



# Labor of love



## After 9 years, Ed Begley Jr.'s show about Cesar Chavez reaches the stage

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# Hailing Cesar



Roberto Alcaraz, left; Shannon Stoeke, Danielle Barbosa and Tony D'Amico in "Cesar & Ruben" at the El Portal Theatre.

## Ed Begley Jr. honors labor activist Chavez with a musical at El Portal

By Evan Henerson | Theater Writer

**W**hat's a blond, self-described "crazy Anglo dude from Van Nuys High School" doing trying to tell the story of one of L.A.'s most heroic Latino activists?

Merely being a creative conduit, says Ed Begley Jr.

"I'm just the middleman," says Begley, the writer and director of the new musical "Cesar & Ruben," which opens Friday at the El Portal Center for the Arts. "I took one of the greatest stories that I've ever had contact with — the life of Cesar Chavez — and I took 17 of the best songs I could come up with that in some way could be made to tell his story. And I just wrote some dialogue to bridge those two things."

The more Begley talks about Chavez, the more humble and modest he seems to become. Chavez, the founder of the United Farm Workers of America, was an inspiration, a "truly important figure in our state and nation's history," says the 54-year-old actor, a regular guest star on the shows "7th Heaven" and

### CESAR & RUBEN

**Where:** El Portal Theatre, 5269 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

**When:** 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; through April 27.

**Tickets:** \$25 to \$35. Call (213) 480-3232.

### "Six Feet Under."

But behind any amount of "I'm not worthy" self-effacement is Begley's confidence that he has done his homework, conducted tons of research and written a solid script. The Cesar E. Chavez Foundation, which represents Chavez's family, was a collaborator and has given "Cesar & Ruben" its blessing. The play's opening is one of a host of Chavez-related honors and activities this year — the 10th anniversary of Chavez's death.

Besides, Begley is no mere celebrity with a case of hero worship. Begley knew Chavez personally and met with the labor leader on a number of

occasions. He was also one of Chavez's pallbearers, carrying the casket through the streets of Delano amid a crowd of some 35,000 people.

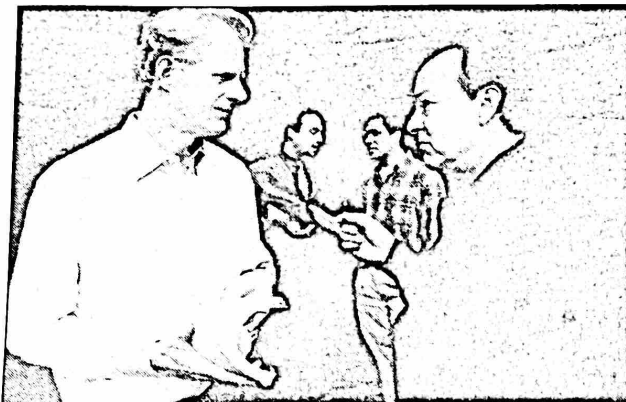
And that connection made Begley as worthy a person as anyone to light the creative flame, say foundation officials.

"What struck us about Ed's project," says CCF executive director Andres Irlando, "is that it was being initiated and driven by somebody who was a personal friend of Cesar's, a longtime supporter of the farm worker movement and someone who has stepped up early and in a big way to support the work of the Chavez Foundation."

"I won't pretend for a moment that I knew him very well," Begley says of Chavez, whom he first met in a coffee shop near Los Angeles International Airport in 1985. "I knew him as (would) a guy who greatly admired him and spent a bit of time with him."

### Worthy measures

Begley spent nine years working on "Cesar & Ruben," which depicts slain



Ed Begley Jr., left, "Cesar & Ruben's" writer and director, discusses a scene with Edward Albert as D'Arc and Alcaraz work in the background.

## EVENTS TO HONOR CHAVEZ

**March 21:** The Los Angeles County Museum of Art launches L.A. County's Chavez celebration. LACMA presents "Cesar Chavez: A Legacy of Ideas," which includes works from LACMA's permanent collection celebrating the causes and movements championed by Chavez. (323) 857-6000; [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org).

**March 29:** The United Farm Workers sponsors the Chavez Walk at East Los Angeles College, 1301 Avenida Cesar Chavez. Registration is at 8 a.m., the walk begins at 9 a.m.; a festival follows. (323) 722-0118; [www.ufw.org](http://www.ufw.org).

