

Farm Workers' Theatre Develops From Strike

Joanne Forman

1966

Huelga, the grape strike in the San Joaquin Valley, has given heart to those who lament the American labor movement as moribund, backward and sold out.

Teatro Campesino, the Farm Workers' Theater, has grown directly out of the strike, and should give heart to those who still lament the American theater as dying or dead.

The theater was started last month by two young playwright-actors, Luis Valdez and Stefan Uhse. Valdez, a member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, is a native of Delano, and has also worked in the fields. All the other actors are farm workers.

Shows are presented at the weekly meetings of picket-workers. A recent playlet went like this:

(During the fifth week of the Strike, the ranchers produced a fraudulent radio broadcast, in which "Governor Brown" addressed himself to the Delano strikers IN SPANISH, ordering them back to the fields.)

Announcer: And now, Señoras y Señores, the Honorable Edmund G. "Pat" Brown. (A striker with a sign around his neck, reading GOVERNOR BROWN, is pushed on stage. He tries to get out, but is met by two other strikers wearing PATRONCITO or BANK OF AMERICA or DI GIORGIO FRUIT CORP. signs. They push him towards the microphone. The GOVERNOR complains that he knows no Spanish. The Bosses suggest that all he needs to say is "No Huelga!" "These Mexicans can't understand much more anyway." The GOVERNOR goes up to the mike and says "No Huelga." The Bosses applaud furiously: "Attaboy, Governor," "Keep it up, Pat," etc. The GOVERNOR goes on, speaking broken Spanish. He speaks for about a minute and a half; in that time, his Spanish improves miraculously, so that he finishes with a flourish, telling his Mexicans in the words and in no uncertain terms to get the hell back to the fields where they belong or he'll send the Immigration after each and every one of them. All this in Spanish. of course.)

The Bosses applaud and come forward, shaking the Governor's band and patting him on the back: "Great job, Governor. Beautiful!" The GOVERNOR appears stunned; he speaks: "Que?" "Great job." "No comprendo." The Bosses start to get irritable: "Aw, come on, Pat. You don't have to use that crap on us. Speak English." GOVERNOR: "No pues, no comprendo. Ya eso, quienes son Uds?" The Bosses get angry, and start to push the GOVERNOR off-stage. The GOVERNOR resists, speaking Spanish all the way. He begins to sound like a Huelgista, as a matter of fact. The Bosses leap on him, just as he starts making another speech telling strikers to keep on with the Huelga. As the Bosses drag him off, he is still shouting: "HUELGA! HUELGA! VIVA LA CAUSA!"

Crude? Doubtless. But crude, perhaps, in the way that the peasant dances to Dionysius on the threshing floors of Attica were crude. Or the bawdy skits presented on Italian street corners in the 15th century. Or the racy "zarzuelas" in the low dives of Madrid.

The near relatives of Teatro Campesino in our own times are probably the "Lehrstucke" of Brecht's youth, the Living Newspapers of the WPA 'thirties, and the young traveling players of Mao's guerrilla army.

Teatro Campesino is too young to worry yet about its future. That will be determined ultimately by the response of the audiences. For now it is busy with Spanish and English sketches which grow out of the lives of its audience. Soon the group hopes to go on tour throughout the state.

The Theater has asked everyone with costumes, talent, ideas, energy or money to contact the Farm Workers' Theater, Box 894, Delano, California.

(Editor's note: Joanne Forman, who has been working with the Free Southern Theater this year, is joining TEATRO CAMPESINO in January.)

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