

Corridos! Tales of Passion And Revolution by Luis Valdez

An Adapted Tradition

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An adaptation is an interpretation of previously-existing materials, transformed according to specific aspects of the medium to which the original cultural product is to be transferred. The interpretation is determined by the cultural situation and the historic moment in which the adaptation is done; when previously-existing materials are interpreted, adaptation intervenes in a specific group of cultural and social relations and events. Adaptation, then, continues to be a process parallel to translation.

From its first appearance, *Corridos! Tales of Passion and Revolution*, by Luis Valdez, was both an adaptation and a translation.¹ In the “actobiography” of El Teatro Campesino,² we find the background of this document. Written and directed by Valdez when the theater was headquartered in San Juan Bautista (1971-1980),³ we find *Los corridos: Rosita Álvarez, Gabino Barrera (Ballads Adapted from the Mexican Tradition)* (1971), and at the El Teatro Campesino Playhouse (1981-today), *Los corridos Cornelio Vega, Delgadina, Soldadera (Adapted and Directed by Luis Valdez from the Mexican Tradition)* (1982-1983).⁴

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A Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library review states that the piece began as a five-week Teatro Campesino workshop in 1982, which sought to explore the stories and lyrical narrative of Mexican corridos.⁵ The production was so successful that a production of these corridos had a three-month run at San Francisco's Marines Memorial Theater and was awarded 11 prizes by the Bay Area Critics. In 1984, it was performed again several times.

In 1987, Valdez wrote and directed an adaptation of the 1982 work for the U.S. Public Broadcasting System (PBS) network, adding a subtitle: *Corridos! Tales of Passion and Revolution*. The production was given the George Peabody Award for excellence in television and historian and critic Chon A. Noriega includes it on the list of the 100 best Chicano film scripts, placing it in the Short or Video Narratives category.⁶

Corridos! has two leitmotifs. The first is a character, the teacher, played by Valdez himself. The second is the musical theme called *El corrido*, sung by Linda Rondstadt, which explains what the genre is: the soul of a people that speaks with melancholy of tragedies and joys.

As Yolanda Broyles-González says in the only academic article about the program—very critical and unfavorable, by the way, contrary to the opinions in the reviews published in cultural supplements—the dramatization for PBS excluded the corrido *Cornelio Vega* and includes the one about the dishwasher.⁷

Production for television, then, is the second level of adaptation, since the first level was producing a piece for the stage based on corridos and linking them up through a recurring musical theme and the explanation of the scenes by the teacher. The third directly involves the way in which the piece is dramatized: the songs, sung in Spanish, are dramatized by men and women actors, but are also interrupted by a narrator who translates the lyrics into English. As a creator-adaptor, Valdez never loses sight of the fact that his text must interpret cultural situations for an audience that does not share the tradition, the history, or the original language. Thus, the dramatization also serves as a translation.

The production of *Corridos! Tales of Passion and Revolution* is divided into three acts situated in three different settings. In the opening scene, the teacher is in a cantina where two historic corridos are sung; in the next, he moves to an office to introduce the three songs about women soldiers, or *soldaderas*, during the revolution; and in the last, from the projection room, he talks about Mexican migration to the United States right after the Mexican revolution, presenting a corrido about migrants. In the epilogue, he returns to the cantina.

The two historic corridos involve tragedies of love in which the female protagonists die. The first is *Rosita Alvérez*, who is murdered because she disobeys her mother—in Valdez's interpretation, with traces of humor, Rosita is tempted by the devil, whose face merges with hers in the mirror, and is murdered because she's a flirt. It is interesting to note that the end of the corrido, which is also mocking, cannot be heard because during the dancing, it merges with the polka *Échale un cinco al piano* (Put a Nickel in the Piano), by Felipe Valdez Leal.

The corrido is dramatized as a farce: the devil's make-up is like a carnival performer's; the choreography exaggerates the gestures and the outcome, Rosita's death—she literally kicks her legs up, as if to kick a bucket, showing her drawers, and then wafts up to heaven like a circus acrobat—underlines the amusing side of the punishment inflicted on women for being disobedient or flighty and loose, as narrated in the original corrido and its adaptation.

