
J I M H I N C H

Corona de Espinas
Migrant Farm Workers, a Medieval
Mystery Play, and the Future of
Religious Art in America

ON A CLEAR, COLD DECEMBER evening a few weeks before last Christmas I sat in a 215-year-old adobe church and listened to the devil preach the gospel. The devil, or Luzbel as he was named in the play I had come to see with my family at the Mission San Juan Bautista in the heart of California's lettuce-growing country, mounted a platform in the center of the sanctuary and heaved from his shoulders a six-foot-tall wooden cross. Luzbel set the cross upright and wedged its base into a hole in the platform. Glaring at a dozen or so shepherds cowering on the sanctuary floor before him, he swept back his cape and addressed the audience. The play, called *La Pastorela*, or "The Shepherds' Play," was almost over. For more than an hour Luzbel and his demonic minions had tried to derail the shepherds' journey to Bethlehem, where angels had promised a glimpse of the newborn Savior. Alcohol, partying, sexy girls, brawling—none of these temptations had lured the shepherds off their path. Now it was time for despair.

"¡Atención, caballeros!" Luzbel barked. He was not a tall man but he commanded the stage. His head was shaved, his eyes were hard, and his black boots struck the boards with thick heels. He spoke in Spanish, the language of this play and all other plays staged by El Teatro Campesino, America's oldest and most revered Spanish-language theater troupe, founded nearly fifty years ago by striking migrant farm workers in the fields of California's San Joaquin Valley.

Luzbel sneered:

Se dice que ha nacido
El mismo rey del cielo,
Y ahora lo van a ver
Pero van a su desconsuelo.

*Este rey que van siguiendo
Reposa allá entre animales
Nacido allí en la miseria
Sin riquezas materiales.
Su vida será un camino
Muy triste y doloroso
Y su muerte se les explico
Porque van tan llenos de gozo.*

(It's rumored the king of heaven was born and now you're going to see him. But you're only heading toward sorrow. This king you're looking for lies among animals, born in misery and poverty. His life will be a sad, sorrowful road, and I will tell you about his death since you're so eager to meet him.)

Luzbel paused as dirge-like music struck up. And then followed one of the most astounding moments I have ever witnessed onstage. Luzbel, the devil himself, who earlier had entered the play riding a black steed through an explosion of fire and smoke, mounted the cross and draped himself upon it like Christ crucified. He donned a crown of thorns and sang a song called "*Corona de Espinas*":

*Ay Jesús, solo Jesús
Quiso morir en la cruz.
Su dolorosa pasión, sí señor
Contempla y llora, dijeron.*

(Oh Jesus, Jesus alone wished to die on the cross. Yes, my friend, consider his pitiful death and weep.)

Luzbel gazed upon the shepherds. In a quiet voice he informed them that the Christ child they yearned to see would not save the world in power and glory. He would die forsaken on a cross, "*su roja sangre obrando la redención...gritándole a su padre en los cielos, 'Padre, why have you forsaken me?'*" (working redemption by his red blood...crying to his father in the heavens, "Father, why have you forsaken me?") (The English in Jesus's final words is in the script.) Lowering himself to the stage, Luzbel hoisted the cross back onto his shoulders and walked toward the mouth of hell, a dark doorway leading out of the mission. Satanás, Luzbel's chief lieutenant, flailed her boss with a whip. Junior devils crowded around, laughing and gaping. The shepherds stood aghast. They got the message. Jesus would die. That and nothing more was the salvation. They trudged after Luzbel. They reached the mouth of hell. I, along with everyone else in that sanctuary, sat in appalled silence.

