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Con Su Pluma En Su Mano, Gustavo Arellano Inspires Stage Tribute in San Jose

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Orange County columnist Gustavo Arellano and Anthony Garcia, executive artistic director of the Denver theatre company Su Teatro, pose for a photo at Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana in San Jose, California. **(Rachael Myrow/KQED)**

The [OC Weekly](#) column [Ask a Mexican](#) started out as a joke in 2004, but within a couple of years, [Gustavo Arellano](#) became a nationally syndicated spokesman for Orange County: the good, the bad and the very, very racist. This weekend, you can see his sense of humor interpreted for the stage in San Jose with [Interview with a Mexican!](#) at Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana, or [MACLA](#) for short.

The 39 year-old Mexican-American born and raised in Anaheim has covered many topics over the course of his journalistic career: "Tacos, pedophile priests, Mexicans and

neo-Nazis. Hey, it's a living right?" Love his pointed sense of humor or hate it, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone else who does such a wickedly funny job documenting Orange County's historically uber-right politics, and politically incorrect attitudes.

In *Ask a Mexican*, which ended in 2017, Arellano blended a genuine desire to educate with a sarcastic edge that makes the lesson amusing to readers -- whether they know the answer already or find themselves quietly taking notes. Here is but one example:

Dear Mexican: Believe I've heard from you, in an interview, that "gringo" is either out-of-date or inappropriate and that *gabacho* is the better choice. I've checked online and most sources say that *gabacho* is a pejorative and/or generally refers to Europeans. Is this the case, or is *gabacho* just a better word than "gringo"? Also, as a native SoCal cracker, is it acceptable for me to use *gabachoor* to refer to myself as such? What is the proper etiquette and usage so I don't offend anyone or embarrass myself? I've also asked friends, but the vote seems to be split.

Gringo-Gabacho Greg

Dear Gabacho: As I've explained in this *columna* before, *gabacho* and gringo are synonyms for the same thing—*gabachos*, with the key differences being certainty in their respective etymology (*gabacho* comes from Provencal, while no one has ever put forth a definite origin story for "gringo"), and the important fact that *gabachos* long ago appropriated "gringo" into a harmless term that has absolutely no sting, while *gabacho* maintains its sting. And now you want to proudly refer to yourself as a *gabacho*, *gabacho*? No. Content yourself with the theft of half of Mexico back in the day, and leave our treasures alone once and for all.



The Mexican “Goldhat,” played by actor Lorenzo Gonzalez, plays off of Gustavo Arellano's stereotype-busting column, "Ask a Mexican." (Photo: Courtesy of Steven Abeyta)

You can see why Arellano has taken heat from readers on the political left as well as right. He takes pride in the criticism, calling himself a Jeremiah, the Old Testament prophet whose complaints about the Jews were not greeted with enthusiasm or warmth by the Chosen People. "I say how it is, whether people like it or not. Most of the time, people don't like it, but that's OK," Arellano says.

Arellano [resigned](#) as editor in chief of the *OC Weekly* in 2017, rather than capitulate to a demand by the publication's owners to lay off most of his staff. Soon after, he began writing a weekly column for the opinion section of [The Los Angeles Times](#), and he delivers regular commentary in a series called [Orange County Line](#) for the Santa Monica public radio station KCRW. But the copyright for the *Ask A Mexican* column remains the property of the *OC Weekly*, even if it has no value without Arellano's trademark wit.

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"I would have never imagined that the column would even run that long," he says. "There was a proposed television show. That flamed out. *Ask a Mexican: The Movie*. Yeah, that wasn't going to happen."

There was even a play, but that died after one reading. But Arellano knew playwright Anthony Garcia, executive artistic director of the Denver theatre company [Su Teatro](#). So when Garcia pitched his concept for another play, "I trusted him," Arellano says. "And he came up with a great piece of theatre."



Ramon (Miguel Martimen) and Andrea (Paola Miranda) eat tamales in *iInterview with a Mexican!* at Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana in San Jose. (Photo: Courtesy of Steven Abeyta)

So how does this become a play?

To make it work for the stage, Garcia married bits from Arellano's columns and books with music, dance, and back-and-forth with the audience. "The whole piece really is about asking questions. We say, "Ask, so you don't look like a *pendejo*." I.e. stupid. "You can get educated and insulted at the same time."

In the last year since the first staged reading at MACLA, *iInterview with a Mexican!* played in Denver and Albuquerque before returning to the Bay Area.

Garcia says he's been surprised at how warmly audiences accept the edgy humor. "There is a conversation about how we can't talk about race anymore without understanding

everybody's personal vibe. Clearly, I know enough to know when to keep my mouth shut, but on stage, I don't think we have those same restrictions."

Garcia has led Su Teatro for half a century, and says Arellano's humor plays well in Denver. "There are Chicanos who've been there for a very long time. There's recent immigrants. There's second and third-generation Mexican-Americans kids who call themselves Mexicanos but don't know shit about the Virgen de Guadalupe. And these are my students!" says Garcia, who's also an adjunct professor at Metro State College in Denver.

Garcia adds he hopes this play can serve as a tool to help younger generations understand more about themselves in a palatable fashion. "We love to laugh at ourselves."

Is there one question Arellano gets all the time: "If you hate Orange County so much, why do you live here?"

His answer: "You can only truly love Orange County if you despise it. Cause there's a lot of horrible things with Orange County, but those things are slowly going away."

Does that make Gustavo Arellano an optimist or a pessimist? Well, he's still living there.

[iInterview with a Mexican!](#) runs through November 11, 2018 at Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana in San Jose. For more information, click [here](#).