The teacher/narrator mentions certain corridos on scandalous topics, like the *Corrido of the 41*,⁸ to make the transition to the next act, the longest of the video, based on the corrido about *Delgadina*, based on a Spanish medieval romance. The version sung here is from the nineteenth century, and is listed as having been collected in Michoacán by Vicente T. Mendoza—it is listed as number 116 in his book, which includes others from Durango, Guanajuato, Chihuahua, and Zacatecas.⁹

The production is interesting for several reasons. Valdez decides to situate the corrido toward the end of the 30-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, the *Porfiriato*, and underlines both the characters' aristocratic origins and their wealth. This serves as a contrast with the act that follows, situated during the revolutionary period, to underline the corruption of the upper classes and their lack of ethics or even the most elemental moral values. The topic of the corrido is incest, and its result, filicide. The entire corrido is sung by a chorus, symbolizing the community that witnesses the abuse by the patriarch. Delgadina's ethereal beauty is underlined by making

her character be played by a classical ballerina who moves across the stage on her toes, initially gracefully, and in the end, in a ghostly way. She is accompanied by a narrator who, with death-like make-up and a strange costume—he is a mixture of dancer, with half his body uncovered, and butler, wearing gloves and livery— translates the verses into English. Actors and actresses reproduce the scenes of the family life of the king, his wife, his son, and his three daughters. The characters wander through sets that, on the one hand represent their ancestry, and on the other hand, mock their supposed noble lineage. For example, on the walls hang moving portraits of ancestors who are making ridiculous gestures of approval or disapproval. At mealtimes, a multitude of servants wait on the family, and as the food is served, the corrido is interrupted with the sounds of Juventino Rosas's waltz *Sobre las olas* (Over the Waves).

A fundamental scene for pointing out the corruption characteristic of this oligarchic patriarchy depicts the father taking communion at mass with his family, and immediately after, demanding his daughter's sexual favors while the mother, an observer steeped in ignorance, watches with indifference or submission.

Delgadina's tragedy also stems from her disobedience to her father; however, in this case, it is reasonable because he wants to take her as his mistress, and since she does not consent to consummate the incest, he locks her up and lets her die of thirst in full view of everyone. Including the beautiful corrido about Delgadina situates us in a period when the powerful could commit any injustice with impunity, sheltered by an equally unjust regime, as the teacher seems to say when pointing to the period in which the director decided to represent it.

To introduce the second act, a minimal transition is used: a musical background using the Zacatecas march and a fragment of black and white documentary footage of the entrance of the revolutionaries into Mexico City in 1910, which serves as a bridge and indication for the viewer that the following corridos will be different.

To effect this change, the narrator not only moves into an office, but also changes his costume on camera, discarding his nineteenth-century tie, all the while there is a smoking pistol on the bar. Characterized as a Villista soldier, with a Texan hat and cartridge belts crossed over his chest, the teacher-narrator will now act as someone who sets the context and as a cultural translator. He begins by clarifying that the Mexican Revolution was the first great social movement of the

twentieth century, explaining that for the first time, the people had a voice and used it to express itself in corridos. But in addition, he wants to underline the important role played by women in this period. Lastly, he speaks of the U.S. journalist, John Reed, who accompanied Francisco Villa.

With that, he has not only put the songs into context, but he has also told us the structure of the second act. This is visually the most attractive section because it presents on a lavender or orange background, reminiscent either of the dawn or dusk, back-lit scenes of revolutionaries on a train, in which the camera moves in or back to give us the sensation of a multitude and because, in addition, it includes footage of documentaries from the period.¹⁰

The musical leitmotiv is the corrido *La rielera* (The Railroad Woman) with an altered chorus to emphasize the female character more: "I have my pair of pistols / with a good supply of ammo / One for my [female] beloved / and another for my rival" has become "I have my pair of pistols / for the revolution / one is a 30-30 / the other is my good 32"; or "I am the railroad woman and I have my Juan / He is my life; I am his love / when they tell me the train is leaving / good-bye my railroad woman, your Juan is leaving" becomes "good-by mother dear, I'm going with my Juan." This way, the railroad woman is no longer just a woman at a whistle stop; she becomes a *soldadera*, or camp follower/woman soldier. Fragments of *La Adelita* and *La Valentina* are also played. It is noteworthy that of the corridos selected for this act, none of them is really about war.

