

**2018 Roger L. Stevens Address  
IN SEARCH OF THE HEART  
by Luis Valdez**

*The following was transcribed and edited from the audio record of the presentation. It cannot be published or distributed without prior permission of the author.*



Thank you. Good Morning. It's a privilege and an honor to be here with my colleagues, representing the whole country. It is the fulfillment-of a life-long dream: to assimilate, integrate and participate in the United States of America and America as a whole. We are here in the Kennedy Center, an amazing building and institution that has been here since 1965, when *El Teatro Campesino* was founded, over fifty years ago. I want to analyze those fifty years in a very special way, beginning by acknowledging my work for John Kennedy, the *Viva Kennedy* Campaign in 1960. I was twenty. You couldn't vote in California unless you were twenty-one then, but I nevertheless did precinct work and met the candidate in San Jose. I was a part of an organization called *MAPA, Mexican American Political Association*, and at a campaign rally, we presented him with a gilded sombrero, and urged him to put it on. John Kennedy being John Kennedy demurred and quipped "No, no...I'm going to wait to wear it in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York." I loved that joke. Of course his assassination changed all our lives, it completely changed my life. It politicized me in ways I never expected. Speaking of institutions and giants in the field, another milestone for me occurred some years back in Silicon Valley, when I was on the dais with David Packard of Hewlett Packard fame. As I rose to speak, I said "Mr. Packard it's an honor for me to be here with you, I want you to know that we share something essential: We both started in a garage. The difference is, I'm still there." And that's really a defining characteristic of my farm workers theatre, the fact that we are still working out of a packing shed in San Juan Bautista. It has been our playhouse now for over thirty years and we continue to create new work there.

Our emphasis is always on the performer, always on the material, always on the new plays, rather than the building itself. We can't afford it all. I wish we could have a big building like this, but the Kennedy Center is here for all Americans, so that is how we use it. *El Teatro Campesino* performed down the hall in the Terrace Theater here some years back. But fifty years is a long

time, so I want to put my comments into perspective. How can you measure, how can you analyze, how can you break down a half century and make sense of it? We decided a couple of years ago, that if El Teatro was going to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, which was in 2015, we would continue it for two years; celebrating a fifty-two year cycle, to coincide with the Aztec "century." The lighting of new fires occurred every fifty-two years, in Mexico, in ancient America. So I am going to talk about our fifty-two years and I'm going to break those down into four thirteen year periods. Four times thirteen equals 52, so each period represents a point or movement in our overall process of renewal. That's important because it defines my approach as a playwright. It informs me as to how to understand my own reality as well as my work.

The four points comprise the acronym P.L.O.T. That's PLOT. P is for Preparation; L is Launch or point of attack; O is for Opposition and the T is for Turn. After the climax you turn, into the denouement. Plot is not necessarily much regarded these days, but it is still an essential and integral part of the art form because you can't build a play without paying attention to plot. I use the acronym to teach playwriting and to teach screenwriting as well. Plot is very important so I'm going to plot my life and go back to the beginning. What are my roots? Well I could go back a long ways, I could go back two thousand years to the oldest extant play in the Americas. We're all Americans and I want to welcome you to America.

I'm not a minority group. I'm not a recent arrival, I'm not an immigrant. I'm a Native American. Though indigenous peoples rarely have an opportunity to speak openly, I'm very happy to be able to do this here in Washington at the Kennedy Center, to proclaim my native Americanness. The first theatrical performance in what is now the continental United States occurred on the banks of the Rio Grande, in what is now El Paso. Two plays were staged on horseback. One dealt with the Conquest of Mexico; the other with Spain's defeat of the Moors. Besides the Yaqui Easter ceremony in Sonora. these are my theatrical roots. I can bring it in closer, literally down to earth. I was born in 1940, in a labor camp in Delano, California. Delano was established during the Grant Administration in 1873, and there was a recession that year. They were building the Central Pacific railroad across the San Joaquin Valley in California, until they ran out of money and just stopped in the middle of nowhere. The Chinese workers who were working there were laid off. They said ok, we are laid off and have nowhere to go, so they camped out and waited to be reemployed for a year. When workers started to die of cholera, precipitously, they built a cemetery next to the railroad. These were the founding bones of the city of Delano, which was named after Grant's Minister of the Interior, Columbus Delano, uncle to FDR. Many years later, I was born in a labor camp near that cemetery.

