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## Theatre of the Sphere: Exploring a Generative Acting Methodology

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*Maya Malan-Gonzalez and Lakin Valdez in Lak'ech – "Tu eres mi otro yo / You are my other me." Photo: Alexandra Meda*

# *Theatre of the Sphere*

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by Daphnie Sicre

## Exploring a Generative Acting Methodology

In June 2023 I had the incredible opportunity to participate in "Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being," a workshop conducted by Lakin Valdez, an expert in "Theatre of the Sphere" and son of its visionary creator, Luis Valdez. The workshop took place at Studio Luna in Los Angeles, California.

Divided into two weekends, the workshop served as a solid introduction to the acting methodology developed by Lakin's father, Luis Valdez. Although I had previously learned about "Theatre of the Sphere" and El Teatro Campesino from an online ACTOS workshop with Christy Sandoval (El Teatro Campesino ensemble member), the experience with Lakin was truly transformative.

Throughout this workshop, I had the privilege of immersing myself in the world of "Theatre of the Sphere" and exploring its unique and captivating approach to theater making. The methodology left an indelible mark on me, inspiring me to share my experience and insights with others.

In this essay, I'll dive deep into the core of "Theatre of the Sphere" with the guidance of Lakin Valdez as he sheds light on the origins, significance, and impact of "Theatre of the Sphere" as an acting methodology. During our conversation, Lakin Valdez delved into the establishment and evolution of "Theatre of the Sphere," unveiling its core values that sets it apart from conventional Eurocentric acting methods, empowering each artist to unlock their true potential.

Together, Lakin Valdez and I explored the historical roots, core values, and evolution of "Theatre of the Sphere," while also discussing the importance of learning about this acting methodology. He highlighted the adaptability of the workshop exercises, fostering self-expression and creativity for artists of diverse backgrounds and physical capabilities. The methodology's emphasis on interconnectedness and partnership creates a safe space for artists to explore their boundaries and embark on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Additionally, we discussed the demand for this approach, especially after the release of the book, *Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being*, by Luis Valdez and edited by Michael Chemers.

## What is 'Theatre of the Sphere'?

"Theatre of the Sphere," an acting methodology and approach to theater making, found its roots in the late 1960s when Luis Valdez developed it as a means for farm workers to express themselves during the strikes and the fight for union rights. Lakin Valdez emphasized its connection to the United Farm Workers movement, stating, "Out of this process of creating theater, specifically with the idea that theatre would function as the cultural arm of the United Farm Workers movement, it became clear that there was an aesthetic and various forms that were being developed by the company in the midst of this political upheaval in the 1960s." Lakin Valdez added that training for Chicax and Latine theater was virtually non-existent. Through Luis Valdez's theatre company, El Teatro Campesino, "Theatre of the Sphere" became available to people who saw themselves as either workers or as committed activists who were there to create theater.

According to El Teatro Campesino's webpage, "Since its inception, El Teatro Campesino and its founder and artistic director, Luis Valdez, have set the standard for Latino theatrical production in



Exploring the different stages of the Litany of the Ball.

Photo: Maya Malan-Gonzalez

the United States. Founded in 1965 on the Delano Grape Strike picket lines of Cesar Chavez's United Farmworkers Union, the company created and performed "actos" or short skits on flatbed trucks and in union halls."

Over the past few decades, El Teatro Campesino's acting methodology, "Theatre of the Sphere," has thrived primarily through oral tradition and having people attend trainings at El Teatro Campesino. Since the 2021 publication of the book that outlines "Theatre of the Sphere," workshops have become widely available and the methodology's impact has transcended Chicax theatre circles, resonating with a broader audience. At its core, "Theatre of the Sphere" embodies Mesoamerican spirituality and philosophy as an acting methodology. The book initiates its journey through El Teatro Campesino history, interweaving Valdez's personal insights and memories, while laying the foundation for the emergence of the "Theatre of the Sphere" acting methodology, and thus, the "Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being" workshop.

