

Culture Clash in AmeriCCa

written by Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas and Herbert Siguenza, directed by David Emmes

South Coast Repertory • March 16-April 6, 2008 (Opened 3/21, rev'd 3/22e, ext. 4/13)

For more than a decade, **Culture Clash** (the trio of Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas and Herbert Siguenza) has been creating serio-comic portraits of U.S. population areas by interviewing citizens and then performing the edited transcriptions. Beginning with 'Radio Mambo,' the Miami survey that is still the group's best effort, they have been adding to their repertory, either with site-specific shows like 'Bordertown' (San Diego/Tijuana), or with an expanding national portrait collected in 'Culture Clash in AmeriCCa,' currently at Orange County's South Coast Repertory. Sporting a handful of fresh local faces added for this venue, the show quickly extended a week to April 13.

The resulting edition of 'Culture Clash in America,' in SCR's Julianne Argyros Stage is a two-hour, two-act greatest hits collection with such recognizable neighbors as the befuddled day laborer, a sun-setting Mike Corona, and a goofy Vietnamese-American Car Clubber.

As we reported in 2006 after seeing the world premiere of the trio's 'Water & Power' at the Taper, the Clash has emerged as a bona fide regional – if not national – treasure. Still flying a proud, if faded, standard of political theater, they showed in that show greater writing and acting range. Their talent for clowning, however, can undercut the potential sharpness of a 'Zorro in Hell,' which last year at the Montalban (unreviewed), seemed like backsliding. That show has a still-potent message about cultural imperialism here in the (albeit fabricated) West. Mexican characters and storylines are money in the bank for studios, while Mexican actors are banished to the food banks. But the point and rapier wit were dulled by too-often unfunny schtick.

However, whether one is card-carrying Clash party faithful or first-timer, "Culture Clash in AmeriCCa" offers their "sketch-theater" at its finest. Familiar loonies like 'Radio Mambo's' Todd and Francis, the mildly racist Norwegian-Cuban couple who are now post-Katrina trough-feeders, are joined by less familiar folks like a merry Berkeley transsexual, a proud Nuyorican, and a white-bread Lesbian pair from suburban San Diego.

Credit director David Emmes for getting out of the way of what works and encouraging what the boys needed to work on. One only wishes they had taken the time to screw their skills to the scripting place and added the editorial über-structure that would lend the power of 'W&P.' These scenes seem to cry for a cohesive package, perhaps with Montoya's empathetic day laborer as tour guide, that offers a more directed look at the shifting tones of our immigrant nation.

Quibbles aside, it's always a thrill to be in a Culture Clash audience. They are such kinetic performers that anything that happens in the theater during a how can provoke a spontaneous aside. Whether or not they break character for such improv, however, we feel the gears constantly whirring in each artist. Montoya's many moments go beyond comedy and reveal his deepening acting skills. Salinas, who could be winning loving cups on 'Dancing With the Stars,' combines his keen comic-timing with musical timing for a dancer's primer on how to distinguish Latin cultural differences. And, finally, the great Siguenza, the group's acting chameleon who supports the trio



Ric Salinas
Richard Montoya
Herbert Siguenza

PHOTO HENRY DIROCCO

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like the bottom acrobat in a human pyramid, offers his predictable range of disappearing acts, in everything from surfers to tribal African. If Culture Clash served up no more than Herbs, it would still be worth the meal ticket.

There are few -- if any -- events as reassuring to the potential for bi-cultural theater as a Culture Clash performance. It's less noticeable here than in L.A., where extended single-ticket runs overflow with the pride of a Middle Class Hispanic audience taking ownership. Still, Culture Clash has the ability to satisfy both cultures. And, as time goes on and they continue to deepen their craft and messaging, Culture Clash becomes much more than a good night out. They prove that a divided house will stand. And through April 13 in Orange County, that's for a standing ovation.

– Cristofer Gross

WITH Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas and Herbert Siguenza **PRODUCTION** Angela Balogh Calin, set/costumes; Lonnie Rafael Alcaraz, lights; BC Keller, sound; Conwell Worthington III, stage management