Chapter IV

Re-visioning a People

The embattled union movement spearheaded by César Chavez occupied the American political sphere during the 1960s. This was a specific political response to a situation and its force was in the community endeavour that it transpired to be. *Teatro Campesino ensemble* was essentially a part of the political movement born of the social discontent that snowballed into the various civil rights movements of the decade. *Teatro Campesino* was a decisive force in deciding the fate of the “David and Goliath standoff between the United Farm Workers Union and the agribusiness giants” (Broyles-Gonzales *El Teatro xi*). By the year 1967, after having created a decisive impact on the politics of agri-business *Teatro Campesino ensemble* in theory and practice, emerged from its initial, narrow preoccupation with specific situational responses to embark on a cultural mission of affirming the Chicano rootedness in the Americas where the politics of nationalism had created a sociology which regarded the native as an alien or even an immigrant. The theatre movement that started off as the artistic wing of a political struggle went on to become a community movement that asserted the dormant power of the Chicano community.

The movement called Chicanismo, aimed at a holistic cultural empowerment of the Mexican-American community, went far beyond
the usual simple reactions to Anglo pressures. The Chicano movement took the shape of an alternative to the pressures from the majority community, the space of a search for a mythic womb. Nietzsche’s depiction of man’s angst best illustrates the inspiration that informed the movement called Chicanismo. He writes:

Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots be it among the most remote antiquities. What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, or a mythic home, the mythic womb? (116)

It was a people’s journey, among the western ethos of the present U.S.A. in search of a mythic womb; a unique journey in search of a self identity. The movement called Chicanismo is rooted on the bulwark of the Aztec myth to which they trace the origin of the “Chicano mythic womb.” Chicanismo, in its praxis in the U.S.A. of the twentieth century is an anticipation of the avant-garde movement that favoured the forging of a new relationship between performance and its audience. Chicanismo, in this, shared the defining convention of the avant-garde that social and political radicalism should be bound up with artistic innovation. It is in this spirit that this radical movement is to be viewed in the corporate American space of the twentieth century. The sacred aspect of the mythical-
religious is brought to bear on the politico-historical reality of the Chicanos in America. The more sophisticated element of the “sacroprofane” (Broyles-Gonzales El Teatro 58) is developed as a main locus of Chicano cultural rootedness. The sacroprofane reality begins with the realization of a Chicano alternative mode of existence which the Chicano authenticates and thus freely draws from.

Teatro Campesino conceptualized itself on the fundamental principles of the Theatre of the Sphere. The Theatre of the Sphere is a sustained attempt at reviving the submerged collective memory while making it the foundation for not just theatre performance but a Chicano pedagogy and life training. This is a practice that begins with the consciousness of the continuity between life on and off stage. Spherical mode of acting does not see artistic practice as different from life practice. The concept of actor or performer, as one who is practiced in a stylized mode of communicating, which is basically pretending with mastery enough to create the willing suspension of disbelief in the spectators, is against Teatro Campesino philosophy of extending life practice on to the stage. The insistence on the essential unity of the person on and off stage was the basis of the evolution of the Theatre of the Sphere as a formula of self-education and training aimed at sharpening individual and collective life performance skills. This was precisely the programme that aimed at exorcising the shadow of oppressor syndrome from the minds of
the oppressed and in the process making them complete human beings.

At this point in the growth of the *Teatro Campesino ensemble* can be seen the coming of age of the very ethnic theatre form, the *mito*, with a typically surrealist structure. Huerta observes: “Reflecting the colonial gaze turned inward, these subgroups searched for a sense of “home” in a land that used to be home, a land in which they were the majority and Spanish was the official language, not a forbidden tongue” (*When Sleeping* 23). The historical trajectory of the *Teatro Campesino* thus spans a very interesting path potentially regressive to the dominant consumerist social trends. *Mito* is a popular myth that takes the form of a parable based on a popular Mayan-Indian ritual. This theatre *genre* was the direct product of the development of the Theatre of the Sphere. The special contribution of the *mito* in helping to form a critical attitude is evident in its structure and content. The *mitos* offered an alternative system of interpretation graphing the socio-political space of *barrio* life from the 1970s to the ‘80s within the traditional Mexican spiritual-religious space of the mythic. Its thrust is on ending the power of oppression by effecting a passing from one mentality to another, that is taking the focus away from the non-issues of pure economic policy or structural reforms. The scripting of the plays under discussion here can be read effectively only when their attempts at dialogue with the actualities of lived life, the non-textual
domains of human activity and life situation, are also brought into focus. *Mito* is an attempt at reading the component of the incompatibility between life as conceptualized in the Mesoamerican myths and its praxis in the Mexican-American community across the border. In other words, it is the historicity of the plays with their politics of the borderlands that makes them meaningful. *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* as is typical in a *mito*, foregrounds an unreal, cosmic/universal character. There is a more serious version of the *pelado* in the *mitos*. The *pelado*, in the *mitos* gains a cosmic colour and flavour. He signifies in an esoteric manner, though with his feet firmly fixed in the daily reality of the present. Belarmino of *The Shrunken Head*, Bernabé, and Indio of *The Dark Root of a Scream* are characters in the surreal line and they are superimposed on to the present as impairments. The *mitos* engage themselves with the unreal at so uncomfortably close an angle that the social space of their existence comes in for mockery as the unsubstantial and the unsustainable.

*The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, an early *mito* which makes direct reference to the Mexican Revolution foregrounds a highly surreal central character, Belarmino. Here as Alfredo Cuellar observes:

> Advocates of *chicanismo* therefore hope to reconstruct the Mexican American’s concept of themselves by appeals to pride of a common history culture and ‘race.’
*Chicanismo* attempts to redefine the Mexicans’ identity on the basis not of class, generation or area of residence but on a unique and shared experience in the United States. (7)

He is to be read in the larger context of the Mexican political turmoil of 1910 and with reference to the story of the revolutionary peasant leader, Pancho Villa. Pancho Villa is ambushed in the streets of Parral, Chihuahua and the mystery surrounding his killing and interment, subsequent events of disinterment and beheading and the strange disappearance of the head, are all used to weave the magical realistic story while transposing this legendary character as a member of the modern *campesino* family. It is a parable illustrating a people’s attempts at finding meaning in their lives by weaving out of their past life of collective resistance a larger cosmic story metonymically linked to their present lives of resistance. There is a play on the fact that Francisco Villa (Pancho Villa) was himself a *campesino* who dared to kill a land lord for raping his sister.

Belarmino who belongs to a present day migrant *campesino* family, however, is a disembodied head. In the introductory act of the play all the other characters in the play remark on and are marked by their attitude towards this emblematic character. It is the etiology of present day entrepreneurship that makes a *mito* like *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* a rich mode of rendering the blunted realities of mundane existence. The desperate act of Pancho Villa who could not
accept the outrage to his sister is a deliberate superimposition on the present day discourse when such acts pass unnoticed. That is the spirit behind the tricks Domingo, the war veteran seems to have mastered.

There is Belarmino, the oldest son, in *The Shrunken Head*, pathologically unacceptable to the *bourgeoisie* sense of decorum because he lacks a body. Belarmino, the protagonist is a pathological case in a societal circle which identifies its sanity/health as against the aberrant sexual identity of their anomalous existences and hence unacceptable to the *bourgeois* sense of decorum. His presence in the family frightens Domingo, the only normal assimilated off-spring in this *campesino* family who has learnt the trick of making money through the ravishment of land and betrayal of fellow *campesinos*. Joaquin, the youngest brother of the family, is a social outcast but is awe struck by the revelations of his oldest brother, Belarmino whom he comes to worship as the lost head (spirit) of the revolutionary hero. Surrealism informs the renderings of all the other characters who are preoccupied with the consciousness of the reality or the lack of it in their relationship to this highly unreal persona. Belarmino himself, however, always remains off-stage through the first act. It is also a theatre technique that points to the present day real of the time of action which signals the absence of the Mayan mythic homeland of the Aztlan where Belarmino rightly belongs.
In the second act of the play the audience is outraged by the scene where the highly unreal Belarmino is teeming with cockroaches that creep out of every aperture in his only organ—his head. Stan Steiner in his book *La Raza: The Mexican Americans* dedicates a chapter to cockroaches. Here he dwells at length on the importance of cockroach to the Chicanos. He reports:

The cockroach is the theatre’s mascot, its star performer, and it faithful audience.

