

Young actors find the man behind the symbol that is Cesar Chavez

By Brandon Yu | April 18, 2018

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Photo: Michael Macor / The Chronicle

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Daniel Vigil portrays Cesar Chavez in “Between Dirt & Sky,” an original musical performed by young actors.

In the 25 years since his death in 1993, Cesar Chavez has been remembered in the way one would expect — as a symbol, a groundbreaking activist, a dogged fighter for the rights of American migrant farm workers. He is revered, as he ought to be.

But at the Brava Theater’s youth production, “Between Dirt & Sky,” running April 20-21, the young cast from the theater’s Mission Academy of Performing Arts is digging past the textbook summaries. At a recent rehearsal, actors, dancers and musicians ranging in age from 7 to 17 are being moved around onstage as they make their way through the second act of a musical that explores the formative stages of Chavez’s life.

“It’s really making a case for the more human side of someone that I knew growing up as this huge icon,” says director Marcelo Pereira. “It’s giving a different perspective. It focuses less on the movement that he created, but more so on who the man was behind the movement.”

“Between Dirt & Sky” observes an often vulnerable Chavez finding his path as a leader, from a childhood affected by the Great Depression and racist surroundings to the personal sacrifices he made as a budding labor leader. At one point in the musical, Chavez’s wife, Helen, speaks

of their son writing his name over his bed out of fear his often-absent father would forget it. Even as Chavez gains ground in the fight for farm workers, the production focuses on the personal demons he struggled with. Throughout the show, the ghost of his mother, Mama Tella, visits Chavez as he searches for a sort of existential reassurance.

The sense of uncertainty and human flaws provides a ripe learning environment for the young cast, Pereira says, allowing the student players to ponder questions like: “In order to have an impact this large, what is it that you have to give up?”

“Yesterday we were talking about how leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., leaders like Cesar Chavez — they knew they were going to die young,” Pereira says.

That knowledge makes such figures seem simultaneously human and superhuman, prompting an even larger question, one that playwright Lisa Quoresimo says was fundamental in writing the musical. “What made him different?” she says. “Out of all these migrant farmworkers going from field to field, what made him the one that could stand up and say, ‘Let’s make a change?’”

For the young actors seeing Chavez often lost at their age, the answer would be — well, not much.

“I feel like sometimes as a society, we tend to paint our leaders as these divine entities,” says Daniel Vigil, a 16-year-old who plays Chavez. “They did great things, but at the end of the day they’re just like you and me, and I think this show really shows that you can be a leader just like them as well.”

“He really was just a normal person who had the courage to stand up,” says the 14-year-old Chloe Thurmgreene. “I think it’s really empowering for young people, knowing they can do it, too.”

The musical, written by Charles Eurydice Gray and Quoresimo (who composed and arranged the music), was conceived as a youth production through the San Francisco Arts Education

Project in 2001 and staged, among other places, at the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose, where the roots of Chavez's activism began to take hold.

“When we did the show before, I got letters from kids saying, ‘How can I get involved? How can I help make a difference for the farm workers, for the union?’” Quoresimo says.

There is a similar goal in this production to inspire and engage the younger generation in both cast and audience.

But now it comes with perhaps more rigorous inquiry about Chavez's life and legacy, especially with further distance from his death and during such a politically tumultuous era. The piece touches on the delineation between Mexicans and Mexican Americans and stances within the farm workers movement that could now be seen as anti-immigrant.

The intention, Pereira says, isn't to attempt to reconcile these thorny truths with the standard image of Chavez, but to instead understand it as part of a complicated struggle that continues today. In rehearsal, the cast digs through contemporary politics to find similar issues within “Between Dirt & Sky,” from racial tension to the Environmental Protection Agency's recent approval of pesticides that pose great risk to farm workers. Meanwhile, Quoresimo says, unionizing has only become more difficult since the musical's 2001 premiere.

If Chavez were alive today, he might be disappointed at what appears to be regression,

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Thurmgreene says. But it’s hard to say whether he would have been deterred — in the show’s brief glimpses of an older, weaker Chavez, we see a still fighting spirit.

“Throughout the whole show, he always tends to say, ‘There’s so much more work to do,’” Vigil says. “And I don’t think that would’ve changed at all.”

Brandon Yu is a Bay Area freelance writer.

“Between Dirt & Sky”: Written by Charles Eurydice Gray and Lisa Quoresimo. Directed by Marcelo Pereira. 7 p.m. Friday, April 20. 3 p.m. Saturday, April 21. \$7-\$13. Brava Theater Center. 2781 24th St., S.F. (415) 641-7657. www.brava.org

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