## All are welcome

"Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being" workshop is designed for anyone. People who have never performed are invited to play and it doesn't matter if they want to be actors or not. The spiritual approach behind the workshop is that it is designed for all human beings to explore the spirals in our bodies and in our movement.

“  
It's about  
empowerment  
through  
collaboration,  
mutual respect,  
and solidarity.”

”

— Lakin Valdez  
‘Theatre of the Sphere’ Practitioner



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## 'Theatre of the Sphere' is ensemble-based

The evolution of "Theater of the Sphere" from its inception within the United Farm Workers movement led by Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and Larry Itliong, as an aesthetic to a theatrical form, was greatly shaped through the exploration of El Teatro Campesino's members. Luis Valdez crafted a theater practice with a strong emphasis on the citizen as the cultural representative of the movement. The core focus of "Theatre of the Sphere" lies in ensemble-based theater, an approach that empowers individuals through artistic expression and cultural identity exploration amidst the backdrop of political struggle.

The methodology encourages the development of an artistry deeply rooted in one's own culture and community, drawing inspiration from Mayan and Aztec heritage. Lakin Valdez shared, "That was the starting point, finding something that worked for the company, the core company at the time that could give them tools and learn to discover their basic truth of who they were in the midst of this incredible political struggle." The idea that "Theater of the Sphere" sought to present was that the individual human being is a microcosm for the universe at large.

## For the people

The historical context of "Theatre of the Sphere" stems not just from a scarcity of theater training and professionals during the politically charged 1960s, but especially a scarcity for those engaged in activism and community-based theater *for the people*. In a time when folks were using theatre as a form of entertainment, the need for an inclusive and culturally grounded theater practice gave rise to "Theatre of the Sphere."

"Luis Valdez, being an acrobat himself, explored theater with a group of artists and activists to define it on their own terms," says Lakin Valdez, revealing the organic growth of the practice during the 1970s.

"Theater of the Sphere" became a vehicle to explore themes of humanity, indigenous heritage, and the historical interconnections of American theater, inclusive of all the Americas.

## Core values of 'Theatre of the Sphere'

The core values of the "Theatre of the Sphere" acting methodology involve empowerment, mutual respect, solidarity, and partnership. The method aims to foster a deep understanding of one's identity in relation to others, emphasizing interconnectedness and compassion. Two critical beliefs are essential to the understanding of this work:

1. Huinik' Lil — the idea that we are all human beings that vibrate.
2. In Lak'ech — the idea that "Tu eres mi otro yo." English translation: "You are my other me."

These ideologies are critical in developing mutual respect and solidarity within the group and workshop. In our interview, Lakin Valdez provided first hand insight, underlining the profound impact that Huinik' Lil and In Lak'ech have on our participants. He emphasized, "Empowerment is a key aspect of the methodology and approach to theater making. It's about empowerment through collaboration, mutual respect, and solidarity." Through ritual and physical exercises, participants develop trust, empathy, and a sense of shared purpose. Lakin Valdez offered: "The physical exercises and ensemble work are crucial to the process, and they help to unlock the participants' limitless potential while acknowledging their limitations." Having taken the workshop myself, I understood that I could stop at any moment if I felt that I couldn't do something, but at the same time, I had the support of all the ensemble members to uplift me, as we were all reminded, they are my other me.

## Indigenous roots

One of the most distinctive features of "Theatre of the Sphere" is its direct connection to indigenous roots. Lakin

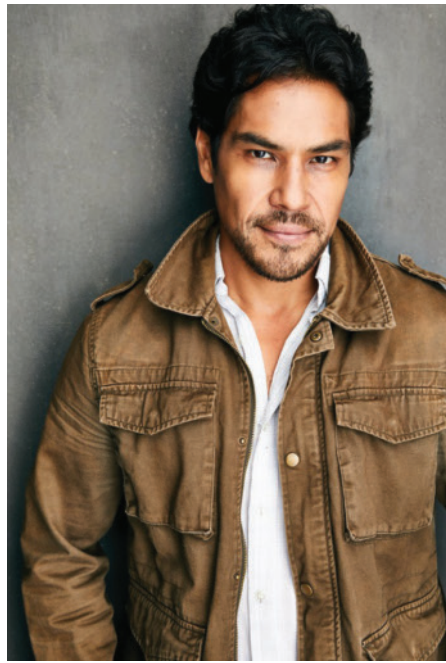
*'Theatre of the Sphere'  
practitioner Lakin Valdez*

