CHAVEZ RAVINE

A Study Guide by Adam Pockross
The Contents

Historical Background ........................................ 2
Characters .......................................................... 5
Themes ............................................................... 8
Culture Clash (not Club) .......................................... 10
Director Edgar Landa ........................................... 11
Design Choices .................................................... 13
Glossary ............................................................. 15
Essay Questions .................................................... 18
Historical Background

The renowned Chicano theatre troupe Culture Clash premiered their history-based play *Chavez Ravine* at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles on May 17, 2003. According to former Center Theatre Group Artistic Director Gordon Davidson, “the development of the play *Chavez Ravine* has taken place over several years with much research and many personal interviews within the community.”

The play uses over 50 diverse characters—both fictional and historical—to tell the history of the Brooklyn Dodgers arrival in Los Angeles, and the struggle over land rights, which occurred even before the team planned its move. In 1962, the Dodgers officially moved to a section of Los Angeles named Chavez Ravine. But that is only the middle of the story.

The beginning of the ravine’s development occurred back in the 1800’s. The ravine itself was named not for Cesar Chavez, the Mexican American civil rights activist, but for Julian Chavez, an early Los Angeles County Supervisor from the 1840’s. The ravine was once home to generations of Mexican-American families. According to PBS’s website, “Chavez Ravine was a self-sufficient and tight-knit community, a rare example of small town life within a large urban metropolis. For decades, its residents ran their own schools and churches and grew their own food on the
land. Chavez Ravine’s three main neighborhoods—Palo Verde, La Loma and Bishop—were known as a ‘poor man’s Shangri La.’

However, when the Federal Housing Act of 1949 granted federal money to cities for the express purpose of building public housing projects, Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron voted and approved a public-housing project containing 10,000 new units. Many of these units would be located in what is now Chavez Ravine, at a project called Elysian Park Heights. The city used the power of eminent domain to purchase the land. Eminent domain permits the government to purchase property from private individuals in order to create projects for public use. Many of the existing buildings, where generations of Mexican-American families had prospered, were leveled.

However, as is often the case with government projects, the plans for the housing development got tied up in debate. And, as usual, this debate hinged on ideological name-calling. However, this time the name-calling took on frightening proportions. This era in the United States came to be known as the “Red Scare” era. Senator Joseph McCarthy had the country in a paranoid fervor about who was a communist and who could be trusted. Many politicians and artists were pegged “commies” or “pinkos,” then interrogated, black-listed and jailed in the name of democracy. Supporters
of the federal public housing plan for Chavez Ravine were among those targeted.

One of those supporters was Frank Wilkinson, the assistant director of the Los Angeles City Housing Authority and one of the main proponents of Elysian Park Heights. He is also a character in the play. In 1952, Wilkinson faced questioning by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC.) After undergoing the United States Senate’s version of the Inquisition, he was fired from his job and sentenced to one year in jail.

In 1953, Norris Poulson was elected mayor of Los Angeles on the strength of his anti-communist and anti-public housing stance. He vowed to stop the Elysian Park Heights housing project and other examples of “un-American” spending. Poulson finagled a way to buy the land taken from Chavez Ravine back from the federal government at a greatly reduced price, “with the stipulation that the land be used for a public purpose.”

Los Angeles County supervisor Kenneth Hahn hoped to bring the first professional sports team to the expanding city. He began scouting out existing teams who might relocate to Los Angeles, including the Brooklyn Dodgers. Dodgers’ owner Walter O’Malley arranged with city officials to purchase the minor league Los Angeles Angels team and its small ballpark with the promise of procuring a newly built stadium for his Dodgers on the land in Chavez Ravine. It was a deal that was overtly favorable for the
Dodgers, and less than palatable for many Angelenos, especially the residents of Chavez Ravine. Allegations were flung at Mayor Poulson for making illegal deals with the Dodgers while betraying the public.

