

Me Voy Pa' Mexico (I'm Going to Mexico) was written and performed in the 1920s by Netty and Jesus Rodriguez, a brother and sister vaudeville team from Texas. This sketch was discovered by Nick Kanellos on a 78 rpm record, which had been made because of its popularity. A rough translation into English by Mr. Kanellos follows.

Me Voy Pa' Mexico
by Netty and Jesus Rodriguez

NETTY

¿Cuando salimos, Panchito?

JESUS

Pues, ¿quien sabe, vida mia?

NETTY

Esta muy mal lo que hicimos, y lo que es yo no me iria.

JESUS

Ten un poco de paciencia.

NETTY

iPacencia! Ya es demasiada.

JESUS

iComo tienes impaciencia! Vale la pena guardar. No hay que retroceder por ir nuestra tierra a ver.

NETTY

Pos yo no me espero mas. Me quedo y busco trabajo. Y si tu quieres, te vas porque yo, prieto, me rajo.

JESUS

¿Quiubo, chata? ¿Que sucede? Cierre su pico atrevido, Ud. quedarse no puede porque se va su marido.

NETTY

Pos, vete, si quieres, anda. Porque yo aqui bien estoy. Y Ud. a mi no me manda, iy sepalo! iNo me voy!

JESUS

iPero como viene fiero! El hombre manda, ¿lo oyo?

NICOLÁS KANELLOS

Note: Kanellos incorporated a number of slides into his talk. The following text combines his introductory remarks with comments made about the slides.

I am going to give a few highlights of the development of the Hispanic theater in the United States. These highlights will deal with the themes of this conference, although the whole history is much more diverse, more expansive than just grassroots theater.

The problem has been that when and if any kind of theater commentary is done on Hispanic or Latino traditions in the United States it has usually been of the folk or rural theater. People have gotten the impression that that was all that existed, some old, antiquated plays from the Middle Ages that were imported by the christenizing Franciscans and Dominicans. These turned out to be shepherd's plays, which are very important in their own right and have created a long standing tradition that still lives today.

But at the same time, in the late 16th Century, when these Franciscan and Dominican missionaries and soldiers came to the New World and were moving up into what has become the Southwest of the United States and Florida, there is secular theater from all that time, theater that goes beyond the religious, folk theater. Even in the Colonial days in New York, Massachusetts, and Philadelphia and during the early 19th Century.

The emphasis in my writing on the history of this theater has been on the work that has not been done, that is, in documenting the theater companies, the theater houses, their modes of transportation, and their economic base. In my talk today, I'll be limiting myself to a brief period, the first part of the 20th Century in the Southwest.

As a background to that, let me say that in California when it still belonged to Spain, as early as the 1790s, we have news of plays by subscription, of companies actually performing for the communities out there. They were performing in pool halls — yes, there were pool halls — and inns for the travelers. These same pool halls and inns were important in the development of resistance against the invading American forces during the Mexican-American War. They were cultural centers that spanned the gaps of the social strata. They brought together people who were cowboys as well as hacienda owners.

This theatrical tradition built up along the California coast because there was a cattle industry and a mining industry. The cattle industry especially developed the need for the creation of ports for the export of hides. They would be exported through Mexico. By the middle of the 19th Century, steamships were traveling up and down the California coast to Acapulco, Mazatlan, Baja, California, San Diego, San Francisco, Monterey.

What developed in the 1840s and 1850s was a cadre of traveling companies that presented Spanish grand dramas, melodramas, four and five act plays. They would take a whole evening to perform with all kinds of occasional entertainments in between — songs, skits,



Don Lalo (Leonardo Garcia Astol), a peladito in Mexican American vaudeville.

dancing. Most of the people that belonged to these companies were Spaniards, or claimed to be. These theater companies would come up by steamship to Baja, California. They would take a stagecoach across Baja, take a ferry to Northern Mexico, go from town to town by stagecoach up to Tucson, take the coach across from Tucson to Los Angeles, in Los Angeles get on the steamboat again and go up to San Francisco. You can imagine what that must have been like.

