



## 'Interview with a Mexican'

MACLA presents live performance based on the work of Gustavo Arellano

November 7, 2018 by Jeffrey Edalatpour



Gold Hat, one of many caricatures in 'Interview with a Mexican,' is meant to satirize racist stereotypes about Mexicans. *Photo by Steven Abeyta*

Last year, in September, MACLA hosted the first staged reading of *Ask a Mexican* by the Denver-based playwright Anthony J. Garcia. He based it on Gustavo Arellano's trenchant *OC Weekly* column of the same name.

From 2004 until his resignation from the weekly last year as editor-in-chief, Arellano would answer letters from the public about Latinx culture. The cartoon bandido character who

appeared at the top of every column set the tone. Arellano was going to confront caricatures and stereotypes by dismantling blatantly racist letters that were ignorant of and/or openly hostile toward immigrants and their experience of America. Arellano replied to them with an unapologetic, cynical glee.

A typical call and response would unfold like this (from Dec. 29, 2015):

*DEAR MEXICAN: How come all the Mexicans who came here two or three generations ago look like "almost white" people while the ones coming now look like those little guys who live naked in the Amazon and kill things with blowguns? No Indios Need Apply (NINA)*

*DEAR POCHO: Chalk the phenomenon up to the natural unfolding that is the American immigrant experience. Countries tend to dump their upwardly mobile, lighter-skinned natives on the United States before the shoddier, darker folks show up in the steerage of rusting freighters.*

Earlier this year in an interview with the New York Times, Arellano said, "If you don't have haters, you're not doing your job correctly." When I spoke with him on the phone last week, I asked him to elaborate on why he thought it was a good thing to invite vitriol.

"Because people don't like to hear the truth," he says. "The truth is inconvenient. *Ask a Mexican* was very controversial in talking about a topic that has been taboo for so long, which is Mexicans. And daring to talk about these stereotypes, daring to talk about our status in society, why it's wrong, and pushing back at people."

But Arellano doesn't presume to say that his column could cure racism. "People have told me that I have changed their mind," he says. "That's frankly not my point. My point is just to put the truth out there. People could accept it or not." In 2010, Garcia and Arellano initially discussed the idea of adapting his work in Denver, where Arellano and former Congressman Tom Tancredo publicly debated immigration policies. Garcia went on to receive funding for the adaptation from the Hispanic Cultural Center in Denver, Colorado State University-Pueblo and MACLA.

Since last year, the playwright, who is also the executive artistic director of El Centro Su Teatro in Denver, has expanded the show and renamed it *Interview with a Mexican*. It now

includes more of Garcia's "bawdy" humor (according to Arellano) and draws on writing from elsewhere in Arellano's career—he's a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times and Gravy*, the Southern Foodways Alliance journal. The cartoon bandido also makes it to the page as Gold Hat, one of the narrators.

For the playwright, Gold Hat displays one aspect of Arellano's writing personality, but there are other threads. The narrative "fluctuates between this guy who is pretty edgy and not always (I'm trying to search for words in English because I have a bunch in Spanish that we use) *polite*, on one hand," he says. "And then on the other, this nerdy intellectual. We split this up. There are only four performers, but I think you'll find that what they do is they live within those elements of either his personality or his writing trends."

Garcia also explained what's changed from last year's production. "It got weirder," he says. "It was pretty bombastic when we first did it, and it just kept going in that direction. My feeling has always been that one of the greatest things Gustavo did is he established himself as the authority on Mexicans. And his audience was not just Mexicans." Garcia also moved beyond the original premise of posing questions and answers. He and the the cast realized they could go anywhere. *Interview with a Mexican* features music, dance, video and slides—and audience participation.

Garcia's theatrical impulses are somewhat different from the columnist's. "I want us all to have a good time, and by the end, we're all friends, so let's act like we're at the party. The party where we all know each other. That's been the transition."

On Fri, Nov. 9, there will be a Q&A session with Garcia, Arellano and the cast.

### **Interview with a Mexican**

Nov 9-11, \$15+

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