“cockroach!” another actor exclaims. “Whenever we go on tour we take them with us inside our trunks.”

“A town of cockroaches,” says Luis Miguel Valdez, the director of El Teatro and the Centro Cultural Campesino – the Farmworkers’ center of culture. “La cucaracha is everywhere. Why? Because no one cares what happens in this place.”

In the abandoned drugstore on the dusty main street of Del Ray, a town of migrants and fruit packing sheds and Mexican bars, these obstinate actors have created a Centro Cultural Campesino. (325)

In the obscurity of the barrio life cockroach symbolised a stubborn resistance to the brutalization of the mind and the body. The spherical performer/character Belarmino undertakes to master the aspects through which he progresses along the various steps of training the body, heart, mind and soul\(^2\) to reach the awareness that
individual capacity for action and response exists only in concord with group, social, ecological and cosmic forces. Thus Belarmino trained with the infinite potentialities of a spherical actor not just tolerates the cockroaches but renders the bond between the insects and himself a welcome factor. It is the responsibility of the spherical actor to predispose the audience to re-evaluate and analyze constantly their feelings and emotions, like the feeling of nausea for the lice and cockroaches, part of his daily reality. This deliberately nauseating picture is a double signifier which points to the disinfecting quality of propriety of modern social life as well as the harmony and balance between the individual and the natural order in accordance with the revived Mayan-Aztec mythic culture with the cockroach as its mascot. While it is a visceral reaction (not purely intellectual) that is called for, it comes in for juxtaposition against the mass mentality to submit to the money making tricks of the likes of Domingo; the dogged persistence of the cockroach is a challenge to the model of exploitation personified in the character of Domingo, a parody of the labour contractor. He comes up with very convincing evidence when the workers demand their pay:

MINGO: I already paid him! If you don’t believe me look here in my pay book. Here’s everybody that received their wages. See ...what’s signed here? (He shows CHATO)

CHATO: I don’ know, ees in Spanish.
MINGO: Spanish? It’s your name, stupid. Chato Reyes.

You sign it yourself.

JOAQUIN: Nel, carnal, we got you there. Chato don’ know how to read or write. (*Mummified* 151)

The audience, the most important part of the Theatre of the Sphere, is thus predisposed to perceive themselves in dialectical relationship with their social reality helping them assume an increasingly critical attitude and a participatory role towards their world where the labour contractor is part of the daily exploitation they encounter. Thus while the rest of the characters either resign themselves to or recoil from Belarmino they are dwarfed into an aberrant reality by the hero. He is also the man of Aztlan, the Aztec mythic homeland. The *barrio* reality of the Native-American ethos positions the human within nature and not over against nature as is the prevalent Western ethos of the present. This micro-macrocosmic insight regarding human being’s relationship to the larger cosmic order is fore grounded in the scene in *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* where the audience is confronted with the image of this unnatural character eating cockroaches.

The final act of *The Shrunken Head* is almost dedicated to the cockroaches of various sizes that cover the walls of the house. It is the low cost, high energy stage technique that indicates the mythic density of the *barrio* home. The members of the *campesino* family, who doggedly remain culturally rooted by refusing to assimilate,
survive on the cockroaches. Domingo who climbs up the economic ladder by implementing the exploitative tricks he learnt in the marines, is assimilated enough to afford a comfortable home for himself outside the barrio. But all the other members of the family find that ill gotten luxury distasteful. They prefer the discomfort of their barrio home where “brotherhood is in the blood, the blood of La Raza” (Steiner 240). The eagerness with which they eat the cockroaches directly from the walls is a theatre signifier pointing to their psychological leanings towards their mythic home land, the Aztlan.

The mechanical level of interaction, between Domingo who now comes back to the barrio as an Immigration Welfare official and his own family he is designated to monitor, indicates the gulf between the present space of the barrio life and the cosmic level of the mythic space. The Shrunken Head is an enactment that narrates the relationship between the physical laws of the present and the psychic force of the symbolic network of relations they call mythic homeland.

The protagonist Belarmino who is a head sans body mostly burps and farts and sings “La Cucaracha.” He speaks only the language of ribaldry outrageous to the bourgeois sense of decorum represented on stage by Domingo, the second son of the family, a war hero who aims to become middle class. The tricks he had learnt in the U.S. Marines, as Joaquin the anti-hero of the family perceives,
are nothing but the language of self-aggrandizement at the cost of the hapless victims of state policies like the bracero programme. Joaquin the rebel who frequently gets into trouble is sent to the reform school and later a reformed Joaquin come onstage without a head.

Domingo has internalised thoroughly the establishment rhetoric of making money. He says, “that’s true, Mom. But now things are gonna be different. I am here now, and we’re going to be rich-middle class! I dint come out of the war without learning nothing” (Mummified 144). He has learnt that the hegemony of progress benefits the already privileged few and in playing the part of the labour contractor he exploits the labour force. Hence he is spacing the accurate lines along the relations of production in the corporate agri-business. Domingo is cognizant of the popular equation of systematic trends when he associates ‘the land of opportunities’ with “the land where you can start at the bottom, even in the fields, and become a rich man before you can say...” (Mummified 144). At this point Domingo is interrupted by the loud burping sound let out by Belarmino “BELARMINO: ARRRRGGGHHH” (Mummified 144). The biting satire of the burp that cuts through Mingo’s oratory complimenting his parents who were smart enough to cross the border is more than just an outrage to the sense of decorum; it is a sound that tunes in with the “La cacuracha” song whose rhythm is the rhythm of the Chicano ethnic self hood just as
outrageous or not as the family surviving on cockroaches. To the sense of rectitude of the audience falls the very difficult choice of deciding which option is more squeamish: doggedly holding on to ones conscience by refusing to partake of the spoils of exploiting the hapless even at the cost of eating cockroaches or making money by banking on the hapless condition of the oppressed.

Joaquin is infected with a very contagious aberration the *barrio* syndrome which has been distinguished from simple gangsterim. Steiner describes this contagion thus:

> The street gangs of the barrios are different from those in most ghettos. In a sense they are born not solely of poverty, but also of cultural pride. Like street-corner chambers of commerce the gangs of barrio youth defend the spirit of *La Raza* with bravado and youthful boisterousness. (232)

In the true spirit of *La Raza* he sees his brother who stoops to make money by exploiting his own people as a betrayer of the community and its culture. Joaquin is reformed and rehabilitated at last only to end up a well polished Anglicised youth without a head. The whole play is a body language which says what a Chicano is. A Chicano is whole only with his culture and emotive powers intact. It is all right for a culturally castrated trim American youth like Domingo to think exploitation as a normal state of affairs, but for a Chicano who carries within his psyche the community spirit with a quest-for-hero
myth in lived legends like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata to be a consuming subject is to be seriously truncated.

To a member who lives the spirit of La Raza his culture is encoded in his mother tongue and Steiner testifies, “It is difficult to eradicate the spoken word. Language then becomes the last resource of cultural survival. ‘If the language goes, the culture goes with it” (211) The idea of pruning as part of the de-education process involved in English education which subsumes every other language of communication is also central to the play’s message. The pungency of the central idea is scripted in the performance mode of the headless body of Joaquin who reads in the bodiless head of Belarmino, potential community strength to resist all odds.

The message of the play is measured out in every sardonic reaction of the different characters reacting to the situation. Lupe, their sister, on an Americanised Joaquin’s return from the reform school comments: “I think Joaquin, Jack is gonna be okay, Ma. He can still find a job in the fields. A man doesn’t need a head to work there” (Mummified 190). Lupe’s seemingly naive comment takes a dig at the structure which requires of the masses just the use of their hands. Joaquin who uses his head is to be pruned of his thinking faculty. Joaquin, the boy of the barrio, who talks back to the ‘whole lousy system’ is not just poverty-stricken; he is affected by cultural pride and has to be reformed.
Steiner makes uses the emblem of the shrunken head as a metaphor for indoctrination: “De-education is a difficult process. The culture of La Raza and the Spanish language were native to the country for hundreds of years before the coming of the Anglo to the Southwest; they are not easy to uproot” (213). The process of uprooting involves decapitating or is as good as killing the Chicano Raza. That the spirit lives on in the community is metaphorically signified in the symbol of the stolen head of Pancho Villa. The symbol of the shrunken head of Pancho Villa comes full circle when the decapitated hero of the Mexican Revolution anticipates the physicality of the loss of a cultural rootedness: “There’s the body and here’s the head. Let’s get together!” (Mummified 191).