El Teatro Campesino is quite possibly the most important American theater

troupe you've never heard of. Though the company is lionized in the world of theater professionals, and though its founder, Luis Valdez, a onetime migrant farm worker himself, has been awarded the Presidential Medal of the Arts and written scripts for the Broadway play *Zoot Suit* and the hit film *La Bamba*, most people are unaware that tucked away in a tiny California farm town lives and works a group of dramatists who have fundamentally altered the possibilities for American art in this present age of immigration. I'll get to why you haven't heard of El Teatro Campesino (or ETC, as the company refers to itself) and why the troupe makes its home in California farm country later. For now it's important to understand that a play like *La Pastorela*, with its downtrodden heroes and frank display of religious storytelling, represents an art form rare in the US but common in Spanish-speaking cultures that can—and, with the rapid spread of Spanish-speaking immigrants throughout America, probably will—make immigrant art a vital peacemaker in this country's seemingly endless battles over race, class, and religion.

That's what I thought, anyway, as I sat with my wife, Kate, and our two kids watching *La Pastorela* last December. San Juan Bautista is a forty-five-minute drive from where I live in San Jose. The kids and I, along with our daughter Frances's godfather, a close family friend named Steve, had bought tickets for Kate's birthday. We were joined in the packed, sold-out sanctuary by a remarkably diverse crowd. Migrant lettuce pickers mingled with San Francisco theater sophisticates, a busload of students from an inner-city high school, and townspeople from San Juan Bautista, for whom ETC Christmastime productions are an annual ritual. All of us, regardless of background or faith, delighted in the shepherds' madcap bumbling and the devils' hapless ploys. At one point Satanas emerged disguised as a randy Carmen Miranda figure, reclining on a table laden with fruit. Abandon your prudish religious journey, she warned the shepherds, or there would be "no more chicka-chicka-boom-boom for you." El Hermitaño (the hermit), a comic character dressed in rags, functioned throughout as a sort of Greek chorus, and at several key moments called the shepherds back from temptation. Little devils, local kids in costume, darted around the sanctuary startling audience members, including at one point my two-year-old son, Benjamin, who sat in rapt absorption throughout the entire performance. Everyone roared at the jokes, clapped to the music and watched Luzbel on that cross with identical awe. We were caught up in something special, an art form that bridges cultural divides because it, too, was born in division. And because it didn't set out to be art [Plates 7 to 9 are scenes from a 2007 production].

El Teatro Campesino began as a response to injustice. In 1965 grape pickers in California's San Joaquin Valley, led by labor organizer César Chávez, walked off the fields surrounding the agricultural town of Delano demanding a living wage,

health benefits, protection from pesticides, and clean water and toilets on the job. That same year a twenty-five-year-old recent drama school graduate named Luis Valdez was living in San Francisco, trying to launch a career as a playwright. Valdez had grown up the son of migrant California farm workers, moving so often during his childhood that he often missed out on performing in the school plays he'd yearned after since he was six. He picked crops during the summer and majored in drama at California State University, San Jose, on scholarship. One day in 1965 Valdez's mother showed him something his grandmother had mailed from Delano, Valdez's birthplace. It was a copy of *El Malcriado*, the union newspaper. Valdez knew immediately what he wanted to do.

"I had this idea of a farm-worker theater," Valdez told me when I met him earlier this year at ETC's San Juan Bautista headquarters. "When the strike broke out I couldn't wait to get there." Valdez learned that Chávez would soon be visiting San Francisco. He tracked down the labor leader to a Catholic parish in a rundown part of Oakland. The two met in the basement of the church rectory. Valdez broached his idea. Chávez said, "Okay, but there's no money, or actors, or stage in Delano, or time to rehearse. Still want to try it?" Valdez replied, "Absolutely."

Valdez drove to Delano and was an immediate flop with the workers. At a meeting at union headquarters—a corner grocery store at the edge of town—a sea of perplexed faces greeted his proposal. "A theater is coming here?" someone asked. "When?" That night Valdez gathered a few pieces of cardboard. He made placards with a felt-tip pen and some string: *Campesino* (farm worker); *Don Coyote* (field supervisor); *Patrón* (landowner). The next day Valdez met with the workers again and draped one of the placards over his neck. A worker gamely volunteered to wear another. In moments the two were acting out a scene from the picket line. The workers' eyes lit up. They laughed. And then suddenly all the placards were taken and the farm workers' theater, El Teatro Campesino, was born.