As a Chicano, I am intrinsically involved in this history of California and the so-called winning of the West, which for Mexicans is really the losing of the North. What is now the Southwest was once half of the national territory of Mexico. So border crossers are just trying to get back to where they belong but someone keeps trying to build a wall to keep them out, and that wall will do no one any good. I keep telling people to look to the oceans. Even two oceans could not keep people from coming to America. The Wall of China couldn't achieve what it was supposed to achieve. The Rocky Mountains could not stop the covered wagons. Why does anyone believe that this wall is going to stop anybody? You can't stop the essential progress of the nomadic human race.

I didn't know this when I was born in that labor camp in 1940. We all are born somewhere. We look around and say "Who are we and what am I and what can I do?" I didn't know that I was Mexican. I didn't know that I was a farm worker. I didn't know anything at that point. My first memories are riddled with contradictions. I remember that we had a ranch. We had our own little hacienda of 300 acres with two houses and barns and my dad was a farmer, a very successful farmer growing row crops. We had a 1941 Chevrolet sedan. They stopped making these cars during the war but we had a new car. I remember a little sticker in the back window that said Roosevelt 44, but I had no idea what was happening outside our ranch. As I became more aware of the world at five years of age, it slowly began to sink in that this ranch was not my father's. Actually it had belonged to a Japanese American farmer. In 1942, he and his family

had been arrested and prisoned in a relocation camp. That was my first inkling, with a nasty stab of guilt, that our family prosperity during World War II had been at the expense of this Japanese farmer and his family. In 2012, when the 1940 census was released, I finally looked up the record and surmised his name was probably Yamaguchi. He and his wife and daughters were all dispossessed never to return. The rumor was that the farmer had committed suicide somewhere. In any case it was all over by 1946. We were out. My dad was not the owner; he was leasing and growing crops for the U.S. Army on consignment. Our prosperity had been generated by World War II. So with all the G.I.'s coming back, American agriculture was reorganizing for the post war era. Corporate agribusiness was in, and the small dirt farmer was literally out in the cold. My parents had been on the migrant path before in the 1930s. Suddenly my family found itself back in the Great Depression.

I had never been on the migrant path. I'm 6 years old and I'm saying what the hell happened? We used to be rich. We had a ranch. What happened? Well, the 41 Chevy went with us into the fields and quickly disappeared. I don't know what happened to it; I imagine my dad sold it. He had to. We needed the money. So he traded it for an old pickup truck. That's how we began to migrate in 1946. We went to the Garden of Eden which is now Silicon Valley and picked apricots and prunes and strawberries and then fall came and we went back to the San Joaquin valley to pick cotton. So I was a cotton picker. OK, I'm not ashamed. I mean it was a good way of life. It was fun for a kid in some ways. I loved jumping off the cotton rack into the cotton. It was like diving into a cloud. And the whole world was out in the fields. There were African-Americans from the South; there were Okies, Arkies, Asians, Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, even Sikhs from India with their turbans. We were all cotton pickers, and we are all equal. You don't see that anymore. Agribusiness has so segregated the labor pool, it is now mostly Mexicans out in the fields. It is something that obviously still concerns our Teatro Campesino, But the fact is that the changing demographics of the 40s led to ethnic redistributions in the fields. Most white or immigrant farm workers left the farms and moved to the city. Not the Mexicans. It's not easy to work in the fields. But Mexicans keep coming across the border to work at doing stoop labor jobs most Americans do not want to do to this very day.

