

FROM THE GROUND UP

a publication of STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

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Focus on Protest Theater

Why Theater?

Mother Earth rises from her volcano. Around her scramble four figures, chanting. They shrivel as she flings drops of water on them. Mother Earth transports these people to the past, and they relive their follies of environmental abuse.

These actors are members of the Tecum Umani Peasant Theater Company, a Nicaraguan street theater troupe that aims to raise awareness of issues surrounding their community. By highlighting these issues, they hope to empower their audiences to create social change for themselves.

This idea is not new. For centuries and throughout numerous cultures, theater has been used to alter mindsets, to create different worldviews. In medieval times, morality plays were common. The avant-garde artists of the 1920s found theater to be a particularly useful medium for spreading their manifestos. Theater to empower women emerged in the late sixties in the United States, and in modern India, one can find nearly seven thousand active groups performing on the streets.

Theater is used so universally and so prolifically for good reason. Primarily, it is accessible to actors and audiences. Performance does not require literacy, nor does it necessitate the use of technology. What it does include is the

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In This Edition...

What is theater? For what reason do we watch or perform acts upon the stage? Historically and currently, theater is both a source of enjoyment and a vehicle for social change. In this volume of *From the Ground Up* we will focus on the motivating aspect of theatrical performance, investigating what it is that makes performance so effective in raising awareness. We will look at the roots of this medium, this coalition of art and activism, and we shall see through SAF's own Project Levante and other theater groups the ways in which performance today is being used to create awareness, empower audiences and create meaningful social change.

Protest Theater Past and Present

◆ Protest Theater performances in India raised consciousness of colonial rule in the early 19th century. More than one hundred years later, the founding of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) precipitated widespread use of Protest Theater. Today many social action groups in India use theater to challenge issues that range from oppression of women to political corruption.

◆ The turn of the century Irish Dramatic Movement was a theater-based effort in Ireland to establish Irish identity as separate from British identity and the British "caricature" of the Irish.

◆ Lenin used theater and large theatrical festivals as propaganda tools in post-revolutionary Russia. They glorified the new socialist regime and poked fun at tsarist and capitalist practices.

◆ Students at East Harlem's Soul and Latin Theatre (SALT) performed shows in the late 1960s on topics such as homosexuality, drugs and poor schools to their classmates and neighborhoods "to get across what's happening in the schools and the neighborhood by acting out how people treat one another."

◆ Since the mid-1980s, performance has served as a valuable tool in the continuing AIDS struggle in the United States by raising awareness, challenging stereotypes and resignifying the social meaning of the disease. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which began in 1987 in New York but by 1989 had spread nationally and to Canada, uses theatrical methods to cut red tape blocking access to desperately needed drug treatments.

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For more information or to submit articles, contact:

Student Action with Farmworkers
1317 W. Pettigrew St., Durham, NC 27705
919-660-3652; 919-681-7600 (fax)
<http://cfs.aas.duke.edu/saf/>
mwiggins@duke.edu

From the Ground Up Editor:
Kate Chomsky-Higgins

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Protest vs. Traditional Theater: What's the Difference?

Intention is the quality that most clearly distinguishes protest theater from traditional theater. While most types of theater have the ultimate goal of delivering a message or of stimulating the audience to reflection, protest theater focuses heavily on these aspects of the performance. The primary objective of protest performance is to stimulate social change.

While traditional theater is valuable in many contexts, protest theater fills a niche within the dramatic world that has contemporary consequences for the world in which we live.

According to Harry J. Elam, Jr., a scholar of Black and Chicano social protest theater, the difference between protest and traditional theater is that the former has "an explicit social purpose" that directs the audience to social action, which the latter lacks. He describes it as "an ever-evolving genre appearing wherever oppressed people assert their subjectivity and contest the status quo."

Protest theater is often characterized by the proximity of the actors' social situation to that of the characters that they portray and to that of the audience for whom they perform. Compare this to the traditional goal of theatrical entertainment in which actors create realistic characters whose social situations are most likely unrelated to those of the actors themselves or their audience.