Belarmino is as ill adapted in a social space of rational values as Bernabè in the eponymous play. Bernabè’s absorbed listening to the stars, observing the being of the earth, can be seen only as signs of stupefaction created by the ruthlessly rational Enlightenment attitude which is based on the primacy of man and the contingent instrumentality of nature / resources and the like. An organic society is considered unreasonable because the dominating man in pursuit of his material interests is the victim of his self-created alienation. Bernabè is a parable about the prostitution of land. The message is clear and focused – to rearrange Earth’s environment Man need not use sophisticated geo-engineering or any of the complex technology. All he has do to nurture the earth is press his
emotional, libidinal energy into service. The space taken up for 
dramatization is the biomorphic space of the valley in which 
Bernabé, a moron, a source of “easy stoop labour” (Early Works 134) 
lives. The play serves as a metaphor of the socio-ergonomic reality of 
the “Mexican-American farm labour community whose average 
income was less than $1,000 annually” (Garcia 1).

The mythical memory that the play Bernabè draws on is the 
locus of cultural pride which is also the element that problematizes 
the antiheroic world of street-fights, of the lumpen proletariat, the 
world of disrupted families and of hunger, poverty and death: the 
world inhabited by Bernabè. The character Bernabè and his psychic 
range invoke the Chicano claims to a land that was home prior to the 
European invasion and consequent dispossession. Bernabè, like 
Belarmino, is a creature of Aztlan. It is the politics of the large-scale 
takeover of land by the railroad moguls and the agribusiness giants 
that make the premise of the claims to a pre-European connection to 
the Mayan mythic homeland, the Aztlan, authentic and significant. It 
is this aspect of the possession-dispossession rhetoric of the play 
Bernabè that gives richness to the description of the neo-Aztec 
character Bernabè. The whole action is thus rendered magical 
realistic and hence the text of the play which makes use of an alien 
discursive space is to be read in its own terms.

Unhindered libido evolves as the most powerful nurturing 
energy capable of consuming itself. The cultured world from its
structure can decipher his genuine fear of condensation only as parapraxes. He is a man whose identity is too de-centred to be caught within the complex of structures. His consciousness is his life instinct and the taboos of guilty desires do not exist in his world. Thus Bernábe yields up his life in a marriage and rebirth hermeneutic cycle. He matures into death/rebirth. Bernabè is a psycho-pathological alien to the whole enterprise of agri-business. While the surrealististic text of action is interesting for the dream like image sequence of the action, here it has an archetypal richness. The archetypal quality of the dream image is dense in that the dreams here extend back not just to the individual childhood of the dreamer but to the collective Inca-Aztec culture. Bernabè is introduced as a dreamer of wildly unreal things.

The play Bernabè is a hybrid of the real socio temporal situation of the political story of the 60’s and the residue of the Mayan-Indian rituals whose mythic memory in relief to the life of the grubby valley is effectively banked on for dramatic effect. The opening puts the play in perspective:

*The action takes place in a rural town on the San Joaquin Valley of California. The time is the early 1960s. It is summer—not a cloud in the sky, not a breeze in the air. The crop lies majestically over the landscape, over the immensity of the fecund earth. The valley is sweltering under the heat. The sun is lord and master.*
Rising abruptly on the flatness of the land is Burlap, California—a small squat town not picturesque enough to be called a village, too large to be a labour camp—population 2,100, one of the hundreds of similar tank towns that dot the long flat immensity of the valley, covered with dust and crank case oil. The town has a Main street, the commercial centre of town, consisting of a gas station, general store, bank, hardware, café, Mexican show, and Torres Bar & Hotel. Amid these business establishments are empty lots littered with debris. (Early Works 134)

The images are all of hardship and ruggedness: the sweltering sun, no wind, squat town, littered debris, dust and crank case oil suggesting decay and commercialism.

This world is vastly different from the world of Bernábe, a mentally-retarded farm worker in his early thirties touched with cosmic madness. To him an exploitative relationship is pathologically repressive and as traumatizing as an exploitative exchange with the elements. The play is titled Bernabè because of the heroic pathos of human existence that Bernabè symbolizes. The emptiness of the streets is a deliberate piece of irony as it focuses on the void between its apparent listlessness and the volume of commercial space and density of spiritual action it is subject to Bernabè the character and his life, mimes the sort of commodity
fetishism that is rationalized as the essential in the social space created by exchange values: thus the town with a commercial centre with general store, bank, hardware, café, Mexican show, and most notable of all, Torres Bar & Hotel, externalizes the consumer age. Bernabè mimes the aspect of commercialism which sees everything including life as rationally comprehensible and hence amenable to the quantity value system. Thus Bernabé is worth a thousand sacos a day; He is out of work when he cannot work with his crooked leg; “he’s got an itch” (138) and so must enlist the help of one of the girls in the brothel. This is the level of social exchange which Bernabé finds quite alien; neither can the modern social discourse accommodate a person with elemental perceptions and so he is insane and unreliable to the extent that he is subject to its material conditions.

The mise-en-scene conceives Bernabé as endemic to the cosmic ambience of his habitat. Bernabé’s love for la terria is not exploitative and so he is an outcast with the crime of economic and social failure hanging round him. It is no accident that he inhabits the litter and debris of the modern business establishments. It is the miming process that is underway in Bernábe’s surrealist way of seeing the social space. Bernabé’s miming the world of the corporate ranches alludes to the structural aberration that rationalizes land grabbing and monopoly. These are, to the subjective consciousness of Bernabè, just contingent factors.
Broyles points out how “in the Theatre of the Sphere mode the Performer’s sphere is construed not as self-contained, but in exchange with three other spheres: audience, society, nature and cosmos” (*El Teatro* 108). The Spherical actor/performer Bernabè manages to develop eye contact with the audience. His spherical actor training has given the farm worker/performer the training to address the audience directly even as his action pirouettes round the central idea of the insanity of the process of unfettered amassing. His action draws direct responses from the audience. Bernabè, like Belarmino of *The Shrunken Head*, is the aberrant character, one who is outside the structure of propriety and so with a lot of freedom to improvise. Bernabè's insane condition and his extremely abnormal gestures and actions on stage are the dramatic techniques that make the play dialogic. The dialogic mode of performing the myth and its evocation is explained by Gloria Anzaldua thus:

> In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular art from everyday life. The religious, the social and aesthetic purpose of art were all intertwined. Before the Conquest, poets gathered to play music, dance, sing and read poetry in open air places. The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shmanistic. (66)
The message of the whole text of the play itself is this element of dialogue. In the third part of the *mito* Bernabè is seen in conversation with the Earth, the sun, the Moon and these characters on stage are a depiction more of the organic regionalism than a cosmic universality. The play attempts to stand a social reality on its head. The main event in the play is the life and death of Bernabè and its eventfulness is the (a)sexual love of Bernabè. But the message of the play is to be sought neither in the subversion of the capitalistic social reality nor in the cosmic magical reality, but in the aberrant reality of Bernabè who is both subject to and antithetical to the capitalistic social reality. The contrast between his perfect nonchalance and his mother’s almost paranoiac worries is at once the signifier of the discourse of power and its resistance by a transcending of it which makes for the theme of the play.

His hallucinations, however, contain within them their own transpersonal rationale. Bernabè who dovetails perfectly into a totally cosmic ambience is completely lost and panics in his earthly habitat. The disruptive force of the whole action is the high energy action of Bernabè himself who like Belarmino is a clown, the *pelado* with a psychic depth, thus without limits to what he can say or do. He had the power to make unlimited references to the lower stratum, primarily the reproductive organs, belly, thigh, and feet. He could even expose them on stage and get away with it. This power of the clown is on display in all these plays performed in the spherical
mode. *The Dark Root of a Scream* is a performance piece that uses this technique effectively.

