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Pushing Boundaries Onstage

Culture Clash, Oral History Theater, and the Influence of El Teatro Campesino

Kristen Ana La Follette

Oral history has been viewed as subversive and revolutionary as a research method in many academic circles. For years, traditional history departments questioned and often rejected the legitimacy of interview-based research. Oral sources were deemed inherently unreliable and oral historians ill-equipped to determine the veracity of their sources. In acknowledging subjectivity, the field posed a threat to established interpreters of history. Additionally, valuing multiple voices challenged written records. Oral historians also recognized that great value lay in the analytical potential of inconsistencies and faulty memory. The discipline persisted despite marginalization by academic circles. Today, movements to decolonize the practice continue to adapt methodology toward more inclusive practices within and outside of academia.

The interview exchange is the heart of oral history, where interviewer and narrator converge. The resulting recording and transcript are rich with information via setting, behavioral cues, what is spoken, and silences surrounding words unspoken. This generates ideal source material for stage performance. Verbatim theater therefore seems an intuitive outcome of the oral history process. It offers the possibility to reanimate the orality of the interview for a live audience. Scripts often also replicate humans’ ingrained tendency to organize life events in narrative form. Individuals who would never be in one room together can be placed side by side onstage. This creates space to
imagine them in conversation with one another. As actors employ the words uttered by multiple narrators, they interrogate social structures, highlight incongruence, and reveal connections between people who may seem completely disconnected on the surface. The spoken word infuses energy into oral history and theater. Both are uniquely positioned to heighten the perception of what it means to be human.

Yet the historiography of verbatim theater still largely privileges few to create a small central group of lauded performers. In predominant overviews of the genre, one will see the same names and plays mentioned over and over. The dynamic contributions of Chicano and Latinx theater companies are frequently left out of mainstream theatrical recognition. However, they successfully disrupt narratives traditionally presented on the American stage. Culture Clash was a notable troupe that infused oral history theater with their satirical perspective and biting social critique. They leaned into the subjectivity of actors to profile Latinx communities in site-specific plays. Culture Clash drew upon the Mexican carpa tent show tradition, rasquache aesthetics, and popular culture to wield comedy against social inequity. This politically aware theater also traces back to the work of El Teatro Campesino. Culture Clash presented diverse and discordant voices onstage, propelling oral history theater forward.

Pre–Culture Clash

Herbert Sigüenza, Richard Montoya, and Ricardo “Ric” Salinas were performers who all came to live in San Francisco’s Mission District. Before the 1970s, though in the same neighborhood, their creative paths had not yet collided. Sigüenza was born in San Francisco and raised for a time in El Salvador. He returned to spend his teenage years in the United States at the height of the Chicanx movement. Sigüenza was eventually trained in visual arts but was then drawn to theater and performed with the company Teatro Gusto. Salinas, also from El Salvador, moved to San Francisco as a child. He attended San Francisco State University, where he was involved in theater and later joined Teatro Latino. Montoya grew up in the heart of the Chicanx movement. His father was the well-known poet and activist José Montoya, whose collaborations with Luis Valdez during his early days with the UFW (United Farm Workers of America), influenced and inspired his son. Valdez was a founding member of El Teatro Campesino, which was intimately connected to the farmworker struggle. The early impact of Valdez laid the groundwork
for Culture Clash. Montoya was trained in acting at the American Conservatory Theater and moved to San Francisco after attending California State University, Sacramento. From their varied backgrounds, Sigüenza, Salinas, and Montoya shared comedic styling, integrating stand-up, politics, and humor in their work. To further trace the path of their influences and how the three came together as a troupe, El Teatro Campesino plays an important role.

**El Teatro Campesino as the Forerunner**

In late 1965, a flatbed truck pulls up beside a grape field in California’s Central Valley. A banner hangs across the back of the truck with the words, El Teatro Campesino, which translates to “The Farmworkers’ Theater.” Farmworkers begin to gather alongside to view the show as several actors stand atop this moveable stage. One performer wears a large sign with the title Esquirol, denoting a strikebreaker or scab. Another is Patroncito, the boss, and dons a papier-mâché pig mask. Through the mask he loudly chides Esquirol for wanting to join the emerging farmworker strike. Then Patroncito insists they switch roles so the worker can experience how difficult it is to be a boss. Soon the reversal turns as both Patroncito and Esquirol realize they share a common humanity as they both suffer under the unequal farming structure that places them at odds. In the end, Patroncito is dragged offstage as he is mistaken for a farmworker. “Where’s Cesar Chavez [a prominent union leader]? Help! Huelga! Huelgaaaaa!” he calls out, using the strikers’ common rally cry. On traveling open-air stages, El Teatro Campesino imbued the acto, or short skit, with humor to encourage laborers to join the emerging UFW union and strike.

