



Richard Montoya,  
Ric Salinas and  
Herbert Siguenza

# CULTURE CLASH

## SEES ZORRO IN HELL

By David C. Nichols

Photos: Eric Schwabel

**F**OR OVER 23 YEARS, the redoubtable trio of Richard Montoya, Herbert Siguenza and Ric Salinas has fearlessly assaulted the national landscape as Culture Clash.

The country's foremost Chicano/Latino theatre company has received numerous awards and had many original works commissioned by America's top regional venues. Using outrageous humor, political smarts and a wholly personal approach, whether turning Salinas' near-fatal 1989 shooting into *A Bowl of Beings* or donning beaky noses for Aristophanes' *The Birds*, there's nothing quite like Culture Clash.

Recently, the troupe has probed LA's underbelly in *Chavez Ravine* and the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle-winning *Water and Power* at the Mark Taper Forum. In *Zorro in Hell* (subtitled *Cultural Learnings of Early California, For Make Benefit Glorious Gringo Nation in Aztlan*), opening in July at the Ricardo Montalban Theatre, Culture Clash swashes and buckles stereotypes under the direction of Berkeley Rep icon Tony Taccone in his LA debut.

Purposeful subversion has marked Culture Clash since 1984 when they began in San Francisco's Mission District as part of "Comedy Fiesta." Their singular blend of dynamic personalities and revolutionary intent seems made to order for *Zorro in Hell*, which skewers Hollywood depictions from Douglas Fairbanks to Antonio Banderas yet pulls in historical aspects from real-life "poet bandit" Joaquin Murrieta to modern-day assimilation, to find relevance for our dualistic times.

Culture Clash's conjoined energy, which has exhilarated and provoked audiences in numerous plays, site-specific events and community-outreach projects across the country, crystallizes in conversation.

Montoya, the son of legendary Chicano artist, poet and musician José Montoya, becomes a de facto ringleader, with Siguenza's plainspoken acerbity and Salinas' questioning amiability bounding off his charismatic verve. Siguenza who, like his colleagues emerged from such celebrated Bay Area companies as El Teatro Campesino, recalls the group's origins: "It was

WE BECAME THE HARDEST



Clockwise Ric Salinas, Herbert Siguenza and Richard Montoya

**WORKING THEATRE GROUP IN THE COUNTRY,  
HITTING THE PAVEMENT SIX, EIGHT MONTHS A YEAR,  
AND THAT SUSTAINED US. IT GOT OUR NAME OUT THERE,  
AND WE GOT BETTER AS ACTORS, WRITERS, BECAUSE WE  
WERE PERFORMING THREE-QUARTERS OF THE YEAR."**

—HERBERT SIGUENZA

founded in an art gallery, Galeria de la Raza. It was supposed to be a one-night Cinco de Mayo standup show. We started with Marga Gomez, Monica Palacios, José Antonio Burciaga [the fourth founding member] who's since passed away... a very interesting genesis of individuals."

Montoya adds, "It doesn't often get told but there was a whole year and a half leading up to that comedy weekend. I, and Herbert too, I remember, were thrown out into the ice water at every gay cabaret, every lefty political event, you name it. I often failed miserably leading up to it. Rene Yañez, who created the event, and I had done performance art for a year and a half leading up to "Comedy Fiesta." That was a pretty big deal. I was miserable. I didn't really know what a standup comic was, just that there was a lot of it at that time. But, now, performance art, that was something I was very interested in.

"We all had been involved in theatre companies in the Bay Area, primarily political. I remember doing some outrageous performance art, getting run out of places like Stanford. It's time to remind ourselves that there was a lot of work leading up to that one weekend, and we were not embraced. There was a lot of opposition because the political movement we're from was still taking itself pretty damned seriously, with good reason. People were dying in El Salvador, in Nicaragua in '84. So it wasn't a one-night, happy accident...It was some hard work. I just remember the failures because that made us strong."

The soft-spoken Salinas, frequently the voice of an opposite viewpoint, adds, "But it was unique to get comedy with that bi-cultural, Chicano outlook. This was before *In Living Color*. It was culturally cutting-edge stuff we were doing, anarchistic, and nobody else was doing that."

There were seminal influences, though; Montoya recalls "doing lights at the back of La Galeria, for ASCO, which was people like Gronk, Harry Gamboa...this weird performance art group out of East LA. I was just this kid with six light switches, and here was this amazing group. That was interesting to us. Because, certainly, San Francisco, south of Market, was exploding with performance art, rivaling New York City at that time.

"There was a standup comedy side to us but coming out of Teatro Campesino, the famous

theatres that we did...we were trying to find a new form. That's what's still exciting in terms of the group. We are interested in pushing the form. That's stayed constant."

Also constant: Culture Clash's financial self-sustenance, even as federal arts funding has diminished. Siguenza, at once relaxed and intense, notes, "That's exactly why we were never a non-profit. We started as a California Partnership because we saw Teatro Esperanza, Teatro Campesino, struggling with grants. A lot of creative energy spent in front of a computer writing a boring grant. That wasn't fun for us."

Salinas observes, "If it wasn't for the California Arts Council, which did give us our initial seed money, well, it would have been a tougher road if we didn't get that. It got us jump-started."

Montoya concurs, adding that "it meant we were autonomous almost everywhere we went, even when we were down here in Los Angeles. That's where we got our strength from, because we were not answering to anybody or beaming through an agenda."

Siguenza adds, "What ended up happening was that we hit the road. We became the hardest working theatre group in the country, hitting the pavement six, eight months a year, and that sustained us. It got our name out there, and we got better as actors, writers, because we were performing three-quarters of the year."

