

Interview with Marcela del Río

Yvonne Shafer

Yvonne: I would like to ask you how you started to write plays? You are an artist, a poet and a playwright. How did you happen to start working in the theater?

Marcela: My mother was a writer and she played piano. My father, in his youth, was an actor and later he was a lawyer, but the actor remained in him, no? And the theater became like second nature to me. Then, at home my mother always played the piano. She played opera, and she wrote parodies of opera and we sang them. For me that was like an introduction to the theater. Then, I wanted to be an opera singer. When I was 15 or 16 years old, I started singing with a great teacher. When I was 17, my teacher died. And two months later my mother died. Then, my career as an opera singer was finished. I stopped studying, and I started working in the office of a magazine. When my mother died, the director of the magazine asked me "Please, I know that you know the operas because I saw you singing, and your mother took you always to the opera. You can write criticism of the opera."

Then, I started working in an office all day, but I felt that something was lacking. For my art was like my life. Then, I went to my uncle, Alfonso Reyes. And I said "I want to study theater what can I do?" He wrote a letter to the director of the academy of cinematography in Mexico. I went there. I worked in the office until 5 o'clock in the afternoon, and then I went to the school of theater. Then, I had a career as a professional actress. I worked in television and I worked on theater. I was acting in professional performances. When I started in theater, I told the director of the magazine, "Now I know more theater than opera. Please let me write about theater." Then I started as a critic of theater in the magazine.

Then one day, a theater director called me and asked me if I wanted to perform in a play. This play was going to be in a festival in Moscow. I said yes. Everything was to be paid. We were working on the rehearsals, but one

Yvonne Shafer is an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her book *American Women Playwrights, 1900-1950* will be published by Peter Lang early in 1994. This interview is part of a book co-edited with her colleague Associate Professor Salvador Rodriguez del Pino, *Contemporary Mexican Theatre: Six Plays*, to be published in 1994.

day I had a car accident. The car was destroyed completely, and I was injured. Then, I could not go to the rehearsals. When I went back, nobody was there, nobody, nobody! Then, I went to the committee, and I asked what happened? Did they change the time? The rehearsal? What happened? No, the group had discussions between all the actors and the group was dissolved. Then what can I do? I am not invited to Moscow. They said "Yes you are invited, but you will have to perform a monologue because there are no people." So, I was looking and looking and reading and reading monologues, Mexican monologues. I found only three, and I did not like them. And a friend said "You are an actress. You know everything about theater, write a monologue!" Then I wrote my monologue. And I directed, I made the costume, I chose the music, I made every thing. And I went to Moscow with my play. Before the play, it was very funny because I was nervous. I asked "What is the theater like?" They told me it was a small theater. But when the curtain opened, I saw two thousand people! This is a small theater? But it was in front of the Balshoi theater, which is much bigger! My goodness! I was so nervous, but it was a success. The Russian people asked me, after the play, to sing on the radio. They interviewed me and paid me for it. I was amazed. When I went back to Moscow, I had a marvelous trip because I was also invited to Rumania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia. It was a marvelous trip. And on the train, because it's a long trip, I had time to think. I thought "OK, now I do everything. I direct, I write, I act. Out of all these different activities which do I enjoy the most?" I discovered that I enjoyed the writing.

When I came back I was already assigned a performance as an actress in *Fuente Ovejuna* by Lope de Vega. Then, that was my last performance as an actress. Then, I started writing. I wrote *Miralina*, *Claudia* and *Arnot* in 1962.

Yvonne: We are speaking here in April 1992, and the last play was recently just performed at Florida Central University and has been performed elsewhere. But now, may I ask you another question? You have a wonderful painting that shows a woman taking the world off Atlas' back. Do you feel that at this time you want to show women taking a more powerful role in society in the plays you write?

Marcela: I think it is very difficult to answer that. I think that women always have done many things, but it is the people outside who write the criticism, who write the history, who do not take into account what women have done. I think that in all times, women did many things that are not put in the history. The history is the problem.

Yvonne: But in the twentieth century, in recent years for example, in Mexico aren't there many women playwrights?

Marcela: Yes, many, many, but in the history of theater they talk about plays written by men. For instance, I have a clear example. In the time of my mother—my mother was a writer—she and other writers founded the *Ateneo* of women writers, Mexican Women Writers.

Yvonne: This was in Mexico City?

Marcela: Yes, in Mexico City. In *Ateneo*, in their magazine, they published more than fifty entries every month, every month. And in the time of war, there were articles against the war, about pacifists . . .

Yvonne: What year would this be?

Marcela: 1934 to 44. . . . They had programs in radio. Women from all of America have written in this magazine. For instance, the Nobel prize winner Gabriela Mistral. She wrote in this magazine. They invited writers from Latin America. Gallegos was invited by them.

Yvonne: And some of these women were writing plays which were performed in the theater?

Marcela: Plays, novels, one of the group founded the Feminine University because it was difficult for women to go to the university. They founded La Universidad Femenina de México, only for women. It was a very strong activity.

Yvonne: And what is the name of the magazine?

Marcela: *Ideas*. I wrote three articles in the *Excelsior* about the history of *Ateneo* de women writers.