The matter was brought to the public, where, by only a three percent margin, voters decided to allow O’Malley to build Dodger Stadium in exchange for giving the Angels’ ballpark back to the city. Though additional lawsuits delayed the official transfer of land and the actual construction, in 1959, the city began clearing the land, but only after police forcibly evicted the last few families who had refused to leave Chavez Ravine. Even so, some of those families camped out on the land for another week.

The Dodgers moved to their new field in Chavez Ravine for opening day of the 1962 season. Nearly 20 years later, Fernando Valenzuela hurled an opening day shutout, his first of eight during his rookie season. In what was to become known as Fernandomania, attendance skyrocketed when the Mexican pitcher took to the mound at stadiums around the country. The rookie became the first player to win the Rookie of the Year honor and the Cy Young Award (for best pitcher) in the same season. Go Dodgers!

Characters (most of them)

Culture Clash wrote many, many characters into the script of Chavez Ravine, most of them played by more than one person. Some are historical
figures, some are based on historical figures, and some just help the story.

Here’s a who’s who in order of appearance:

**Vin Scully**: He was the voice of the Dodgers then, and he remains so now (he has been the voice of the Dodgers for 60 years!).

**Fernando Valenzuela**: Dodgers’ pitcher of Mexican decent who caused “Fernandomania” in Los Angeles (and current Spanish commentator for the Dodgers along with Jaime Jarrin)

**Henry Ruiz**: Chavez Ravine resident, World War II veteran.

**Maria Salgado Ruiz**: Chavez Ravine resident, Henry’s sister, future organizer.

**Father Thomas**: “Gringo” Priest of the Santo Niño Church.

**Señora Sanchez**: Loca, elderly resident of Chavez Ravine.

**The Rodarte Brothers**: Providers of hot Latin beats.

**Señora Ruiz**: Henry and Maria’s mother.

**Richard Neutra**: Architect of Elysian Park Heights, considered one of modernism's most important architects.

**Frank Wilkinson**: Site manager of the City Housing Authority, proponent of public housing, soon to be scared red.

**Manazar**: Narrator and dead poet whose ashes were spread across the ravine. Only the audience can hear or see him (“so feel free to buy [him] a drink.”)

**The Eminent Domain Players**: levelers of land in the name of public good.

**Howard Holtzendorff**: Wilkinson’s boss.

**Pachuco**: Ravine resident from the old days (also, see glossary.)

**Nicky Apodaca**: Ravine resident comedian.

**Mover/Shaker**: Shadowy figures who are in it for the money.
**The Watchman**: Shadowy figure who’s in it for the power, and to fight communism where it profits him and his cronies (The Watchman had a column in the LA Times and was widely believed to be Norman Chandler, Editor of the LA Times)

**Uri**: A Russian sheepherder.

**Pete Seeger**: My dad’s favorite folk singer; early pioneer of protest music.

**Nacho Lopez**: Wilkinson’s translator.

**Norris Poulson**: Congressman, The Watchman’s choice for mayor of Los Angeles.

**Mr. Rosini**: Resident.

**Police Chief Parker**: You can assume his role from his title.

**J. Edgar Hoover**: First director of the FBI; fond of womanly garb.

**Committee Chairman of the California Senate Committee on Un-American Activities**: Red-scarer baiter.

**Walter O’Malley**: Dodger owner; breaker of Brooklyn hearts.

**Kenneth Hahn**: County Supervisor; early Los Angeles Dodger fan.

**Millie Miller**: Cub reporter for the Los Angeles Herald Newspaper; looking for the “straight Danish, not tooty fruity.”

**Yiddish Radio Announcer**: host of the Yiddish Radio Hour in Brooklyn.

**Mrs. Maraccino, Tough New Yorker**: angry caller of the radio program, upset about losing their Dodgers.

**Ten Year Old Gordie**: Angry caller who grows up to be Gordon Davidson, the artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum when *Chavez Ravine* was first produced in 2003.