In *The Dark Root* Gato the *vato loco* displays in a physical manner his sexual interest in Dalia and it takes place on the occasion of the funeral wake of Dalia’s boyfriend who dies in Vietnam. Similar is the picture in Bernábé where we see him engaging in acts of sexual encounter with *La Tierra* right on stage. The audience is not given the option to remain non-participating voyeurs in such situations. The acting mode takes on extreme physical forms and as such invites the audience who are from the outset to the thick of the action, by the performers’ act of establishing eye contact with them. They are directly addressed and cannot but get involved when they are within the helplessly intimate actions of the performer/character.

The play was, at some points, taken over by audience groups and such actively participating audience made for the second spectacle of the action. The actively participating audience came to be known as *cócoras* (Broyles-Gonzales) and their liveliness often supplanted the stage attraction. Broyles-Gonzales testifies to the fact that the stage was just a make-shift affair with a high degree of audience participation. During the initial performances of *Bernabè*, as Valdez himself testifies in his interviews, the audience would come onstage and take over the action from points they felt wanted particular twists. The audience was authorized to interrupt the
action and direct the performers regarding the turn of events on stage. In one of the picket line performances a member among the audience intervened to add the scene where Bernabè roughs up Torres for slapping Consuelo. This intervention added density to the character of Bernabè. Bernabè who goes into fits of paranoiac terror on being confronted with Consuelo’s erotic coquetry is equally enraged at her helplessness. In the play Bernabè that went into print form Bernabè physically assaults Torres, the owner the Cantina (brothel) for slapping Consuelo.

It is not at all accidental that the other main character in the play, who tries to help Bernabè, runs a brothel — another by product of the degenerate social order. But he has economic success to gloss over the ugly phase of his reality. In Bernabè, therefore, we find historicizing and economic success sharing common platform of consumption which, from a cosmic view point is sensed to be a crime. Primo, Bernabè’s cousin, means well when he tries to rent him the services of Consuelo, a whore by profession. Consumerist American world can only perceive as prurient lechery the libido or the life instinct evinced by Bernabè.

Here the indecorum of displaying the material bodily lower stratum is also a means of disrupting the dominant order and its abstractions by hinting at the closeness of lower stratum to the life cycle and the perpetual promise of renewal. Bernabè concludes with the scene where Bernabè is seen nude, in a cosmic embrace with La
Tierra, the earth, his bride. This final scene is to be read together with the brothel scene where Consulo tries all the tricks of her trade on Bernabè but fails to woo him. As she fumes at Primo who hired her services for Bernabè the audience is given a feel of the undirected sterile hatred of a prostituting culture of which both Primo and Consuelo are mechanical victims. Bernabè is sharp in pointing to the element that mystifies sexuality in order to quantify it. Prostitution is one of the processes of quantifying sex. There is an exchange value fixed to it and is stilted to Bernabè’s aberrant consciousness. To Bernabè his mother who hires him out as cheap stoop labour and Consuelo who hires out herself are one and the same person. He screams as she approaches him:

    Mama! Mamaaaaa! (Strobe light effect, slow to fast. Bernabè is backing away from Consuelo — or at least the Madre dressed in Consuelo’s clothes. (154)

His terrified screams echo louder against his mother’s snobbish expletives on seeing Consuelo:

    she turns him around. Consuelo pauses for a second, smiling cynically, then exits into Torres Bar. (136)

It is obvious that Bernabè is paranoic because he cannot operate in a discourse system that commercially quantifies organic emotions like sexuality. The irony of the scene is enhanced by Consuelo’s cynical smile at the mother’s frantic gestures. To Bernabè all fragmented aspects of existence, be it his mother or a friend / foe, are tangible
terrors. This aspect of his character make the people of the tragi-comic real world brand him a footling hopelessly mad and makes him an easy prey to exploitation. The Chicano mythical universality is evoked in Bernabè to portray the doom of the tragi-comic daily reality which is caught on a clumsy footing. This level of incompatibility is the disruptive signifier of the play. The dialogic element of the message is exponential to the level of confusion of the protagonist Bernabè, insane or too polymorphous organic to be accommodated in a reductively striated world. This is the point of its mythic intervention. He cohabits with *La Tierra* – the earth mother / lady love, provider / destroyer.

But it is the subversive density of the climactic marriage of Bernabè to *la Tierra* that dents its commodity logic. While life and death are never quantifiable, here in the Chicano mode of the real they are seen as the cyclical process that is in harmony with nature. Thus the consummation of his marriage with *La Tierra* is also the moment of his deliverance from a life of debasement. It climaxes in his death, but it is not just the pathetic end to a mechanical life but also the signature of a new birth. The affective significance of his action is to be sought in the lived reality of the community.

An alternative vision of reality that is based on a very specifically Chicano aesthetic is the focus of the play’s text. A search for an alternative real in itself is the result of the systematic depravation of a community subject to long years of subjugation.
The self-identity is conceptualized as an axis of its own and hence is a negation of the construction of oppositional qualities in direct relationship to the Other. The play employs indigenous cultures and values as a foil in rejecting the most pernicious influences of Enlightenment and capitalism.

The persona of Bernabè further employs the dream for contemporary Chicano life as an alternative social organization. The mito, Bernabè, gains depth more as a discussion of a process of conflicting levels of energy rather than as a finished text with a packaged meaning. Hence the concept of the spherical actor vis-à-vis the character of Bernabè as well as the other central characters in similar mitos demanding the dynamism of spherical acting is significant. Bernabè cannot be grasped fully without recourse to the Mayan Indian myth of the feathered serpent. It is the historical space of the play Bernabè that gives richness to the delineation of the characters.

In Chicano mythology “The feathered serpent is the coming together of two divergent zones of the human — the material and the spiritual inherent in the entire creation. Feather symbolizes the precious, the spiritual and the serpent stands for the mundane and earthy, the material” (Littleton 558-68). The Theatre of the Sphere fosters the feathered serpent blueprint which is nothing but a community of self-conscious doers. A self conscious of its actions is lofty enough to transcend the narrow myopic and hence grows to
cosmic stature, almost equal to the creator. Bernabè in the play is the only spherical character-actor who crosses the threshold of Death to grow to a cosmic stature. It is not a transcendent reality but an extended life of the community.

The hypertext of Bernabè’s existence with a pre-oedipal social awareness is rich for the absence it notifies. It signifies much more than what is contained in the linguistic sign notified by “mad.” The aberration of systemic etiology of positivism in Bernabè is the space of the Aztlan, the Chicano mythic homeland created by the memory complex of Bernabè. Like Antonio of Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima, Bernabè has psychic contours and “remembers the dreamer child within, drawn to the Indio myths of earth, mountains, and river” (Lee 328). The contours of “double weave, of memory of the “facts” of history and his own” are externalised through the network of his social relations. His only familial relations are his mother and his cousins who are part of the signifiers of a cultural complex in which they are implicated. The protagonist Bernabè shows a visceral antagonism towards the discourse in which they operate. On stage are seen only those characters that are real to Bernabè’s stilted consciousness. His biological father is never present in his memory zone and his psychological depth precludes a father figure. He “is a recollection of the Nahu and Mayan myths employed as pre-Cotesian cultures and values in rejection of the most pernicious effects of
Enlightenment and capitalism, as a source of alternative and empowering forms of social organization” (Perez-Torres 292).

The unreality of modern universalism starts gaining visibility because that is precisely the rational mode of conceptualizing from which, happily for him, he is alienated. His cosmic madness is also the valid Chicano vision of reality that expands to include a holistic reality. The moron here lives in a “spherical reality.” Thus the audience, locked up within the sensibilities of Bernabè, reads the subtleties of modernist universalizing discourse which is open only to the elemental perception of a moron.

