Manuel Pickett sees change through the theater

For 37 years, Theatre and Dance Professor Manuel Pickett has directed stage productions at Sacramento State that speak to the Hispanic heritage, advance messages of activism and political involvement, and focus on the education of the student-actors.

Now Pickett is retiring, raising the curtain on a new act in his life. While he will return to Sacramento State to direct until the department has selected a replacement, April’s production of Zoot Suit was his last as a faculty member.

Pickett’s foray into the performing arts began with music. He took up numerous instruments at age 12, eventually settling on the guitar. In 1968, he joined Cesar Chavez’s farmworkers movement, carrying the guitar with him to events. “Every time we had marches, I’d be the one who would start all the songs, keeping the morale up,” Pickett says.

One day Luis Valdez, the founder of Teatro Campesino who would go on to write Zoot Suit, asked Pickett to play at his wedding and was so impressed that he asked him to be his theater group’s musical director. During a tour of Mexico, one of the actors got sick, and Pickett took his place on stage.

“I learned to love the craft,” Pickett says. “I loved how it affected people. You didn’t need a theater. You didn’t need lights or sound or anything like that. You just needed a cause and a purpose. I saw how powerful it was.”

Plays and music by Teatro Campesino became integral parts of the United Farm Workers message. “What brought people to the rally was actually the theater performances and the entertainment,” Pickett says. “Once they were there, the political organizers would talk to them about the struggle we had.”

In the early 1970s, Pickett and his wife moved to Sacramento, where he started Teatro Espejo, doing two to three shows a year. He got his bachelor’s degree at Sacramento State, did his doctoral work at UC Davis, and in 1980 came back to Sac State as a professor.

One of the first plays he directed was Short Eyes, about a child molester locked up in a California state prison. In a set designed by emeritus Professor Paul Waldo, all
eight actors were on stage at the same time, with prison cells suspended from the ceiling. Pickett says it gave audience members the feeling they were locked up with the prisoners.

Pickett also developed a collective theater format, training students in how to create a production from just a theme and without a written script. Eight of his productions were created through that format.

During the weeks leading up to *Zoot Suit*, Pickett didn’t think too much about it being his last play. His attention was focused on another aspect of university theater that is important to him: the educational aspect for its young participants.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” he said during rehearsals. “Are the students learning something from the process?”

Pickett’s students are well aware of his commitment.

“Manuel’s a really good director,” says junior Kristen Sanchez, who played Della Barrios in *Zoot Suit*. “He kind of gives you a lot of hints and a lot of little ways to get into character.”

Jose Perales, a junior who portrayed Henry Reyna in the production, agrees. “He does a lot of acting workshops. He works with you outside of rehearsal.”

Sanchez: “Anytime you need him …”

Perales: “He’s there.”

That commitment has not been lost on Pickett’s peers. “He has been and will continue to be a valuable member of departmental culture so that we keep Chicano theater alive on this campus,” says Theatre and Dance Chair Linda Goodrich.

Pickett intends to stay active in Teatro Espejo, which has grown into a production group, playing in different venues and providing training for young directors. He’s also working on a screenplay and is proud of daughter Marisol, who has shadowed him since age 5 and now, at 26, uses theater and puppetry to help children become more expressive.

“And then I have my grandkids,” he says. “I just spend so much time with my grandkids.”

Pickett believes real change has been accomplished since those early days with the United Farm Workers and Teatro Campesino, but that it goes back and forth, like any struggle, and goals that are won are sometimes lost again.

“But we come back and we struggle again,” he says. “There’s a concept called pensamiento serpentino, the thought of the serpent. Like the snake, you’ve got to shed your skin and keep going. That skin has a lot to do with just getting rid of all the negativity. You keep going until you shed your skin again – anew. You’ve always got to look forward and say, ‘OK, well, maybe we didn’t win this battle, but we’ve got another one ahead that is just as important.’ ”
For more information on Sacramento State’s Theatre and Dance Department, visit www.csus.edu/dram. For media assistance, call the University’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156.

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