

THEATER

Feed Your Head!

Talking with actor
Vicente Guzmán-Orozco
about *The Shrunken
Head of Pancho Villa*

by Gary Morris

Literal "talking heads" – the kind with no visible body – are not unfamiliar to theatre and moviegoers. Samuel Beckett's famous *Happy Days* comes to mind, with its beleaguered heroine buried up to her bosom in sand. Then there's notorious B-movie *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, which features another female head, this one more pissed-off than put-upon. Now Portland welcomes its own talking head with The Milagro (Miracle) Theatre's revival of Luis Valdez's 1964 play *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*.

Shrunken Head dates from the early days of Chicano theater. A typical Valdez mix of agitprop and absurdism, the play satirizes racist stereotypes via a raucous comedy about a Mexican-American farm-worker family in eternal crisis. There's an alcoholic father, a saintly, long-suffering mother, a quartet of delinquent adult children, and Belarmino, a slobbering, lice-ridden head who thinks he's Pancho Villa and screeches "La Cucaracha" at regular intervals. When the family isn't busy

imploding, members spend their time feeding bugs and worms to the ravenous Belarmino.

I spoke with the man portraying Belarmino, local gay actor Vicente Guzmán-Orozco, about this unusual role. What was it like for an actor, who depends on his entire body, to be denied the use of most of it?

"It's been a riot in rehearsal finding what I can do with just my head," he says, "and how the rest of the actors respond to it, not to mention what they throw my way ... sometimes literally! And for someone who's notorious for talking with his hands, this is a little torturous. I caught myself clapping without realizing it the other night."

He adds, "I think it sets the tone for other surreal parts of the show. And it gives the audience a chance to speculate about this bizarre, loud, disembodied head. Actually, even though I've eaten fried crickets, I was kind of worried about what we would use for bugs! But I'm good with what we're using; I won't say what it is, but I'll say that when you watch me relishing that cockroach, I really am enjoying it."

Guzmán-Orozco grew up in rural Washington County, himself the child of farm workers, who emigrated from Colima, Mexico. I asked how his family reacted to his being gay.

"My family has always been very supportive, fortunately, even about my sexuality," he says. "It was pretty apparent I was a little dif-

ferent from very early on, but like most Latino families, we would not really address what that difference was; everybody knew it, but nobody talked about it."

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Vicente Guzman-Orozco

"Even when my sister sent me money so I could go to the '93 Gay Rights March in D.C., she and my mother spoke about it as another one of my activist interests. But by the time I was 21, I made the point that we were not going to dance around the subject anymore. My mother said all she wanted was for me to be happy, and she had to admit I was!"

His activism, he says, began with working at the Milagro Theatre nearly twenty years ago – that, and a teenage anti-racism project. Now he works with Cascade AIDS Project, "organizing a group of men to work to protect and educate their community through social events, discussions and presentations."

Blending theatrics and activism is a role well suited to Guzmán-Orozco, who even has

a name for it – "actorist." He explains, "I've used performances to teach about everything from safer sex for migrant workers to energy efficiency for elementary students. I've done quite a bit of theater with a message."

"Drama is such a great tool for bringing up thorny or difficult subjects in an entertaining and/or engaging way, and it's always been a natural and instinctive medium for me. *Shrunken Head* should provoke conversations about identity and politics, but it sure doesn't tell you what to think." He adds, "That to me is good artistic expression."

As for being a gay Latino actor in Portland, Guzmán-Orozco is enthusiastic, calling the city "progressive, supportive of Latinos, and so gay-positive. With *Miracle*, which is pretty unique in the Northwest, we have leading roles that reflect our lives, including the Latino LGBT experience." And when he isn't busy being an actorist, he excels at another role – homebody, with his partner Eric.

THE SHRUNKEN HEAD OF PANCHO VILLA runs May 8-30, 7:30 p.m. Thurs., 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun. at the Milagro (Miracle) Theatre Group, 525 SE Stark St., \$20-\$22 adults, \$16 students, 503-236-7253, milagro.org. There is a free post-performance panel discussion on the "Seeds of Chicano Identity" following the May 10, 17 and 24 afternoon matinees.

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