Drawing from diverse theater traditions, El Teatro Campesino would evolve into the most widely known and commercially successful Chicanx theater troupe of the 1960s and 1970s. Its accomplishments opened possibilities for contemporary Latinx theater companies whose success is a credit to their aesthetic style, commitment to social change, and tenacity in bringing visibility to the community. The troupe would go on to inspire and directly train new generations of performers and companies as it provided the most well-known representations of Latinxs onstage, created by Latinx writers. Actors found opportunities to work in El Teatro’s ensemble and were trained in workshops that showcased their performance theory.

Culture Clash was one of the next generation of acting troupes to emerge from the path forged by El Teatro. Culture Clash pushed their common
aesthetic further, eventually using oral history theater to examine specific Latinx communities throughout the United States. Both companies draw from similar roots to create unique performance forms and share stylistic elements of humor embedded in social commentary. Each can trace back to Mexican popular theater, as well as Brechtian notions of abstraction, to bring larger societal truths into focus. El Teatro broke ground for Chicana theater as a whole, and Culture Clash would continue to shift the boundaries of theater and oral history.

Farmworkers labored in Central Valley vineyards under dismal and dangerous working conditions. The farming system in California was also highly stratified, and attempts to organize unions in the early 1900s were squelched by employers. However, in the 1960s, organizers were able to form broader coalitions to more successfully advocate for unionization. In 1965, the UFW was formed in an alliance between the Filipinx-led Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) and the National Farmworkers Association, a largely Mexican American organization. They led a series of grape strikes and boycotts to draw attention to their emerging movement. In reading about the strikes, Luis Valdez was inspired to join their efforts. The child of migrant laborers, Valdez, who trained in theater for years, felt performance was the ideal medium to speak to workers. He envisioned plays staged directly in the fields that would energize laborers to get behind the emerging movement. Valdez approached the organizers, Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez, to propose his idea. With their blessing, Valdez invited the community to help develop the ensemble, offering opportunities to previously untrained actors. Fresh from his collaboration with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Valdez had honed skills in commedia dell’arte. Because of this experience, outdoor performances, improvisation, and the use of masks would figure centrally in the early stages of El Teatro and influence later work.

Valdez held a series of meetings in Delano, California, at the center of the strike effort. An ensemble cast soon evolved and the troupe took its performances out to the fields. They staged actos on top of flatbed trucks parked near Latinx and Filipinx farmworkers. Performers hung large signs around their necks denoting their roles, erected minimal sets, and used masks and symbolic props. Improvisation and feedback facilitated the influence of the audience, who would shout, cheer, and loudly boo. The characters symbolically represented the class struggle between farmworkers and grape growers. As in the scene described earlier, farmworkers were underdogs
whose plight was exacerbated by the unjust farming system enforced by growers and facilitated by strikebreakers. Presented alongside vignettes—songs and other performances—the skits gave the workers’ situation urgency and proposed a solution: to organize and join the union.

While El Teatro’s plays began to develop an audience, the strikes and boycotts also gained momentum, garnering support from national allies such as the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and United Agricultural Workers. The UFW decided to march in 1966, and thousands of laborers walked some 340 miles to Sacramento to jump-start a larger farmworker rights movement. El Teatro followed the march, invigorating crowds along the route, which helped maintain energy for the strike. Word of their work spread, and soon the company was invited to perform for universities and audiences abroad. El Teatro’s aims and notoriety then seemed to come into conflict with the UFW. The two parted ways. In the decades that followed its divergence from the union, El Teatro established itself as the premiere Chicanx theater company, developing beyond the acto to create full-length plays.14

El Teatro’s large body of work eventually included published scripts and Theatre of the Sphere, their own distinct performance theory based on Aztec and Mayan philosophy.15 This theory encouraged actors to think dimensionally not only about how they functioned onstage but about their greater relationship to the world. It was “a multidimensional pedagogy that included the intense program of the Veinte Pasos (Twenty Steps); participation in platicas (teachings) by indigenous maestros; danza; interaction with different indigenous communities in the United States and Mexico; a program of readings and discussion; and the work of stage performance and community involvement.”16 El Teatro therefore trained actors in a revolutionary world view. This nurturing of Chicanx theater, with the explicit aim to change mind-sets and affect social issues, led directly to the next generation of performers. Many trained individuals, including members of Culture Clash, would take the original impetus for Chicanx theater further, employing oral history–based performance to continue El Teatro’s tradition of advocacy grounded in community.