Valdez told me this story in ETC's lobby, a series of connected rooms in a converted tomato-packing shed ("poetic justice," Valdez quipped) on a mostly residential street a few blocks from the Mission San Juan Bautista. San Juan is a rarity in California, a historic town not blighted by subdivisions or strip malls. The mission was founded in 1797 by Spanish Franciscans. A sign in front of the adobe sanctuary proclaims, *This mission has never been abandoned. It is now the parish church of San Juan Bautista.* The surrounding town occupies a compact grid lined with bungalows, antique shops, saloons, and Mexican restaurants. Chickens roam the streets. Nearly half the 1,862 residents are Latino, a slightly lower percentage than in surrounding San Benito County, which annually produces more than 120 million dollars worth of lettuce, bell peppers, fruits, nuts, and other agricultural products. ETC's headquarters, though retrofitted inside with a 175-seat theater (for non-Christmastime productions) and a café

with a bar, still looks like a packing shed. Its cream-colored paint is fading. A barbecue sits on the front porch. Beside a pair of French doors leading to the lobby hangs an old placard: *Obama 2008*.

Standing in the lobby, Valdez directed my attention to a framed sheet of butcher paper hanging high on one wall. The sign, nearly fifty years old, reads in black felt marker: *Farm Workers Theater (Except on Sundays when it becomes a clinic) ¡Viva la Huelga! ¡Viva la Causa!* The rest of the lobby serves as a de facto museum of ETC posters, photographs, newspaper reviews, and even an original Virgin of Guadalupe costume from a production of *La Virgen del Tepeyac*, one of the company's other Christmastime productions, a dramatization of the Virgin of Guadalupe's miraculous appearance to the Mexican colonial Indian Juan Diego [see Plate 10]. Below the butcher paper a photo showed Valdez and his farm workers processing down a street in France, where they had traveled for a heralded appearance at the International Theatre Festival in Nancy in 1968. Another photo showed acclaimed British theater director Peter Brook conducting a summer-long workshop in San Juan Bautista in 1973. There were stills from performances on PBS and the BBC. Posters for *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*.

I asked Valdez why, given this upward trajectory, ETC remained in San Juan Bautista, applying each year for meager county arts grants and playing to the same mostly farm-worker audiences. Valdez paused before replying, "You can make a lot of money and be famous and strangers treat you as if you're not human. But in the end what does all of that mean?" We stood before the Virgin of Guadalupe costume, a red dress and green shawl draped over a mannequin topped by a halo of cornhusks. Valdez recalled annual processions through the streets of San Juan on December twelfth, the Virgin's feast day. Farm workers trailed behind costumed ETC actors dancing and playing music. "It gives us a real heart here in San Juan Bautista," he said. "It's been a very important part of why we're here."

El Teatro Campesino's history is fascinating and vital. And it's gratifying to learn that art born of social ferment can mature and gain international recognition. But I would not have felt moved to write this essay if I hadn't seen Luzbel mount that cross. One of my abiding disappointments as a person of faith is the dearth of quality mainstream American art and music addressing religious themes. There are breakout exceptions, of course. *Into Great Silence*, a wordless 2006 documentary about a French Carthusian monastery grossed nearly a million dollars and won rapturous reviews. The band U2 concluded one of its most recent and critically acclaimed albums with a flat-out prayer called "Yahweh." Singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens wows indie listeners with songs about Abraham and Jesus's transfiguration. For the most part, however, art and faith in America occupy parallel universes. Religion is mostly ignored by mainstream American

artists, musicians, and journalists. Artists of faith often cloak their beliefs or turn to a separate ecosystem of trade groups and like-minded audiences.

