UC Riverside
UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title
Carlos Morton: Bio-Bibliographical Essay

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0bd6154f

Author
Arrizón, A

Publication Date
2021-06-27

Peer reviewed
Chicano Writers
Second Series

Edited by
Francisco A. Lomelí
University of California, Santa Barbara

and
Carl R. Shirley
University of South Carolina

A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book
Gale Research Inc.
Detroit, London
CARLOS MORTON  
(15 October 1942 - )

M. ALICIA ARRIZON  
STANFORD UNIVERSITY


PLAY PRODUCTIONS: EL JARDIN, IOWA CITY, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, 1975;  
LAS MANY MUERTES DE DANNY ROSALES, SAN DIEGO, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, 1976;  
EL GARDEN, SAN DIEGO, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, 1977;  
LAS MANY MUERTES DE RICHARD MORALES, SAN DIEGO, TEATRO MIL CARAS, 1977;  
LOS DORADOS, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA-PACIFIC THEATRE, 1978;  
RANCHO HOLLYWOOD, SAN FRANCISCO, TEATRO GUSTO, 1980;  
JOHNNY TENORIO, SAN ANTONIO, TEX., CENTRO CULTURAL DE AZTLAN, 1983;  
PANCHO DIABLO, LOS ANGELES, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, 1984;  
LA MALINCHE, AUSTIN, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, 1984;  


Carlos Morton is one of the main contributors to the development of Chicano drama. He is the recipient of several drama prizes, such as the one he received in 1986 at the Second National Latino Playwriting Contest. In 1989 he became a Fulbright lecturer at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México for a year.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, on 15 October 1942, Morton is the son of Ciro and Helen López Morton. Because his father served in the U.S. Army, he traveled with his family all over the United States and Latin America. He has lived for extended periods of time in Chicago, New York, San Diego, San Francisco, Los Angeles, El Paso, and Mexico. He also lived a few years in Panama and Ecuador, where his father was stationed. His travels and his bilingual background are important forces in Morton's creative process of becoming a playwright. Being bicultural has made him search for a firm identity.

Morton received his B.A. in English from the University of Texas at El Paso in 1975 and an M.F.A. in 1979 from the University of California, San Diego. He married Azalea Marín in 1981, and they have three children: Miguel Angel, Carlos Xunchu, and Seth. From 1979 to 1981 Morton worked as a playwright with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and taught courses in Chicano drama and creative writing at the University of California.  

PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY GARCIA
of California, Berkeley. In 1981 he entered the Ph.D. program in drama at the University of Texas at Austin, where he was employed as an assistant instructor until 1985. Morton became an important force in the Latino artistic community of Austin while working on his doctorate. He completed it in 1987 with a dissertation titled “Three Plays on the Latin Experience in America: Johnny Tenorio, Malinche, and The Savior.” He taught drama for three years at Laredo Junior College in Texas. Currently he is an associate professor in the Department of Theatre at the University of California, Riverside.

When Morton received a scholarship in the mid 1970s to study drama at the University of California, San Diego, he dropped everything to become a full-time writer. Previously he had experimented with prose and poetry, but he settled on playwriting as an avocation after several of his plays were produced and published. He considers Chicano drama as the literature of the Mexican-American people, characterized by a spirit that reflects their hopes and aspirations. He deals with the questions of identity, origin, and future of the different generations of Mexican immigrants. Myth, history, and religion, combined with a sardonic and humorous theatricality, characterize Morton’s symbolic system of writing and the aesthetics of his theater. The elements of myth, history, and religion are essential to the sociocultural context, the most valuable aspect of his playwriting.