In 1978, El Teatro gained a Rockefeller grant to create Zoot Suit for the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. The troupe’s inaugural wide-scale production was the first time a Chicanx play had been produced on a main stage. The script was based on the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and subsequent Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles in 1943, in which hundreds of pachucos, or Latinx
zoot suiters, were rounded up after a gang-related murder. The trial convicted twenty-two men to life in prison for their ties to the gang. At the same time, anti-Latinx fervor sparked riots in which White sailors stripped and attacked pachucos in LA. Police refused to intervene. The play highlights the discrimination faced by the defendants during the trial while illuminating racial tension, power inequity, and Latinx community identity in the midst of sanctioned marginalization. *Zoot Suit* became a smashing success, selling out an eleven-month run in LA. It then made its way to Broadway, the first Chicano play to ever do so, before finally becoming a major motion picture.17

While in LA, *Zoot Suit* connected with diverse theatergoers, many of whom were attending their very first play. El Pachuco, the omniscient narrator of the piece, is especially striking. Wearing the ultimate zoot suit—including a crisp hat, chain, and large pleated pants—he represents the Greek chorus. He is also alter ego to the protagonist, Henry Reyna. El Pachuco notes Reyna’s dire situation and prods him to examine his misfortune, all while exuding the ultimate cool exterior.

El Teatro’s revolutionary act as Latinx writers profiling Latinx characters onstage cannot be understated. The portrayals and styling of *Zoot Suit*’s characters inspired performers to imagine that Chicano plays could and should be staged with high production value and vibrant visuals. Herbert Sigüenza, Richard Montoya, and Ricardo “Ric” Salinas were among those invigorated by the play.

**The Formation of Culture Clash**

In 1978, after hearing positive reviews of *Zoot Suit*, Sigüenza traveled to Los Angeles to view a performance. The experience—especially that of witnessing El Pachuco—was transformative. Of the opening scene, Sigüenza said, “The minute the knife goes down that giant newspaper and El Pachuco comes out, I was sold. I knew from that day on that I was going to do theatre the rest of my life. Because I saw people that looked like me doing world class, professional theatre at a really high level, and that was my goal.”18 *Zoot Suit* became one of the catalysts that set Culture Clash, and their later oral history work, in motion. Yet the influence of El Teatro on the formation of the group would extend further.

El Teatro Campesino convened several Chicano theater festivals in the early 1970s to showcase and encourage new groups to take up performance.19 At various points, Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza separately came to perform
with El Teatro. In early 1984, Valdez convened the Concilio de Arte Popular at El Teatro’s headquarters in San Juan Bautista, California. The meeting brought together Chicanx artists of various genres to form a coalition. They intended to organize a board to further collaboration among artists, seek shared financial support, and facilitate Chicanx advocacy through the arts. During this initial meeting, the need for comedy and levity to reinvigorate the Chicanx movement was emphasized. Visual artist Rene Yañez agreed with this sentiment. Just a month later, he assembled a performance showcase in San Francisco’s Mission District. Held on Cinco de Mayo at Galería de la Raza, the event provided the occasion for Comedy Fiesta to come together, thus creating the forerunner of Culture Clash.\(^{20}\)

As Comedy Fiesta, six performers—Montoya, Sigüenza, and Salinas along with José Antonio Burciaga, Marga Goméz, and Monica Palacios—assembled their stand-up routines to form a new ensemble group.\(^{21}\) Each actor’s extensive stage experience facilitated their use of comedy and short skits as vehicles for social criticism. After this original gig, the troupe decided to continue on together, though each still sought individual side work. Two years later, Goméz and Palacios left Comedy Fiesta to continue fully on their own. The remaining members renamed the group Culture Clash. This new title represented their intention to confront the tension between dominant culture and Chicanx identity while referencing mainstream films and television. Popular entertainment mostly ignored Latinx people. When infrequently represented, depictions relied on stock characters, reinforcing stereotypes that glossed over nuances within the community.\(^{22}\) Culture Clash also wished to confront divisions within the Chicanx movement, such as those between activists and “armchair” Chicanxs, who espoused ideas but did not join efforts.\(^{23}\) After defining this more focused identity, Burciaga eventually also departed. The three remaining members developed a signature style: they combined sharp wit with satire, calling on Latinx theater traditions and pop culture references to confront Chicanx issues.\(^{24}\)

**A Style Develops**

Early on, Culture Clash used their work as an outlet for their frustration as Latinx actors. Despite formal training, Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza continually met with rejection auditioning for roles. In 1988, exasperation with limited opportunities and representation led to their first full script, *The Mission*.\(^{25}\) Focused on San Francisco’s Mission District, the trio traveled back
in time to relive and reimagine the history of their neighborhood. Every role was played by one of the three actors, which led to some creative maneuvering when all were expected to be onstage. The play begins at Mission Dolores, which gave the neighborhood its name. In the 1700s, Father Junípero Serra, a Spaniard, founded twenty-one Catholic missions throughout California in an attempt to convert American Indians. The scene opens with the trio playing indigenous people as Serra flogs and criticizes them. It highlights individual and systemic maltreatment of indigenous people within the mission system. As the scene shifts to present time, this harm is linked to contemporary marginalization of Latinxs, who share mixed indigenous and colonial Spanish origins. In the next sequence, the actors are living together in an apartment. They lament the ridiculous roles in which they are cast and the need to take on unsavory jobs to pay the bills. They soon hear that a performance showcase is to be held on the mission grounds. Culture Clash audition but are immediately rejected. The trio decides the only way for their work to be seen is to kidnap the event’s main performer, the famous Spanish singer Julio Iglesias, and hold him hostage until they are given a slot. A similar fusion between pop culture references and comedic social critique is woven throughout the piece. In touching upon MTV, Mel Brooks, and sitcoms of the 1960s and ’70s, their humor both reflects the era the actors grew up in and makes fresh references from the present time.26

