



## LOS MATACHINES

*Los Matachines* is a ritual dance that employs 10 – 12 male dancers in two lines. In addition there are the following characters: El Monarca (the king), La Malinche (innocence, faith, purity), El Abuelo (a clown in the kachina sense who is the Master of Ceremonies), El Toro – the bull (evil presence). There are also musicians who accompany the dance. While there are basic steps and characters, the interpretations of *Los Matachines* varies according to geographic location and local conditions.

Of all the cultural expressions in New Mexico, none better represents the intercultural amalgamation of Aztec, European, and Pueblo images, themes and traditions as does the dance, *Los Matachines*. First, it is the only ritual drama performed in both Hispanic and Pueblo communities in the Rio Grande Valley. Second, it is performed in towns and villages from Zacatecas, Mexico to Taos. Third, it is performed across cultures on key winter and summer feast days such as Christmas, New Year's and the Saint's Days of San Antonio, San Lorenzo, San Jose and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Finally, the universal themes of encounter, struggle and transformation form the basis for all performances. *Los Matachines* has evolved into a multi-cultural presentation that remains vibrant in today's multimedia world.

The origins of *Los Matachines* are obscure. Those who claim a European origin see elements of the Spanish drama *Los Moros y Cristianos* which celebrates the Spanish victory over the Moors in 1492. Others see Aztec origins in the costumes (cupils, Aztec crowns) and names of the characters: *Monarca* (Moctezuma) and *Malinche* (Cortez's interpreter). The residents of San Lorenzo Pueblo see *Los Matachines* as a celebration of their role in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. In southern New Mexico, the dancers wear Plains-style war bonnets and the dance captains are called Comanches instead of *Captianes*. In these same communities, the *Matachines* use bows and arrows to overcome the old, erroneous ways and open the door to conversion. So where did this ritual begin?

It is certain that the Spanish brought both the drama *Los Moros y Cristianos* and the danced called Los Matachines to the Western Hemisphere. The term "Matachin" might be adopted from the Arabic word, "mutawjjihm," meaning "to assume a mask." *Matachines* dancers all wear masks. However, the basic word is also a combination of two Persian words, "Mat" meaning "death" and "chine" or "chini" meaning "fool." By the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century a popular dance in Italy and Spain was the "Dance of the Bouffons" or "Matachines" that had its origins in a Greek weapons dance and a Roman festival that celebrated Mars, the God of War. It is well-documented that the Franciscan friars of the early Spanish Colonial Period employed the morality play, *Los Moros y Cristianos*, which dramatically tells the story of the victory of Christianity over the Moors in *La Reconquista*, in their attempts to convert the Pueblos of the Rio Grande Valley. At the same time, the Aztecs of Mexico utilized ritual dances to relate their history and incorporate their subject more fully into the empire. It is most probable that the Spanish Friars combined elements of the European *Matachines* dance, which ends



with the capitulation of a King, with the lessons of *Los Moros y Cristianos*, which ends with the Spanish defeating the infidel Moors, in order to obtain a greater conversion rate in their early years. Combining the dance with the drama and changing the characters' names to *Monarca* and *Malinche* would have allowed the Franciscans to tell a story through a ritual with which Native Americans were familiar, using characters with whom they could identify. By the time *Los Matachines* arrived in the Rio Grande Valley with the Oñate expedition, it had already incorporated European and Aztec elements to become a hybrid presentation. It is fair to conclude that a secular drama/dance, *Los Matachines*, arrived with the Spanish, but that Aztec beliefs, practices and resistance modified it significantly into a religious, morality drama that reinforced both Old World and New World ideas.

We see more intercultural adaptation in the costumes and props used in the dance. First, the headdresses worn in the dance seem very familiar. The first tendency is to relate them to Moorish turbans with the scarf and fringe that covers the face. However, they are also reminiscent of the plumed headdresses of the Aztec nobility. Finally, we can also see here the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. The headdress follows the liturgical dress of Catholicism with an adaptation of the bishop's miter for the *Matachines* dancers, and a papal tiara (corona) for *Monarca* and the *Capitanes*. However, the Bishop's miter has a solid front and back. The Aztecan headdress had an open back and was attached to the head with bands and ribbons. The miter of *Los Matachines* appears to be a combination of the bishop's miter from Catholicism with the Aztec headdress with Moorish decoration attached. The headdresses of *Los Matachines* reflect the intercultural evolution of the dance itself.

Another demonstration of the intercultural nature of *Los Matachines* along the Rio Grande lies with the dance as performed by the Tewa, Tiwa, and Towa groups. Yet, these groups developed separately and do not speak the same language. Still, the music played in each version at these Pueblos is almost identical as are the costumes and the dance steps. In addition, it has been the practice for centuries that Pueblo men perform the dance while Hispanic men play the instruments. These similarities indicate a common origin and practice and the fact that both Hispanic and Pueblo communities interacted in important community events. Moreover, the *Matachines* dances of the Rio Grande Valley do not fit the pattern of the *Matachines* dances of the Tarahumara, the Yaqui and the Mayo of northern Mexico and Arizona. It would be logical to assume that the traditional dances of the established Pueblos along the Rio Grande contributed additional local adaptations to that version of the dance that came north with Oñate. The Spanish may have introduced *Los Matachines* to the New World, but New World influences and imperatives molded and shaped Old World practices into new and different presentations.

Adaptation occurred as well with the Aztecan influences. In a description of Aztec dances, observers noted that the dancers carried a feathered fan in one hand and a rattle in the other. At some time over the centuries, the fan has become a wooden trident or



*palma*, used both in the manner of a fan and as a weapon. Final evidence of adaptation to New World realities comes with an explanation of the only female in the dance.

The role of *La Malinche* is always played by a little girl who wears a white, first Holy Communion dress. She is not only the solitary female character, but also the only dancer who does not wear a mask. She is the embodiment of purity and innocence. Her costume and actions identify her with the Virgin herself. She wanders between the two lines of *Matachines* dancers, always guide by an *abuelo*, or “grandfather clown.” She takes the rattle from *Monarca* (the king/Moctezuma) and animates the other dancers. At the end of the dance, *Monarca* finally submits and bows to *La Malinche* in a ritualistic representation of the Native American conversion to Christianity. In *Los Moros y Cristianos*, the Virgin represents the acceptance of Christianity. In New Mexico, she has been replaced with *La Malinche*, Cortez’s interpreter and the first Native American to convert to Christianity. Beyond the adaptation, *La Malinche*, is a key figure for all who participate in and watch. Young and innocent, she symbolizes hope, redemption and the future. When evil is defeated, and the old ways (*Monarca*) have capitulated, *La Malinche* is the embodiment of the transcendence of good over evil.

*Los Matachines* is a complicated, multi-layered, ritual dance. In all cases, the moral is the triumph of good over evil. The specific manner in which that story has been presented has evolved over time to incorporate the costumes, characters and chronicles of the Spanish, the Aztecs and Pueblos; the same groups that form the foundation of the Southwest.