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UCSB Conference to Focus on El Teatro Campesino and Chicano/Latino Theater

To mark the opening of the Teatro Campesino archives, UC Santa Barbara will host a one-day conference later this month featuring Luis Valdez, the founder and artistic director of the world-renowned Latino theater company.

Titled "Necessary Theater: Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino," the conference will begin at 9 a.m. on Tuesday, January 12, in the campus's MultiCultural Center. It is free and open to the public. The program will explore Chicano/Latino theater in the United States, as well as Latin American theater. It will include panel discussions; a keynote speech by Valdez, titled "Up From the Roots: The Flowering of El Teatro Campesino"; and a stage performance by the political comedy troupe Chicano Secret Service.

"This conference is a milestone for us as we celebrate the opening of the Teatro Campesino archives," said Salvador Güereña, director of UCSB's California Ethnic Multicultural Archives (CEMA), where the collection resides. "The Teatro's historical archive is of inestimable value to understanding the origins and the evolution of Chicano theater." Until now, the archives have, for the most part, been closed, and scholars, students, and the general public had little or no access to them.

Among the archives is a collection of vintage video recordings, made available by CEMA last summer, that represent the first 25 years of the company's history. The recordings feature vintage theater performances; historical documentaries on the farm workers movement; scenes from the award-winning play and film "Zoot Suit"; and such shows as "Rose of the Rancho," "Los Corridos," and "La Pastorela." Other documents and materials in the archives include interviews with Valdez and other members of the theater company; commentaries by United Farm Workers leader César Chavez; scripts and production notes; photographs, graphic art, and set designs; audio recordings; and correspondence files.

"Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino influenced a generation of young Chicano artists, many of whom cast their lot and joined different Chicano theater companies in the 1960's and 70's," said Carlos Morton, a professor of theater and dance at UCSB. "I joined the San Francisco Mime Troupe from 1979-81, a company that Valdez worked with earlier in his career. We owe a debt to him and others who started this incredible theater movement that brought joy and pride to a generation of Chicanos -- a movement that still continues today and is recognized worldwide."

Valdez founded El Teatro Campesino during the Great Delano Grape Strike of 1965, with short performances for audiences of farm workers in the fields of California's Central Valley. Within five years, El Teatro had gained an international reputation and had inspired the formation of many other Chicano theater companies. During the company's early years, all the actors were farm workers. Valdez emphasized ensemble work, in which all actors contributed to the interpretation of the performance. Most troupe members took on multiple roles, with one person serving as an actor, technical director, company manager, and tour coordinator.

A Council Member of the National Endowment for the Arts, Valdez is also a founding faculty member of California State University, Monterey Bay. He is the recipient of honorary doctorates from San Jose State University, the University of Santa Clara, Columbia College of Chicago, and the California Institute of the Arts. His first major critical and popular success was a production of his play "Zoot Suit," which was funded through a Rockefeller Foundation Artist-in-Residence grant in 1977 and subsequently became the first play by a Chicano to be produced on Broadway. Among his other creative projects are a film version of "Zoot Suit," which received a Golden Globe Award nomination for "Best Musical Picture" in 1981; the film "La Bamba," which was written and directed by Valdez; and an adaptation of his own stage play, "Corridos: Tales of Passion and Revolution," for which he received the

George Peabody Award for Excellence in Television in 1987.

Other projects include "The Cisco Kid," a film Valdez directed for Turner Network Television, and a biopic for Warner Brothers on the life of Cesar Chávez, for which he is writing the screenplay.

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