

From Teatro Campesino to now: Latino theater in Kern County

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Project Summary

Despite being the birthplace for the Teatro Campesino, Kern County does not have many Chicano/ US Latino theater venues and performances. Using in-depth interviews and a countywide survey, I seek to analyze the potential lasting influence of the Teatro Campesino on contemporary Kern County theater. I also seek to analyze the current theater opportunities and offerings for Chicanos and US Latinos theater in Kern County.

Introduction

Kern County has a heritage of having internationally renowned Chicano theater, but there is currently not a dedicated Chicano or Latino theater group in the area. In 1965 Delano, CA was the site of the Grape Boycott which led to the formation of the UFW (UFW, n.d.) Located in Kern County, this city became central to agricultural side of the Chicano movement. As part of the mission to educate farm laborers on the issues of the strike, boycott, and the Chicano movement, Luis Valdez joined the founders of the UFW and founded his Teatro Campesino which was “a union tool for organizing, fund-raising, and politicizing” (Broyles-González, p. xii). Teatro Campesino was vital to the UFW, therefore to the Chicano Movement as it was understood in the agricultural regions of Kern County. By extension, it became a symbol of Chicano and US Latino identity. It was a form of agitprop performance which is defined as “propaganda; *especially* : political propaganda promulgated chiefly in literature, drama, music, or art” (Merriam Webster Dictionary, n.d.). While the word propaganda has a negative connotation, in the context of the Chicano movement, this propaganda was one which unified and uplifted. In the introduction to Radical Street performance, Cohen-Cruz describes this type of performance as “acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power” (1998, p. 1). This was a subversive, influential, and eventually, internationally renowned theater company. The aim of this study is to observe the effects, if any, that the Teatro Campesino has had on contemporary theatre in Kern County, and to observe what are the current theater opportunities for Chicanos and US Latinos in Kern County.

Methodology and Analysis

The primary approach will be responsive interviewing of local actors, director, and administrators of community theaters in Kern County. Using the snowball method, in-depth interviews will take place first with those I’ve already heard have experience with Chicano/ US Latino theater. These include The Spotlight Theater which had implemented a bilingual play series about a decade ago, Bakersfield Community Theater which has a division called Brown Boards Company (BBC) whose mission it is to produce plays for the Latino audience, and finally the local institutes of higher education CSU Bakersfield and Bakersfield College seem to have at least one Chicano/ US Latino production per school year. Of these, the only ones which still seem to be active are the productions at CSUB and BC. However, I’ll continue interviews with the snowball method in the aim of finding other theater productions that I haven’t heard about. Furthermore, in order to bring in quantitative data, I’ll conduct a countywide survey with a representative sample on their opinions and experience with Chicano/ US Latino theater in Kern County. Following the example of Rubin and Rubin, I will use this mixed-method approach of

in-depth interviewing and using qualitative data from a survey to bring a more rich and nuanced understand of the state of Latino theater in Kern County (2005).

Expected Results

I expect that, despite being the location where the Teatro Campesino originated, there aren't very many venues or avenues for Chicano/ US Latino actors, writers, and directors to perform or present original works. I speculate that the legacy of being the birthplace of this group is not very strongly connected to the identity of local artists because the Teatro Campesino moved to Northern California and dissociated from the UFW in 1971 (El Teatro Campesino, n.d.), only six years after having started on the picket lines of the Grape Boycott in Delano, CA with the UFW. In addition, I speculate that, despite there being many community theater options in Kern County, there are not as many opportunities specifically for the Chicano/ US Latino demographic.

Importance of Study

The importance of the Teatro Campesino within the Chicano Movement and, more generally, the US Latino heritage is indisputable. It is the most well-known example of the US Latino theater company, not just on a regional level, but also nationally and internationally. While US Latino theater is currently having a strong moment on the national level, due mostly to the influence of Lin Manuel Miranda's work on Broadway, there is not seemingly such a Chicano/ US Latino theater renaissance happening at the county level in Kern.

Furthermore, in the literature about the Teatro Campesino, the group is associated primarily with Luis Valdez and his vision, rather than being something which belonged to the community as a whole. In her study on the Teatro Campesino, Yolanda Broyles-González undertakes a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews of the members of this group. Her focus is to bring a feminist and Mexican working-class perspective to the analysis of this group. My study would fill a gap in the literature pertaining to how the Teatro Campesino established the legacy of Chicano theater in Kern County and how that manifests in practice today.

Ethical Considerations

I will seek Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this project. The population will include only healthy adult subjects in Kern County. Rather than having a traditional informed consent form, since this is a social study, I will read a verbal consent script to all subjects and make available to them a copy if requested. I will submit copies of possible in-depth interview questions and also of the larger countywide survey. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

References

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