One theater director emerged on the scene in the

1860s and he is known in Mexican theater history as the first to take theater out into "the provinces." That was Gerardo Lopez de Castillo. He joined one of the Spanish troupes, married the leading lady, the daughter of the founder, and toured what had become Northern Mexico after the Mexican-American War. The troupe later settled down and became a resident company in San Francisco. They used that as their base to tour around California.

The most important thing about this is that once there is in the Southwest a Mexican culture within an Anglo political/economic context, the Mexican theater from that point on takes on a context and a social role that it never had in Mexico. (The same can be said of the Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Spanish theater in New York or the Spanish and Cuban-American theater in Florida with regard to Havana, San Juan, or Madrid.) It now becomes a place to preserve language and culture within an alien environment. It becomes a place for community organizing, a place where the contestatory role of Hispanic culture is borne as an alternative to the official culture, news, and information of the larger society.

During the rest of the 19th Century, this role is preserved more in the community setting and expectation than in the kinds of plays being presented, because the plays presented continued to be the melodramas and grand dramas of Spain; once in a while, there's a Cuban or Mexican play presented, but the Cuban or Mexican or Puerto Rican stages were not really developed yet. There's no such thing really as a Mexican culture at that time, identified as such. The rise of nationalism comes later in the early 20th Century. It's the things that go on around the plays that provide the new social and political context in the United States.

Gerardo Lopez de Castillo, for instance, became the President of the Junta Patriotica Mexicana, the Mexican Patriotic Society, and was a political organizer in the community. Many theater people became organizers in the community and the theater space itself was quite often used for that purpose. This tradition becomes collateral

NETTY

Yo no soy su mandadera. Aqui el hombre manda, y...no.

JESUS

¿Y no manda? Eso creiste.

NETTY

No lo crei, que lo se.

JESUS

¡Que pronto te lo aprendiste! Y lo que yo se ensene, que pronto se te olvido. El hombre es hombre dondequiera y debe ser respetado siempre por su companera. Cuando me amarro en Celaya co amantes ilusiones, yo llevaba la saya. Y porque oyo platicar que aqui la ley es tirante, ya me quiere cambiar lo de atras pa' adelante. ¡Pues se equivoca la ingrata! Si chilla porque esta aqui, le desquebrajo una pata, a que se acuerde de mi.

NETTY

¡Ah, como trae vaqueta! ¡juele con su valentia! Si llama a la policia, ya veras si me respeta.

JESUS

¡Ora veras!

NETTY

¡Andele! ¡Pegeme!

JESUS

¿Pa' que la voy a pegar, si en mi suelo mexicano sobra quien me quiera amar?

NETTY

¡Como me las cargas, Pancho! Pero no importa, compadre, tengo el camino muy ancho pa' jalar donde me cuadre.

JESUS

Pues que sea feliz, mi chatita, si no me quiere seguir. Quedese en hora bendita, al finno me he de morir. Alla las tengo de amar, y en llegando a Manzanillo, alli me vuelvo a amarrar. Y alla no sere tan maje, buscare una mujer muy mujer que no se raje y sepa agradecer los afanes del marido, una mexicana pura que no cambie de opinion y no deje las tortillas por jot queques y jamon.

NETTY

Que ya se esta propasando.

JESUS
Pos ¿por que se rajo, desgraciada?

NETTY
¡Como sera, hablador! ¡Callese!

JESUS
¿Por que me he de callar? ¿Cuando le neque mi amor pa' que se quiera quiera? ¿No trabaje muy bonito pa' comprarle güenos tenis?

NETTY
Sure.

JESUS
¿No la llevo su prietito a revalsarla por Venice?

NETTY
Ummmmm hmmmmm.

JESUS
¿No me estava camellando un ano sin descansar? ¿Y Ud. nomas vacilando y enseñandose a polvear? A como sera Ud. ingrata, xcomo me ha dado Ud. guerra! ¡Que mal se porta mi chata! ¡Que ya olvida hasta su tierra!

NETTY
Eso si, no me lo diga.