While the audience is always in the position to be the "interpreter of meaning," says Elam, protest theater encourages spectators to step out of their passive roles and make changes in their own realities. Ultimately, protest theater intends to create further activism off of the stage. He asserts that "audience participation...is critical in the social protest theater, because it functions as a measure of social efficacy and a precursor to social action."

Protest Theater is staged drama that enacts the drama of ordinary life for certain audiences. Through audience identification and themes that center upon social reality, protest theater engages, encourages and enrages audiences, finally playing a significant role in lasting social change.

Theater of Reality: El Teatro Campesino

During the Delano Grape Picker's Strike of 1965, a small theater troupe emerged to support the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), (later to become the United Farm Workers) and to encourage audiences to participate in nonviolent resistance towards oppressive employers. It was the first, and destined to become the most successful, Chicano theater company in the United States. Today the work of Teatro Campesino, the farmworkers' theater, continues to influence protest theater groups across the United States and beyond. SAF's Levante Theater Group is among those inspired.

The name El Teatro Campesino derives from post-revolutionary programs of the Mexican government that, through theater, taught indigenous people skills such as delousing hair and brushing teeth; in essence, they taught them to become 'civilized'. They took the name of these teatros campesinos in order to reclaim theater for the more noble cause of empowerment.

El Teatro worked to dramatize farmworkers' struggles through humor. Often using

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Project

Project Levante is a drop-out prevention program for middle and high school migrant farmworker students, supported by the North Carolina Migrant Education Program. Since over 50% of migrant students quit school to help support their families or care for younger siblings, SAF decided that Project Levante had to employ non-traditional and participatory means to combat this trend.

n t e !

notes from the field

L e

The Project Levante Theater Group uses drama to initiate discussion among farmworker students, their parents and educators about the educational barriers faced by farmworker students in North Carolina schools. SAF Interns perform the plays in different locations around North Carolina and facilitate discussions following the play on topics such as language barriers, immigration issues, parent involvement in education, and the college application process. SAF began using theater to address the needs of students from farmworker families in 1993. Most of the actors are first generation Latino immigrants who grew up doing farm work and are now college students. Past plays have included *College: Me* by Ruben Fuentes, an adapted version of *No Saco Nada de la Escuela* by Luis Valdez and *Una Cuenta de Esperanza* by Ben Edwards. All plays are performed in Spanish or are bilingual (Spanish and English).

"At [one] performance... [we] talked to some guys... [who] loved the play and mentioned that they had dealt with almost all of the scenarios discussed."

-Erica Lian
1998 performer



photos by Jennifer Sugg, 1999 SAF Intern

Over 50 percent of migrant farmworker students nationwide leave school before graduation to help support their families or care for younger siblings. Public schools across the rural U.S. fail to engage the skills and knowledge migrant students bring to the classroom. This crisis of educating and supporting migrant teens is especially compelling in North Carolina, where some counties have a migrant drop-out rate of 100 percent.

In 1993, SAF initiated Project Levante (rise-up in Spanish) to address the complex issues that farmworker teens face. Project Levante combines the non-traditional and participatory techniques of popular education and protest theatre to combat migrant drop-out rates and encourage school success among farmworker students. The popular education component of Project Levante includes such activities as journal writing, bookmaking, life-mapping, conflict resolution, leadership initiative games, documentary photography and writing, role-playing, and college and career training.

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Theatre of the Oppressed

Dr. Augusto Boal does not settle for a passive audience. Nor an appreciative, applauding, admiring audience. He demands interaction; he demands a climbing, moving, thinking, acting audience. Augusto Boal does not desire spectators. He deals with *spect-actors*.

While working at the Brazilian Arena Theatre in the 1960s, Boal discovered that theater combined with active discussion empowered audiences to consider and generate change in their own lives. As he presented audience members with opportunities to suggest change on the stage, so they found the courage to initiate that change in their own communities.

Theatre of the Oppressed was born.

Boal developed a variety of techniques, all based on the same principle: that the activated spectator, which he dubbed the spect-actor, has the power to create social change. Once someone who has always been forced to merely watch the action is allowed to become part of it, that person is able to see herself as part of the solution to her oppression. *Dynamization* is the transformation from mere spectator to empowered spect-actor.