In “The Auditions” scene, the actors stage vignettes lampooning, while simultaneously drawing critical attention to, the superficial ways Latinx actors are represented in entertainment:

(Lights up. Richard walks into the light.)

**RICHARD:** Hi, thank you for the audition. Yes, I just got the script, my Spanish is great. *(Holding product. With Anglo accent:)* Hola, su baño tiene mal olor? Es usted embarazado con sus visitas? No se preocupe-pee. Usted necesita “2000 Flushes.” Deja su baño especta . . . culo, culo? Oh, espectáculo! Disfrutalo, hoy!

(Blackout. Lights up. Herbert, dressed like Frida Kahlo, stands in a spotlight.)

**HERBERT:** First of all, let me congratulate the producers at ABC-TV for doing the mini-series on “The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo.”
Excuse me? Am I willing to connect my eyebrows? For two-grand, I’ll make love to Diego Rivera!

(Blackout. Lights up. Ric does elaborate Bob Fosse–type dance. Lights black out in the middle of his dance. Lights up. Richard enters.)

**RICHARD:** I have prepared a song for the audition today. Here goes. *(Blows tune whistle. Sings:) “Yo soy como el chile verde, Llorona, picante, pero sabroso . . .” What? You want it in English? Yes I can do that. “I am tender chunks of pork in a light, zesty green sauce. Spicy . . . but not hot.”*

(Blackout. Lights up. Herbert is the sleepy Mexican, complete with sombrero, serape and cactus. He lifts his head slowly and points offstage.)

**HERBERT:** Señor . . . Indiana Jones went that way.

(Blackout. Lights up, Ric does a line from “La Bamba.”)

**Ric:** Ritchie!

(Blackout. Lights up. Richard stares straight ahead; he holds a spear and speaks with his very best Shakespearean accent.)

**Richard:** Is it for fear to wet a widow’s eye
That thou consum’st thyself in single life?
Ah! If thou issueless shalt hap to die
The world will wail thee like a makeless wife.
The world will be thy widow, and still weep
That thou no form of thee has left behind.

(Blackout. Richard continues in black.)

This scene tackles shallow nods to diversity in commercialism and limited depictions in brief television specials. In light of the dearth of roles offered, Salinas stated that even writing scripts was a political act. He said, “As Latino actors, we knew that we had to write our own roles, our own stories. There
are millions of Latinos, like us, who are bilingual, bicultural and proud of both their American and Latino roots, who are not being represented.” In acknowledging biculturalism, the scene also challenges assumptions that all Latinxs speak Spanish. Importantly as well, in the brief nod to *La Bamba*, the trio takes on commercially successful representations of Latinxs. The biographical film, written and directed by Valdez in 1987, was criticized by the Chicano community for whitewashing the story of musician Ritchie Valens, born Richard Valenzuela, in order to appeal to a mostly Anglo audience. Even Valdez was not spared from the critical eye of Culture Clash’s no-holds-barred farce.

Humor cut to the heart of social issues. As the troupe found, “With comedy, we could address socially relevant issues but disguise them with wit.” Comedy could both disarm the audience, making viewers more receptive to the critique offered, and release tension that arose when dealing with challenging topics confronting social hierarchy. The comedic roots of Culture Clash can be attributed both to its predecessor El Teatro Campesino and older theatrical traditions. Both companies share a rasquache aesthetic, a rough-edged, underdog style reminiscent of traveling Mexican tent shows. Despite the jab at *La Bamba*, the relationship between the companies remained good natured and *The Mission* was soon staged at El Teatro Campesino’s home in San Juan Bautista, with director Tony Curiel further developing the piece.