As I sat in the Mission San Juan Bautista sanctuary feeling overwhelmed by the sight of an actual human body hanging from a cross, I realized that El Teatro Campesino has accomplished something remarkable. Year after year the company tells unabashedly Christian stories to a diverse audience—and earns a living and mainstream praise doing so. ETC grossed nearly four hundred thousand dollars in 2009, the latest year for which tax records are available. The troupe was recently lionized at the annual convention of the Theatre Communications Group, America’s premiere umbrella theater organization. Though Valdez told me that he, like many other people, was inspired by César Chávez’s Catholic social activism, ETC is not a religious organization and not all of its productions address religious themes. Rather, the company represents an altogether different way of making art, a way almost unheard of in present-day America but quite common in the Spanish-speaking tradition from which ETC emerged. Plays such as *La Pastorela* and *La Virgen del Tepeyac* don’t simply bridge the worlds of faith and popular culture. They embody an understanding of art that renders irrelevant much of America’s anguished hand-wringing over the place of religion in public life. Experiencing such art was an electrifying experience. To understand the source of its power I quickly learned I had to look beyond that first ETC performance in the Delano grape fields. I had to go back farther, to another, earlier beginning of ETC’s story, a time in western history when faith and popular culture weren’t simply complementary. They were the same thing.

La Pastorela is an adaptation of a medieval mystery play called *Secunda Pastorum*, or “The Second Shepherd’s Play,” a dramatization of the biblical story of angels announcing the birth of Christ to a group of shepherds near Bethlehem. The play is thought to have been written in the first half of the fifteenth century by an anonymous English author in the vicinity of the Yorkshire town of Wakefield, where it was performed as part of a cycle of plays dramatizing the entire Christian story. This ancient work of dramatic art found its way to twentieth-century California by way of Spanish missionaries, who in the late 1700s journeyed north from Mexico to establish a network of twenty-one mission settlements, including Mission San Juan Bautista. The missionaries quickly set about converting and, in places, practically enslaving the local Native American population. Drama, as in the Middle Ages, proved an ideal tool for teaching non-literate people the basics of a complex faith. The plays were popular. They outlived the missions and remained a vital part of Catholic parish life both in remnant Mexican communities following the US conquest of the American Southwest and in the burgeoning population of Mexican and Latin American migrants drawn north by agricultural and other low-wage work.

ETC staged its first *Pastorela* in Delano on Christmas Eve, 1966. The

performance was a flop. Valdez based his script on the medieval English original, a tough sell to farm workers accustomed to versions back home in Mexico honed and polished by centuries of community performance. A few years later, at a theater conference, Valdez was buttonholed by a friend named Jorge Huerta, at that time a graduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, writing a dissertation about Spanish-language folk theater in the American Southwest. Huerta showed Valdez a book he'd unearthed in the UCSB library, an anthropological study called *Early Colonial Religious Drama in Mexico*. The book contained original versions of colonial plays. Valdez "grabbed it from me: 'Let me see! Let me see!'" Huerta recalled in a recent interview. (He is now an emeritus drama professor at the University of California, San Diego.) Valdez Xeroxed one four-page script in particular, the story of the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Here at last, he thought, was a church play ETC's audience might respond to.

That year, 1971, ETC had just moved from the San Joaquin Valley to San Juan Bautista near the Salinas Valley, John Steinbeck country. The United Farm Workers had recently shifted their focus to Salinas Valley lettuce pickers. Though ETC had formally separated from the union to pursue its own artistic projects, the company remained allied with César Chávez and committed to educating and entertaining migrant laborers. A restaurant owner in San Juan Bautista sympathetic to the union donated a fifty-seat theater space to ETC. That Christmas, seeking to draw farm workers from the surrounding countryside, ETC staged *La Virgen del Tepeyac*.