"Part of the trap," Montoya continues, "along with everything else—auditioning, rejections, writer's block—is you tend to feel undervalued. It's not like Paris, or New York, or London, where, as a mid-career artist, you're valued. Here, it's particularly tough because it's also a youth-driven market. But, even in that milieu, you've got to continue to write works that challenge yourself and your audience." He pauses, then deadpans, "I think we've managed to be remarkably not bitter about it."

Siguenza adds, "What helped us is getting produced. If you're not being produced by the regional theatres, you feel like your worth isn't there. There are great writers in the Bay Area who are dying to be on certain stages in LA but they're not part of that system. I'm not saying we're a part of a system but we have been through the Gordon Davidson nurture."

Montoya adds, “You feel like you have a home at the Taper, at South Coast Rep. You’re part of a consortium at LA Theatre Center.”

Not that there aren’t still frustrations such as the misconception that LA theatre pales next to New York, even as more Broadway artists relocate out here.

Siguenza admits, “What really pissed me off about *Chavez Ravine* and *Water and Power*, which I think are our most mature plays, are that people went, ‘Well, will it play in New York?’ Who cares? It played well in LA. Isn’t that good enough? When a play’s a hit in New York, they never go, ‘Will it play in LA?’ I don’t get it.”

Montoya jumps in. “They never stop making LA-themed movies, so the question is really, ‘How Latino is it?’ We’re in the ecosystem of *Wicked*

Security. There’s this 200-year-old woman at the El Camino Inn schooling him. It’s a multi-layered play, mind-blowing, psychedelic, which says something about standing up and being counted. That’s why we’re taking the image of *Zorro*.” To which Siguenza adds, “Rising up.”

Montoya references the LAPD clash with peaceful protestors at MacArthur Park on May 1. “Look at the vilification and beat-down the immigrants took. That angers us.” It also makes them wise. Siguenza notes *Chavez Ravine* survived critical apathy. “We got the worst review we’ve ever gotten from the *LA Times*, yet audiences found us.”

In *Water and Power*, Montoya recalls, “the sharpest jabs were at our own, who have mastered the art of the deal but not the art of the heart. If we

**“WE’RE STILL TRYING TO BE SUBVERSIVE. I THINK EVERY PLAYWRIGHT IS SUBVERSIVE. EVERY ACTOR TRUDGING THROUGH LA ON THE WAY TO AN AUDITION IS SUBVERSIVE.” – RICHARD MONTOYA**

right now. What the Nederlanders are doing for *Zorro in Hell* is a pretty wonderful thing...We’re borrowing their group sales office. That’s a really nice, neighborly thing. People want to see something at the Montalban succeed and they’re willing to put their money where their mouth is. Michael Ritchie and Center Theatre Group sent out 40 thousand pieces of mail on our behalf. I’m not sure that would happen on the East Coast.”

Montoya interrupts himself: “I want to say three things for the record today. One, we did the Broadway girl thing for a while. Two, we were on time for our interview today, and three, we were cooperative. I just want those things said because I think there’s a little misconception out there that we’re difficult.”

He continues: “*Zorro in Hell* takes on a lot of stuff we just talked about. There are too many writers parked at Starbucks, trying to come up with reality TV show pitches. At the heart of *Zorro in Hell* is a writer who is jaded, who has been there, and he stumbles upon this inn, perched on the Hollywood Freeway, at El Camino Real.”

Salinas adds, “And going with the angst of writing, the loneliness of writing, this journey the writer takes through the world of *Zorro*, a lot of it could be in his mind. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, the opium, pot-smoking writer thing.

“Along the way, he probably got tired of what’s going on in California, and probably did spray paint a Z on the capitol dome in Sacramento. Now, he is being held by Homeland

have the Montalbans and the LATCs, and we had to be good business people to get those, that’s fine. But what are we putting on those stages? It has to be looked at, it has to be good.”

Siguenza comments, “We’re doing a play about the myth of hero. How, right now, we need a hero, we need a leader, to make us rise up against this tyranny, this injustice. We need justice. We don’t have that.”

Montoya adds, “I think we’re using a co-opted image. What we say in the play is, ‘We’re co-opting the co-opted.’ *Zorro*’s creator was an Anglo-Irish Catholic, Johnston McCulley, and we resisted it and wanted to mock it. Yet he left us a usable tool, much more useful than the ‘Latin Explosion’ ever was. It’s that you can rise up and ride your horse, and take on the governor, or the LAPD, or whoever the dominant culture is.

“We’re still trying to be subversive. I think every playwright is subversive. Every actor trudging through LA on the way to an audition is subversive. This celebrates that. Whether you’re pink, yellow, brown, Latino, whatever—you’re a creative person and it’s difficult in this town. You’ve taken the long, lonely road. You can be rewarded in the end and the rewards may not be money but, man, there’s nothing like putting on a pair of tights and a sword...”

“It really did warm our hearts when we saw some photos from the ‘50s of pudgy little white boys with masks on. They thought they could be Latino. That’s a good thing.” ■

**ZORRO IN HELL**

Opens July 18;  
plays Wed.-Fri., 8 pm;  
Sat., 2:30 and 8 pm;  
Sun., 2:30 and 7:30 pm;  
through Aug. 19  
Tickets: \$25-\$55  
Previews July 11-17 (\$30-\$40)  
Z-ZONE (first two rows) \$25  
every performance  
Ricardo Montalban Theatre  
1615 N. Vine St., Hollywood  
877.EL.ZORRO or  
www.cultureclash.com