

Mexico City Theatre, Summer 1993

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Theatre continues to thrive in Mexico City, as evidenced by its Summer 1993 season. During any given week newspapers advertised upwards of 80 plays. Offerings included dinner theatre, children's theatre, bourgeois comedies, imported musicals, puppet theatre, bar theatre and experimental theatre. Although many performances seemed geared toward attracting money-paying audiences for mindless entertainment, a significant portion challenged audiences to examine some aspect of life in a serious way. Most of the plays were contemporary and written by Mexicans; exceptions included excellent productions of *La secreta obscenidad de cada día* by Chilean playwright Marco Antonio de la Parra, and British playwright Ronald Harwood's *El Rehén* directed by Luis de Tavira. Plays by several of Mexico's "established" playwrights were performed, including Emilio Carballido, Vicente Leñero, Hugo Argüelles, Sabina Berman, Victor Hugo Rascón Banda and Juan Tovar. Several young, relatively unknown dramatists also had excellent plays performed, notably José J. Vázquez and Alberto Castillo. "Serious" theatre continues to play, for the most part, to relatively small audiences, but somehow it continues to be produced.

Several aspects of Mexico City's Summer of 1993 "serious" theatre season are worthy of note, including unusual dramatic spaces, ingenious sets, a passion for Mexican issues, an obsession with history, a smattering of humor, a dabbling with theatre of the absurd, metatheatre, and the resurrection and modernization of dramatic texts.¹

Most of the plays produced in Mexico City take place on "traditional" stages, with the audience facing the actors, separated by an imaginary fourth wall. Others take place in spaces built for performing theatre, but have unusual features, such as the charming two-story stage of the Teatro de Santa Catarina, the arena-style Casa de la Paz or the experimental theatres of UNAM. Other spaces have been adapted for theatre after serving some other function. For example, El foro de la comedia and Foro de la Conchita were formerly

residences. La Bodega de la Escenografía at INBA's Theatre School is so named precisely because it was, and to an extent still is, the school's storage area for props and scenery. Such spaces have limitations in lighting and sound, but offer unique experiences to actors and audiences alike, such as in a performance at La Bodega when the audience sat at a table in the middle of the dramatic space. This was theatre in the round, but with the audience center-stage, immersed in the action. Still other performances took place in public squares or rooms in public buildings.

Resources for costumes, sets and props for the various performances varied tremendously. On one extreme, the set for *Chin Chun Chan y Las musas del país* was extravagant, with multiple scene changes, moving scenery, and multi-story theater boxes on stage. The set was only outdone by costumes which rivaled those of Mexico's famous Ballet Folklórico. On the other extreme was *El Edipo imaginario*, a play which featured advanced theatre students at UNAM. Its set consisted of a sofa, some children's toys, and several oversized children's play blocks. Reportedly, the budget granted for this play was so meager that the actors brought most of the props from their own homes. The costumes were from daily life, except an over-sized diaper worn by the actor. These elements were entirely adequate for the play, and the resulting theatrical images matched its thematic underpinnings of theatre of the absurd. Simplicity and representation, rather than complex realism, marked the sets and costumes of most of the plays.

Four threads dominated the fabric of many of the season's plays: 1) a focus on Mexican identity, 2) an exploration of the relationship between the past and the present, 3) the presence of plays within plays, and 4) inquiry into human existence.

In many plays, delving into Mexican identity went hand in hand with exploring the interconnected nature of past and present. The very structure of four excellent plays illustrated this link: *La casa del español* by Victor Hugo Rascón Banda, *Escarabajos* by Hugo Argüelles, *Grito de silencio* by José J. Vázquez, and *El jinete de la divina providencia* by Oscar Liera. *La casa del español* began with a woman delirious on her deathbed, claiming to hear voices. The voices transformed her into her younger self to reenact scenes from her past. The play depicted her arrival in Northern Mexico from Europe and how her life became intertwined with that of a Tarahumara Indian girl. *La casa del español* exemplified the interdependence of past and present, America and Europe.