Valdez highlighted that, "The workshop's terminology is infused with spiritual concepts from indigenous cultures like the Mayans, Aztecs, and other indigenous groups across the Americas." El Teatro Campesino used the Mayan Yucateco principles to help redefine the methodology. During the workshop, Latine and Chicana participants specifically embark on a journey of understanding their place in the world and rediscovering their indigenous heritage. Lakin Valdez expanded on this, stating, "We delve into ancient practices and traditions, drawing inspiration from our indigenous roots to inform the theater's philosophy and approach." This unique aspect enriches the experience, creating a transformative and culturally grounded theater practice. Participants of the workshop delve into understanding their place in the world and reconnecting with their indigenous heritage, unearthing ancient practices and traditions that inform the methodology's philosophy and approach.

### Four essential aspects

"Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being" workshop revolves around four essential aspects: the body, mind, the heart, and spirit. During the workshop that I attended we only explored the body, mind, and heart aspects.

The workshop begins with a strong emphasis on the body's freedom of movement, with exercises that utilize music, dance, and rhythm to develop balance and grace. This physical approach reflects the idea that the human body, with its various moving parts, forms parts of circles and collectively constitutes spheres. For example, we did an exercise with a soccer ball (one of the key elements of the workshop) where we moved the ball all over our bodies. It was so clear, as we moved this



soccer ball, that we had our own sphere. And when we stood with someone else doing the same exercise, we were able to observe their sphere, and how collectively, we all have spheres surrounding us. When people participate in the workshops, Lakin Valdez also places great importance on partnership and shared space, which becomes a transformative force for participants. He asserted, "It's within this partnership that we discover and transcend our limitations."

Moving on to the heart sphere, the workshop explores the emotional side, encouraging actors to embrace the spectrum of their emotions while maintaining control over them. Exercises center around the concept of opposites and duality, allowing participants to navigate between opposing emotions, while developing balance and harmony, symbolized by Quetzalcóatl. For instance, there were moments where we passed the ball around to each other. With this action, we were connecting with someone else. The ball isn't thrown, but gently given to someone else. With this action, a connection is formed. There is a bond when you look at someone straight in the eyes and offer them a gift.

The mind, during the third part of the workshop, is described as logical and illogical, imagining and conceiving, work-

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*Finding stillness, listening to one another, while adjusting the posture of the Egg. Photo: Maya Malan-Gonzalez*

ing in unity with the heart and body. The exercises focus on the interplay between the logical and imaginative aspects of the mind. Improvisations involve communication and interaction on a more spherical level, promoting a profound connection among participants.

### Litany of the Ball

The movements and exercises in “Theatre of the Sphere” were crafted in collaboration with the actors of El Teatro Campesino, drawing inspiration from the Mayan concept of zero. According to this concept, every individual occupies a sphere of potential energy, described as a vibrant vibration. The sphere encompasses the body-heart-mind-spirit continuum, representing the spiritual vitality that resonates within each person. As actors, both on stage and in life, this notion reinforces the idea that we are all “vibrant beings,” existing within our own sphere of dynamic energy. For the core of the workshops, Lakin Valdez uses activities to explore movement, such as the Litany of the Ball.

One of my favorite activities was the Litany of the Ball. I had read the book and seen the pictures but did not fully understand its importance. I also did not think I was capable of doing all the exercises. I was wrong. This exercise involves working with a soccer ball, unlocking mental resistance, and discovering the body’s physical capabilities. The ball acts

as a powerful tool to break down barriers and instill a sense of trust and fluidity among participants. The ball, being a sphere, allows us to explore our own sphere as well as the spheres of others. As mentioned earlier, the ball serves as an element that helps determine what and where our sphere is as we explore space with it. In this activity, we were taken through a series of physical movements that represent Mayan animals. We used the ball to create harmony and balance while also being reminded of our spheres.