"We were going to have four shows," Valdez told me, mirroring the Virgin's four appearances to the disbelieving Juan Diego. (The Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint, is said to have appeared to Juan Diego at the site of a shrine to Tonantzin, an Aztec earth goddess. The Virgin, her skin dark like an Aztec native, tells Juan Diego to instruct the local bishop to build a church on the site of the shrine. Several appearances and miraculous events later the bishop agrees.) December ninth, opening night, hundreds of people lined up at the theater. "It filled up, a hundred people, more people standing outside, people banging on the doors," Valdez recalled. The company stopped the performance and Valdez went outside. "Stay calm," he announced. "We'll run the show again at nine." The nine o'clock show filled up without making a dent in the crowd outside. A ten o'clock show was added. Another at eleven. "We had to do four shows all four days," Valdez said. "That first night four hundred people were in that little theater. And it was the same all four nights. This was all farm workers. I saw the light. I thought, this is real strong. There's something here."

The light Valdez saw was not simply the lure of a Christmastime ritual comfortingly familiar to a migrant farm-worker community far from home. Church-based plays such as *La Virgen del Tepeyac* and *La Pastorela* embody an

approach to artistic creation perfectly aligned with the needs of marginalized people. The signal difference between medieval mystery plays and modern drama lies in the fact that medieval plays were not artists' creations presented to an audience of non-artists. They were community events produced by local civic associations (usually trade guilds) for an entire town watching and participating in the processions, church services, and partying that marked major religious holidays. Mystery plays closely tracked liturgical movements and language, enabling regular people to enact powerful rituals they normally had to watch from afar. At the same time the plays mixed broad comedy with religious messages. The original *Secunda Pastorum*, the one that flopped in Delano, begins with a wacky subplot in which a lazy shepherd steals one of his fellow shepherds' sheep and disguises it as a baby in a crib at home. (The subplot is not totally divorced from the faith lesson since the audience is led to discover that a baby lying in swaddling clothes is really...a lamb.) Only after this bit of slapstick is resolved do the angels arrive to announce the birth of the Savior.

The plays are what you might call total works of art, entertainments created by and for a community eager to understand how local experiences relate to a vast cosmic story. Distinctions drawn nowadays between public and private, faith and secularism, high art and low entertainment simply don't apply. One of my favorite illustrations of this aspect of medieval culture comes from an entirely different source, a commonplace book kept by an early sixteenth-century London grocer named Richard Hill. The book, described in Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars*, is a compendium of stuff Hill wanted to remember and have handy when it was time to say his prayers or conduct business. There's a wealth of devotional material, religious poems, notes on the liturgy, carols, prayers. But there's also a list of family baptisms, recipes for brewing beer, notes on cheese sales and bread taxes, some popular adventure stories, and a few ribald jokes about friars. In this world faith and art are neither separate nor unequal. They're just part of the fabric of life.

Such medieval attitudes, of course, died out a long time ago in America, if they ever existed at all in this ardently forward-looking nation always at odds with itself about how, and how much, to incorporate private matters such as faith into the public sphere. Old-fashioned Catholicism did not, however, die out in countries such as Mexico, where, especially in smaller towns and villages, centuries-old patterns of religious expression remain vital. "Popular Catholicism [in Mexico] did not fundamentally separate the public and private spheres," Juan Martinez, a professor of Hispanic Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, told me. "The Virgin of Guadalupe, Passion Week—these things have always been very public events, and they are to this day.... They are lived out in the community, not inside the walls of the church."

Martinez told me that for many Latinos in America, both immigrants and

US-born, the tension they encounter in their adopted homeland between faith and public life simply doesn't make sense. Nor does the American notion of faith as a matter of private decision and commitment. "You can't assume if they're very devoted they're very religious[ly observant], or if they're not doctrinally focused they're not devoted," Martinez said. Every year thousands, perhaps millions of immigrants, regardless of their own individual piety, stream home to villages in Mexico to celebrate saints' days. "They'll spend two or three days partying, having a big block party," Martinez said. "The city stops." As it does, increasingly, in America. Type "Virgin of Guadalupe Iowa" into Google and you get 174,000 results, including a recent photography exhibit by photojournalist Marguerite Nicosia Torres documenting celebrations of the Virgin in Marshalltown, a county seat in the state's middle that is now nearly a quarter Latino.