Hugo Argüelles wrote the bulk of *Escarabajos* in 1959, then set it aside. Thirty-two years later he unearthed it and gave it a new twist by interspersing additional text. The 1959 portions transformed into the flashbacks of a 1991 character. During the performance, the 1991 protagonist prepared in a make-up room to perform the cross-dressed role of Medea in "the big break" of his long,

painful acting career. As he prepared he conversed with the ashes of his mother, reminiscing on the hard knocks of his past. These recollections triggered scenes from the life of his troubled family in 1959. The flashbacks revealed a home filled with resentments, lack of understanding, hatred, insults and unhappiness. An overwhelming, oppressive sense of anguish from Jaime's 1959 past gave psychological insight into his miserable present. Once again, present and past were inseparably intertwined in this play.

Grito de silencio gave a rare glimpse into the life of "nifios callejeros"—the poorest of the poor children in the immense shanty towns surrounding Mexico City. As with *Escarabajos* and *La casa del español*, flashbacks provided the structure to this play. A recently hired social worker tried to understand an incarcerated teenager, Temo. In the interviews she conducted and the flashbacks which ensued, she journeyed into the hopeless world of the underprivileged, filled with downward spirals of drugs, violence, sex, crime, malnutrition, filth, squalor, illegitimacy, homelessness, obscenity, and police brutality. After a period of confinement, authorities released Temo, but the beatings he received in jail left him mentally incompetent. Audiences gained a sobering, powerful glimpse into a seldom-infiltrated side of Mexico City. *Grito de silencio* was perhaps the most emotionally forceful play of the season.

Northern Mexico's state of Sinaloa provided the setting for *El jinete de la divina providencia*. The play's structure revolved around a fact-finding visit from a delegation of Catholic officials in response to the nomination of a man from Sinaloa for canonization. As they interviewed the inhabitants of the town regarding the miracles of "Malverde," some of the events described came to life in flashbacks. Thus, the action flowed between the past and the present. The visiting authorities had no easy job, because their "witnesses" were unreliable narrators. Malverde's legend as a sort of Robin Hood saint inspired the poor of contemporary Sinaloa to revolt, even though the rich nervously recognized the legend's power and sought to manipulate it. The play's depiction of oppression, violence, and the inability truly to understand the past left audiences with a disquieting sensation.

Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda by Sabina Berman also explored the inexact nature of history, but with a humorous, insightful focus on relationships between the sexes, which the title of this play exemplifies. Set in the bourgeois apartment of a vivacious and attractive single woman, it portrayed the torrid love affair she had with a historian obsessed with Pancho Villa. While he desired a purely physical relationship, she wanted nurturing time together; his work on Villa was the compromise. He babbled endlessly about Villa, and she listened dutifully and even consented to type the manuscript of a biography. In the meantime, the historian and his subject developed a symbiotic relationship. At

first, as Adrián described moments from Villa's life, Villa appeared and lived out the narrated events. Later, as Gina typed the manuscript of the biography stage right, Villa acted out the events stage left. When she corrected a mistake by crossing out prior lines, Villa shifted into reverse gear, retracing his steps to undo the historian's prior ideas about his life, thus suggesting historians' omnipotence over the past. Later, Adrián was inspired in his romantic conquests by Villa, who interacted directly with his historian to give him advice. The interaction reached a new level when Adrián's life affected Villa—each time Adrián suffered a romantic setback a bullet riddled Villa's body. In like manner, Villa gloried Adrián's successes, to the point of rolling a cannon onto the stage, then firing it to signify conquest. Despite its abundant humor, *Entre Villa. . .* was serious indeed, signaling the need for a new kind of romantic relationship, cautioning against blind acceptance of "History," and exploring the relationship between past and present.

Las adoraciones, *Feria de Juan Rulfo*, and *Chin Chun Chan y Las musas del país* all dealt with Mexican history and identity without any onstage allusions to 1993. *Las adoraciones* was set in 16th century Mexico and portrayed the agony of Carlos Mendoza, a native leader of Texcoco. After formally accepting Catholicism, he later rejected it in deference to his native roots. An inquisitorial investigation later sentenced him to die. Unfortunately, the dramatic pace of the performance of this drama was painfully slow—the low points being two extended Catholic ceremonies—in Latin! Despite a tremendous set and compelling subject matter, the production was disappointing.