**Elderly Woman, Benny the Worrier, Herb and John**: Weary ravine residents.

**Cleve Herman**: MC for the Dodgerthon television fundraiser.


Bonzo: Chimp who stars opposite Reagan at the Dodgerthon; soon to be replaced by George Herbert Walker Bush.

Roz Wyman: Councilwoman of the 5th District; instrumental in Dodgers moving to Los Angeles.

Lou Costello and Bud Abbott: Comedy Duo widely popular in the 1940’s; their “Who’s on First” routine is in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Lencho, Joe, Sal, Raton: Four Ravine resident voters, who “could make the difference” in the vote to block Dodger Stadium, or they could just get drunk instead.

Jaime Jarrin: Mexican Vin Scully.

Dodger Dog Girl: She sells hot dogs, called Dodger Dogs, which are therefore much more expensive.

Sheriff, Detectives 1 & 2: LAPD civil libertarians; just doing their jobs.

Nicky Apodaca the 3rd: Son of Nicky Apodaca Jr; grandson of Nicky Apodaca Sr.

Themes: Why is This Play Relevant Now?

In director Edgar Landa’s first rehearsal speech to his cast and crew, he said: “This is my favorite Culture Clash play, it tells a story from the heart. I don’t think it takes sides. I think it tells a fair story and lets us decide.” Some sides to consider:

1) Eminent Domain

When Landa was in high school, his family lost their home to eminent domain. “They were two years away from owning it out right. It’s still a big
issue,” says Landa. “Some say [Dodger Stadium] is the best thing that ever happened to that area, while some say it’s the worst.” Eminent domain permits the government to purchase property from private individuals in order to create projects for the public good. Though the government supposedly only exercises its power of eminent domain for the public good, the good of individuals is often superseded. So if it’s not good for all, what is public good?

2) **Communism/Socialism**

We all know the “Red Scare” was a ridiculous time in American Politics. But isn’t it interesting that the fears of communism and socialism are at the forefront of American politics today? Just ask the Republicans what they think of President Obama’s stimulus package. Are the fears of the cold war similar to the fears of a potentially bankrupt capitalist society? Are they at all justified? If everyone’s on the take, who’s giving?

3) **Assimilation**

In his speech to his cast, Landa also said: “There is a movement in the air to rename that area [of Chavez Ravine] ‘Dodger Town.’ ” How do the struggles of the past even matter anymore? Should we forget about our roots and only look to the future, where we all cheer for the same team? Are we defined by our heritage, held back by it, informed by it, or relegated to it?
CULTURE CLASH (not Club)

Culture Clash is Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas, and Herbert Siguenza. They founded their troupe in San Francisco’s Mission District on Cinco de Mayo, 1984. Their work ranges from sketch comedy to an adaptation of the Greek comic playwright Aristophanes, to their own full-length plays, including The Mission, A Bowl of Beings, S.O.S.—Comedy for These Urgent Times, Unplugged, Capra Clash, Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami, Bordertown, The Birds, Nuyorican Stories, Anthology, Mission Magic Mystery Tour, Anthems: Culture Clash in the District, Chavez Ravine, Senor Discretion Himself, Culture Clash in AmeriCCa, Zorro in Hell, and most recently, Water and Power. Their new play Palestine, New Mexico will premiere at the Mark Taper Forum in December of this year.

According to Culture Clash’s website, “for the last fifteen years, Culture Clash has been focusing on site-specific theater, weaving personal narratives culled from interviews into an ongoing dramatic tapestry.” Theater companies across the nation, including the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, have commissioned them to create performance pieces specific to their cities. When Montoya, Salinas, and Sigüenza go to work on one of these plays, they first research the city’s history and also what is currently happening in the community. They interview people from a myriad of
ethnicities and opinions, then they write and perform a play which comes from all these different perspectives.

“Their work gives immediate dramatic voice and expression to people in a certain time and place. It is theater of the moment, written and performed first for the people and communities on which it is based, and secondly for a broader audience. Culture Clash uses “performance collage” to bring history, geography, “urban excavation,” “forensic poetry” and storytelling together in a contemporary, movable theater narrative through a Chicano point of view.”