Two of Morton’s early plays are theological comedies: El Jardín (The Garden, 1975), printed in The Many Deaths of Danny Rosales and Other Plays (1983); and Pancho Diablo (Frankie Devil, 1984—written in 1976). In the first one, the historical conquest of America parallels the loss of Paradise in the biblical story of Adam and Eve to show that humankind (and, in particular, Chicanos) has been oppressed since the creation of the universe. In Pancho Diablo, Morton represents good versus evil with God as a Texas Ranger and the Devil as a nato loco (crazy dude). The Devil appears with a mustache, sunglasses, huaraches, and a Mexican poncho. He has long, thick, black hair, which he wears with a headband across his forehead. He quits his job in hell in order to live the life of a common man. God is described as benevolent except when he takes on the role of a ranger—in popular culture the oppressor of Chicanos. God is described as a hip and unfathomable man with a Zapata mustache who smokes Cuban cigars. He is able to assume many disguises.

In order to give a Mexican flavor to Pancho Diablo, Morton creates prototypes reminiscent of real characters. In this play, as in El Jardín, the dramatic action is developed by means of the absurdity and humorous scenes—presented in terms of concrete stage images. However, the various themes manifest different levels of the Chicano experience, both cultural and political. In both plays, oppression is dramatized in a totally illogical world:

PANCHO DIABLO: The masses no comprenden porque hemos secuestrado a Lee Treviño; ni comprenden porque estamos destruyendo los ‘Taco Bells’; no comprenden porque [do not comprehend because we have kidnapped Lee Treviño, nor do they comprehend because] they themselves are too tied up in the pinche [damn] sistema that each day enslave them más [more].

ALL: Yaaaaaaaaaaaa.

PANCHO DIABLO: While Gringolandia is engaged in a bloody class and race war, movimientos de liberación [movements of liberation] throughout el mundo (the world) will rise up to attack the tentacles of the octopus. Nosotros que estamos aquí en la panza de la bestia [We who are here in the belly of the beast] must strike the first blow para La Libertad!

ALL: Yaaaaaaaaaaaaa.

PANCHO DIABLO: Y ahora, quiero presentarles al Vato [And now, I want to introduce you to the Dude] who’s going to make all this possible; mi amigo and yours, La Muerte [Death]!

ALL: Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.

LA MUERTE APPEARS IN CALAVERA [skeleton] COSTUME.

Morton’s symbolic system breaks from what he perceives to be the dead ritual of Christianity in Chicano culture. He uses theater to reawaken the audience to the human ritual, acclimating the desire for freedom and justice. Essential ingredients in Morton’s plays are humor and satire. The purpose of these is to make one feel concerned for whomever they may represent in real life: oppressors and oppressed. Whether he treats mythical, religious, and social themes or presents human beings in search of liberation, there is al-
always a sense of humor in the character, situations, and language, as in El Jardín:

SERPIENTE: My little quesadilla, once you discover the wheel, you'll have the mechanics to build a marvelous civilization.

EVA: Will my people acknowledge this? Will women be appreciated? (Thunder and lightning build in intensity)

SERPIENTE: My little jalapeño, you will be worshiped, idolized, put on pedestals! Take a bite!

The code-switching from English to Spanish makes the humor even funnier. Most of the time the plot is a collage of suggested issues such as exploitation, liberation, assimilation, and racism that never get well developed in the dramatic trajectory. Nevertheless, what is important is the form of theater taking place: a comedy, where the theme of oppression becomes a sardonic metaphor for the represented universe. In the situation above, Eve is being convinced to eat the forbidden fruit by the Devil, the serpent. She eats it, and then she and her beloved man are expelled from Eden. The next scene transports the spectator to Chicago, Illinois, where Adam and Eve are living in middle-class comfort. The abrupt presentation of different situations makes the dramatic experience be the action of time, which is constant change: from one era to another, from one generation to the next one, from the old world to the new. While in these pieces the intention is to present anti-Christianity, with a satirical interpretation of Latin-American culture and its dogmatic doctrine, the entangled politics are just a reflection of the street-level sense of humor.

