarization in the study and celebration of Chicano culture. I believed, perhaps too optimistically, that my participation in this process of recovery and documentation could draw needed attention to an important cultural practice that had been ignored and marginalized in academic discourse.

When I began to make contacts with San Antonio's Mexican American arts community, I was surprised and pleased to discover that someone with motivations similar to my own had already undertaken such a project. A Mexican playwright named José Manuel Galván-Leguízamo, on commission from San Antonio's Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, had just written and directed a play titled *Las tandas de San Cuilmas—Los carperos* ("The variety shows of 'San Cuilmas'—The *Carperos*").¹ This work was based on material he had obtained from interviews with performers who had been active in theater and tent shows during the 1930s and 1940s, many of whom I would later consult myself. Although his end product was a play, Galván used expressly ethnographic methods to gather his material. Indeed, his approach was so similar to mine that I sometimes worried that my own work would be redundant. After all, if Mexican Americans in San Antonio had already brought someone in from Mexico City to document their history, what did they need me for? Without fully answering that last question, this paper will relate Galván's play to the socio-discursive process by which a Mexican American middle class has carved out a space of identity for itself in the ideological field of public history in San Antonio. I suggest that the play engages discourses of authenticity and heritage while also seeking to represent the *carpa* through that form's own irreverent, carnivalesque aesthetic.

Memories and Histories of Performance

My own fieldwork and Galván's project were both part of an process of discursive production about Mexican American theater in San Antonio that began with the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s and has continued to the present day. Since the end of my original fieldwork, in fact, I have had to struggle to keep up with the pace of that city's documentation of its own theatrical past. Like so many of the expressive forms that are converted into heritage culture, commercial live Spanish-language theater in San Antonio was and is a residual, vanishing institution. In the 1950s, competition from Mexican films and later from television sent the city's once prosperous Mexican American theater industry into decline. Because few Anglos were willing to recognize the importance of *mexicano* artistic achievement, and because many members of the emerging Mexican American middle class sought to distance themselves from the theater, the subject remained largely absent from public discourse until the Chicano movement. During the *movimiento*, activists in San Antonio and elsewhere converted their childhood memories of the theatrical past into symbols of a proud cultural patrimony. However, their populism led

them to emphasize the working-class *carpa* over the “legitimate” theater. In the work of Luis Valdez’s *Teatro Campesino* and similar troupes throughout the Southwest, actors recontextualized the popular ethos of the tent shows to fashion an explicitly political, grassroots theater (Broyles González 1994). *El Teatro Campesino* recalled the *carpa* aesthetic in its *actos*, which were short, satirical sketches on the farm labor struggle and Chicano politics, and examined the *carpa* explicitly in a play titled *La gran carpa de la familia Rascuachi* (Huerta 1982).

Galván himself took part in similar projects in Mexico, where the popular movement was also rediscovering and refashioning the *carpa* as it created its own *avant-garde* political theater, as well as networking and sharing ideas with their Chicano counterparts. Born in 1952 in Mexico City near the Colonia Obrera, he was in the third year of *secundaria* (similar to junior high) in 1968 and was deeply affected by the repression of the student movement in that year. After finishing the *secundaria*, he ran up against bureaucratic obstacles to continuing with his education and chose to enter an independent *preparatoria popular* (translatable as “popular high school”) run by radical University students. This school was set up to serve “*los rechazados*” (“the rejected”), students who had failed the examinations required of applicants to the establishment *preparatorias*. There, amid the vitality and creativity of Mexico’s grassroots struggle, Galván received his first instruction in theater, taking classes in choral poetry from members of the *Mascarones*, one of the best-known exponents of the *Nuevo Teatro Popular* (New Popular Theater) in Mexico. With a theater group composed of students from the *preparatoria popular*, he participated in the 1972 World Fair in Nancy, France, collaborating with Luis Valdez’s *Teatro Campesino* on a performance against the war in Vietnam. The work was also a comment on the Paris peace talks, which were then in progress. In Mexico, with the *Mascarones*, Galván performed frequently in rural areas, travelling by burro to remote indigenous communities and using interpreters to present works of political theater. The group also visited other countries in Latin America and participated in *encuentros* (“encounters”) with U.S.-based Chicano theater groups. In one such *encuentro*, which took place in the early 1970s in Mexico City, the *Mascarones* group took members of *El Teatro Campesino* to Mexico’s famous *Teatro Blanquita* and performed a piece of their own titled *La gran carpa mexicana*, which explored the group’s roots *carpa* aesthetic. According to Galván, this visit was part of the inspiration behind *La gran carpa de la familia rascuachi*. *El Teatro Campesino*, in fact, performed this play for a 1972 film titled *Somos uno* (“We are one”), which also featured a *Mascarones* play about agrarian prob-