Culture Clash’s next play, *A Bowl of Beings*, premiered in 1991. It offered an array of satirical sketches, all confronting Chicano identity. The script took on a deeply personal tone, featuring several emotionally intimate sketches. This direction was attributed to Salinas’s brush with death in 1989. One evening, after a party the three attended in San Francisco, Salinas attempted to break up a fight. Instead, he was shot by an assailant. His struggle to survive induced a new perspective on life and death. He addressed this directly in the poignant monologue “Ricflections.” The combination of depth and levity resonated with audiences, and *A Bowl of Beings* toured more widely than *The Mission*. The attention it gained led to a PBS Great Performances special, which soon set the stage for their oral history–based work. After the special aired, the nonprofit Miami Light Project asked the group to bring *A Bowl of Beings* to Miami. Impressed by the reception the play received, Miami Light Project commissioned Culture Clash to return and profile the city by interviewing its residents. In many ways, this new play would present a creative departure and evolution of Culture Clash’s form.
Oral History Theater

The early 1990s brought oral history theater to the fore. In 1991, riots broke out between Lubavitch Hasidic Jewish residents and the Caribbean American and Black communities in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Tensions concerning social and economic separations between the groups boiled over when a Lubavitch motorcade struck and killed the young Gavin Cato. Yankel Rosenbaum, a Jewish student, was then killed in retaliation. Anna Deavere Smith soon interviewed and personally portrayed myriad community members, civil rights leaders, and eyewitnesses to create *Fires in the Mirror*. Prior, she wrote the series *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, for which she interviewed individuals in various communities and embodied each onstage. In Crown Heights, her interviews covered not only the riots but the distinct cultural identities and histories that influenced how the groups interacted and failed to connect with each other. In 1992, she used a similar technique in response to the Los Angeles Riots, which flared up after four White police officers were acquitted for the beating of Rodney King, a Black male, despite video recorded evidence. Smith’s interest in collisions between social groups influenced by historic marginalization connects clearly to Culture Clash’s work. However, the latter would not focus on violent flash points.

In order to approach Miami from the inside, a board of over twenty Miamians was compiled by Miami Light Project to offer advice and a pool of narrators. As Sigüenza noted, “Since we were outsiders, it was important for there to be a structure to facilitate our relationship with, and truthful understanding of, the community.” The board provided this link, drawing from a broad slice of Miami’s community, suggesting two hundred potential interviewees who represented widely differing socioeconomic groups and opinions. From this list, Culture Clash decided upon seventy city residents to ultimately interview over a two-month period. They also observed life in Miami, as ethnographers would, to more accurately portray its vibrancy and contradictions. The troupe’s writing process was unique as a three-part collaboration among the actors. After interviews, they would transcribe recordings and work separately on their monologues. Together they would then identify similar themes, create composite characters when it seemed messages were similar, and decide which interviews to represent in verbatim monologues. Culture Clash created this site-specific theater through interviews to showcase Miami as a particular location.

In 1994, *Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami* premiered at the Colony Theatre in Miami Beach, Florida. The play begins with a monologue
by Sigüenza that explains how and why the piece was created. He also provides context for the conflicting views that would be presented. Sigüenza includes his positive take on Cuba, formed after an artistic residency there. As he speaks, two shadowy figures enter the stage and approached him in an obvious show of intimidation. They represent the perspectives of conservative Cubans who left the nation in exile, vehemently opposing Fidel Castro. Their world view looms large in Miami society. After Sigüenza is chased off-stage, a slew of other characters emerge in a series of monologues. Some speak alone. Others are presented together to reenact conversations or link themes that emerged from interviews. Characters include Haitians, several waves of Cuban exiles and their children, Black residents, drag queens, and Jewish individuals.

The predicament in revealing contradictions was significant. As Sigüenza noted, “Our greatest challenge in creating this work was to ensure that we played these people realistically and with dignity, avoiding broad stereotypes and shallow characterizations.”38 The juxtaposition and interaction of these voices lend the play vibrancy. These divergent and sometimes contradictory perspectives not only document a textured story of modern Miami through opinions about its residents by its residents but reenact the historic and social dynamics influencing their positions in Miami hierarchy.

The script interweaves the history of the city with a discussion of current issues. Culture Clash does not shy away from economic divides. They note when they found contrasting groups. They observe that White residents and exiles often attain strong financial security through business, while others, like many Haitians, live with limited job prospects and social mobility. Racial tension aimed at, and between, marginalized groups was also addressed. The actors include asides and gestures by characters revealing the distrust among Miami’s groups. They explore de facto segregation. In the scene “Tea for Two,” two Black women sit in a café to discuss the history of the area. They reveal their own oppression and existing tensions:

**DOROTHY:** When Miami became a city, we became second-class citizens. When we built the railroad, we were placed adjacent to downtown. Back then they called it Colored Town, or the Central Negro District, or Overtown; that’s what the people called it. And later, when white downtown wanted to expand, it couldn’t go east because it would go into the bay and west was the Miami River, so they expanded right
into Overtown. And they built their big old expressway which further divided the community. And I don’t think they understood what a flourishing, vibrant community it was. It was self-contained, self-operated. We were treated like first-class citizens in Overtown. No ma’am. Most local history books still tend to sugarcoat the founding of Miami and the building of the railroad. Yes, indeed, I would have to say that people in this country have amnesia.

(The Cuban waiter comes back and pours more tea.)