It was that sort of foundational piety El Teatro Campesino tapped into with its first staging of *La Virgen del Tepeyac*. A few years after that performance a woman named Longina Montoya, mother to one of the company's youthful recruits from the nearby farm town of Hollister, gave Valdez a dog-eared copy of the script of *La Pastorela* she had performed as a child in San Luis Potosí, Mexico. ETC began staging both plays each Christmas, first *La Virgen* inside the mission sanctuary, then *La Pastorela* outside on the town streets, just as devotional plays were performed in the Middle Ages. In 1980 a tremendous rainstorm threatened to drench the shepherds. Monsignor Amancio Rodriguez, pastor of the mission, threw open the sanctuary doors and invited the players inside. Since then ETC has alternated the plays, staging one or the other for the entire season leading up to Christmas.

At one point during our conversation Valdez quipped to me that he considers himself "a roaming Catholic," not a doctrinal churchgoer. His words reminded me of Juan Martinez's description of Mexico's cultural but not necessarily personal piety. As Valdez elaborated, explaining that he embraces faith because "it's something that belongs to the people" (he also confessed with an abashed smile that his wife is "a more doctrinaire Catholic"), I thought once more about Luzbel's astonishing sermon from his perch on the cross. The power of that dramatic moment, I realized, came not simply from Luzbel's words, or even from the fact that those words were spoken by the devil. The power came from seeing a living body crucified, and from knowing that the play the audience was watching was itself a living expression of the gospel Luzbel preached. At one point Luzbel scoffed to the shepherds that Jesus "*no es más que un pobre como ustedes*" (is nothing more than a poor man like you). The words were meant to be insulting, but of course the farm-worker audience got the point. And they continue getting it long after the play ends. Each summer ETC stages a workshop for roughly five hundred migrant children, teaching acting, directing, puppet-making, and

staging. Company members perform at local schools and recruit actors and extras from the fields and from barrios in the San Francisco Bay Area. Valdez told me he used some of the money he earned from *La Bamba* to buy fifty acres in the nearby hills, where he hopes one day to build a farm-worker cultural center.

Artists of faith often struggle to find that sweet spot at the intersection of popular acclaim and spiritual conviction. It seems to me that El Teatro Campesino offers another way forward for anyone wishing to make the world pay attention to stories of faith. People of all backgrounds respond to El Teatro Campesino not simply because the company is high quality. They respond because ETC walks its talk. “Because Teatro was founded on this underground activist movement it’s now become an international symbol,” Patricia Garza, a theater professional in Los Angeles, told me. Garza, who coordinates educational programs at the Center Theatre Group, LA’s premiere drama company, is part of a team advising ETC on plans to hire a few more staff members and embark on a national tour. “This idea of...bringing forth social justice through art and creating. That’s the root of it,” she said. I predict that wherever native-born artists find themselves unable to meet the evident demand in America for faith-based art—art that enacts, not simply preaches, the love of God—immigrants will do it for them. In San Juan Bautista—indeed in Iowa—they already are.

Shortly after meeting Luis Valdez in San Juan Bautista I came across an old newspaper article about him that changed my understanding of his life and work. The article, a July 16, 2000, *New York Times* profile coinciding with a revival of *Zoot Suit* at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, gave a different explanation for ETC’s long residence in San Juan Bautista. Valdez, the article claimed, had tried to make it on Broadway and in Hollywood. And he’d failed. *Zoot Suit* closed after only fifty-eight performances at New York’s Winter Garden Theatre, losing more than eight hundred thousand dollars. After *La Bamba* in 1987 Valdez “wasted a lot of years playing the casino game in Hollywood,” he told reporter Chris Jones. “Hollywood is a mean seductress, man.”

