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Play

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Last night in downtown L.A. at the MALDEF building on Spring Street I had one of those proverbial, "If you dropped a bomb in the room there would be no more..." thoughts. In this case it was Los Angeles Latino theater.

It doesn't happen often, in the same room: Jose Luis Valenzuela, Evelina Fernandez, Diane Rodriguez, Luis Alfaro, Josefina Lopez, Patssi Valdez, Dan Guerrero, and lots of other playwrights, actors and producers. They're all dramatis personae in one way or another of the Latino Theater Initiative at the Mark Taper Forum, which according to a new book, was part Chicano/Latino theater Bauhaus and part backstage telenovela.

The new 86-page book - or monograph as the academics call it - is titled "[Latino Theater Initiative/Center Theater Group Papers 1980 - 2005](http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/books/chicanoarchives.asp) (<http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/books/chicanoarchives.asp>)." It's the first attempt to document the most important Southern California Latino theater program housed at a major theater.

Skipping the whole L.A.-was-once-Mexico part, here's how the story begins. In 1978, L.A. Mexican Americans gave the Center Theater Group a box office windfall month after month by selling out performances of the play Zoot Suit. The Luis Valdez play dramatized the World War Two era story of a group of L.A. Mexican American youths on trial on trumped up murder charges. The trial and media coverage fueled one of the uglier chapters in L.A.'s long xenophobic history.



Playwright Luis Valdez urged theater administrators to accept his play as a work of American theater first, and an ethnic-specific play second.

You'd think Zoot Suit's success would get producers' phones buzzing, "Got Latino playwrights? Get 'em over here, pronto!" Nel. For 15 years after Zoot Suit, Latino-themed plays remained absent in the city's most prestigious theater complex. In an effort to diversify audiences CTG gave the go ahead to create the Latino Theater Initiative in 1992 after a similar program shut down when the nearby LA Theater Center closed its doors.

The book's core is an essay by Chantal Rodriguez, a CalArts adjunct theater professor. She combed the recently donated Latino Theater Initiative archives to write about the ups and downs of the Initiative.

"There was definitely a lot of challenges, in working with the institution, having to maintain the status quo, looking at the financial needs of the institution. It was very successful. The first few years they had box office successes. They saw the numbers of Latino audiences shoot up and rise. And then they started realizing, we have to put our time and effort into developing those writers," Rodriguez said as she prepared for a panel discussion with Chon Noriega, the director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, the book's publisher.

Between 1992 and 2005 the Latino Theater Initiative incubated eleven plays by Latinos produced on the Mark Taper Forum's main stage. Noriega said in the book's Editor's Note that the Initiative fostered, "the development of new and emerging artists, its support for new work beyond that commissioned for the main stage, and the incorporation of community-based programs into a mainstream theater group."

The book also documents CTG administrator's raiding of the Initiative's coffers and griping after the Initiative's first large production, the 1993 play "Bandido" by Luis Valdez. The play's based on the story of 19th Century California outlaw Tiburcio Vasquez. Oliver Mayer, a nationally active, L.A.-based Latino playwright - who was a commissioned Initiative playwright at the time - told Rodriguez the quality of the Valdez play undermined the Initiative.

"It was a very bad production of a very bad play and it cost a lot of money. I mean, I am a huge Valdez fan, but I am not a fan of that play. But you know what happened? It killed the potential in a lot of ways, so it took a long time to get it back."



A large part of Luis Alfaro's oeuvre was born out of the Initiative. There was a time in the late 1990s to early 2000s when you'd look forward to seeing that big bold poster on Grand Avenue and First Street advertising the new Luis Alfaro play at the Mark Taper Forum.

Diane Rodriguez - head of the Latino Theater Initiative for a decade until CTG chief Michael Ritchie cancelled it in 2005 - said seeing the book about the Initiative for the first time was a "life moment."

"The legacy is that we mentored a generation of Latino playwrights and artists and I see so many actors that are doing fantastic work and we used them in so many of the readings, we have a Pulitzer prize winner among the playwrights that we developed, I mean, how more fabulous is that?" Rodriguez said. She's talking about Cuban American Nilo Cruz and his play "Anna in the Tropics."

Latino theater and Latino theater professionals are alive and well in Los Angeles. Down the street from the book signing, theater elder Jose Juis Valenzuela is the artistic director for the Latino Theater Company at the former L.A. Theater Center stage. 20 and thirtysomething theater professionals also work at smaller theater companies around the region.

Further proof fell into my hands just as I was about to leave the book signing. Josefina Lopez walked up to me and told me I must see the 20th anniversary staging of her groundbreaking play, "[Real Women Have Curves](http://www.casa0101.org/)." (<http://www.casa0101.org/>) Yes, a Chicana has been born, graduated from high school, and is halfway done with college since Lopez wrote the seminal play about a precocious undocumented teenager from East L.A.

Poet and Journalist Adolfo Guzman-Lopez writes his column [Movie Miento](http://www.kcet.org/updaily/socal_focus/commentary/movie-miento/) (http://www.kcet.org/updaily/socal_focus/commentary/movie-miento/) every Tuesday at 2 p.m. on KCET's SoCal Focus blog. It is a poetic exploration of Los Angeles history, Latino culture and the overall sense of place, darting across LA's