**MARGO:** That’s very interesting, Dorothy, but my experience here in Miami has been totally different, coming from New York. The retirement lifestyle, living on the beach is great, but from what I see of Miami, what we call Miami, not Bell Harbor or Sunny Isles, I don’t see any mixing here at all. *(She dismisses the Cuban waiter with disdain.)* There are definitely divisions worse here than I have seen in a long, long time.

Way back in segregation days, what we call Blacks now, they lived in one section or two sections. Now you have Black Haitians living in Little Haiti, or Black Cubans living in Wildwood, or some name I can’t think of. And then you have people who live in, uhm, Oak . . . oh you were just talking about it.

**DOROTHY:** Overtown.

**MARGO:** Overtown! Those people don’t meet other people. Now you’re going to have to pardon me, Dorothy, but these are just my observations.39

In this scene, and throughout the play, the script includes sidebars. These are moments that interrupt characters and narrative flow, such as when the Cuban waiter enters to pour tea. They are reminders that the monologues are based on actual interviews conducted with real people in real time. *Culture Clash* also uses sidebars to highlight the opinions that exist between social groups about each other.40

Importantly, *Culture Clash*’s choice to create staged performance around oral histories while amplifying dissonance took *Radio Mambo* beyond a simple retelling of individual stories. It did not seek to leave existing relations as
they were—to smooth over the distinct and strong opinions of community members to emphasize connections rather than disunity. Some have critiqued verbatim theater pieces such as Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project’s *The Laramie Project*, surrounding the violent death of Matthew Shepard, in which incongruous voices were somewhat muffled to instead highlight similarities between characters. As performance scholar Della Pollock noted, “Wherein some may aestheticize stories on stage, as Walter Benjamin coined the term, this striving toward beauty removes discourse and discord, rendering political discontent mute and serving the purposes of the elite.” The potentiality for political change inherent in portraying stories for an audience may be dulled as lines are blurred, rather than drawing a magnifying glass to the very issues that created the overarching conflict. Culture Clash certainly does not run this risk, as it tackles political issues directly.

While making conflict and typically invisible populations visible, *Radio Mambo* also brought voices into hypothetical dialogue. Juxtaposing conflicting viewpoints in a way that did not happen in physical reality, it laid disagreements bare and opened possibilities for discussion. As Ryan Claycomb remarked, “In short, while various characters place blame on one another, many also often acknowledge the complicity of their own community, and when placed up against one another, they create a dialogue unlike what is typically heard in the streets.” In seeing stories side by side, the audience could pick up on their commonalities and imagine how, if these people and groups did have a conversation, they may find ways to alleviate the issues that kept them apart. In her own experience with oral history theater, reenacting the stories of southern mill workers onstage, Pollock found, “By telling the told, it seemed performance could ‘dialogize’ the mill world—it could be a nexus of perspectives, a point of contest and intersecting visions.” *Radio Mambo* staged a similar intersection. It was not just a retelling of the history of Miami but an act of dialogic creation and history-making.

In 1996, Culture Clash brought *Radio Mambo* to the San Diego Repertory Theatre after its initial run in Florida. Roger Guenveur Smith directed the play and helped the trio reshape their performance. Smith is a renowned stage performer and his familiarity in presenting historically grounded documentary theater facilitated his work with the script. He also frequently acted in and collaborated on Spike Lee’s films. That same year, Smith portrayed Black Panther Huey P. Newton in a one-man show. His nuanced and complex performance was featured on PBS and eventually led to an award-winning film with
Lee. With Radio Mambo, Smith helped the troupe whittle away extraneous scenes to allow the narrative power of each monologue to come into focus. The original script included Culture Clash mounting a guerrilla takeover of a radio station, but the resulting adaptation in San Diego removed this. Audiences reacted positively to the genuine nature of the monologues, whose specificity lent them a universal quality. Early on, Culture Clash’s members worried the play’s confrontation of attitudes toward Castro and Cuba may alienate audiences. Instead, their honest portrayals drew viewers in. Radio Mambo became one of their most successful and widely toured works. It led to a series of four additional site-specific plays commissioned by other cities. These would include profiles of the interplay between San Diego and Tijuana in Bordertown, as well as Nuyorican Stories of New York, The Mission Magic Mystery Tour in their return to San Francisco, and of Washington, DC, Anthems: Culture Clash in the District.

While the group continued their site-specific work, projects by Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza also expanded, as each continued to branch out, performing their own individual pieces. Their brand of social commentary pushed audiences to confront divided social structures. Culture Clash’s method for documenting communities through oral history interviews, blending pop culture and satire, circles back to the influence of El Teatro Campesino and the stylistic roots both theater companies share.