lems titled *Don Cacamáfer*. During the 1970s, then, the *carpa* was the subject of a binational dialogue among radical *mexicano* theater groups who saw the form as the embodiment of their own populist sensibility.

Galván remained with the *Mascarones* until 1978 when, because of differences with the artistic director, he and twelve other performers left the group to form a new ensemble called the *Grupo Cultural Zero*. The name of the group was related both to the prominence of the Sandinista commander Eden Pastora (“Comandante Zero”) in Nicaragua and to performers’ feeling that they were starting over from zero. The *Grupo Cultural Zero* continued for another eight years or so, performing children’s theater, dramatized *corridos*, agit-prop works such as *Nicaragua: años sin tregüa* (“Nicaragua: Years Without Truce”) and a *carpa*-like work titled *En la tierra del nopal* (“In the Land of the Nopal”). By 1986, the group had begun to decompose, and Galván left it and came to the United States with his wife. Like so many, he intended to return to Mexico within a few years but has ended up making this country his home. Although “day jobs” have often been a painful necessity, he has continued to perform and direct plays in various cities in the United States and has authored several plays, many of which have been performed by Chicano theater groups. In San Antonio, his directing credits include *Soldier Boy* (1988) and *Curanderas, Serpents of the Clouds* (1995), *La Víctima* (1995), and most recently, a reading of *Surcos de oro, Water with Tears* (March, 1999), a play about César Chávez by Tucson-based playwright Sylviana Wood. When I interviewed him in Los Angeles about *Las tandas de San Cuilmas*, he was supporting himself as a clown for children’s birthday parties. Currently, he works for the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center as the director of *Grupo Animo*, a youth theater workshop. In the course of his career as a performer, playwright, and director, Galván has done extensive research on the popular theater and its aesthetic. *Las tandas de San Cuilmas*, was the logical outgrowth of this continuing interest.

But the play may be seen as an outgrowth of the Chicano movement and its links with the Mexican student movement not only in its subject matter, but also through the institutional arrangements behind its creation. In the 1980s, Chicano artists who had been active in the *movimiento*, and who sought to achieve its ideals, invoked San Antonio’s theatrical tradition in the process of creating the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, which is centered on the restored Guadalupe Theater (King 1981). In academia, such scholars as Nicolás Kanellos (1990) and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (1991, 1984, 1983) engaged in impressive projects of recovery and documentation of the U.S. Latino theatrical heritage. Chris Strachwitz and James

Nicolopolous's mediated autobiography of Lydia Mendoza (1993) contains numerous references to *carpas* and theater and, interestingly enough, was also related to a play at the Guadalupe. A dramatic film about the *carpa*, written by Edit Villareal and Carlos Avila, was released (Avila and Villareal 1992), and several local television programs in San Antonio have aired interviews with former vaudevillians. Currently, an organization called the Centro Alameda is in the process of restoring a theater called the Teatro Alameda, and the Hertzberg Circus Museum has mounted an exhibit on the *carpa*. The Carpa García, one of the more popular tent shows, even has a site on the World Wide Web page of Mónica García Brooks, a descendent of the García family who works as an academic librarian in West Virginia.