Feria de Juan Rulfo was a marionette production in a second-story room of the Palacio de Bellas Artes. The text of the performance was a collage from the writings of Juan Rulfo. Music, scenery and intonation were added to the agonized, murmuring world readers encounter in *Pedro Páramo* and *El llano en llamas*. The performance began with a skillfully performed traditional marionette scene. In the next scene the marionette masters, dressed identically to their marionettes, also took the stage. In other scenes performers brought to life larger than human-sized figures. A surreal scene featured faces talking inside what appeared to be an aquarium. Another scene featured silhouettes projected onto a screen. Finally, a barroom scene featured human performers transformed into marionettes from the neck down. Although this description of types of presentation sounds more like a circus than a serious play, the stunning, unusual conception of the marionettes and the painstaking performances belied a highly artistic piece. The intriguing world of Rulfo came to life in a delightful, serious way.

In recent years, Enrique Alonso rescued two short Mexican musicals written by José F. Elizondo just after the turn of the century. Vicente Leñero linked the

musicals through a dramatic frame set in revolutionary Mexico. The sensational performance of *Chin Chun Chan y Las musas del país* in the magnificent Julio Castillo Theater resulted. The ambiance of revolutionary Mexico began upon entering the building. Soldiers in full uniform solemnly stood guard in the lobby, where pictures of early theatre stars adorned the walls, and old fashioned ushers escorted spectators to their seats. Before witnessing the performance of *Chin Chun Chan*, actor/spectators from revolutionary Mexico arrived, escorted by the same ushers who had seated real spectators. The actor/spectators conversed with authentic spectators on weather, politics and the morality of the play. The audacity of one actor/spectator to distribute anti-Huerta flyers resulted in his immediate execution. The inner play, *Chin Chun Chan* itself, was set in the sumptuous lobby and dining room of a hotel. A Mexican posing as a rich man from China arrived. When he witnessed a show at the hotel, authentic spectators witnessed a performance (the hotel's show) within a performance (of the "Mexican Chinaman") alongside a performance (the spectator clients of the hotel) within a performance (of the 1918 spectators). *Las musas del país* featured three writers who took inspiration from Xochimilco, the Yucatán, and Veracruz to write a play. Actors performed dances and songs from each area in corresponding costume. Despite an apparent lack of content depth, *Chin Chun Chan y Las musas del país* focused on Mexican identity, portrayed theatre within theatre, and looked to the past. The acting, singing, dancing, set, costumes, music, and interaction with the audience were spectacular.

As mentioned above, *El Edipo imaginario* by Alberto Castillo had many characteristics of theatre of the absurd. It began by depicting a love affair but escalated into much, much more. The couple didn't want just a physical relationship, they wanted to play. Each time they met they enacted a different variation on the Oedipus complex. In most variants Abelarda acted as mother and Eloíso played her diapered, pacifier-sucking infant. As the play progressed, the characters sought bigger thrills, and their metadramas became increasingly violent and culminated when Abelarda played out an abortion, killing her lover/fetus, then she committed suicide. In grotesque counterpoint to the bizarre, brutal actions of the characters, theme songs from "The Dick Van Dyke Show," "I Dream of Genie," "Woody Woodpecker," "The Mickey Mouse Club," and "The Munsters" played during scene transitions. Spectators enjoyed quirky, whimsical fun, but left with sickening lumps in their stomachs because the play portrayed a violent, dark side to fun and games.

Mexico City's Summer 1993 theatre season featured tremendous concern for understanding and coming to grips with reality. In some cases the reality was of a national significance, and in others the delving focused on individuals. People on the margins of society—homeless children, a Tarahumara Indian, poor laborers

from the state of Sinaloa—received the spotlight as readily as Pancho Villa. The symbiotic nature of past and present was represented over and over as a way of framing reality. Finally, the power of theatre itself as a tool to understand and affect reality was powerfully portrayed through metatheatre. *Grito de silencio* and *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* had admirable commercial success, each enjoying runs of well over a hundred performances. They combined entertainment value, first-rate aesthetics, and tremendous creativity. Their undergirding social messages undoubtedly moved many theatre-goers in socially significant ways. Mexico City's Summer 1993 theatre season featured performances which were thematically serious, technically brilliant, tremendously entertaining, markedly resourceful, and emotionally energetic. Unfortunately, most of the packed houses of the season belonged to theaters with "cupo limitado." The season's only major shortcoming was its meager number of spectators.

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Note

1. Since efforts to see every play during the Summer 1993 season would have been impossible, this article focuses on a cross-section of some of the season's most noteworthy plays.