JESUS
Entonces, ¿por que no vienes?

NETTY
¿Como quiere que lo siga, si ya tierra alla no tienes?

JESUS
Y me las echa de un kilo. Ya ni vergüenza le da. Como se ha hecho del estilo y las costumbres de aca. ¡Voy a sacar el divorcio!

NETTY
¡All right, very well, all right!

JESUS
Senora, no me las trabe. Si es que yo aprendí a espiguiar, hableme como Ud. sabe, y no me la venga a enredar.

NETTY
No diga que se lo enredo, ique ya mas claro no hay! Si Ud. se va, yo me quedo. ¡Adios, Panchito! ¡Bye, bye, hoo hoo!

to the actual play; it's the whole experience, what the people do when they are in the hall and relating.

Over the years, the theater became one of the three most important institutions in the Hispanic community, a place where people came together. The three institutions were the Church, the mutualist society, and the theater. The theater played this role because of its organizing function and because it was a place for preservation of culture and language. As more and more immigrants came in, they perceived that their culture was at a disadvantage, was endangered because of the influence and total pervasiveness of "Americanism" and their very tenuous position in the United States. The theater often took on the mission of preaching, of letting people know how to behave in society; it often became a school for young people, a place to learn how you should act.

In the 1920s, with the growing liberation of women in the United States, the men, who very much held the reins of the culture and were the leaders of the Hispanic community, converted the woman into the cultural battlefield. The Mexican Revolution had produced thousands upon thousands of immigrants, the majority of whom were men; men remained the majority for a very long time. The community — identified by the leaders as a community in exile — saw itself not only threatened by the pervasiveness of English and American culture in general, but also by the liberalized customs regarding women in Anglo-American society. In the newspapers, in publications, and in the theater there were quite often attacks on "flappers," women who cut their hair short, wore their dresses short, smoked in public, and mixed their English and Spanish. They became "agringados" or "pochos" or "renegados," which was the



New York's famed vaudeville house, the Teatro Hispano, c. 1939. It featured artists from all over the Hispanic world and the U.S. Southwest.

worst of all. Now, "renegado," you know from old Western movies, that's a really bad guy, a renegade. Well, renegade is actually from the New Testament; those who denied Christ are the renegades. This came into the vernacular as those who denied their identity, their

mother culture, their language.

A very important thing happens to this theater tradition, which started off with grand drama and melodrama in the 19th Century, with rather large touring companies that then became resident companies in San Antonio, San Diego, Baja, California, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. As soon as what are perceived as hordes of immigrants, laborers, economic refugees from the Mexican Revolution come into the United States, the theater becomes really empowered. You have to bear in mind that there was no television or movies then. There are silent films, that catered to an Anglo American audience. Theaters were segregated; Mexicans were not allowed in the Anglo American theaters to see the movies. There were very few places for entertainment.

A very important person in developing the theater in the United States, as well as throughout Mexico, was Virginia Fabregas. She was called the First Lady of the Mexican Stage. She was known for touring theater throughout the Spanish speaking world. Her tours would extend from Spain to the Philippines with the United States in between. She'd go to Puerto Rico, Cuba, come into New Orleans and go through Texas, throughout the Southwest to Los Angeles, up to San Francisco, then go to the Philippines and back. I even found her going into Guam. Today, there's still a Teatro Fabregas in Mexico City, founded by her son, who's also a very fine stage and film actor, Manolo Fabregas.

She toured from 1900 to 1940 throughout the United States. Every time she toured, especially during the Revolution, there were people who defected from her company for the lucrative stages in the U.S. They would found their own companies and become the heads of resident companies in the Southwest. She is also very important because she shows the role and leadership of women in the stage. This was one of the few places in Hispanic culture in this time where there were businesswomen, not only as artists, but as entrepreneurs. She and numbers of others became very wealthy, very important. They ran companies that had forty or fifty people in them, they traveled with bands, whole orchestras, all kinds of stuff.