I agree with Yolanda Broyles-González that the presence of John Reed is odd. Why replace the teacher's voice with his? Perhaps including it is part of the adaptation process, since he is not only a narrator, but a character who interacts with the others, particularly with the *soldadera* Elisabeta. But, in addition, his inclusion is also related to the fact mentioned that in this text by Valdez, the adaptation also serves as a translation of cultural values: introducing a U.S. American voice, a white, Anglo-Saxon character who speaks English without a Chicano accent or Latino jargon and does not constantly

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move from English to Spanish may be a dramatic technique so the viewers find a point of connection with the content of the work. Broyles-González notes that the characterization of Reed represents the benevolent Euro-American who mediates between the Mexicans who kill each other, or who defends the women from their drunken, abusive men. Reed's texts, read by the character, serve to link together *La rielera* (The Railroad Woman), *La Valentina*, and *La Adelita*, all played with arrangements for accordion and redova (what in Central Mexico is called "Northern music"), sung in an open-throat style by Linda Rondstadt, and ending with a large chorus.

The last act also has a cinematic transition, but this time of Hollywood fiction, the dream factory. The teacher, who has now returned to his role as narrator, translator, and setter of contexts, tells us that the corridos dealing with episodes of the migration of a million Mexicans to the United States immediately after the revolution display a sharp sense of humor and a hint of political satire. The *Corrido of the Dishwasher*, the teacher explains, involves an illegal immigrant.¹¹ Accompanied by a player piano, he begins the story of dreams of Hollywood that end in disappointment. The introduction of what is considered the first Chicano novel, *Las aventuras de don Chipote o cuando los pericos mamen* (The Adventures of Don Chipote, or When Parrots Suck), by Daniel Vanegas, points to the topic of this corrido as a common thread throughout Chicano literature: the desire to return to the homeland because of disappointment.¹²

As the intertext shows us Rudolf Valentino's sheik, the real action takes place in a kitchen where the actors imitate slapstick comedy style. Valdez uses this to situate the corrido written on the other side of our borders—his side—where the hero is a human being who has to work to survive, a person who fled the war with the hope of well-being that never comes. Curiously, in this case, the action is not interrupted with the translation of the lyrics. Amidst the exaggerated movements, the circular chase, and the over-done gesticulation, a new villain appears: the immigration officer, showing his INS badge.

The adaptation's epilogue is brief and deals with the corrido's durability. Sitting at a table, Valdez and Linda make a toast and the circle closes with a return to the musical leitmotif, *I Am the Corrido*. What is not talked about is the durability that an adaptation to video or film gives theater. If it were not fixed, the stage production would have been ephemeral; the memory of the translation would have remained only in the few existing reviews, which, in turn, are interpretations. The possibility of consulting this document gives us the other voices not only of the revolution, but also of Mexico's narrative and musical tradition, of its border and the "other side." ■■■

FURTHER READING

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NOTES

¹ The first public showing of the video in Mexico was as the closing session of the Chicano-Mexican symposium titled "Those Pachucos, Those Chicanos, Those Spanglish-Speakers! The Theater of Luis Valdez and His Fight for an American Mexican-ness" at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in June 2010. The second was at the symposium, also held at the UNAM in October 2010, titled "Other Voices of the Mexican Revolution in the Fabric of Mexico and the United States." At the latter symposium, the author presented a shorter version of this article.