The play is acted out in the spherical acting mode. While discussing the spherical acting mode the near impossibility of recording the ten years of intense physical experimentation work of a human collective is to be kept in mind. Perhaps a visual version of the physical acting technique is the only experience that can anticipate the feel of this specific acting mode. However the mitos themselves gather meaning only from the spherical acting technique.

The spherical actor is trained to know himself/herself as a vibration of energy moving through space. He/she concentrates on the particular energy zone that is the focus of a particular play. Bernabè is a play that concentrates on the heart which is the energy zone with the potential for death. Death is also the aspect within the womb with the power for birth. The spherical actor/performer uses his whole body, chiefly the face and the lower stratum, to transmit
this energy. In Part Two of *Bernabè* he is seen in his hole below the earth lighting a candle to a sexy Aztec goddess. Here he uses his body in a way that pointedly conveys his sexual energy. He eagerly embraces the earth, his face to the ground conveying his total absorption in a sexual act. This is his bodily posture in the last part too where he identifies the revitalizing energy of sex in the process of death. His life energy brinks on death and understandably, true to the play’s logic, his cosmic madness is consummated in his death/marriage to the Earth. It is this eager acceptance of the transformation from life to death that makes *Bernabè* incomprehensible and too large for a commoditized dream reality. It is significant that death is not taken as a point leading to transcendence. On the contrary, death is a point which makes indispensable the relevance of the community as a site of continuity with shared physical memory.

The play is an equation of unequal exchanges between a group of denaturalized pigmies locked up within their commoditized selves and *Bernabè* whose cosmic signification is his awareness of the memory of his community of shared physical experience. It is also a pointer to the fact of life where being alive is nonsense if not experiencing life as an ongoing process. Subsequently, being dead is not the end of a process of linearity called life. Death, as signalled in the cyclical system, is the inevitable process leading on to new life. The mythic serves to guide the human beings concerning the powers
that animate our life. This is the subjective rendering of the powers of our own body and nature. This is the role of the mythic in the Spherical acting mode.

If Bernabè’s condition according to modern psychiatry is a case of “cosmic madness” Belarmino is a pathological impossibility. As for Indio, the Chicano martyred for the American cause, he sublimates into feathers. All these characters are a rejection of the *bourgeois* pedigree of negotiating life in terms of a formalized identity in that they reject the positivism of a whole body/self with sexual potential. Their existence itself is a rejection of the constructed identity—the only space mandated for an individual to operate in a system of exchange values.

Unlike the central characters in these two mitos, Indio, the central character of *The Dark Root of a Scream* is just there; in terms of modern pathology he is in a condition of *rigor mortis*. But it is the all consuming presence of this *martyred* character that conveys the subversive force of the ritualistic womb that his coffin ultimately transpires to be. The whole play alternates between the discussions and musings of two different groups intimately connected with him—the family of the dead Chicano soldier, Quetzalcòalt who keeps watch around his coffin as it awaits the state funeral, and his friends who are on their way to the wake. The audience is given a sequence of images of Indio’s life in flash backs from the words of his friends and his mother as they reflect on their experiences with him.
The stage setting is described as a “collage of myth and reality” (79). It is a vertical contra poise of the temporal-historical against the elemental subjective space of the mythical-abstract. The action takes place within a pyramidal structure where the *mise-en-scene* is an indication of the fluid time of the action. The base of the pyramid, brightly lighted is divided into two scenes — a street corner where his friends, the *barrio* boys discuss Indio (Quetzalcoatl) and his mastery of native Inca art practices, and a living room which bears the metallic black coffin draped in the American flag carrying the mortal remains of Indio. Here his mother, his lady love and the *barrio* priest keep wake. The pyramid contains “*a blend of images of the modern civilization-guns, knives, automobile parts and somewhat more spiritual icons like the crucifix, rebozos and ancient Indio images: conches, the sunstone, the feathered serpent, etc*” (*The Dark* 79-80) in an ascending order within the vertical space. The symbolic fixtures within the pyramid are visibly there within the psyche of all the characters present as part of the action, be it the wailing mother, or the *vato loco*, Gato who covets Indio’s lady love Dalia. The *mise-en-scene* indicates the intensity of their ties to their mythic homeland strong enough to blur the boundary between the psychic space and the material space. The stage is thus set for the suspension of a realistic space. Consequently the unfolding of all the fantastic events is never out of place for all their strangeness.
The Vietnam War and the context of the gory killing fields always linger in the general background of the play. The mother is hysterical at the sight of blood dripping from the coffin. The action of the drama alternates between the barrio boys discussing the smell of death and decay emanating from Indio’s coffin and a fainting mother who is brought to using smelling salts. This mito makes use of the senses of smell, sight and touch for the thematic blending of the two different worlds. This is in sharp contrast to careful description of the subjective world of elemental perceptions felt as such by a moronic Bernabè “It is summer—not a cloud in the sky, not a breeze in the air. The crops lie majestically over the landscape, over the immensity of the fecund earth. The valley is sweltering under the heat. The sun is lord and master” (Early Works134). The colourlessness of the blinding heat of the sweltering Sun of midday California in Bernabè is as intense as the strong presence of the colour of blood and the smell of death in The Dark Root of a Scream. This makes the tactile world of the elements more intensely felt.

The violence behind Indio’s non-existence in The Dark Root of a Scream, just as Bernabè’s awareness and Belarmino existence in The Shrunken Head share the surrealist taste for shockingly subjective and bizarre images. These Mitos record Teatro’s anticipation of the surrealist mode of communication. The obsession with frighteningly bizarre colours and the strong flair for Images that reach back to the individual psyche are features common to both surrealism and the
carpa tradition of the Teatro. They also share the defining surrealist conviction that artistic innovation should be committed to social and political radicalism. The commonly felt Dada sentiment phrased in Arp’s comments: “Revolted by the butchery of the 1914 World War, we in Zurich devoted ourselves to the arts. While the guns rumbled in the distance, we sang, painted, made collages and wrote poems with all our might” (Hopkins 8). The Teatro reflected similar sentiment in a different space and in relation to a different war. The experience and the artistic intent have remained unchanged. The Teatro shares the surrealist technique of abandoning the linear perspective in the mitos. One very vital illustration is The Shrunken Head where Belarmino, the disembodied head waits for his mother to place him on to the body of Joaquin, the good brother who steals from the rich to feed the poor, beheaded by the state.

There is confusion in the time of the action when a head from a different age and a different social event comes to occupy the present space. Confused temporality is seen in The Dark Root as well when Indio who dies in the Vietnam War conveys the intensity of the Chicano psyche to emerge as the sacrificed persona of the mythic Quetzalcoatl. At the end of the play however real time is fused into psychic time when the whole group is left with the sacrificed heart of Indio. The play with an open ending points to a cyclical reality where death is never an end but a cause of rebirth. We are confronted with a treatment of life as a process.
It is no coincidence that it is precisely the flag draped onto Indio’s coffin as a mark of respect to the martyred soldier that drips blood. Together with the Priest’s remarks that it could just be the dye from the flag, the whole picture signals the repressive hypertext of a nation which is meant to be a space of consensus. The vato locos⁴ who shared the social life of the barrio with him discuss his political activities. They mock the community leader, Indio, who couldn’t resist the draft for all his talk about Chicano power and the force of resistance of the Chicano group. The helplessness of the minorities against the arbitrary powers of the nation which drafts at its will is the highlight of their talk. According to the priest Indio is racist for exhorting them to be proud of a culture which according to him practiced cannibalism. There is no mistaking the pockets of insecurity within the national space hinted at by the image of a national symbol dripping the blood of its own people.

The primitivizing undertones of drum-beating and colourful ritual of sacrifice common to Bernabè and The Shrunken Head are seen here too. Chicano regionalism which is the cultural basis here, shares affinities with surrealism in its rejection of any delimited sense of art. There is a play on the signifier, cannibalism, and a blurring of the space and agents enacting cannibalism. At this point the action sends strong signals linking the mythic Quetzalcoatl to the real Quetzalcoatl, who was full of cultural pride. The real Quetzalcoatl of the barrio, according to the politics of war, was
martyred to save national interests. The *mito* brings in a deliberate confusion of the belligerent rhetoric of the nation with the aspect of cannibalistic practice of human sacrifice that the priest talks about. However there is a significant difference between extreme individualism of surrealistic art and a political ethos of community that the *Tearo Campesino* based its artistic practice on. In *The Dark Root* the memory of the community life of radical resistance finds voice in the renderings of Dalia, Indio’s lady love.