Former Center Theatre Group Artistic Director, Gordon Davidson says the following about *Chavez Ravine*: “No one could tell this story like Culture Clash... [They] have increasingly applied their extraordinary writing and performing skill, uncompromising commitment to the political possibilities of theatre, and unique comic and social sensibility to creating plays in, about, and for specific communities. Known as the ‘premier Chicano comedy troupe’ Culture Clash has evolved into a sophisticated theatre-making collective whose work transcends all such categories.”

Check them out at [www.cultureclash.com/](http://www.cultureclash.com/).
A Short Interview with Director Edgar Landa

1) Before you spoke a word to the cast, you set the tone by playing some music. What was it, and why did you play it at that particular juncture?

It’s a compilation with some baseball songs, some old Dodger songs, and some Lalo Guerrero, who wrote one of the songs we use in the piece. There’s not any real function but to make the mood more festive. Not like church. I like to break the rules. Play loud music. That’s why when I do a read through, if I do one, we don’t sit around a table...we sit in a circle. But this time I thought the story was complicated enough with the actual facts and what’s surmised and what’s imagined. I also wanted to make sure they were clear on the Spanish slang.

2) You worked as the assistant to the director during the original Mark Taper production (as well as playing some minor roles.) What did you learn from working with Culture Clash that has prepared you to direct this show?

I’ve known those guys since 1993. I learned you can take something of serious matter and you can always find humor. This story is held with high import in the Mexican American community, they tell it with heart, and they tell it with a lot of humor, not just with the bad people but also with themselves.

3) How will this show be different from that production?

First of all, we have ten actors instead of four. The band was a little smaller, three instead of six. When I asked the guys if I could do it, I told them I wouldn’t put my directorial stamp on it, because the play’s already a play. Like all their plays, we see the theatrics of it: we see costume changes, men playing women; they don’t let us forget too often that we’re in the theatre. I really refrain from saying anything about the original production to the design team. Because they’re students, I wanted their creativity to be brought to the show.

4) How do you plan on balancing the humorous and the serious aspects of this production?

I think it’s so well written that the balance is in the writing. As a director, I try to guide the actors to the moments when we find the heart of it, and also the comedy of it. There is a structure built in to find that. Henry and Maria
are kind of the soul of the play, especially Maria, she takes us through the entire play.

5) When you were in high school, you lost the home you grew up in to eminent domain. How does that affect your directing choices?

I think it’s just another level of resonance. I’m not going to compare my loss to theirs, but that was the home I grew up in, and my mom would still be living there with the mortgage paid. Now, thirty years later, she doesn’t have that. And a school is built there now, and I drive by and I still see the driveway.

6) Why is this production timely?

Because the issue still goes on with eminent domain. The play also speaks to the changing of cities. That, in order for us to change, there are sacrifices that are made. Gentrification is a huge issue: Echo Park, Silver Lake, Highland Park... these are neighborhoods that are being gentrified, and not always to the liking of the people who are always there. It changes things dramatically.

**Design Choices**

Though the director certainly has his vision for the whole, the parts of the play must come together in their own way. For the costumes in *Chavez Ravine*, Costume Designer Rachel Engstrom says, “since many of the actors play multiple characters, they will have a base costume that they will add pieces to in order to create the specific character. Most of the show takes place in the 1950s, but there are a couple spots where it is in the early 80s and I tried to reflect that in the costumes. It is a comedy, so I kept a lot of the colors light, but there are some shadowy figures as well.”

For the lightning of *Chavez Ravine*, Lighting Designer Leah Austin says, “My main motivation came from Edgar, who says ‘Leah, make it
pretty.” To do that, Leah followed her artistic impulses, which “come from the clean, crisp, modern lines of the 60’s juxtaposed against the warm, earthy, more rustic shadows of home.”

