

Cinco de Mayo and Mexican-American Theatre

Educational Packet for Grades 5-10

Curated by: Milwaukee Youth Theatre

Cinco De Mayo

Cinco de Mayo is a Mexican American holiday that can be tricky to talk about if you don't do your research. For non-Mexican Americans it is important not to use the holiday to perpetuate harmful myths and stereotypes.

Here are some resources for helping your students learn about Cinco de Mayo and authentic Mexican-American culture.

Books:

[Cinco de Mayo \(Celebrations in My World \(Paperback\)\)](#)

[Cinco de Mayo: The History of the Battle of Puebla and the Famous Holiday](#)

[Living Beyond Borders: Growing up Mexican in America](#)

[I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter \(9781524700515\): Sánchez, Erika L.: Books](#)

[Be Bold! Be Brave! 11 Latinas who made U.S. History \(English and Spanish Edition\)](#)

[They Call Me Güero: A Border Kid's Poems](#)

Articles:

[READ: Cinco de Mayo history: Not exactly a Mexican import](#)

[Cinco de Mayo: 5 Myths and Facts to marvel you](#)

Videos:

[Cinco de Mayo: The Real Story!](#)

[Hispanic American Contributions to American Culture](#)

[What does it mean to be Mexican-American?](#)

[Mexican Americans Documentary](#)

Don't Forget your best resource: **your students!**

If you have students of Mexican ancestry, give them an opportunity to speak about their heritage. Ask them if they would like to present something to the class about their family history, or family traditions. Don't push and don't put them on the spot. Ask them privately and give them time to prepare if they agree.

Activities:

Ask your students to tell you what they know about Mexican culture. There are no wrong answers. Write it all down on a shared document or white board. When they are done, split them up into groups and assign each group one or more of the "known" cultural items. Have them research it's origin, history and authenticity. The groups can then present their findings. This is a good time to talk about harmful stereotypes.

Discussion:

Ask your students about the traditions that come out of their own heritage. Let them discuss the importance of these traditions to them and their families. Stress how we might all come from different backgrounds and traditions but we all have something to contribute to our collective culture.

El Teatro Campesina

El Teatro Campesino played a part in making Cinco de Mayo the celebration it is today. Founded on a picket line in 1965, El Teatro Campesino (Farmworker's Theatre) is still going strong. With the encouragement of Caesar Chavez, members of the United Farmworker's Union began to perform skits on flatbed trucks and in union halls. They used their voices to unite the migrant workers and embolden them to seek better treatment from their American employees. During the 60's and 70's El Teatro Campesina was mostly funded by their trips to L.A. where they would perform for colleges in what was known as their Cinco de Mayo Run.

The theatrical form that the Teatro Campesino used on the picket line was the *acto*. The defining characteristics of an acto are:

- Short sketch
- Humorous
- Minimal prop and costume, designed to be performed anywhere
- Obvious heroes and villains
- A clear solution to a conflict

Over the years the stories that El Teatro Campesino present have changed but always at the heart of it all, is the struggle for social justice.

Watch this video with your class: [Luis Valdez - Founder "El Teatro Campesino"](#)

Discussion:

- Ask your students to imagine that they were part of an activist theatre company. What kind of issues would they like to address through their performances? Make a shared list.
- Discuss whether or not theatre can be a tool for social change? Why and how?

Activities:

- Divide your class into groups and have each group research a different aspect of the Delano Grape Strike. Who were the workers? Who were the owners? Who was Cesar Chavez? How long did the strike carry on? Why were the workers striking? What was the result? Each group can present their findings to the class.
- This activity takes place over a series of days and is meant to emphasize the value

of collaboration.

- a. Divide the class into groups and assign them a social issue from the previous discussion.
 - b. Give them a class period to write an *acto*, pertaining to that topic. Have them turn it in at the end of class.
 - c. Make copies of the sketches and hand them out to the class in the next class session. Have each group perform their skit. After each one, allow the class to discuss what worked and what did not work. Brainstorm new ideas and what could make it funnier, more dynamic or more impactful. Have the students take notes on each sketch. At the end of the class, collect the scripts.
 - d. At the next class give each group the collected notes on their sketch and allow them time to make changes, rewrites and rehearse. If time, let them perform their final version of the script. Discuss this writing process. Did they enjoy receiving the feedback? Did it make their sketches stronger to have other voices involved in the creation? Did it help in their understanding of the topic?
- Luis Valdez, the founder of El Teatro Campesino, is an award winning playwright. His best known play [Zoot Suit](#) is available for rent on Amazon. Watch it with the class and then research the Zoot Suit Riots of Los Angeles in 1943.
 - There is a wonderful history of mask making and usage within the Mexican community. Masks are used for folk dance, religious ceremonies, holidays, theatre and wrestling. Why not plan a mask making activity? [Mexican theatre masks](#), [How to Make a Mexican Coconut Mask](#) , [Papier-mâché Mask Making](#), [Mexican Wrestling Mask](#).

Esperanza Rising



Esperanza Rising is a historical fiction novel written by Pam Munoz Ryan. Ryan, a Mexican-American author based her novel on the immigration story of her grandmother.

The heroine of the book is Esperanza, the privileged, perhaps spoiled, daughter of wealthy Mexican parents. After the murder of her father, Esperanza flees to California with her mother. In a labor camp in California, Esperanza discovers a new strength and resilience inside of herself and a new empathy for others.

Pam Munoz Ryan received numerous awards and high praise for this novel. So much so that it was turned into a play by Lynne Alvarez and is frequently performed in children's theatres across the country.

Activities:

- Read the book as a class or listen to an audio recording: [Esperanza Rising Read Along - Prologue](#)
- Take time to discuss the various themes of home, displacement, hope, new beginnings, love, forgiveness, acceptance....the book is full of good themes for students to extrapolate. Have each student pick out a theme from the book and compose an essay on their chosen theme using 3 passages from the book.
- Purchase a copy *Esperanza Rising* the play and read it as a class. [ESPERANZA RISING](#)
- If you don't have time for the full script you can download a [Reader's Theatre Script for Esperanza Rising](#) and perform that as a class instead.