All of this documentation has had a profound effect on the small community of musicians and actors who were active in San Antonio's Spanish-language theater scene before World War II. With the small "heritage boom" that has developed around Mexican American theater in San Antonio, the *artistas* have discovered a new audience and a new market in which their memories are valued symbolic goods. The performers had continued to remember the past in their own ways, of course, by staging church benefits, senior citizen shows, and even making occasional nightclub appearances. Their efforts to reunite with their former audiences have paralleled and sometimes intersected with outside efforts at documentation, but they have also retained a "show business" flavor that public history and academic documentation has lacked and addressed a public that grew up with the popular theater. The comedian Mimi Reyes joked to me in the summer of 1997 during an interview, "They don't come because you're good—They come to see how old you're getting!" Of course, these performances have almost certainly been more vital than this self-satirical comment would suggest. But Mrs. Reyes's statement does highlight the fact that the *artistas'* own representations of the past not only created that past as object of memory but also marked the passage of time itself, calling attention to life-cycle processes and historical events that performers and audiences had shared.

In telling their stories and participating in recovery efforts, the *artistas* have brought tensions and rivalries that already existed among them to a new field. From the artists' statements to me in interviews, it appears that many of these rivalries derived partly from a rift between *artistas de teatro* and *artistas de carpa*. During the heyday of professional Spanish-language theater in San Antonio, performers and comic material circulated actively between the tent shows and the more prestigious theaters, but a hierarchical distinction emerged between *artistas* who identified with one or the other set of venues. Even today, in interviews with me and other

researchers, *artistas de teatro* often portray those who identify with the tent shows as lesser artists, while the tent show performers portray the theater artists as elitist. This tension seems to derive not so much from the class positions of the performers themselves but from notions of prestige related to the perceived class position of their usual audience. Of course, rivalries stemming from competition and personality conflict also existed within the two categories of performers. But whatever the reasons for friendships and rivalries, a complex interpersonal politics informs the *artistas'* decisions about whom to mention to whom and in what sort of light.

Thus, in many different ways and for many different audiences, representations of the *carpa* and stage vaudeville as heritage culture have flourished in San Antonio and elsewhere in greater Mexico during the last thirty years. In San Antonio, I suggest that these discourses have proliferated in part because they appeal to a more or less politically liberal *mexicano* professional and managerial class which looks nostalgically to the *barrio* and the small south Texas town for a source of authenticity and cultural identity. This group's self-conscious interest in documenting its roots may be seen as one localized example of the aesthetic of self-ethnography that, according to John Dorst, characterizes late capitalism (1989). The *carpa*, in this analysis, would be one of many cultural practices that have been converted into signifiers of themselves in the current social and political juncture. But I would suggest that the desires that animate attempts to reconstruct the *carpa* also have deeper historical roots. As part of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism, folklore involved the construction of an internal Other, usually the peasantry, in which the true, authentic national identity of the bourgeois self was thought to lie. In Fernández's terms, nationalistic folklore studies provided the European bourgeoisie with a way of achieving mastery by predicating the distinctiveness of the "national" peasantry onto its emerging, inchoate sense of self (Fernández 1986:36). This peasantry was understood as representing the past of the bourgeois self, mapping a sentimental temporality onto social hierarchy. Although such identification with "the folk" has always had a "downward" motion, it has also re-valORIZED that motion, leading paradoxically to a simultaneous adornment and disparagement of the bourgeois self with the trappings of peasant identity. This predication has always been incomplete and unstable, resulting in a quest for a communion with a national soul that has always seemed to have disappeared just yesterday. National identification has thus been based on a paradox of identification and estrangement.