**March 31:** Third annual Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning at locations throughout the city. You can join an organized service project in your area or help fill a need yourself by tutoring a child, helping an elderly neighbor, serving in a homeless shelter, or volunteering at a school or community organization. (818) 265-0300; [www.cesar Chavez foundation.org](http://www.cesar Chavez foundation.org).

**April 11:** Third annual Educating the Heart Dinner, 7 p.m., at the Regent Beverly Wilshire, 9500 Wilshire Blvd. Honorees will include Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Rep. Nancy Pelosi, and actors Edward James Olmos and Ed Begley Jr. (818) 265-0300; [www.cesar Chavez foundation.org](http://www.cesar Chavez foundation.org).

**April 23:** First day of issuance of the commemorative United States postage stamp honoring Chavez. A ceremony will take place at noon at the Court of Historic Flags in Civic Center mall, 320 W. Temple St. (818) 265-0300; [www.cesar Chavez foundation.org](http://www.cesar Chavez foundation.org).

— E.H.

newspaper columnist Ruben Salazar (played by Tony D'Arc) welcoming Chavez (Roberto Alcaraz) to the afterlife and helping recount several important moments in his life. Begley knew early on that the play would have music and that artists like Sting (whose song "Fields of Gold" appears in the musical), David Crosby ("Hero"), Peter Gabriel ("Don't Give Up") could help to tell Chavez's story more poignantly than newly composed music.

At the urging of a friend after an early read-through, Begley added Spanish-language songs by Enrique Iglesias, Carmen Moreno and Ruben Blades as well. (Yes, the character of Cesar Chavez does sing.)

The addition of Spanish songs and the introduction of Salazar as a character Chavez could interact with turned out to be key turning points in the creation of "Cesar & Ruben." By the time he assembled a scene for a Oneness Foundation benefit last year at Polytechnic High School, Begley knew he was getting closer to having something he could put on stage.

By Labor Day, he took a finished draft to actor/director Edward James Olmos, another longtime friend. A few weeks later, Olmos participated in a read-through at the El Portal.

"It went very well, but I knew I needed to do some more work on it," says Begley. "So I kept working on it, we got some backers, and here we sit."

"Here" is the lobby of the El Portal, where Begley, in shorts and a sweat shirt, folds his long legs under a table during a mid-week interview a couple of weeks before "Cesar & Ruben" starts previews. The El Portal — now exclusively a rental house — staged an occasional musical back before the resident producing companies folded. "Cesar & Ruben" will mark the first time a production has made use of the orchestra pit.

In addition to Alcaraz and D'Arc in the title roles, the play features Marta DuBois, Danielle

Barbosa, Evan Saucedo, Rachelle Carson (Begley's wife) and Edward Albert (son of Eddie Albert) as the grower, Naylor. Several actors are playing characters based on real people who are still alive.

"That people were coming in to audition for a \$415-a-week, eight-show-per-week gig spoke volumes about the lack of good material for people in the L.A. community," says Begley. "I thought maybe I'd get a couple of good singers and a couple of good actors and we'd find a way to make it work. I had the best pool of singers and actors to choose from that you could imagine."

## Human, not icon

Alcaraz, who plays Chavez, admits that trying to embody an icon is a task that "has its daunting moments."

"I think Cesar represented different things to different folks, and I can only hope to do justice to one third of them," says Alcaraz. "The biggest thing is to try to make him human as opposed to Cesar Chavez the holiday or the street or the stamp."

While a student at Loyola Marymount University in the late 1980s, Alcaraz had the opportunity to hear Chavez speak. "I remember being struck by what a man of few words he was," he says, "how soft and direct and how that kind of contrasted with how much he had accomplished."

Needless to say, "Cesar & Ruben," which could run through May, will hardly be the last people hear about Cesar Chavez. According to foundation officials, several other film and stage biographies of Chavez and the United Farm Workers of America are in development.

Begley has gotten wind of several of the projects, and hopes that they all succeed. When he learned of a possible competing play produced by Martin Sheen, — another friend — Begley told Sheen to "bring it on."

"He said, 'Ed, I hear you're doing a play. I don't want to butt heads with you,'" Begley recalls. "I said, 'Butt heads? Martin, you take the 310 area code, I'll take 818. Now we've got to get 323, 619 and 760. Let's make it across the board. Let's have a play on every street corner about him.'"

Spoken like a true creative middleman.

"I approach this with great humility," says Begley. "The only thing I would say is, it's coming up on the 10th anniversary of his death. The microphone is empty, people are in the theater. Somebody sing a song. I'm happy to kick the show off and sing the first song."