**Stylistic Connections and Shared Influences**

Parallels between El Teatro Campesino and Culture Clash run deep. In an interview with the Mark Taper Forum, Montoya noted, “Our rhythm, our iambic pentameter, our language” was absorbed from viewing and working with El Teatro. Both troupes can trace several stylistic motifs to carpa, and popular theater. Carpa companies toured Mexico and border communities in the American Southwest, employing elements dating back to the 1700s. The form reached the height of its popularity in the decades after the Mexican Revolution. As carpa troupes moved from town to town, entire families would attend. They presented a mixture of formats including dance numbers, song, political satire, and dramatic poetry to entertain audiences ranging from young children to grandparents. Sometimes clowns or even acrobats performed. El Teatro’s early work reflects this varied arrangement, with vignettes featuring acto, music, or dance. Culture Clash’s plays also switched rapidly between dramatic monologues, humorous sketches, and poetry. Though El
Teatro eventually moved to full-length plays, it still frequently incorporates elements of dance and music.

Another hallmark of carpa was over-the-top humor. Comedy worked in tandem with audience participation and became the vehicle to connect with largely working-class spectators. Crowds loudly laughed and applauded performances they enjoyed. However, if skits were not up to par, actors were instead met with roars of boos and jeers. Therefore, performers frequently improvised, adjusting their style to elicit a positive audience response. Fueled by the pressure to meet the scrutiny of live viewers, actors relied on quick wit and physicality to amplify humor onstage. Pacing was rapid, movements were large, slapstick humor became a staple, and stock characters built on established audience expectations. Eventually, the carpa style transmuted to film and television. By the time Valdez and El Teatro began their shows in Delano, many audience members were accustomed to this responsive theatrical form. El Teatro actors magnified performances in turn. Their goal clearly was not just to entertain but to use heightened audience energy to inspire individuals to join the UFW strike. In 1967, Valdez explained how humor enhanced the social message of El Teatro’s pieces: “We use comedy because it stems from a necessary situation—the necessity of lifting the morale of our strikers, who have been on strike for seventeen months. When they go to a meeting it’s long and drawn out; so we do comedy, with the intention of making them laugh—but with a purpose. We try to make social points, not in spite of the comedy, but through it. This leads us into satire and slapstick, and sometimes very close to the underlying tragedy of it all—the fact that human beings have been wasted in farm labor for generations.” Comedy made heavy issues more digestible. It neutralized threatening and overwhelming circumstances that farmworkers lived through. Simultaneously, it buoyed crowds so that enthusiasm remained high even during the most challenging portrayals.

For Culture Clash, humor also led the way. As Salinas has said, “Despite the cultural, social and political implications of our subject matter, the emphasis was always on the funny, the satirical, what would invoke the biggest laugh, which pratfall would work best.” This responsiveness to audiences via comedy was also a tool for drawing attention to the absurdity of social inequity. In articulating critique through farce, the painful bite of conflict was somewhat lessened. Notably for both Culture Clash and El Teatro, humor could communicate to the audience that actors understood their pain. In poking fun at unjust circumstances, a sense of power and possibility could also be restored to those who outwardly lacked agency.
The rasquache aesthetic is another offshoot of carpa tradition. Rasquachismo is an artistic sensibility that addresses the plight of the underdog, or the oppressed, while critiquing power structures that produce injustice. It is also a scrappy make-do attitude, when artists use what is available to them to create. As El Teatro Campesino began performing, they lacked financial backing. They staged sets and costumes out of what was near so minimal backdrops were used. Props and flags were made from burlap, signs around actors’ necks were cardboard, commedia dell’arte masks were papier-mâché, and the performance space itself was the back of a truck. This approach was financially practical and another signal to the audience that performers understood their lived experience and recognized their oppression. In rasquache, even if scenes depicted are not literal retellings, visual representation employs symbols that identify with historical marginalization.

Cantinflas, the performer most popular in Mexican and American films of the 1940s and 1950s, rose to prominence through carpa and is a prime example of rasquache. He took on the pelado persona, that of a street or slum dweller. Dressed in exaggeratedly ill-fitting clothes, he emulated the struggles of the working class and used wit to outsmart those in power. His wide appeal and ability to cross over into mainstream entertainment illustrate how deeply his methods resonated with audiences of various backgrounds. El Teatro embodied a similar rasquache ethos as it continually reflected the plight of the underdog. The farmworker with little economic power could use the union to poke holes in the authority of the grower through actos. For Culture Clash, the underdog spoke back to the invisibility of Latinxs.

**Site-Specific Theater Today**

In 2007, Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza collaborated with the Social History in Performance Art seminar at UCLA led by Professor David G. Garcia, a scholar on Culture Clash’s history. Students examined Culture Clash’s aesthetic and Chicanx theater’s potential for social impact. The class created their own actos to teach material to one another. They then identified individuals to interview who represented different generations and experiences within the Latinx community. Culture Clash held a series of workshops with the students that were instructive in their methods and fostered reciprocal sharing. The trio would perform monologues from a site-specific play, discuss how these were constructed and help the class shape work in progress. To culminate the experience, Culture Clash and the students held an evening showcase of their monologues. Afterward, Garcia noted, “Our exploration of
Culture Clash’s work generated much discussion around the power of teatro as a form of public revisionist history. In reflecting on the use of satire as a tool of resistance, I asked students to identify how the theatre productions from ETC [El Teatro Campesino] to Culture Clash also illuminated the sociopolitical conditions of the particular time and place of their creation.”