Boal's techniques include Forum Theatre, in which the "audience" is encouraged to intervene in a theatrical representation of an oppression that affects them; Image Theatre, which entails the sculpting of bodies into relationships that reflect a situation in the outside world; and Invisible Theatre, a public show in which the audience is unaware that the action they are watching is contrived, unaware that they are an audience at all. Through these and many other innovative techniques, Boal has helped groups to deal with issues such as political oppression, gender role inequality, and racial stereotyping.

Boal published his first book, entitled *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, in 1971. In the preface to his second book, *Games For*

Actors and Non-Actors, published in 1992, Boal defines theater as "the art of looking at ourselves." His goal is "the development in everyone of the capacity to express themselves through theater." He works hard to realize that dream of *everyone*. In each place that he visits, destinations which span six continents, he leaves behind a legacy of knowledge in the form of a few people who can use his techniques to empower their own communities. SAF's Levante Theater Group makes use of Boal's theory and example.

The first International Festival of the Theatre of the Oppressed was held in Paris in 1981. It became an annual event. In 1997, the festival attracted over 300 practitioners of Theatre of the Oppressed techniques.

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Boal established a Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro (CTO - Rio) out of which he directs a Theatre of the Oppressed theater troupe. He is an annual speaker at the National Conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and in 1997 the Association presented him with a Career Achievement Award in recognition of his extraordinary contributions to his field.

Boal remains committed to his life's work. He continues to lead workshops and develop new techniques to deal with the changing world. But his basic commitment remains. He writes, "Theater should be happiness, it should help us learn about ourselves and our times. We should know the world we live in, the better to change it."

Levante

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The Project Levante Theatre Group uses social protest theatre to initiate discussion among farmworker students, their parents and educators about the educational barriers faced by farmworker students in North Carolina schools. As 1998 Levante performer Kandra Strauss put it, "Popular theatre truly does reach audiences in a powerful way." SAF Interns perform protest plays in different locations around North Carolina and facilitate discussions following the performances on topics such as language barriers, immigration issues, parent involvement in education, and the college application process. Most of the actors are first generation Latino immigrants who grew up doing farm work and are now college students.

Since its inception, The Levante Theatre Group has performed plays at over 40 sites. Past plays have included *College: Me* by Ruben Fuentes, *Una Cuenta de Esperanza* by Ben Edwards, and an adapted version of *No Saco Nada de la Escuela* by Luis Valdez. All plays are performed in Spanish or are bilingual (Spanish and English). Fabiola Valdez, a performer with the 1999 Levante Group, noted that "it was amazing how much [the play] actually helped" the audiences of migrant families and educators. "The feedback from the audience, especially the parents, really [kept] me going," said 1998 performer Luis Maciel.

A young Latina woman argues with her parents over her decision to attend college. She wishes to go, but her parents will not allow it.

This scenario is acted out by Teatro T.O.R.T.I.L.L.A., a California State University at Fresno based student organization, and is all too common in the Latino community, says Fabiola Valdez, a seasoned member of the troupe.

Teatro T.O.R.T.I.L.L.A., which abbreviates El Teatro Of Raza Towards Involvement in Local Latino Awareness, performs mainly for schools and church groups in the San Joaquin Valley. Established in 1990, this group has a

Teatro T.O.R.T.I.L.L.A.

repertoire of eleven primary productions that focus on "the social, political..., educational and cultural issues facing the Mexicano, Chicano, and Latino community," according to a statement by the group's advisor, Joseph Garduque. Troupe members wrote five of the Teatro productions. The troupe focuses on about three shows at a time and performs about one to three times per month, as schools and organizations invite them.

Targeting high school students, parents and teachers and dealing with topics ranging from drug abuse to financial aid, the troupe performs a show that is relevant to each particular audience. After the performance, members, who are primarily

first generation farmworking students, answer questions and foster a dialogue with the audience about the ways in which the drama relates to their own lives. Valdez speaks of parents who had little idea of the importance of education for success in today's society, or no knowledge of the financial opportunities available to them and their children. Having watched Teatro T.O.R.T.I.L.L.A.'s production of *College Me*, they were suddenly quite curious about financial aid. For their children, sometimes seeing Latino college students on stage was enough to inspire them to aspirations of higher education. Says Valdez with awe, "It totally changes them."