These dynamics have continued to inform twentieth-century nationalisms, including that of the Chicano movement. Nevertheless, I would

suggest that critiques of European nationalism cannot be easily mapped onto Chicanismo without attention to the historical and social circumstances of the movement. In Chicano nationalism, such differently marginalized figures as the farmworker, the pachuco, the Indian, and the undocumented immigrant have all served in one way or another as foils for a politically radical middle-class sense of ethnic belonging. Even after the end of the movement, the *carpa*, because of its association with the rural farmworker and its importance for Mexican remains a potent symbol of identity. Thus, documentation of the *carpa* and other aspects of San Antonio's *mexicano* theatrical past may be seen as part of a project in which a minoritized middle class seeks to publicly ground its identity in historical narrative. This nationalism is linked to "a process of interior decolonization" which "has affected ethnic minorities, families, and groups that until now have possessed reserves of memory but little or no historical capital" (Nora 1989:7). My application of Nora's statement to Chicano nationalism and its uses of history should not be interpreted as assertion that *mexicanos* in the United States have no history of their own. Rather, I argue that before the movement, they lacked access to a public identity grounded in a valorized, celebratory history. In postwar San Antonio, where a virulently racist Anglo-Texan nationalism had deeply invested itself in public history productions around such key symbols as the Alamo (Flores 1998), this fact took on a special salience. By converting cultural practices like the *carpa* into symbols, the populist nationalism of the Chicano movement provided a counter-discourse to the dominant accounts of Texas history. This counter discourse was grounded in very concrete memories of a racially stigmatized population whose access to middle-class status was often quite recent and incomplete.

Performing History and Memory

Las tandas de San Cuilmas—Los carperos must be seen as arising from this nationalist project, although, as I will show, it complicates nationalistic documentation in many intriguing ways. In the opening lines of the 1989 version, Galván's play places itself in relation to the public culture universe I have just sketched by invoking not the muse of drama, but that of history. Four blasts of an Aztec-style conch shell trumpet begin the performance, ushering in a series of highly stylized Indians, Spaniards, *mestizos* and French. Through solemn ritualized movement and dialogue, these characters enact over four hundred years of Mexican history, from the Spanish conquest to the 1910 revolution, in approximately fifteen minutes. This narrative culminates in figure of a male peasant, driven

by the violence of the revolution to flee Mexico. Saying good-bye to his mother, he sets off for San Antonio, thus linking the *carpas* and their Mexican American audience to the historical tableau that has just been presented. In the following number, however, the focus shifts from the public narrative sequence of history to the personal, reflective experience of memory. The entire cast appears on stage in costumes alluding to Mexico's turn-of-the-century *teatro de revista*. Led by a dapper Master of Ceremonies and dancing to a late twentieth-century *cumbia* beat, they welcome the audience with a song about historical recovery itself and the *mexicano* self's search for belonging in narrative and nation.

EN LAS TANDAS DE SAN CUILMAS
(BIENVENDIA)

Bienvenidos esta noche
al teatro de nuestra vida
Donde esta herencia dormida
ya comienza a despertar

Ya se escucha otro cantar
desde el fondo de mi pecho
pues tengo el mismo derecho
de expresar con libertad.

Mientras más rasco, más veo.
Mientras más veo, más encuentro.
Quisiera rascar por cierto
las raíces de mi pueblo.
En las tandas de San Cuilmas
ya se cantan los recuerdos.
[more follows]

IN THE TANDAS OF SAN 'CUILMAS'
(WELCOME)

Welcome tonight
to the theater of our life.
Where this sleeping heritage
begins to wake once again.

Now another song is heard
from the bottom of my heart
for I have the same right
to express [myself] freely.

The more I dig, the more I see.
The more I see, the more I find.
I wish to truly unearth
the roots of my people.
In the *tandas* of San Antonio,
now memories are sung.
(Galván 1989:10)

Las tandas enjoyed two successful runs, one in 1989 and the other in 1991, both at the restored Guadalupe Theater. In both of these runs, it was performed by *Los Actores de San Antonio*, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center's resident theater company. The play consists of a series of sketches and dance pieces, each of which is drawn from Galván's own fieldwork or from a written or recorded historical source. Galván approached his material by taking a punch-line or central narrative of a joke or sketch and building around it, adding on new dialogue, new characters, and topical references to bring out what he saw as the text's symbolic gist. The result is not a representation of his informants' words so much as a set of variations on their ideas. The effect of the play, then, is not a re-creation of the *carpas*. Circus acts, for instance, are absent from the play, and when I attended a performance of the 1991 version, the audience seemed not to miss them. Rather than re-creating the tent shows, *Las tandas* evokes their style and spirit by focusing on those elements that the author took to be distinctive.