These companies were worshipped by the communities. Weeks before they would come to San Antonio or El Paso, the newspapers were writing about them and telling everyone to go and there were sold out performances. The stature is like rock stars today, the way that they were followed. Fabregas was known for importing a European modern theater into Mexico and bringing it wherever she toured. She would be playing plays from Spain, France, Germany, in Spanish translation. She was also picking up plays by resident playwrights in the United States and taking them on the road with her.

During the 1920s, the Hispanic film industry began, with films being made at night in the same studios in Hollywood that were used to produce the Anglo American industry. This drew artists from all over the Spanish speaking world, from as far away as Spain and Argentina, to Hollywood. All of this produced in Los Angeles twelve main theater houses presenting plays on a daily basis — different plays every day; they still maintained the wonderful institution of

JESUS

¿Para que es su amor tirano, si esta lleno de interes, si no es puro ni esta sano, ni me promete honradez? Porque en el pecho me lleve, voyme a Mexico, y veras. Que el amor, aqui se muere. Alla vive hasta demas. Si, a Mexico querido donde amar es un honor, donde el amor ha vivido sin mas precio que otro amor.

NETTY

¡Ay, Panchito de mi vida, ya no puedo resistir, triunfo mi patria querida, yo tambien me quero ir!

JESUS

Por fin se viene conmigo.

NETTY

Y esperando tu perdo, pa dondequera te sigo.

JESUS

Pos, pa' Mexico, mi chata.

•••

I'm Going to Mexico
by Netty and Jesus Rodriquez

NETTY

When are we leaving, Panchito?

JESUS

Who knows, my dear.

NETTY

What we did was very bad, and what's more, I wouldn't be leaving.

JESUS

Have a little patience.

NETTY

Patience! It's already too much.

JESUS

How impatient you are! It's worthwhile to persevere. One shouldn't back down about going back to our homeland.

NETTY

I'm not waiting any longer. I'm staying here and looking for work. If you want, you can go, handsome, because I'm not going.

JESUS

What's the matter, baby? What's wrong? Shut your smart mouth, you can't stay because your husband is leaving.

NETTY

Well, go ahead, leave if you feel like it. Because I'm fine right here. And you don't give me orders, get that straight! I'm not going!

JESUS

You're really coming on like a wild animal! The man is the boss, get it?

NETTY

I'm not your flunky. Over here the man gives the orders and...doesn't.

JESUS

He doesn't give the orders? That's what you believe.

NETTY

I didn't just believe it, I know it.

JESUS

How fast you learned it. And what I taught you, how fast you forgot it. The man is the man anywhere he might be and he should be respected by his woman. When you snared me back in Celaya with romantic dreams, I was wearing the pants and you were wearing the skirt. And now that you've heard that up here the law is a tyrant, you want to turn everything around on me. Well, the ungrateful woman is mistaken! If she squawks about being here, I'll break her leg, just to give her something to remember me by.

NETTY

Ah, what a grudge you carry! Get out of here with your tough guy threats! If you call the police, then you'll see if you respect me.

JESUS

Now you'll see!

NETTY

Go ahead, hit me!

JESUS

Why should I hit you, if my Mexican homeland is overflowing with women who want to love me?

NETTY

the prompter. On weekends, they would have three different performances Saturday and Sunday. In addition to those twelve main theater houses, there were another twelve or thirteen secondary houses offering entertainments to the community, everything from drama, melodrama, zarzuela, real operetta, opera, and vaudeville. A lot of the workers, empowered by the dollar, began to vote with their dollars and some of their popular entertainments began to make incursions into this zarzuela, operetta, and dramatic tradition. Vaudeville came on the rise and by the 1930s it conquered the other forms of entertainment.

This is important because it is through vaudeville that the basis of the Mexican-American identity began to be reflected. (And in New York, we can talk about Puerto Rican or Cuban identity, the same in Florida; they all had rich Spanish language vaudeville traditions.) It is vaudeville that becomes a kind of sounding board. The material is drawn right from the community, the language is drawn from the community, the music, everything. This begins to take form on the vaudeville stages in the urban centers and then later on, especially during the Depression, out in the hinterlands. At that time, the movies moved into the theater houses because they were more economically advantageous for the theater owners. So, the vaudeville performers got kicked out and ended up in tents, continuing to tour through the little towns along the Rio Grande Valley, for the farm workers, the migrant workers, et cetera. It is here that the contestatory nature of the theater continued to grow. It is here where all the experiments with bilingualism, biculturalism and all the types of theater particular to the United States, as opposed to Mexico or any other of the Hispanic countries, grow up.