Back in 1946, there were large labor camps with some 2000 people living in army surplus tents. With so many hands, the cotton picking season was over like that. We couldn't move on because my dad's old pickup truck had broken down. We ran out of money and there was nowhere else to work because the cotton season was over. So we started living by fishing in the river, the San Joaquin Delta canal. We caught fish and took the fish back to my mom and she would make tacos. "Fish tacos" before they were trendy. One morning I almost drowned. I fell into the canal and my dad saved me by pulling me out by the hair. So my mom got very worried and told me and my brother to go to school. A yellow bus would come into the camp every morning. We climbed onto the bus and went to the nearby school at Stratford, not Stratford on Avon, Stratford on the San Joaquin. I knew I wasn't going to be there for very long. But it was there that I got hooked on theatre for the rest of my life. Thanks to my lunch bag.

My mother had commandeered a little brown paper bag. There were still paper shortages in 1946 that some of you may remember. I didn't want a big grocery bag. I wanted a bag "my size" and my dear mother found a little one in the company store. She packed it with two tacos and off I went to school. With the bag under my jacket I remember feeling the warmth of my mother's tacos on my way to school. Once there I put it in the closet and waited for lunch. The school had no cafeteria so everybody brought their lunch. Some of the kids had lunch pails; you know those with Mickey Mouse or Hopalong Cassidy emblazoned on the side. So my poor little sack, which had been my mother's gift to me, suddenly made me feel ashamed because other kids had real lunch pails and all I had was this sorry little brown bag.

The Anglo kids would open up their lunch pails and bring out white bread sandwiches, with ham, tomatoes and cheese. Sometimes they had a cupcake. Sometimes an apple or an orange and a thermos. Wow, a thermos. I had never seen a thermos in my life. Well, that made me even more ashamed and mama's dear little tacos looked sadder and sadder to me, and so I began to eat

tacos the way a wino drinks his wine - on the side, halfway out of the bag, down here so they couldn't see me and the kids would say "What are you eating?" "No nothing. No no." "Let me see." "No no no no." I'd stare at their sandwiches and wonder what they were eating. Well this went on for several days and they kept looking at my tacos and I kept looking at their sandwiches and one day the inevitable happened: we exchanged lunches. The rest is Taco Bell history. I used to take care of my bag, as if it was my only possession. I'd fold it very carefully to bring it back to my mother. One day at the end of school, I couldn't find my bag. The teacher saw me running around looking for something and she said, "What is it?" and I told her "Oh a little brown paper bag? Yes, I took it." she said. "Well give it back." And she said "I can't." She then escorted me into a room in the back and there was my bag, all ripped up floating in a basin of water. I thought the teacher had gone berserk. She reached down and grabbed a little piece of the brown paper bag, dipped it into some white paste and then put it on a mold. For the first time, I noticed a mold - a clay mold - and it was an animal, a monkey! She said "do you want to try it?" and I said "yes." At that moment I discovered one of the secrets of the universe. It's called paper maché. Now this was November, early November, and I said "it can't be for Halloween so what is this for?" She said "it's for a play."

The whole school was involved in a Christmas play. She said, "we need two first graders to play monkeys, because the play is about Christmas in the jungle." I forgave her about the bag and happily auditioned. I didn't know then that a monkey was a symbol of intelligence in the ancient Mayan culture, but I jumped and ran and monkeyed away real good. She was quite impressed. I got my first role in the theater. I was excited and happy when we started rehearsals. I saw the old beat up school auditorium being transformed. They brought in fake trees and I got a costume that was better than my own clothes: I had a little red vest, little green pants, a little tail, red shoes, and a little hat. Oh, it was amazing. And then the teacher gave me the mask that she made from my mama's taco bag. Oh man, I saw myself in the mirror and thought: "Look at me, I'm larger than life." I was looking forward to my debut before the world on that little school stage.

Then on a Tuesday I went home to the labor camp and my mom said "we're leaving tomorrow." And I said "But mom, the play is on Friday." and she says "it doesn't matter, we're being evicted." So I cried and she cried with me. The next morning my dad got the truck going and we left. The San Joaquin valley fog hits very early in the fall. We drove through Stratford, past the school before it opened and it was dawn. As I saw the school disappear into the fog, I felt a hole open up in my chest. It could have destroyed me. But I've always believed that any negative can be turned into a positive. So what happened instead is that the hole became the hungry mouth of my creativity. This is what I took away with me from that old school: the secret of paper maché; an unfulfilled love for the theatre; and anger, my righteous residual anger because we had been evicted from the labor camp. That hole in my chest is still there but it is much smaller now. For the last 70 years I've been pouring poems, plays, songs and screenplays in it with no end in sight. But the real poetic justice finally came about 20 years after our eviction when I went to Cesar Chavez and pitched him the idea for a theater of, by, and for farm workers. That was my real fulfillment.

