

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://cda.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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