Though Culture Clash performances today frequently employ fictional scripts, Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza still individually examine communities through oral history source material. In October 2016, Montoya staged Nogales: Storytellers in Cartel Country with director Sean San José and filmmaker Jean Osato of Campo Santo theater company. Campo Santo’s ensemble is one of the next generation to spring from Culture Clash and therefore El Teatro Campesino. San José is cofounder of Campo Santo and grew up in the Mission District. He was inspired by A Bowl of Beings to write representations of multicultural neighborhoods, and the company focuses its work on communities of color. Nogales was performed at both the Borderlands Theater in Arizona and Magic Theatre in San Francisco. It centers on the 2012 death of José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, a teen shot by American border patrol as he stood on the Mexican side of the US boundary with Arizona. Montoya and San José interviewed a variety of characters on both sides of the border, while Osato filmed the encounters and landscape. Interviewees included immigrant rights advocates, undocumented individuals who detailed the perils of crossing the border, law enforcement, and even Rodriguez’s mother.

At the height of the piece, Montoya and San José take the stage to re-create their interview with controversial Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio. The sheriff became notorious for his large persona and dogged pursuit of undocumented immigrants in Arizona. In defiance of a court order to cease the practice of racial profiling, Arpaio directed officers to question suspected immigrants’ status during traffic stops. He gained notoriety for housing Maricopa County Jail inmates outdoors, even under the beating desert sun. He bragged about issuing pink jumpsuits and surplus bologna sandwiches that turned green in the unrelenting heat.

Montoya embodies the rambling energy of Arpaio in transfixing fashion. San José repeatedly attempts to regain hold of the interview and presses Arpaio to discuss what he knows of the case. The sheriff sidesteps and redirects, continually shifting back to his persona and ideas. He never answers a question directly. This portrait of Arpaio indicts broader complacency. It reveals how power and politics shape which events are buried, especially when they challenge concepts of national sovereignty, race, and the authority
of law enforcement. The play juxtaposes Arpaio’s egoism with an overall examination of the border as a physical and political location that keeps lopsided power structures intact. Montoya’s portrayal harkens back to Cantinflas’s use of empty language to lampoon political demagoguery in post-revolution Mexico.

While oral history theater cannot solve the issues it illuminates onstage, the conversation it develops shapes the ways history is imagined and reimagined: “More specifically, in choosing to create a dialogue of actual voices from the pages of the past, staged oral histories do not attempt to change the substance of what we know about, say, the Los Angeles riots. But they do change how we look at them. By reframing the past not as a series of individually held views, but rather as the kind of dialogue that can prevent future misunderstanding, these plays are revising the discourse around the past.” Culture Clash has built a body of work to shift interpretation of events and the lenses through which communities are viewed. Equipped by El Teatro Campesino’s innovative legacy, Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza confront the biases and blinders that maintain the unequal present. Building upon forms laid down by Mexican carpa theater, both companies have woven their own influences to create their brands of Chicanx performance. El Teatro Campesino and Culture Clash both intended to embolden audiences to view themselves as potential agents of change. Culture Clash then went further to replay community voices back, reinterpreting what may be possible onstage.

Notes

3 Verbatim theater and oral history theater are used interchangeably in this chapter.
7 Richard Montoya, Culture Clash: Life, Death and Revolutionary Comedy (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), xii.
8 Montoya, xiii.


11 Broyles-González, xi.

12 Broyles-González, 74.


14 Broyles-González, El Teatro Campesino, 84.

15 Broyles-González, 56.

16 Broyles-González, 88.


20 Valdez, Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza, “Passing the Baton.”


22 Montoya, Culture Clash, 3.


24 Montoya, Culture Clash, 4.

25 Montoya, 3.

26 Montoya, 5.

28 Montoya, 6.

29 Montoya, 4.

30 Montoya, 3.

31 Montoya, 61.

32 Montoya, 110.


34 Montoya, Culture Clash, 110.
37 Montoya, *Culture Clash*, 113.
38 Montoya, 109.
39 Montoya, 126–27.
42 Pollock, 8.
43 Claycomb, “(Ch)oral History,” 101.
44 Pollock, “Telling the Told,” 16.
45 Montoya, *Culture Clash*, 112.
46 “20 Years of Culture Clash.”
47 Valdez, Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza, “Passing the Baton.”
49 Broyles-González, 28.
50 Bagby and Valdez, “El Teatro Campesino Interviews,” 77.
51 Montoya, *Culture Clash*, 4.
52 Garcia, “Transformations through ‘Teatro,’” 123.
56 Claycomb, “(Ch)oral History,” 110.