In their effort to evoke the spirit of the tent shows, the performers encountered difficulties related both to linguistic issues and to the unfamiliarity of the artistic *habitus* of the tent shows. *Los Actores* was and is made up primarily of bilingual Chicanos from San Antonio, and has made code-switching theater its trademark. Galván's play was drawn from interviews with performers of a previous generation, most of whom are bilingual but who had learned to perform in much more heavily Spanish-speaking environments. For the younger members of *Los Actores de San Antonio*, memorizing a script entirely in Spanish was a difficult process. But issues of performer/audience interaction and improvisation also presented problems.

As Galván related to me in a 1997 interview, some of the performers had difficulty learning the improvised, dialogic style associated with the tent shows.

Ellos jugueteaban con la improvisación. Hubo dos o tres presentaciones en que lo lograron. Yo les decía, —Mira. Aquí hay un chiste. Tú le dices ... Chololo le dice un chiste a Tacuachito y Tacuachito ... en esta parte Uds. pueden cambiar el chiste. No me lo digan a mí ni se lo digan al otro. En el momento que está la parte, Uds. digan.

A veces tenían miedo y recurrían al mismo chiste. Porque no sabían que es lo que iba a pasar. Pero hubo dos o tres ocasiones en que lo probaron y era fabuloso.

They played with improvisation. There were two or three presentations in which they achieved it. I told them, “Look. Here’s a joke. You tell him ... Chololo tells a joke to Tacuachito and Tacuachito ... in this part you can change the joke. Don’t tell me and don’t tell the other person. In the moment when the part comes, you say it.”

Sometimes they were afraid and fell back on the same joke. Because they didn’t know what was going to happen. But there were two or there occasions when they tried it and it was fabulous.

Galván described an episode from the 1989 run of the play that epitomized this issue. In a scene titled “*El amor entre las ramas*” (“Love among the branches”), an actress playing a love-lorn peasant woman was to enter onto the stage, picking petals off a flower saying, “*Me quiere*” and “*No me quiere*” (“He loves me/ He loves me not):

En una ocasión, franco lo que hizo fue ... iba a jalar una y al jalar una se fue toda la flor. Entonces, como que ... allí te necesitas improvisar, porque no es lo mismo, o sea tienes una rutina, pero hay como ... diferentes salidas a éso.

In one occasion, frankly what happened ... she was going to pull one off and when she pulled one off the whole flower came off. So it was like ... there you need to improvise, because it isn't the same. That is, you have a routine, but there are like ... different ways out of that.

In spite of these difficulties, the actors were able to learn quite a bit about the *carpa* aesthetic and to put on a lively and well-received performance, often confronting the differences between the aesthetic of the popular theater and what they had been used to.

Of course, the *carpa* involved not only particular ways of being an actor but particular ways of being an audience. As Galván related to me, this fact came out especially clearly when the troupe took the play away from the Guadalupe Theater to communities across the U.S.-Mexico border.

JMG: Ellos sintieron la diferencia cuando presentamos éso en San Antonio y cuando lo presentamos en la frontera. Hubo una reacción muy diferente.

PH: ¿En serio? ¿Cómo fue diferente?

JMG: El público estaba mucho más integrado. A ese juego, porque lo conoce.

JMG: They felt the difference when we presented that in San Antonio and when we presented it in the border. There was a very different reaction.

PH: Seriously? How was it different?

JMG: The audience was much more integrated. With this game. Because they know it.

