

# Begley's Cesar and Ruben Returns, Revised, and a Grandson of Cesar Chavez Comments

<http://www.lastatetimes.com/2011/10/begleys-cesar-and-ruben-returns-revised-and-a-grandson-of-cesar-chavez-comments/>

February 7, 2012



Carlos Padilla in "Cesar and Ruben"; Photo by Kelly Koerber

When Ed Begley, Jr. began supporting Cesar Chavez's crusade for better working conditions for farm workers in the 1960s, he never imagined how deep his relationship with Chavez would become.

After he met Chavez by chance in the 1980s, he became even more involved in the movement and the two became friends — and then after Chavez's death in 1993, Begley felt moved to bring Chavez's life to the stage. Ten years later, Begley produced his musical *Cesar and Ruben* at El Portal Theatre in North Hollywood.

It was there that he met Chavez's young grandson, Arthur Rodriguez, son of Chavez's daughter Linda and Arturo Rodriguez (president of the United Farm Workers). Rodriguez set up an information table for the United Farm Workers (UFW) in the lobby for nearly every performance. Now, as Begley and Rodriguez sit beside each other eight years later inside Santa Monica College's Studio Stage theater, the two men reflect upon the decades-long journey that has brought them together again.



Arthur Rodriguez

There have been two productions of *Cesar and Ruben* since the premiere in 2003 — one at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, in 2005, and another in 2007 at the NoHo Arts Center in North Hollywood. It has garnered four Valley Theater League Awards and the Margo & Eddie Albert Golden Eagle Award from Nosotros. The show has been given new life yet again with a production at Santa Monica College's (SMC) Main Stage Theatre. The theater was brought to Begley's attention after a meeting at the Broad Stage, part of the Santa Monica College Performing Arts Center, with director Dale Franzen and Perviz Sawoski, chair of the Theatre Arts Department at SMC. When Begley made the decision to produce the show at SMC, he had no idea that Rodriguez, now 27, is currently a student at the college. Fate, it seems, brought them together again.

Curiously enough, Rodriguez's interests have become similar to Begley's own passion for the environment. After enrolling at SMC in 2010, Rodriguez became a part of the college's joint program with the city of Santa Monica City called Sustainable Works. The program teaches students and city residents to practice sustainability. Rodriguez has chosen Recycling and Resource Management as his course of study. He says he was inspired by his years working as a carpenter.

"I saw a lot of waste on the job site. That was my reason for coming back to school," he says. His goal is to enter into the field of environmental politics, focusing on policy. "I want to work on policy and enforcing what already exists, not from the top down but the bottom up. The government is great at developing a laundry list of programs, but they don't have the resources to promote them. That's where we come in. We have to stop having our hand out and to have our hand up," he says, raising his hand as if he were asking a question. "We have to ask the questions, and then act accordingly." Activism, it seems, runs in the family.



Carlos Padilla, Joseph Vigil, Mauro Rosales and Ryan Snanoudj in "Cesar and Ruben"; Photo by Carrie Jesnovec

As Rodriguez discusses his interest in the environment, Begley becomes excited. "You're my hero, buddy," he says, grinning. In addition to his long career as an actor, Begley is well-known for his work with such organizations as Friends of the Earth, Heal the Bay, American Oceans Campaign, and many others. He has served as chairman of the Environmental Media Association and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. He even had a reality TV series about how he integrates environmentalism into his everyday life, entitled *Living with Ed*. It's easy to see why these two get along.

Rodriguez was not always familiar with Begley. Although Begley had been involved with the UFW and the Chavez family's activism for many years, Rodriguez was very young when he met him. When he discovered Begley was writing a musical about his grandfather's life back in 2003, his first reaction was, "Who is this guy?" He was initially surprised about the show, but he says he soon understood Begley's motivations. "Over the course of the play's run I had a chance to fully understand the amazing relationship he's had to the movement and to our family. It wasn't really a project. It was an inspiration," he says.

This inspiration was first kindled in the 1960s, when Begley began supporting the United Farm Workers Association's boycott of grapes. Recalls Begley, "I was a fan of Chavez and an advocate of what he was promoting. I just listened to what he said. Grape boycott—no more grapes. Lettuce boycott—no more *lechuga*," he explains. He continued his support over the decades by sending checks to the UFW and attending events and fundraisers.



Ed Begley, Jr.

It was not until the '80s that he met Chavez in person at a restaurant in LA. After telling Chavez that he supported his movement, Chavez asked, "What is your passion?" Begley informed him about his environmental activism. Begley recalls, "He said, 'saving the trees is important, but what about the people?'" Begley offered to help Chavez with his fight to call attention to the use of pesticides and the illnesses they were causing among farm workers. Their friendship continued to grow over the remaining years of Chavez's life. When he died in 1993, the family invited Begley to serve as a pallbearer at his funeral. "I had the sadness and honor of carrying his coffin through the streets of Delano," he reflects. "He greatly changed my life for the better. I never met Gandhi or Dr. King, but I met that man," he says.