Now all of this is part of preparation. This was my preparation as a playwright. I made puppets out of paper maché. Paper maché really solved everything as I could make puppets that lasted longer than my playmates. Then I became a ventriloquist in high school, performing with a pair of dummies, one Anglo, the other Mexican. We were still seasonal migrant workers, so I began to perform around the campfire in labor camps. I began to realize that if I could do that out there, I could put on shows. They were the perfect captive audience. That idea took root in my mind throughout college, and essentially became the seed from which *El Teatro Campesino* sprang, years later. I learned about the history and the art of theater. I certainly was impressed by the theater of the 1930s, the socialist activist theater. I went to San Francisco and joined the San Francisco Mime Troupe and performed in the parks, doing politicized commedia dell'arte with the company. I was living in the Haight Ashbury before the neighborhood went psychedelic because it was a low rent district. It was great, and I was there with other fellow artists. Then the grape strike came along and I knew that this was my destiny. I had to go back to where

I had started. I had to go back to Delano.

I met Dolores Huerta first and I pitched her the idea. She loved it and said you have got to talk to Cesar. So I went to Delano to march with the strikers, but I was a little intimidated. What will he think of me, and what will he think of doing theater out here in the fields? I finally talked to Cesar at 11:00 at night. At the end of a very long day I pitched him my concept of a theater for farmworkers and being Cesar, very practical and down to earth, he says: "I like the idea, but I've got to be honest with you: there's no money to do theater in Delano and there's no actors in Delano. There's no stage, there's not even time to rehearse. We're on the picket line day and night. You still want to do it?" And I said "Absolutely Cesar what an opportunity."

He was right. I went to Delano as a volunteer and slept on the floor. At dawn we hit the fields, and harangued the scabs from the top of a paneled truck with a bullhorn. A month in, I was elected picket captain. So now in charge of our roving picket line, I added songs and chants. Then we spontaneously began to act, doing these little bits and pieces that were two, or three minutes long on top of the paneled truck. In time we began to perform every Friday night at the weekly strike meetings. We created Actos - 10 to 15 minute learning plays - that we staged in a little hall no bigger than this room. We had a little open area maybe ten by ten feet wide. This was our stage, and with the little kids sitting all around on the floor, this is where the Teatro was born. We found that we could tap right into the hopes and aspirations of the striking farm workers. When there was no hope we could give hope. When there was despair we could make them laugh. When they were down, we were up and we could take our songs and lift them up. We took songs from the civil rights movement. The amazing power of song in the face of danger is incredible and we lived it. The official launch of *El Teatro Campesino* was on the March to Sacramento in 1966 exactly 52 years ago this month. The union loaned us a flatbed truck as our portable stage, with the big United Farm Workers banner as a backdrop. We got some rudimentary lights, a sound system, but the launch, the point of attack for the Teatro was the experience of performing twenty five days and nights in a row all the way up the San Joaquin Valley which for me had been the scene of oppression. It was like the South. The racism was just as bad. The violence was just as bad. But doing theatre helped me to deal with it, even to transcend it.