Lakin Valdez elaborated on the symbolism behind the soccer ball stating, “The soccer ball represents the sphere of energy that encompasses each individual.” He highlighted that the ball serves as a metaphor, reminding participants of the interconnectedness of all beings: “It becomes a powerful tool for physical exploration and communication.” He also said that the ball is used as a physical tool to unlock mental resistance, enabling participants to explore the untapped potential of their bodies. Lakin Valdez explained, “The ‘Litany of the Ball’ is about fostering fluidity and grace in movement, helping us transcend both physical and mental barriers.”

Thus, the soccer ball becomes the central symbol in “Theatre of the Sphere,” as it represents the sphere of energy that encompasses every individual.

During the workshop, we also explored “Theater of the Sphere” theory further,

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learning about the Veinte Pasos or the Twenty Steps. This intricate process, also referred to as the “Twenty Footprints of God” or the symbolic representation of Humans’ Spiritual Pilgrimage, delves into the four phases mentioned earlier—body, heart, mind, and soul—breaking them down into five individual parts, totaling twenty steps in all. Each step is associated with one of the twenty Mayan days of the sacred year, Tzolkin, which consists of a sequence of 260 days. If one completes the full training sequence, each of these steps are covered.

### Accessibility

Lakin Valdez highlighted the remarkable adaptability of “Theatre of the Sphere,” particularly in accommodating participants with physical disabilities. He asserts, “The workshop can be modified to suit different abilities, ensuring that everyone has a path to discover their individual potential.” By working in partnership and exploring the spherical energy of one’s own body and others, the workshop offers an inclusive and empowering experience for all. For instance, we are asked at the beginning of the workshop what we physically can and cannot do. With this knowledge, Lakin Valdez helps modify the exercises each individual.

### Final thoughts

While “Theater of the Sphere” has been around for decades, its visibility has recently increased due to the 2021 release of the book. The growing interest in the methodology has led to a surge in demand for training and workshop opportunities. Lakin Valdez expressed his excitement about the growing interest in the methodology: “I am thrilled to see the renewed interest in “Theatre of the Sphere” and hope to witness more artists engaging with this transformative process.” He encourages artists to explore resources, workshops, and organizations that offer opportunities to learn and engage with “Theater of the Sphere.” He firmly believes that this unique methodology has the potential to open up new perspectives, empower

individuals, and foster a strong sense of interconnectedness among all participants, making it an invaluable addition to the world of theater. Its impact continues to grow.

And I couldn’t agree more.

Sara Guerrero, the founding artistic director of Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble shared, “I’ve always known about the significance and relevance of the work, history, cultural connections, and methodology of El Teatro Campesino, so we recently hosted a two-day ‘Vibrant Being’ workshop for our Santa Ana community in Orange County, CA. We are always looking for practices that can engage a broader spectrum of participants who come with an array of backgrounds, ages, skills, experiences, and connections to storytelling and theater. We are looking forward to bringing El Teatro Campesino back for future workshops.”

As our conversation concluded, Lakin Valdez left me with an even deeper understanding of “Theater of the Sphere’s” power. This ensemble-based theater practice holds the key to unlocking hidden potential, embracing cultural identity, and fostering empathy and compassion among artists and communities. The participants come to realize that they are all united by a common cause, imbuing a sense of empowerment and resilience in the face of political and social challenges. Lakin Valdez explained, “It’s about understanding our identity, our partnership, and how we can mutually respect each other within the workshop.”

In the workshop that I took, the collaborative and empathetic environment nurtured personal growth and artistic exploration, making “Theatre of the Sphere” a profound and life-changing experience for all involved. ■



**Daphnie Sicre, PhD** (she/her) is a multi-hyphenated artist. She is a director-dramaturg-scholar-educator who shares a deep passion for Black and Latinx perspectives in theatre.

Engaging in anti-racist and culturally competent theatre practices, she helps bring stories from the page to the stage. @drsicrelovestheatre