The idea for a jukebox musical about Chavez's life first occurred to Begley in 1994, a year after Chavez's death. "I had a few songs in mind that might tell the story of his life. Pretty soon I had the first act of a play written," Begley says. When he eventually finalized the script, he submitted it to the Chavez family for approval. "They are very careful, as they should be, not to attach [to] anything that does not give his name and likeness the respect it deserves. So I was very honored when the whole family said I could do the play," he says. In 2003, he was honored with the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation Award for his support of Chavez, which remains in a place of honor on his mantel. "It was an incredible moment for me."



Carlos Padilla in "Cesar and Ruben"; Photo by Moshe Elgrably

Despite Begley's assertion that the 2003 production was "pretty bumpy," Rodriguez was still incredibly touched by it. When asked what his initial impression was, Rodriguez becomes contemplative. He speaks deliberately, as if picturing the memory in his mind. "There was a moment where a flood of emotion hit. In that moment, I reflected back to '93." He becomes quieter at the thought of his grandfather's death. "If you were at all a part of the movement it brought you back to the time you spent, whether it was out in the fields or whether you were marching and organizing." Again, Rodriguez pauses. Begley leans toward him, some combination of gratitude and empathy on his face, and pats his knee. "There's this connection Ed Begley created that's almost beyond words," he concludes.

The current production of the play retains the same basic elements of the original. The setting is the after-life, where Chavez meets LA Times and KMEX reporter Ruben Salazar, who interviewed him several times over the years. Salazar, who died under suspicious circumstances during the Chicano Moratorium's Vietnam War protest in East LA in 1970, leads Chavez through the memories of his life. The musical includes songs from such artists as Sting, Carlos Santana, and Ruben Blades.

Over the past several years, Begley has worked to refine his vision. The production premiering at SMC on October 14 is the most revised version yet. Rodriguez lights up at the mention of these



revisions. "We spoke over the phone about some of the minor changes he made. It's the same play, but with this new twist related to what's going on globally. Did he say he has great timing? Because if he hasn't said it, I'm going to throw it out there," he says.



Melissa Harding and Carlos Padilla; Photo by Judy Louff

Begley has updated the play to make it more cohesive, culturally relevant, and dramatic. Responding to Rodriguez, he says, "There's a lot of stuff in the play now about what's going on in Arizona with the immigrant bashing and so on. That was not in the play in 2003, or even 2007," he explains. "There is a whole song devoted to it called 'Migra' by Quetzal," he says, referring to the Chicano rock band from East LA.

Perhaps the biggest revision is the decision to have all of the songs in Spanish. The musical originally contained songs both in Spanish and English. Begley felt this was jarring to audiences. "Now it's very consistent," he says. "I always wanted to have all the songs in Spanish. I felt that would be better, culturally, in many ways," he explains. To create more drama, the show now features a big musical number closer to the beginning. "It's much better now, really following the rules of a musical to grab people's attention right away," he says.

Co-directing with Begley is Perviz Sawoski, SMC's Theatre Arts Department chair. Begley says Sawoski has helped tremendously in improving the staging of the show. "She's doing all the heavy lifting and I'm sharing the credit. She has generously allowed me to be listed as co-director," Begley says. Sawoski has added a lot of dance. She has infused the production with global dance styles such as flamenco, Mexican folkloricó, and Afro-Cuban. "She's a brilliant choreographer," Begley says.



The Cast of "Cesar and Ruben"; Photo by Judy Louff

When he refers to the student cast, Begley gushes about the energy and joy they bring to their work. "They are so gung-ho to do anything. They are so willing and energetic. It's extraordinary," he says.

He quickly rattles off the names of the leads: Carlos Padilla as Cesar Chavez, Melissa Harding as Helen Chavez, Rebecca Breitburg as Dolores Huerta, and Michael Poursh as Ruben Salazar.

“It really is a much better play,” Begley reflects. He looks to Rodriguez. “He’s going to be honest with me. He will tell me if he likes it the same or more or less.” Now, as he hugs Rodriguez goodbye nearly 50 years after he began his support of his grandfather in the 1960s, the influence Chavez has had on his life comes full circle in a way he never imagined.

***Cesar and Ruben*, presented by Santa Monica College. Opens October 14; plays Fri.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm; through Oct. 23. Tickets: \$20 general admission, discounts available for students, senior citizens and SMC employees. Santa Monica College, Theatre Arts Dept., 1900 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica. 310-434-4319. [www.smc.edu/theatre](http://www.smc.edu/theatre).**

**\*\*\*All *Cesar and Ruben* production photos by Santa Monica College photography students**

- Share this:

**LA STAGE TIMES**