One of my great personal milestones on the March occurred when we came to a small town called Cutler, California. That is where I met my wife and life's companion, Lupe Trujillo Valdez. She saw us perform and joined the circus, and she has part of my life support system for fifty years. We're that way for each other, but our kids, our children, have been also part of the life support system. So preparation leads to launch then to opposition: a series that continues to happen, again and again and again, not just in the scenes that we write as playwrights, but in life. We inevitably ran into opposition, and not just from the growers. We started touring and spending so much time out of Delano that the union leadership decided to disband the Teatro. We ended up moving 60 miles north of Delano to Del Rey and setting up a farm workers cultural center as our new home. Then we moved from Del Rey to Fresno, and eventually to San Juan Bautista, a mission town that had been there for two centuries. I wanted to relate to the Old California that had been free, not the colonized, not the immigrant California. I wanted to go back to the native California. San Juan Bautista had been part of it. The mission was established when George Washington was still president, and I wanted to relate to that history. I wanted my company to be based there at the mouth of the Salinas Valley. But when *El Teatro Campesino* settled in San Juan Bautista, land owners wouldn't even rent to us. They thought we were coming in to organize farmworkers. Fortunately one of the Mexican restaurant owners had a little theater, which he rented to us for a dollar a year. I don't think we ever paid him, but for two years that was our home base in a tiny little playhouse, until we finally rented an old corrugated tin warehouse in town.

One day Peter Brook came to visit and we took a long walk and talked and he says "How would you like to host some actors next year?" And I said "Well we can barely support ourselves. How are we going to support you?" He said, "Don't worry about that ,we'll fund you." I said, "But you

know we have this ratty tin warehouse, this is all we have.” “That's all right,” he said, “That's what we want.” He was looking for the empty space, he was looking for the rough theater and he found it in us. Most of our Teatro members didn't know who the hell Peter Brook was. I said to them, “he's a very famous director, guys.” He loved the town, so the next summer, the summer of '73, his whole company arrived and of the three months that they spent in the United States that year, two were in San Juan Bautista. Their improvisational play was based on a classic Sufi myth about The Birds. So we described our two companies as two different kinds of birds. They were always flying needing to land someplace but they had no feet. We were like birds with feet but no wings. With Peter's company that summer was a gorgeous 26 year old blonde, Helen Mirren, who became Diane Rodriguez' roommate and they are still lifelong friends. So all of these things came together. Preparation, Launch, Opposition, Turn. This is all during the first 13 years. After Peter Brook came, I began to meet other people - Bill Ball of the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, and Gordon Davidson. Gordon recognized the Teatro for the first time and invited us in to perform *La Carpa de los Rasquachis* (Tent of the Underdogs) our seminal 1970's corrido play at the Taper in 1974. After that he directly approached me to write something about the history of Los Angeles. He was starting a new theater-for-now series dealing with L.A. history. I was the first director-playwright of color I think that he hired or commissioned, and we kind of agreed that the Zoot Suit Riots should be our focus. So I eventually wrote my play *Zoot Suit*, and took people from El Teatro with me over to the Taper and that was a fundamental turn – the completion of the first 13 years.

I'm with Miguel Piñero in New York and he took me to see his play *Short Eyes* at the Lincoln Center. I'm sitting there with him looking at *Short Eyes* and I looked at him and I thought, I can do this. I can do a professional production. I can do *Zoot Suit*. Fortunately JD, Jose Delgado, also an alumnus of the *Teatro Campesino*, and Diane helped me with the research. We didn't have Google or Wikipedia. They were my Wikipedia and we amassed volumes of books and articles and stuff. On the basis of that research I was able then to begin to pull together what became *Zoot Suit* at The New Theater for Now. Then I rewrote the whole thing and by July and August, we opened the season and it became a phenomenal success. It sold out before it opened; the interest and the demand was so great, we moved the play to the Aquarius Theatre in Hollywood. At that time the L.A. police, the LAPD, were cracking down on low riders in East L.A. mind you. They wouldn't let low riders ride along Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles. They put up barriers saying no more low riders. But the play was running in Hollywood so all the low riders came to Hollywood. They were going up Hollywood Boulevard and then down Sunset Boulevard, and then up Hollywood Boulevard, all the way around Hollywood you began to see low riders and it was an amazing year. It ran for a whole year, a whole year long party is what it was. But it proved one thing. We were box office and that we were in business. Gordon was ready to go to New York. I wasn't ready to go to New York. New York seemed to me to be on the moon. I said I cannot go to New York, even though I had been there with the Teatro at the Village Gate Theater for one night in 1967.