In the '30s, we see on the scene such characters and types and stereotypes as the Pachuco, that in American history really starts to come in at the end of the war, the Zoot Suit riots and all that. They are already on the stages as a kind of hybrid between American and Mexican culture in the 1930s. There's also the U.S. versions of the peladito and peladita, "the shirtless one," the Cantinflas type character that grows up through the Mexican stage, which was also influenced by the English clowns of the 19th Century. You can make the comparison of a Cantinflas and Charlie Chaplin.

Finally, much of this suffered a very, very traumatic blow with the Depression. It not only kicked people out of the theater because there was no economic base, but more importantly throughout the Southwest there was an institution called Repatriation. When it was taken into the hands of the social welfare system and the churches, people were forcibly put on trains and shipped back to the border. The communities became de-populated and couldn't support many of the entertainments that they did before. Some of the theater artists were able to move up to New York, where there were more and more Hispanic immigrants moving and where they were supporting a lively vaudeville stage. There was this kind of mixing and blending that took place on the stages of New York — Teatro Hispano, Teatro Varidades de San Jose, Teatro Cervantes, the Apollo Theater.

How you exaggerate, Pancho! But it doesn't matter, compadre, I've got the road wide open ahead of me to go wherever it suits me.

JESUS

I hope you'll be happy, my dear, if you don't want to follow me. Go ahead and stay, it won't kill me. Back home I've got lots of women to love, and as soon as I get to Manzanillo I'll get hooked again. And back there I won't be so foolish, I'll look for a woman who's a real woman, who doesn't give up, and who knows how to be grateful for her husband's hard work, a pure Mexican woman who doesn't change her mind and doesn't give up her tortillas for hot cakes and ham.

NETTY

Now you're going too far.

JESUS

Why did you give up, wretched woman?

NETTY

What do you mean, liar! Shut up!

JESUS

Why should I shut up? When did I ever deny you my love in such a way that would make you want to stay here? Didn't I work real hard to buy you nice tennies?

NETTY

Sure.

JESUS

Didn't your handsome man take you to have a good time in Venice?

NETTY

Ummmmm. Hmmmmmm.

JESUS

Didn't I work really hard for a whole year without rest? And weren't you just having a good time and teaching yourself how to put on make-up? How cold and ungrateful you are! What a hard time you've given me! How badly my sweetheart is behaving! She's even gone and forgotten her homeland!

NETTY

That's the limit, you can't say that to me.

JESUS

So, why don't you come with me?

NETTY

How can you ask me to follow you, if you no longer have any land down there?

JESUS

She really lays it on me heavy. Now she has no shame left at all. She's really picked up the style and customs here. I'm going to get a divorce!

NETTY

All right, very well, all right!

JESUS

Madam, don't tangle up your words. Since I know how to speak, talk to me like you know how, and don't go tangling me up.

NETTY

Don't tell me I'm tangling it up, nothing could be clearer! If you leave, I'm staying. Farewell, Panchito! Bye bye, hoo hoo!

JESUS

How come your love rules me like a tyrant if its full of self-interest, if it's neither pure nor healthy, if it doesn't promise me honor? So that you'll carry me in your heart, I'm going back to Mexico, you'll see. Our love, it dies right here. Too many more live down there. Yes, I'm going to dearest Mexico where to be in love is an honor, where the only price of love is to be loved in return.

NETTY

Ay, my dearest Panchito, I can't resist anymore, my beloved homeland has triumphed, I want to go, too.

JESUS

At last, she's coming with me.

NETTY

And hoping for your forgiveness, I'll follow you anywhere.

JESUS

Well, off to Mexico, my dear.