Dalia, in the depth of her grief goes to the extent of linking him to the revolutionary Aztec prince Quetzalcoatl, whom he is named after. Narrating the story of all reform measures the Aztec Prince effected in his community, Dalia concludes with the episode where he sails away on a ship of serpents to a strange land. At the point where she talks about king Quetzalcoatl’s promise to return to his people (Littleton 560-1) the whole action congeals the mythic essence of the psychic homeland the Chicano believes in and the play suggests.

Dalia who is emphatic in countering the Priest’s accusations of racism rakes up the sparsely existential space of the *barrio* life in which the psychic presence of Indio is situated. The meta-terrestrial here is an indication of the disordering of the rational consciousness of the real. They are pregnant with the richness of implications that spill out of the symbolic death of Indio. The abstractness of the design that blends myth and reality is essentially the best dramatic
setting in which can be enacted the struggle of the Chicano within the larger Euro–American racial society. Thus the grand finale where among all the ruckus, Indio’s coffin is opened to yield feathers and the rich Aztec costume of their disappeared king Quetzalcoatl, as well as his heart, is the point of triumph of the hopes of the Chicano. Locked within the coffin is found his heart, the symbol of his death as well as a people’s hope of a new life. It signifies the hope of continuity of the physical memory of the oppressed through the community with social awareness enough to transcend the pettiness of individual spaces.

Since the Teatro plays went on to respond to the desiccated consciousness of its society with an alternative system of interpretation rooted in the traditional Mexican spiritual-religious space of the mythic, the historical trajectory of the Teatro Campesino is thus graphed within the political space of the civil rights movement floated in the 1960s and further adapted to the Theatre of the Sphere mode of acting. The issues of political importance touching the lives of the minorities are moulded into the mythic Aztec frame; thus we have the Vietnam War which was an event where the repressive arm of the state, the military, sacrificed mainly its minority subjects at the altar of its arbitrary political will. Indio who happens to be one among them is also an iconic figure like Ché Guevara or Zapata and this is the signification that is mimed to infuse the ideology behind the “Aztec practice of offering the heart of
human representative of the Gods at their altar” (Frazer 680). The *mito* *The Dark Root of a Scream* by analogy is a message of hope for the Chicano people who keep their cultural roots fresh in their psyche. It is also important to understand the relevance of the Theatre of the Sphere, which more than a method of acting, was a way of life rooted in the Chicano mythic reality. We do not have the spherical actor here since he is just talked of. He is brought alive through the awareness of all the other lives, the community lives contiguous to his.

The political event of the bitter labour strike that broke out in the grape vineyards surrounding the little Valley town of Delano in the fall of 1965 is important when discussing at the full force of *Teatro Campesino* as a revolutionary event. The following passage, for example from *Delano: The story of the California Grape Strike* reveal the metaphoric significance of Highway 99, which though is referred to only in *Bernabè*, is always there in all the *mitos* as a silent symbol of an insurmountable social divide as well as the link between Delano and Sacramento:

Highway 99 drops out of dun-colored foothills of the north of Los Angeles ... It is a landscape remarkable only in its flatness, its absolute absence of topography. Except for the few cold, grey months of winter, a deadening heat lies over the dull green fields that stretch from the Sierra Nevada on the east to the Coast Range
on the west. An occasional glimpse of an irrigation canal takes on, for the driver passing through the Valley, the aspect of scenery. Breaking the monotony are a succession of towns, but for all intents and purposes this might be the same, some larger, some smaller yet all seemingly grafted on to the land by the same hand. Beyond those, all that saves the driver from highway narcosis are the big rotating sprinklers and the yellow crop dusters floating lazily in the bleached blue sky until they sweep over the fields trailing clouds of Ortho-K and all the other insecticides that anyone who watches the billboards on Highway 99 could name in his sleep.

In its heat in its flatness, it all suggests a vacuum of the human will, but the feeling like the Valley itself, deceives... agribusiness. (Dunne 3)

The Highway 99 which is a recurring motif in the lives of the farm workers provides the metonymic divide of barrio life in Bernabè and the interior of the run down campesino home in The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa and also the street corner in The Dark Root of a Scream. The run down reality of the subculture conjures up the other side of the social matrix which a mito always foregrounds as a view of the two distinct realities on either sides of a big cultural divide. Thus Highway 99 is always there as a silent presence in all the mitos creating a sense of déjà vu. Dunne's sociological text goes
on to explain how the self-effacing vacuum of the valley deceives, “for it is the heartland of the richest industry in California, a 4.08 billion a year industry that goes by the name agribusiness” (Dunne 3).

The history of the political struggle of the West Side life is also the Chicano cultural history inscribed in the satiric discourse of the Teatro Campesino plays. Incidentally California is also the geographical seat of the most colourful rituals of death and resurrection based on the spirit of transubstantiation. The Teatro ensemble draws from this rich normative space of yesteryears. The heightened sense of their historical awareness was a direct result of a migrant life of deprivation and poverty ironically super-incumbent on the splurge of agribusiness and this influence of their cultural roots is to be found in the very specific art forms of Mexican popular cultural tradition like the mito adapted to the agit-prop form by the Teatro ensemble.

Bernabè, The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa, The Dark Root of a Scream and Soldado Raza are built on the structure of the Aztec myth of initiation. All these plays effectively mime the rational construct of exchange values, and the fact that they blend “the spiritual and political dimensions of the struggle,” (Broyles-Gonzales El Teatro 59) makes their mode of signifying a magical realistic one. They deploy the normative privilege of the primordial images of their Aztec Indian archetypes to represent their aberrant versions which
read as type caricatures of representations of modern subjects and religion falling within the hegemonic spectrum of representations.

Mesoamerica’s Mythic background against which Bernabè is given specificity (the ritual of the god who is sacrificed annually to appease the elements) adds to the vitality of the character. Similar is the ritual of the Mayan myth of sacrifice in the context of which the coffin in *The Dark Root of a Scream* when opened yields up feathered headdress and the heart of Indio. The background signals to the cosmic proportion of the characters as against the grim reality which they overcome in espousing humanistic vision. The Mesoamerican and the South American stories of creation always emphasize an organicity of the creation process. The recorded mythic stories of creation mention a creator though the creation process is always rooted in the organicity of life rather than a powerful creator. This factor witnesses to the egalitarian hopes of the community.

The particular Aztec myth centred on which the messages of the plays develop is that of Coatlicue, the Mother Earth, the Aztec Goddess of life Death and Rebirth. In the Mesoamerican myths Coatlicue (She of the serpent skirt) represents fecundity and is horrifying and bountiful, hideous and radiant. She is always represented as more of a spiritual presence than a Goddess with an active history of deeds. She is named after her serpent skirt and in spite of her fertility, is immaculate. The mythic complexity of the *mitos* brings up a bundle of contradictions instead of a centralized
myth signifying an ineffable power. Spherical character/actor like Bernabè span the cosmic mythic, and the experiential real.

The theme in a mito develops around the unresolved conflict between the commercially real and the cosmically real and is more or less a statement of Chicano identity. Bernabè as a character is cosmically real to the extent that he is a Chicano; Indio, who according to the barrio boys, ended up being just nothing more than cannon fodder in spite of all his talk about Chicano power, is more than just another victim of state politics; he was the cosmic representative of the Aztec myth. From a psychoanalytical perspective the whore house scene in Bernabè can be read as a travesty of a Mayan-Indian initiation rite that transforms Bernabè a novice to adulthood. There is a ritual of violent communication with a spirit; consequent on the necessary convulsive emotional exchange of communication the incumbent goes through death and resurrection whence he comes back to life a whole adult. (Frazer 802) In Consuelo’s room he undergoes a puberty ritual though the focus is on the very elementary nature of Bernabè’s life instinct.