I didn't know that we could do Broadway. I wasn't sure, but Gordon and the Shuberts convinced me to give it a try. New York was not ready for us and critics that had praised the work in L.A., shot it down in New York. I suspect they weren't ready. New York was not ready to entertain the notion of Latinos beyond Puerto Ricans. They were just barely handling Puerto Ricans. So how could they handle Mexicans? Mexicans are people from the other side of the world. There it was again: Preparation, Launch, Opposition, Turn and Broadway provided hard core opposition. So we came and went to New York. In the end, the box office success of *Zoot Suit* in LA gave us enough money to buy the old warehouse in San Juan Bautista that became our playhouse. It was big enough for a 150 seat theater, plus construction shops, rehearsal space, archives, and offices. It was very modest mind you but large enough to sustain our whole operation.

This is our base and this is our school. And the 1980s saw it evolve. We developed a show called Corridos, which is based on ballads; which J.D. and Diane also helped to produce and we took that to television, starring Linda Ronstadt. That was in 1987. I was editing *La Bamba* in LA and flying up to San Francisco to edit Corridos. We shot it at KQED, and it won a Peabody

Award. It gave Linda Ronstadt an idea for a show of her own, singing Mexican songs. We were able to take a form of musical theater created in our little packing shed theatre and recreate it at KQED for PBS, as part of the Great Performances public television series. So far so good.

We kept investing into remodeling the building, but we also tried to up the ante by paying all our actors equity wages. Thirteen years later, our PLOT thickened. Preparation, Launch, Opposition, Turn. The Turn came when we went broke. We went bankrupt. We couldn't afford to pay Actors Equity wages and keep our people on the road. Besides the price of gas had gotten ridiculous with the OPEC strike when in 1973, gas went to four or five dollars a gallon. It really crippled our ability to be able to tour. So we had to reorganize. I had *La Bamba*. I was already a filmmaker. I won't get into that because that's a different story. I became a filmmaker during the 80s when I directed my adaptation of *Zoot Suit* and it was a baptism by fire. But the Teatro was in dire states by the 90s. After going bankrupt, we launched into academia in order to survive.

There was an opportunity for me to become a founding Professor of CSU Monterey Bay. Of the 13 founding professors, I was going to go in half time but then I realized no one else there was in the performing arts. So with the help of El Teatro, we developed an institute of theatre, film, video, radio, and digital space. The cutting edge of that university was that everybody was going to get a laptop. Every student had a laptop. Laptops were new then, and my first laptop came as a member of the faculty in '95. Because we had the state and the federal government behind us we were able to create a theater called The World Theater, right there on campus. We took one of the old cinderblock movie houses built for the GI's and converted it into a 400 seat digital theater - meaning that if movies today are streamed digitally, our theater was ready to receive them in 1995. It was a television studio, a movie house and the university theater. *Valley of The Heart*, my latest play premiered there in 2015.

What I'm saying is that the struggle is such that sometimes you have to produce yourself. I tell young people if you're a playwright, you still have got to produce yourself. If you're an actor, you've got to produce yourself. I learned that in Hollywood. You are responsible for your own career. Helping CSUMB develop their art facilities was only part of it. I reluctantly got involved in university politics, you know how that can go. The state university was to planning to build a new performing arts center, so they let us have our building. When they realized they couldn't afford a new facility, the university took over our theater. It changed my plans. It became a presenting center. They took over the digital television studio that we had created with editing bays. And I finally got very frustrated, I said I can't do what I need to do here. I said, "thank you very much, I'm going back to what I love to do which is to write and direct my plays." I told Hollywood the same thing. My first love is the theater. My first love is, in fact, live performance. I love it and even this, the rhetorical aspect. I can go back to Aristotle like everybody else, but you've got to touch audiences heart to heart.