When *Los Actores* presented the play in the auditorium of a secondary school in Nuevo Laredo, they encountered an audience that was used to answering back to comedians and taking part in the spectacle the way the audience for the *carpas* in San Antonio had done a generation earlier. Thus,

even as the play served to create a cross-border dialogue and highlight the shared heritages of *mexicanos* on both sides, it also highlighted for the performers the very real effects of national boundaries and ideologies of assimilation.

In the writing process behind the play, Galván and the performers retained complete editorial control. The *carperos* themselves were publicly recognized during the performances, but their primary role was to provide 'raw material' for the finished play. Although Galván did consult them about aspects of production, they tended to defer to him and provided few critical comments. Only at this initial stage, in the making of what Trouillot calls sources and archives, did they feel fully able to influence its content (Trouillot 1993:26). *Las tandas* thus shares with ethnographic projects like my own an extractive methodology that Rosaura Sánchez has called a dependent mode of textual production. Sánchez's comments on the testimonial or mediated autobiography could just as well apply to Galván's play and to my projects:

In addition to being mediated, testimonials interpellate not an individual subjectivity but a collective identity, a "We" engaged in political struggle within a diversity of social spaces. Cultural, class, and political differentials and slippages between the various social spaces allow for an ambivalent and contingent identification within the texts but all are part of the process of narrating the nation, the culture, the collectivity. [1995:8-9]

In *Las tandas de San Cuilmas*, the center of this collective "We," is located squarely in a vanishing past suffused with nostalgia. It is a "sleeping" heritage that must be "woken," a "buried" identity whose roots must be "unearthed" and whose absence, in Susan Stewart's words, "continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack" (1993:23).

In this, the play closely resembles folkloric dance spectacles and other nationalistic reconstructions of vernacular performance. Nevertheless, the play's use of costuming and its manipulation of time-space orientations and ambiguities of frame introduce ruptures in the discourse of romantic nationalism. As it explores the gap of longing between present and past and between actual and imagined identity, it also collapses that gap and moves in close to the memory-object, both reproducing and partly transcending the tropes of the souvenir and the restored antique. Stewart's passage on restoration is worth quoting in its entirety:

The souvenir must be removed from its context in order to serve as a trace of it, but it must also be restored through narrative and/or reverie. What is restored to is not an 'authentic,' that is, a native, context of origin but an imaginary context of origin whose chief subject is a projection of the possessor's childhood. Restoration can be seen as a response to an unsatisfactory set of present conditions. [1993:150]

Topical references to such issues as immigration, local politics, and anti-Mexican stereotypes in the U.S. media sprinkled throughout *Las tandas* make it clear such a response is intended.

Nevertheless, the play goes beyond the restored antique in interesting ways, one of which is its use of masks. In both runs of the play, the actors wore full or partial masks, all of which had exaggerated features: hairy eyebrows, wrinkled foreheads, chubby cheeks, droopy mustaches, prominent lips, long noses, warts. In using the masks, Galván alluded to popular theater traditions such as the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, to a wide variety of traditional Mexican masked performances, and to his own past work with *Los Mascarones* and the *Grupo Cultural Zero*, in which masking was used to break with naive referentiality. In addition, however, the masks in *Las tandas* exaggerated the difference between the stylized, slapstick acting style of the *carpa* and the naturalistic style that the play's audience knew through television, film, and stand-up comedy. Interestingly enough, it was this feature of the play the *carperos* themselves found most disturbing. When I discussed *Las tandas* with members of the Carpa García, their comments were generally positive, but they took pains to highlight the fact that they did not use masks. Makeup yes, but they did not know where Galván had gotten the idea to use masks and were concerned that people would get the wrong impression about their own performances. The historical record seems to back Galván up on this one, as some surviving photographs do show *carpa* comedians wearing partial masks (cf. Kanellos 1990). But I would argue that Galván's use of masking went beyond mere reconstruction to problematize the idea of getting the "right" impression. Even as the play leads us to an encounter with the past, it reminds us of the inscrutability of that past and the distance of the *carpa* milieu from the present of historical documentation and celebration. Longing for the context of face-to-face interaction represented by the *carpa*, the audience reaches out and touches a false nose.