² "Since its inception, El Teatro Campesino and its founder and artistic director, Luis Valdez, have set the standard for Latino theatrical production in the United States. Founded in 1965 on the Delano Grape Strike picket lines of Cesar Chavez's United Farmworkers Union, the company

created and performed “actos” or short skits on flatbed trucks and in union halls. Taking the “actos” on tour to dramatize the plight and cause of the farmworkers, El Teatro Campesino was honored in 1969 with an Obie Award for “demonstrating the politics of survival” and with the Los Angeles Drama Critics Award in 1969 and 1972....It is our mission to create a popular art with a twenty-first century tools that presents a more just and accurate account of human history, while encouraging the young women and men of a new generation to take control of their own destiny through creative discipline, vibrant education, economic independence, and artistic excellence.” <http://elteatrocampesino.com/>.

The Teatro Campesino profile on the Hemisphere Digital Video Library is titled “Actobiography” in allusion to its origins. [Translator’s Note.]

³ “In 1971, the company moved to San Juan Bautista, a rural town of 1 600 people located on the periphery of the major metropolitan centers of Northern California. In summer of 1973, legendary British theater director Peter Brook and his Paris-based company, The International Centre of Theater Research, participated in an eight-week experimental workshop with the company in San Juan Bautista culminating in a joint venture performing throughout farmworker communities in the San Joaquin Valley.” <http://elteatrocampesino.com/>.

⁴ In 2007, together with his son Kinan Valdez, the author, he returned to the topic with *Corridos: Ballads of the Borderlands*.

⁵ See *Corridos! Tales of Passion and Revolution*. El Teatro Campesino Collection. Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library, <http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/00539671.html>, HIDVL Artist Profiles. “Actobiography of El Teatro Campesino,” http://hemisphericinstitute.org/artistprofiles/etcampesino/campesino_Actobiograf%C3%ADa_2008.pdf, and compiled August 8, 2008. Hemispheric Institute, accessed October 1, 2010, and <http://elteatrocampesino.com/>.

⁶ Chon A. Noriega, “The Aztlán Film Institute’s Top 100 List,” *Aztlán*, Autumn 1998 vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 1-9, http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/media/documents/aztlanfilmistbychon_000.pdf, and http://outandaboutmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/issues/oa_07_10.pdf.

⁷ Broyles-González argues that Valdez’s attempt to cross over to the mainstream in order to open up to the white, middle-class audience leads him to perpetuate the stereotypes Hollywood has used to depict its Mexican and Chicano characters. She also criticizes the work’s excessive violence, which situates the characters in saloons, with the women appearing solely as companions to the men in their drinking bouts, dressed either as prostitutes or cooks, making tortillas for the revolutionaries. I do not completely agree with her on this score, since the corridos selected speak of women in that tone and tell violent stories. I think the adaptation to more contemporary versions of gender relations would have distorted the tradition Valdez wanted to talk about and that would have bowed to another kind of mainstream, the mainstream of the politically correct. See Yolanda Broyles-González, “What Price ‘Mainstream’?: Luis Valdez’ *Corridos* on Stage and Film,” *Cultural Studies* vol. 4, no. 3, 1990, pp. 281-293.

⁸ He explains that corridos were popular ballads about topical items of the day. *The Corrido of the 41* involves 41 homosexuals, some in drag, surprised dancing together at a soirée and arrested. [Translator’s Note.]

⁹ Vicente T. Mendoza, *El romance español y el corrido mexicano: un estudio comparativo* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1997).

¹⁰ John J. O’Connor’s review links these tableaus with the aesthetics of the Mexican muralists. John J. O’Connor, “Corridos!, an Adaptation of Mexican Folk Tales,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/07/arts/corridos-an-adaptation-of-mexican-folk-tales/html>.

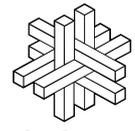
¹¹ Broyles-González is very disturbed by the use of this term, “illegal immigrant.”

¹² Nicolás Kanellos, “Introducción,” Daniel Vanegas, *Las aventuras de don Chipote o cuando los pericos mamen* (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/Plaza y Valdés, 2000), pp. 7-26.

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