The Many Deaths of Danny Rosales and Other Plays comprises four plays: the title play, Rancho Hollywood, Los Dorados (The Golden Ones), and El Jardín. The title work (performed in 1976) is based on the true story of the 1975 killing of a man named Richard Morales by a police chief near a small Texas community. This event took place five miles outside Castroville, Texas. In the play the twenty-six-year-old victim's name has been changed to Danny Rosales. The story is about injustice. The play was originally born as Las Many Muertes de Richard Morales, written by Morton with the collaboration of his fellow graduate students at the University of California, San Diego. This first script was performed and published in 1977.

Los Dorados (performed in 1978) looks at American history from the point of view of the conquered mestizos. The setting is the lower California coast during the first three centuries of colonization. At the beginning of the play, Sinnuhow, a Native American woman, introduces the story:

Damas y Caballeros, Ladies and Gentlemen, the play you are about to see, Los Dorados, is a mixture of facts and fiction about the clash between Native Americans and Spanish conquistadores in Southern California. Los Dorados means the golden ones en español; golden, because all have come to these shores in search of what is precious... be it gold, converts, fame or simply work. (Enter a native woman, Tupipe, who kneels before a campfire cooking. From the opposite side enters Capitán wandering aimlessly, lost and hungry. He reaches for a fruit from a tree and breaks the branch as he hears the sound and
looks up. He tries to eat the fruit without peeling it and tosses it away with disgust as she rises and walks cautiously toward the sound. He crashes in the underbrush towards her as she draws her bow and arrow. He trips and falls and she draws back the arrow and is about to shoot. He sees her, rises, draws his sword and tooters, nearly exhausted. She notes his sad condition and lowers her guard. He backs away from her and puts his sword down on the ground as she lays her bow and arrow on the ground. They walk tentatively towards each other. She picks a fruit from the same tree he did and peels it for him. He devours it ravenously. He pulls out some coins and gives one to her and she takes it, bites it, spits it out and returns it with disgust. He takes a small mirror out of his pocket and gives it to her and she stares at it in astonishment.

The play develops as an account of the submission of the Native Americans to the domain and power of the Spanish missionaries.

*Rancho Hollywood* (performed in 1980) is an attack on Hollywood's stereotyping of Latinos. It is a sardonic, extended metaphor for the false image of Latinos created by the movie and television industries. This play, like *Los Dorados*, is structured as theater within theater, where all the characters are seen as theatricalized. The games the characters play in *Rancho Hollywood*, moving in and out of the different roles they play, add to the interest. The production of a movie as a part of the action, setting the theatrical experience within the context of a film (*Ye Olde California Days*), accomplishes the richness of meta-theater:

**DIRECTOR:** We could get O. J. Simpson to play the slave. Now we need a big name star for the uh, Captain of the clipper ship. Someone with charisma, poise, good looks... I got it! I got it!

**CAMERAMAN:** Got what?

**DIRECTOR:** I'll play the part (The cameraman groans). You play my slave. Where are we? Where are we? (The other actors disperse, leaving the Director and Cameraman to set up the next scene).

**CAMERAMAN:** On a boat. Out in the harbor.

**DIRECTOR:** Oh, I love this. It's so Brechtian. What am I doing?

While the director is assisted by his cameraman as they shoot a movie, the cast members, protesting against them, give their own interpretation to the performance. They refuse to perform the stereotypical version the director wants them to do about the history of California. They organize and direct their own movie. Later the director takes on the role of Jed, a goldminer-soldier who fights against Rico, the governor of California:

**RICO:** (Seen at another part of the stage writing at a desk) To the Honorable President of the republic of Mexico. I am writing to you with a heavy heart....

**JED:** (Appearing at another writing desk) The conquest of California would be absolutely nothing. It would fall like a ripened fruit from its bough into the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race as the people here are incapable of defending it (Jed pulls out a pistol and slams it on the desk).

**RICO:** The uncertainty in which we find ourselves in this territory because of the excessive introduction of armed adventures from the United States of the North leaves us no doubt of the war we shall have with them (pulls out his own pistol and loads it).

**JED:** (Addressing himself to the audience) Therefore, I said, let us strike now and free this blessed country from Mexican tyranny.