The protagonist of most of the Teatro plays is the stock character of the Cantinflas type. Here Bernabè is the typical street idiot who can see what the refined interpretive logic of the bourgeoise fails to acknowledge. The eponymous hero Bernabè is more than just a dramatic rendering of the moronic figure who rises to cosmic proportions like a Hamlet or Orestes; he is a seer who can
envision the tragedy of the times. While the industrial age man can only see the helpless self-abnegation of indentured labour in the person of a mentally retarded Bernabè, like the hero of The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa he is privileged with a defect that helps him see the tragedy of a community construct out of harmony with its elements. In these plays a cosmic angle is made subjective to highlight the vulgarity of the commoditized reality of ordinary life. Organic holism is an experienced reality of Bernabè’s existence; he like Belarmino of The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa is privileged with a defective persona that can, with impunity, laugh at the power structure. More important than the subversion of hierarchy is the holism of vision that helps them see contemporary society as symptomatic of the delusion syndrome, the by-product of economic profiteering that perceives reality only in fragments. It becomes defined and sharp in the context of America.

Teatro Campesino plays falling under the mito category, Bernabè, Soldado Razo and The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa exploit the realistic mode of rendering a range of fantastic themes and dream like events as exotic as a moron initiated into manhood by his rendezvous with Earth (his lady Love) and as absurd as a legendary revolutionary leader personified on stage as a head decapitated ages ago still demanding justice. They are examples of the Chicano response to the dry and thorough Eurocentric realistic theatre. While Bernabè mocks the positivism of a socially
anthropocentric reality of economic capitalism, *Soldado Razo* interrogates the problem of unreal identity in a world of the national chauvinism.

*Soldado Razo* dramatizes mindless death and violence justified by the ideology of war. Johnny and his immediate family circle moves through the events of the play directed by the figure of “the perverse quasi-director,” *Muerte* poignantly unaware of the world of political interests determining their lives. A magical realistic mode externalizes psychological depth of Johnny’s search for a justification for the madness of war. The magical realism of the plays is worked into the structure of the myth to convey its message.

*Soldado Razo* has the plot structure strikingly similar to the solemn Aztec practice of initiation. It is largely based on the custom of offering a human representative of the divine at the altar of Tezcatlipoca, the God of fertility. The human representative chosen as an offering is revered and worshipped as the God incarnate and at the end of a year of living in divine honour he is to be sacrificed at the altar of Tezcatlipoca with ceremonial ritual symbolizing rebirth. This play which balances the responsibility of the events on both personal acquiescence and societal forces is a sarcastic regression of the myth informing the Aztec ritual of sacrifice. Johnny is drafted for the war in Vietnam. On the eve of his departure to the Vietnam his family celebrates the ritual of Johnny’s engagement to his girlfriend Cecilia, a token of his initiation to manhood.
This happy family celebration is foreshadowed by the interpretation of Mr. Eruite (Death) the narrator and interpreter of the events. The maturing manhood of Johnny is signified by his departure to Vietnam. His putative chivalry in fighting for “our country” as sounded in the Father’s consolation “but you recall that you are fighting the communist” (Early Works 133) becomes an absurd verbiage supporting national chauvinism. The eddying pointlessness of the absurdity is highlighted by Johnny’s halting and hesitant perception of everything he does “I don’t know . . .” “May God forgive me” (Early Works 132). The depth of absurdity and his plight is the focus of the play.

Johnny, the soldier of the Race, caricature of the representative of divine comport of the Aztec myth is, a victim of the Vietnam War. The War is a historical situation created to serve the purpose of those who code meaning into history. The message of mythical communication, therefore, can be read in the demystification of the vested interests within the historical. The undercurrent of irony is present throughout in the form of a narrator, Death waiting round the corner at each scene even as Johnny narrates his warfront experiences:

We had orders to kill everybody because they were supposed to be V-C’s, communistas. We entered a small pueblito and my buddies comenzaron a disparar. I saw one of them kill an old man and an old lady. My
sergeant killed a small boy about seven years old, then he shot his mother or some woman that came running up crying. Blood was everywhere. I don't remember what happened after that, but my sergeant ordered me to start shooting. I think I did. May god forgive me for what I did, but I never wanted to come over here. They say we have to do it to defend our country. *(Early Works 132)*

Valdez uses the technique of mystification to demythify war, nationalism and similar socio-political constructs. Johnny writes to his mother, “I had a dream . . . I don’t know how much more I can stand” (133) and later “I killed three of them . . .” negating his earlier angst. The dialogue between Johnny at the warfront and an anxious mother waiting with lighted candle for her son has the orgasmic vitality of life. The war and its causes are distant events to which he is more or less resigned. “I saw one of them kill an old man . . . Blood was everywhere” (132). The events are either not real impressions in his memory or they are aphasic reality where only shadows remain delineating the state of absolute depersonalisation of Johnny’s existence.

Death or Muerte the prime signifier with unlimited signifying capacity is the purveyor of the transgressive truth – As the play opens Death / Muerte enters singing of brave boys that leave mothers in want, girl friends crying – it is the flip side of the policy-makers’ version of truth which is put into the proud Johnny’s *Jefito’s*
mouth. Here mythification serves to denude the construct of established structure and reveals the absurdity of its logic to its victims. The conundrum of the existence of the migrant farm worker community in search of national frontiers is the context of the mitos. That is again part of the message that the mitos convey to the audience.

But the mitos foreground the resistance factor rather than the element of oppression. The conscious memory of the Chicano community is a strongly religious one which Teatro Campesino has developed into an effective tool of political resistance. Pancho Villa a revolutionary leader of the Mexican revolution (1810-1920) is almost a legendary figure and so is Chihuahua, the place in Mexico which is treated as the citadel of revolution. The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa is suggestive of the Mayan sacrificial hero. The primodial image of the hero of the Mayan-Indian sacrificial ritual, the courageous guerrillero who chooses to fight till he is killed instead of dying passively on the block as an offering, is a strong archetype figuring in the legend of Pancho Villa who dies fighting for the poor. An executed Francisco Villa mysteriously decapitated is a repetition of the memory of the sacrificed human gods of the Mayan Indians. Whereas in Bernabè it is the stigmatised social identity of the protagonist Bernabè that renders him mythical, in Pancho Villa it is the anti-establishment revolutionary identity of Pancho Villa that makes him the stuff of myth. What makes them the stuff of myth is their
subversiveness, their political rational which draws heavily on the oral culture of the Chicano community which is replete with psychical residue of the human representative of the divine sacrificed for the common good.

The decapitated head of Fransisco Villa is the symbol of the Mexican revolution living on into the Chicano history of the present which sadly is as oppressive as ever. The memory of the “Campesino, bandit, guerrilla, martyr, general, head of the Northern Division of the Revolutionary Army is finally an undying legend” (*Mummified* 133), who has entered the repertoire of the Chicano psyche as a part of the unconscious residual experience that informs their of selfhood. A peasant leader from Chihuahua, Francisco Villa becomes a rebel hero by murdering a land lord who raped his sister. Thus rendered a victim of the established law he stays on in the Chicano memory as the emblem of dauntless courage with the spirit that dares to look the legal structure of the haves in the face. He is the spirit of freedom that the Chicano identifies with, a part of their ethnic selfhood. The Chicano farm worker family of a father, mother, three sons and a sister in the post World War United States of the 1960’s has all its members strangely connected to the Mexican Revolution of 1810-1920. Clearly more than just a pathological form, Belarmino with an insatiable hunger is the measure of unfathomable deprivation of his community. The absent body of Belarmino is the rejection of American individualism.
In addition to the performances Valdez’ poem *Pensamiento Serpantino* (*Thought Serpent*) exhibits the Chicano spirit and their strong links to their unique culture. The poem extols the dynamism of life as found in the Mayan Indian myths. If the plays assume a life of their own and progress towards a reestablishment of Chicano identity through the use of myths and the peculiar performance style favoured by the *campesinos*, the poems seek to achieve similar goals through structure, rhythm and music and diction. The image of the serpent “crawling out of its dead skin” (*Early Works* 172) condenses ideas of movement and the dialectics of historicization. It is a process of evolution that is mythified. The poem is a metaphoric rendering of theatre as the world. The twin images of the theatre spectacle and the world are being blended into a verbal pastiche to impart an emotive effect of movement:

But REALITY is una Gran Serpente

that moves and changes
and keeps crawling
out of its
dead skin

*despojando su pellejo Viejo*
to emerge
clean and fresh

*la nueva realidad nace*

*de la realidad vieja*” (*Early Works*171-2)
The lines with words in block letters that threatens to break the verse structure together with verbs, like *crawling, to merge, is born*, adverbs *clean* and *fresh* and the like condense the Newtonian three dimensional space and Einsteinien relativity effect to sublimate movement into a force organic enough to fill the spiritual vacuum left by a religion of reason, or at least it attempts to find in movement certain values to be taken seriously and to be considered as of *a priori* existence (Sartre *Existentialism* 21). A serpent that crawls and keeps moving out of its dead skin to emerge anew in life is the very picture of life in its transience/ permanence; alive/dead, dialectics.