It takes a year to edit a good film, treating it with sound effects, dissolves and color changes; but all of that is process. You're telling the story through a processed form as opposed to a live performance, which is here and naked and raw. The analogy is to food. Processed food as opposed to raw vegetables. You know, eat what's natural, what's been grown out of the ground. There's a difference. There will always be a need for theater, especially in our digital times. I told my students at Monterey Bay, we'll be able to do theater with all of this technology but we still need the campfire. And my suspicions and fears have become true. Critics accused me of doing agitprop when I was in New York with *Zoot Suit*. As a matter of fact I was documenting what had been said verbatim at the time. The courtroom scene was a distillation of what had happened in the courtroom. It was not agitprop. Those racist comments were as real they were in American courtrooms. Today we are all enmeshed in the performance of our government, which has become a long 24 hour, 24/7 reality show. Donald Trump is a performer; despicable to some, heroic to others. He doesn't understand what it is to govern or what it obviously means to be president, but he's an undeniable performer and everybody's watching him night and day, 24 hours a day. We're fascinated by this creature. This creature of the digital era. I tell politicians young and old to take some drama courses, learn to act, you're going to need it. People are

going to see you on camera. Learn how to relate, how to perform in front of a camera. It could be that maybe Ronald Reagan started a trend; in the future all our politicians are going to be actors, maybe directors, maybe some of you. Trump is performing daily on twitter.

I decided to go back to writing plays. What saved the Teatro from bankruptcy was our family, our sons and their cohorts because they were young. They were 20 somethings and they were 19 somethings and they didn't care about the money. They wanted the joy of creating. So I went back to my first love. I don't know what the next 13 years will bring. I hope there are 13 more years out there. But the fact is that the world will go on and the new generations that we're now seeing in theater are in some way all our children and grandchildren. I look at young performers and I'm proud of the playwrights, the young women, amazing talents with amazing voices. Performers that have more training than we ever had. I am also proud of the process of cultural fusion. People are very afraid of multiculturalism and they attack it, and diversity is no longer as popular as it used to be. It's not about multiculturalism and it's not about diversity: it's about cultural fusion. I become you and you become me. I never had any Chicano teachers - there weren't any. They were all Anglos from the Midwest. But God bless them and you know the teacher that took my paper bag? I didn't know her name but I was speaking at a conference and the present superintendent of the Stratford school district liked my story. He went back and checked his archives. He went back into the vaults and sent me a brick from the old Stratford school because it had been torn down. I also received a mimeographed copy of the attendance record for the first grade in 1946. Down at the bottom of the page was the name of Louie Valdez who had attended that school for 30 days. I had no idea. To me it seemed like I was there for months but it was only 30 days. That short month launched the rest of my life. Up at the top was the teacher's name, Ruth Tremaine. I never knew her name. God bless her.

As always, I don't know what the future brings. But I can tell you what the past has brought me. It has brought me to this place here in the Kennedy Center talking to you, my colleagues. We have an old Mayan precept that inspires us in the Teatro: "You are my other me, you are my other self. If I love and respect you, I love and respect myself. If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself." So you see the ridiculousness of trying to build walls to shut out the border? That border has to be absolutely open. It's the only way to make it work. In any case Mexicans are going to continue migrating to their ancestral homeland. They want to be here. How would you feel if that was England or if that was France or if that was Israel or if that was Africa right next door? I am part of the same mix you see. Above all I'm an American. My latest play *Valley of The Heart* is the love story between the daughter of a Japanese American farmer in Cupertino, which is now Silicon Valley, and the oldest son of a Mexican American sharecropping family in World War II. So it is about love, but at the same time it's about cultural fusion. Cultural fusion. This is the process of America: Preparation, Launch, Opposition, Turn. As always we're looking for a big PLOT in this country that will propel us into the rest of the 21st century. Yes there is hatred, yes there is fear, yes there is opposition and ignorance. But the present is always a negotiation between the past and the future. I'm going to close with a poem written in 1482, before the coming of Columbus. I'll recite it in three languages. Aztec and also in Spanish, and also in English and here it is (English Translation):

*What is it that your mind was looking for?  
Where's your heart?  
For this, you give your heart to everything?  
Your heart is without direction.  
You are destroying your heart.  
On this earth do you suppose that you can  
ever go in search of anything and find it?*

That encapsulates my responsibility as a playwright: to speak the truth with heart. And so my message to America and to you my fellow colleagues, brothers and sisters is: *America find your heart again.*