Why Theater?

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use of observation in a whole assortment of incarnations: visual, auditory, emotional. It allows for personal contact, and performance lends itself to inciting unrest and activism, the prerequisites of social change.

Protest theater aims to create dialogue. Through the performance of situations common to the audience, often with heavy use of allegory, a mirror is held to the community. If they see in it what the actors intend for them to see, then the hope is that they will begin thinking about ways to deal with these issues themselves. The action must arise from within the community in order for social change to be successful; this is further embodied in the fact that often the actors themselves are members of the communities that they serve. Says Gerardo del Socorro Molinares Dormus, founder of Tecum Umani, "I believe we have the ability to live better, but it has to come from us."

Dormus is the son of agricultural workers. After spending his childhood on a coffee plantation near San Ramon, he and others founded a theater group there. Since then he has founded various rural theater troupes.

Dormus points out that theater does not change minds right away. What it does induce reflection. Whether art imitates life, or life imitates art, protest performance intertwines the two, creating a space in between that fosters communication, growth and change.

Campesino

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improvisation, El Teatro's *actos* were short, succinct and heavily symbolic. They were based upon an outline that members of the company co-authored. It was especially significant that the members of the troupe were farmworkers themselves. Thus their protest was not only symbolic, but also iconic. They were both the representers and the represented. In other words, the fact that what they acted out was essentially aspects of their own lives was extremely important. Luis Valdez, an important organizer and original member of the group, referred to the style as "theater of reality."

The techniques of El Teatro were rooted in the Mexican tradition of the *carpa*, or transient tent show, says scholar Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez. "The Mexican *carpa* and, more broadly speaking, the Mexican popular performance tradition has throughout history served as a counter-hegemonic tool of the disenfranchised and oppressed." According to Gonzalez, Cesar Chavez had hoped to reincarnate the *carpa* as an organizing tool. It was he who named the original characters of El Teatro Campesino.

The theater took leave of its agitation work around 1971, but it continues to function today out of San Juan Bautista, California.

Valdez identified El Teatro as more protest than theater. He said in 1967, "We shouldn't be judged as a theater. We're really part of a cause."

Ways To Get Involved

2000 Into the Fields (ITF) Summer Internship Positions. The Into the Fields program links 30 college students with community-based organizations that work with farmworkers, including: rural health clinics, migrant education programs, immigration and legal assistance organizations, policy and legislation projects and with organizing & occupational safety groups. **Applications are due February 11, 2000.** You must be a college student from a farmworker family, a university student in North or South Carolina, or a former Frontier College Labourer-Teacher to participate. Interns receive furnished housing for the summer, an \$1,100 living stipend and a \$1,250 educational award upon completion of the program. The application process is competitive. To receive an application or more information, contact Libby Manly at levante@duke.edu 919-660-3652.

Earn a Master's Degree in Special Education with an Emphasis in Migrant Education at the State University of NY (SUNY) at New Paltz. This program is tuition free and provides participants with a stipend. **To receive an application and more information call 914-257-2836 or visit www.newpaltz.edu/bilingual_special_ed/migrant.html**

SAF Needs Frequent Flier Miles to fly students from farmworker families across the country to NC to participate in the Into the Fields summer internship program. You must have a minimum of 25,000 miles to purchase one coach class ticket for domestic travel. You can also donate funds to sponsor the travel of farmworker students. **Contact Libby Manly at levante@duke.edu or 919-660-3652 to pledge your support.**

Honor Boycotts called by Farmworkers

Farmworkers are not protected under the National Labor Relations Act and, therefore, can be easily fired and replaced if they attempt to negotiate a living wage or improved working conditions. Often, the safest way for farmworker to pressure grower cooperatives & agricultural manufacturers is through consumer boycotts. Be a conscientious consumer! Support farmworkers in your area by endorsing & honoring boycotts called by farmworkers. **Don't spend a nickel on Mt. Olive Pickle products, California Table Grapes, or NORPAC (including Flav-r-pac & West-pac).**

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1317 W. PETTIGREW ST.
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