Yvonne: Let me ask you about theatrical performances. As a woman participating in the theater you were in Mexico, now you are in Florida—throughout this time you have seen your own publications appear, you have written many things, and you're most respected and admired. But tell me this, what was it like to be in the audience for your first play.

Marcela: It was *Miralina* in Mexico City. *Miralina* is an *avant-garde* play. The history of that play is very interesting, because the association of critics in Mexico was all men. The play was directed by a very famous director in Mexico, Fernando Wagner. Then, the critics did not understand anything in the play, and they wrote incredible things against it, because it was symbolic, not realistic. It was in 1962. The things they wrote were so insulting to me that my husband went looking for one critic to fight him. But when he saw he was a very old man, he couldn't.

Yvonne: Now, your plays in general have been non-realistic.

Marcela: Yes, I always want to put my ideas in different forms.

Yvonne: We are going to publish this anthology now. It will have six plays which would represent some of the Mexican playwrights, but this is a small grouping. There are many playwrights today in Mexico? Right?

Marcela: Yes, many.

Yvonne: And many of them are women. Are many of these women addressing social problems?

Marcela: There are many women writing, and what they are writing covers a wide range of approaches and views of the society.

Yvonne: Now I would like to ask you a very personal question. *On the Way to the Concert*, which we have in the anthology, has to do with your husband, and this must have been a difficult play for you to write. He was an internationally famous violinist who was killed on the way to a concert. I wonder if you could just tell us about the writing and about seeing it on stage?

Marcela: This was an experience for me . . . I owe my life now to that play. If I hadn't written that play, maybe I would have committed suicide. Then after the death of Hermilo, I was blocked. I could not write. I was in bed for six months, just like that. Completely a vegetable, nothing, no? A friend called me. He knew that I was in bad condition after all those things. The play like the tip of an iceberg, was only this small part of my suffering. Then he called me and told me: I want to do a video about *La Señorita de Tagna*, the play by the Peruvian author Vargas Llosa. He wanted me to do the interviews with the actresses, the actors, and the people in the ceremony. And I told him, "It is impossible. I

cannot. I hear words and I do not understand the words. I walk and I do not feel the ground, I cannot do that." "You can," he told me. Finally, he convinced me . . .

Yvonne: And this was in what year?

Marcela: At the end of 1983, because he died in March of 1983. It was at the end, November, December, something like that in '83. Then I dressed myself in beige, because I did not want to wear black and I went. It was incredible doing that video. The actress was Silvia Pinal, a very famous actress in Mexico. She had a reception in her beautiful house, after the play. The actor who was playing Vargas Llosa's character told me he needed a monologue. I said impossible. I sit in front of the typewriter, and my fingers are paralyzed. I cannot do it. At the end of the reception, I went to my house.

I slept, and at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, my eyes opened and the monologue was here in my head completely, completely. All that structure was here. Incredible. Amazing. Then I got up. I went to the typewriter, but my fingers could not type. So I said, "I am more powerful than my fingers." And I took a tape recorder and dictated for the first time in my life. Three days I dictated and corrected. I do it again. I cried. I was on the floor crying and crying and dictating to the tape recorder. The maid came and said, "You have to eat." I said "Don't bother me. Leave the food there by the door." That was Thursday. Then on Monday, I had the monologue finished and typed.

Yvonne: And then you could type!

Marcela: The problem was to get it out. And when I could get it out, I could write.

Yvonne: And then you saw it on stage?

Marcela: No, it's a long way to that. I directed it.

Yvonne: You directed!

Marcela: Ohhh! It was terrible! In the middle of one scene—the actor was a friend of Hermilo and a friend of mine, Luis Miranda—he was such a sensitive actor that in the middle of one scene we were both crying . . . Choosing the music was one of the most difficult efforts for me. That is why I say it was a long way until I could sit and see the play. It was a long way. The premier was

in Los Angeles, because I was invited for the opening of the Latin Festival Theater in Los Angeles in 1984.

Yvonne: And what theater was this?

Marcela: The Bilingual Foundation of the Arts. It's a small theater. It was so amazing the things that happened there. Everybody talked with Hermilo, if you don't believe in ghosts, after this experience, you would say, "maybe." The beginning was very dramatic. The actor was nearly nude, and I put black sheets on the bed. The actor was very, very white. It was very impressive to see the white body in the black sheets. And we turned on the lights and there was nobody there in bed. That happened three times, and it was very mysterious. The technician didn't see him, and I didn't see him. So I said, "Hermilo, don't joke, please." But the actor was there. And when we turned on the stage lights the fourth time we could see him.

Yvonne: So, this was the first time that you saw the play? And you felt, in a sense, a completion for yourself?

Marcela: Yes, it was for me. We had performances one hundred times. One hundred performances. I have a small plaque, the reproduction of the big plaque in the theater that is there, for the one hundred performances. But I couldn't go any more because it was an expenditure of emotion and energy for me. I put so much emotion into it, every time, I always finished crying. Then, after the hundredth, I said "enough." I am recovered. I have found myself again, and I feel that if I hadn't gone through the whole experience, I wouldn't have recovered. So after that effort, I recovered, and it's wonderful. I can write and direct plays. Now I am very happy. I am feeling that the only obligation in life is to be happy.

University of Colorado at Boulder