The poem is a sustained imagery of the dual maintained through counterpoise of verbal diametrix i.e.

The way to fight racism is with

non-racism

The way to fight violence

is with non-violence. (*Early Works* 191)

and again in lines:

Acts of Hatred

must be countered by

Acts of Love. (*Early Works* 193)

Thus develops, “the great amphi-theatre of the cosmos / and you are meant to be active,” a cyclical pattern that evolves through the serpentine structure of the poem.
A very loose, long and slithering structure of the verse with words that focus on a circularity of reality like:

\[
la \text{ nueva realidad nace} \\
de \text{ la realidad vieja}
\]

And so

\[
\text{los oprimidos del mundo} \\
. . . . \text{ cosas.} \quad (\text{Early Works 172})
\]

impresses on the reader the nostalgia of a perfect cyclical reality with a proper focus, a lost cosmic centre:

Religion (re-ligion)

. . . cosmic centre. \quad (Valdez Early 176)

and a sense of perpetual movement:

It must move with the

EARTH, LA TIERRA

It must move with the

MORNING STAR, VENUS

Quetzalcoatt, Jesucristo

It must move with God. \quad (\text{Early Works 176})

A life conscience fostered in the present times when “centre cannot hold” \quad (Yeats) any pronouncement that can be classified as art has
already lost its authenticity before it is in itself fully formed. Its experiential value gives it the sincerity of functional aesthetics. The long winding poem tries to point towards the incompatibility between subjectivity of life and an awareness of being alive. A variety of bits and pieces from life-death; love-hate duo are set into a collage within the free-wheeling structure of a poetic construction that fits big words within short lines and uses maximum possible action verbs that can be fit into a poem.

Kier Elam points out the theatrical effect of “foregrounding where performance structure is conceived as a hierarchy of elements” (14). The theatrical effect created by Spanish language terms and grammatical structures in this poem is an illustration of the functional effect unlimited signifying powers. The grammatical verbs of movement and state of being – togos to be are placed at the beginning of a sentence denoting the primacy of action over the actor / acted:

Teatro

eres el mundo (Early Works 170).

This can be roughly translated to English as ‘Theatre, you are the world. While Theatre and the world find analogous counterparts in Spanish words Teatro, el and mundo you are is co-opted into a single term eres. The Spanish lexicon has a signifier tu for “you” but in the construction “you are” the subject “you” is signified through a derivative of the verb “be.” The Spanish verb ser is the counterpart
of “be” in English, *eres* is a derivative of *sir* which co-opts the subject you. The verse contains several such examples where it is found that a subject / doer is transitively incorporated into an action. Thus the poem is an effort at condensing becoming’ which according to the poet’s metaphysics ‘is.’ The whole poem is just an explication of the Chicano philosophy of life. He makes rich use of the properties of Spanish Language to advance his theory from the existing maze of logic-counter logic. He equates the Mayan Spirituality to the rationale of relativity. Space, distance and time melt into a force that is life in pace with the movement towards an awareness of life.

As suggested in the title the poem tries to create a theatre effect with sound, movement and juxtaposition of verbal images. The poem tries to speak from an organic life situation:

Mexico . . . .

. . . . . . .

E = MC2

. . . . . . . Hate. (*Early Works* 182)

The explanation of Matter and Energy conversion theory as abstract life-force quantified is an attempt at liberating knowledge from the objectivity of 17thC scientific positivism which conveniently dissects the organicity of life.
MEEX-KIN-CO

(Co means serpiente also) . . .

MEXICO

Which means

Serpiente emplumada. (Early Works 181)

is an attempt at reasoning out; explaining rationally the spiritual-material duality of understanding things. The empiricist mode of reasoning brought into the structure of these lines undermines the making of the argument. It doesn’t contain within it the matter-energy holism that it means to prove. But when the poem says

\[ E = mc^2 \]

And you know what?

... 

YES (Early Works 182). It illustrates more of an experience than a general statement. It is a subjective statement and as a personal philosophy has a real value. An episode from Chomsky will serve to contextualize the reference of relativity principle in Valdez. Noam Chomsky narrates what he saw in the cathedral of a reputed college in America: There among the depiction in the stained-glass windows of history from the days of the Civil War onwards he saw a panel dedicated to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It showed the picture of a man sitting at a desk signing some document, with an air force officer standing nearby. An American bomber was shown in the background with \( E=mc^2 \) on a black board (Chomsky 123).
It was a glorification of scientific progress leading to the invention of the bomb. The cult value that can be abstracted from the poem should be read together with the fact that it is subaltern speak. As Bidney observes, “Myth is said to have its mode of necessity and its own mode of reality” (5). The historical position of the farm worker reality is the important factor for being the raw experience, and has the authenticity of the experiencing body vindicating its reality.

Mythification process seen in *Pensamiento Serpentino* is clearly a culture building exercise and hence a rationalistic explanation loses its relevance. It is the human experience of marginalization that is most important and discourse building in these works is extracted from experiential circumstances. It is a culture building exercise and hence a rationalistic explanation is irrelevant. In a corporate world where life is measured in terms of economic success existence is an oppressive struggle with discontinuity and the pathos of exclusion as common place reality. It is the life-death transformation, too drastic for an instrumental mundane reality, that plays like Bernabè and the poem *Pensamiento Serpentino* try to foreground. It is to be read as an existential statement in a consumerised reality. Where economic self promotion is the prime social force, a perpetual *status quo* is the demand of the structure; but human life or life *per se* is a process and gathers its full worth only by an acceptance of its flux and unpredictability. A state of
decay is, therefore, the situation of artificial stasis created by economic power mongering.

The Theatre of the Sphere was a movement that tried to find a network of economic and socio-cultural meanings out of the impoverishment of migrant farm worker reality. Teatro Campesino became the farm workers’ forum for voicing their fears as well as the platform for seeking future solutions in communication with their community. The emotional force of the community real that developed a high level of social awareness and hence pooled its individual spirit along community interests is unique.

The technique of the Theatre of the Sphere was effective in bringing the farm worker community out of its pall of silence and anonymity. It helped create a platform of bargaining for reformed work condition for the farm worker. This process continued until the trend of mainstreaming set in and Teatro ensemble decided to go professional. As is the common trend at the height of their power most movements tend to buy into the system. This was to happen to the Teatro Campesino also, a movement with its inception in a rejection of individualism of the capitalistic mode.

Notes

1 The word is a coinage by Yolanda Broyles- Gonzales. In her book titled El Teatro Campesino explains the term as a blend of the sacred or the religious and the profane or the political.

2 The cyclical nature of acting affirms the intimate structural correspondence that exists between the body, heart, mind and soul and the social reality of their unity as a field of mutually sustaining forces.
It is, according to the Spherical mode of acting the unity of the elements that leads to improvisation with creative focus where theatre forms a platform for communication and interaction for the people.

The audience is directly from the Mexican Carpa where the audience could interrupt at any point of the action and give the action a different direction. *Teatro Campesino* during its *ensemble* days had such dynamic audience. It was an inevitable part of the *ensemble* days. This method of doing theatre was what made *Teatro* the linchpin of the union movement. It helped engender social awareness among the farm workers and gave them a space to voice their real concerns.

Spanish term for a streetwise dude or a vagabond.