The picture above is from set designer Naomi Kasahara. She says, “the central idea of my set is the painting on the floor, the lost community, and the emergence of a giant. On the floor, I tried to draw the facts and history of this community. There used to be this small community of American Mexican families, but because of the new city plan, some people just left, some people were excluded, some people fought till the end. The history
has layers of time. Now we see the huge popular Dodger stadium on the top of the hill, but underneath, there were a lot of houses, families and lives of people. On the black floor, I drew white outlines (or floor plans) of a lot of houses in small sizes, representing the communities, then over the houses I created a huge red baseball diamond. White outlines against a black base symbolizes that it is the lost/dead community, while the one huge red baseball diamond expresses the powerful emergence that totally occupied the area. So my design choice is more direct drawing rather than using metaphor or abstraction, but I thought it could be one strong image on stage to draw the historical fact in large open space. A lot of telephone poles around stage are also creating the feeling of community, and the wooden messy fence shows the leftovers of a destroyed community.”

All these various design concepts come together under Landa’s directorial vision to create the play you see on stage.

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**Glossary of Terms for Chavez Ravine**

*written by*

**Culture Clash**

- **la sobadora/curandera**: sha-woman, herb lady, barrio doctor, masseuse
- **Tongva**: native peoples of Chavez Ravine
- **pinche**: damn, lousy
- **nalgas**: buns, buttocks (great w/eggs)
suave: easy, cool, or take it easy
que la chingada: what the hell, or worse
pan dulce: sweet bread
Pan Dulce: a dancer at the Silverlake Lounge
pachucos: Chicano adolescent of the ‘40s, Zoot Suiter, original punks
toca la guitarra: play the guitar
toca, toca, toca: play it, take a hit, touch me in the morning
menudo: tripe soup (hangover cure)
Phillipe’s: best French Dip in town, a place to have coffee with writer Harry Gamboa, Jr.
tortilla: oh, come on, you know this
Q-vo: (Que hubo): hello, what’s happening
CHA: City Housing Authority
cha-cha: Latin dance
órale: all right!
watcha: look
Hay te watcho.: See you later.
simón: yes
pura basilón: pure fun, puro cool, pure something
ranfla: car
panza: belly
mayate: derogatory term for blacks
gringo: derogatory term for whites
carnal(a): brother/(sister)
Noche Buena: Christmas Eve
puro pedo: bullshit, false
mijo: son
mija: daughter
cállense: shut up
Frida Kahlo: Salma Hayek
Diego Rivera: the fat painter guy
Tonto: stupid, Lone Ranger’s sidekick
greñudos: long-haired
cabrones: bastards
la jura: the cop bastards
No nos moverán: We won’t move.
pendejo: Joe McCarthy
trensas: ponytails
chavalios: little children
corazón: heart
cabeza: head
tecato: heroin junkie
Fernando Valenzuela: the Shaq of his era!
los Dodgers!: the Dodgers!
los Doyers!: the Dodgers!
un Perro de Dodger: a Dodger Dog
un Dodger Dog con mustardo!: you can figure that out!
Juana de los Perros: the dog lady
Tio Gordie: Uncle Gordo
**vato**: guy

**paloma**: doves

**carrizales**: roadrunner

**burrito de brisket**: the original carne asada; burrito of Boyle Heights

**mariachis**: happy fellows

**chones**: underwear

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**Basic Prompts**

1. Using specific moments from the play, define “the greater good.”

2. How does eminent domain demystify the American Dream? First define the American Dream. Then, using specific examples from the play, explain your answer. In your conclusion, offer a solution to the problem.

3. What does Baseball have to do with the American Dream? Do the events of *Chavez Ravine* dispel that association?

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**Advanced Prompts**

4. Does changing the name from “Chavez Ravine” to “Dodger Town” dishonor what’s beneath Dodger Stadium?

5. How does socialism get such a bad name? How come the HUAC was able to generate such fear of communism? How is public housing less American then kicking people off their land?
6. What does *Chavez Ravine* tell us about gentrification?

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3. Ibid.