**RICO:** (To the audience as well) The Treasury Department is exhausted. We have no standing garrison other than volunteers. Please, send money, men, and material at once. God and Liberty, Río Rico, Los Angeles, California. May 25, 1846.

Morton does not necessarily document the historic event, but uses it as a mode of reinventing the past, revising the fall of the last California governor and the loss of the territory. Morton's version of this historic event is based on the case of Don Pío Pico, the last Mexican governor of California.

In *Johnny Tenorio* (1983) Morton re-creates the Spanish tradition of Don Juan, adapting it to contemporary Chicano culture. He writes of a lumpen-proletarian Don Juan named Johnny and sets the dramatic action in an impoverished west-side barrio of San Antonio, Texas. This play was originally commissioned in 1983 at the Centro Cultural de Aztlán, a Chicano arts center in San Antonio. It was first written in a mixture of Spanish and English for a bilingual audience and then translated for a subsequent (1984) production at the University of Texas before a mostly English-speaking audience. The play was
designed for the Day of the Death celebration of 1 and 2 November, which, in many Spanish-speaking countries, is marked by productions of José Zorrilla's Don Juan Tenorio.

In La Malinche (1984) Morton develops the story of a Mayan woman who served as a translator for Hernán Cortés, conqueror of Mexico. Malinche was one of the many native women taken as slaves/lovers when the Spanish landed in Yucatán. Thanks to her intelligence and facility for languages, she became Cortés's principal translator and one of his trusted advisers. They fell in love, and she had a son named Martín. The son of Malinche and Cortés was raised as a Spaniard, inheriting his father's lands and title: marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca.

Morton adapted Medea, by Euripides, to the tale of Malinche, since both title characters are seen as "barbarians" who fell in love with soldiers of fortune in a supposed "higher civilization." Both aided their lovers in subduing their people, and both were later abandoned by these men.

La Malinche is set in the mid sixteenth century, immediately following the Spanish conquest. The figure of La Llorona (the weeping woman) acts as the conscience of Malinche. Morton parallels La Llorona with the chorus in Euripides' tragedy. In La Malinche a Catholic bishop takes the place of the king who banishes Medea, and the bishop acts as a counter to the heathen priestess La Llorona. Malinche, betrayed by the Spaniard who promised that the new rule would benefit the natives, sacrifices her son rather than see him killed by his enemies or used as an instrument of oppression against her people.

The Savior (1988) is the story of the ministry of Oscar Arnulfo Romero, archbishop of San Salvador from 1977 to 1980. Morton writes of the death of Archbishop Romero, who was shot by an unknown sniper at the altar of a chapel where he was saying mass on 24 March 1980 in El Salvador. In this drama, as in Las Many Muertes de Richard Morales, Morton documents a real event. He explains in the introduction to his dissertation (which includes the original script) that he was inspired to write The Savior after talking with priests and laity in Central America who had worked with Romero. Morton feels that this play affirms the kinship between Chicanos and Salvadorans who are tied together by blood, language, religion, and history. He points out that, as American citizens, Chicanos are also morally responsible for the actions of the U.S. government. Romero, who died as a pacifist, represents another victim of injustice toward human beings.

Within the context of Chicano theater, Morton has been especially influenced by Luis Valdez and his El Teatro Campesino. But while Luis Valdez came from a large, farm-working migrant family, Morton was born into an urban life-style and grew up in diverse places. Nevertheless, Morton uses the same tools employed by Valdez and other playwrights in the repertoire of Chicano drama: the myths akin to the Mexican-American culture, a sardonic view of humanity, and a folkloric interpretation of classic patterns. Morton skillfully employs characteristics of the classical rites to construct a comedy or a tragedy that deals with rituals. He sees theater as a criticism and reconstruction of these rituals as he perceives them in a Chicano context. In this sense, Carlos Morton not only sees theater as a ritual but as a combination of rituals within a ritual, in order to present a new perspective.