Reading this article, I thought about a story Valdez told me in San Juan Bautista. We were sitting in a coffee shop. Valdez, a short, jowly, gray-haired seventy-two-year-old with lively eyes and a black leather jacket, explained that he had recently turned over day-to-day management of ETC to his middle son, Kinan. (Valdez’s other two sons, Anahuac, a computer science teacher at a college near San Jose, and Lakin, who lives in Oakland, also work with the company.) Lately, Valdez said, his thoughts had turned valedictory. He looked at me. “I’ll tell you a story,” he said. “I was in New York, about to open *Zoot Suit*. It was the first dress rehearsal. I had a moment of panic. I’m in the Winter Garden watching the play go through a run-through. I had a panic attack and all of a sudden I was swept with the notion of my own mortality and I knew some day I was going to

die. This crept up on me and it took me over. I said to Jack Bender, the assistant director, ‘Watch while I go take a walk.’ I walked along Seventh Avenue to Times Square and I was in a panic gasping for breath. I saw the colors and the neon and I thought, ‘All these people are doomed to die! What does it all mean?’ When the attack started I’d been very full of myself. I was feeling good about being in New York. Something deep inside attacked me and humbled me with the fear of my own death. I started to breathe again and I took control. I went into the theater and Jack said, ‘You okay?’ I said, ‘I’m alive.’ And that was it. It galvanized me and brought me back to San Juan.”

Somewhere between that story and the *New York Times* portrait of an ambitious playwright who tried and failed to leverage activist success into mainstream fame lies a deeper truth about wisdom and redemption gained through weakness. You might say the Virgin of Guadalupe saved Luis Valdez, too, pulling him back from the neon of Times Square and returning his attention to the farm workers—and through them a wider public hungry for art with moral integrity—who needed him. “It’s not how much money you have,” Valdez told me. “It’s a question of how you’re living your life.... People don’t tell themselves the truth. They live with delusions and illusions. I think it’s the function of the theater to cut through that.”

The day I met Valdez I arrived in San Juan Bautista early enough to take a quick walk around the mission. I wanted to see the church in daylight, shorn of its theatrical trappings. I passed oak and olive trees in a walled garden, crossed a grassy plaza, and paused at a gate leading to the mission cemetery, where four thousand three hundred Indians and Spanish settlers lie buried in unmarked graves. I entered the sanctuary through a side door and stood in a dim cool space smelling of candles. A woman kneeled praying in a nearby pew. I walked across a brown tile floor to the central aisle of the nave and stood where Luzbel had mounted the cross. Light filtered through clerestory windows above. Twenty-five yards away rose the altar, backed by statues of six saints (Antony of Padua, Dominic, Francis, Isadore, Pascal Baylon and, of course, John the Baptist) mounted in arched recesses. In a side aisle the Virgin of Guadalupe presided over a secondary altar, 128 candles flickering at her feet in small glass jars. In the silence I remembered the almost unbearable power of the *Pastorela* crucifixion scene. The Christian story, I thought, is most persuasive not when it’s told, but when it’s enacted—embodied. It truly is an incarnational faith. And there is hunger in this world for faith incarnate.

I walked to the church entrance, the mouth of hell in *La Pastorela*. Above the doors a Latin sentence was painted: *Hic domus Dei est et porta coeli*. Here is the house of God and the gate of heaven. I thought back to that final moment in *La Pastorela*, the frightening spectacle of the shepherds shuffling off to their doom. “Who will save them?” the audience wonders. At the last minute, just as Luzbel

is sealing his triumph, a young shepherd named Gila turns and gazes down the nave toward the altar. The audience turns, too, and sees arrayed there a dazzling formation of angels led by Saint Michael mounted on a white steed [see back cover]. “¡Sálvenos!” (save us!) Gila cries. The angels charge through the church and rout the devils, beating them back through the gates of hell. The shepherds proceed joyously to the altar, where Mary and Joseph stand waiting, the Christ child nestled in Mary’s arms. There is no further dialogue in the play as members of the cast, even Luzbel himself, mount the steps to the altar and pay respects to the baby. No one says a word. They don’t have to.

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