The manipulation of metacommunicative frames provides another zone of complexity for the play. Before the initial Aztec-and-Spaniard scene, the play actually begins with a janitor character coming out, sweeping the stage, and then reacting with surprise when he finds the audience.⁴ This janitor returns and provides a structuring motif for the play, even entering into a substantial dialogue with a slick Hollywood agent in a later sketch that draws not on San Antonio *carpa* material, but on sketches from Mexico. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of references to contemporary politics and popular culture with references to the past brings past and present together within the here and now of the comic sketch itself. In other words, the time-space orientation of the “original” performance becomes the matrix for a hybrid form of time in which it is not always clear what is past and what is present. In one particularly deft move in the 1991 run of the play, the performers staged “*Las hijas de don Simón*”, a song that had become a hit on Tejano radio stations at the time and which blended *cumbia* with hip-hop. In this, they emulated the *carperos*’ practice of staging production numbers based on popular hit songs in an act of historical translation that was infinitely more effective than the use of a song from the 1940s would have been. Thus, while the masks highlighted the gap between past and present, the incorporation of the present into representations of the past simultaneously leveled out the distinction. A sense of continuity—even contiguity—between present and past was thus juxtaposed with a sense of disjuncture, of difference.

Conclusion

These moves, involving a play of memory and history, make *Las tandas de San Cuilmas—Los carperos* into what Nora has called a *lieu de mémoire* (1989). This assertion may seem odd, as the *carpa* was not one site, not a fixed place where traces of the past could be seen. But we must remember that sites are what people make them. In its heyday, the *carpa* was a space carved out of any available vacant lot and made into a site by interaction between performer and audience. It is in this interactional space, not any “objective” geographical landmark, that the deeply felt memories of the *carpa* reside. If memory for Nora is a kind of daydream, then *Las tandas* led its audience into a lucid daydream. Although the play did participate in a primordialist project that appropriated the shreds and patches of the past as signifiers of a transcendent national identity, but it also complicated that project. Removed from the original context of the *carpa*, jokes and sketches served as traces of that context, but their ultimate end was not a false restoration of an imagined authentic past, but a re-thinking of the

present. The play thus put aside sterile debates about authenticity and invited critical engagement with the paradoxical relationship of identity and otherness between past and present. It accomplished this by treating the *carpa* with the same playful, irreverent, carnivalesque sensibility that the *carperos* themselves employed in representing the world. The *carpa* aesthetic ceased to be a distanced object and instead became the matrix of representation itself. Thus, *Las tandas de San Cuilmas—Los carperos* brought history as public narrative and memory as private reverie into an uneasy, but dynamic dialogue.

Notes

* I thank José Manuel Galván and Jorge Piña for their generous assistance with this research and for providing me with a copy of the script of the 1989 version of the play. I also thank Irma Escobar, who loaned me a video of the 1989 production during my initial fieldwork in 1990. My initial fieldwork was funded by the Rosenfield Program in Public Affairs, International Relations, and Human Rights at Grinnell College, and my interviews with Mr. Galván occurred during a field trip funded by the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project at the University of Houston. I am grateful to both funding sources. I also thank Richard Flores, the editors of *Text, Practice, Performance*, and a prickly but honest anonymous reviewer for their comments. I take sole responsibility for errors of fact or interpretation. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Austin, Texas.

¹ "San Cuilmas" is a vernacular nickname for San Antonio. "Cuilmas" is often used as a generic nickname for a dead-end town, so "San Cuilmas," by a kind of ironic, affectionate extension, becomes San Antonio. According to Galván, residents of San Antonio were once stereotypically assumed to be moochers who would ask to borrow one cigarette and then ask for another to put behind their ears. This idea led to San Antonio being jokingly called "San Cuilmas el Orejón" (Saint Cuilmas of the Big Ears).

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