



Astrid Hadad. *Faxes a Rumberta* en La Bodega—Mexico City, May 1994

## Theatre in Mexico: New Challenges, New Visions

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If generalizations might be drawn from the 1994 summer theatre scene in Mexico City, a period during which political and social spectacle achieved an historic level of dramatic tension, they would include the following: a decrease in the number of productions; an increase in the number of new, young theatre practitioners; violence, rape, and torture as recurring themes in plays where the characters consume a lot of alcohol; an increase in the number of works by a new generation, which explore male sexuality and desire, both hetero- and homosexual; and interest in traditional Mexican forms such as cabaret, *teatro de revista*, and *teatro de carpa*, upon which Mexican "performance art" is based. Perhaps the most salient characteristic is its diversity: in form (from realism to personal theatre; from lineal structure to performance art); in tone (black humor, tragedy, comedy); in origin of dramaturgy (national, international; classic to contemporary).

Mexico's economic recession continues to affect theatre attendance and production. To address this "crisis," in 1993 the National University's (UNAM) Center for Theatre and Dance instituted three projects to support a wider variety of artists and aesthetic projects while searching for new audiences; *Grandes Directores del Teatro Universitario*, *Dramaturgia Nacional*, and *Teatro Arte Santa Catarina*. Within the first, Ludwig Margules directed two Harold Pinter plays: *Tiempo de fiesta*, and *Luz de luna*, both translated by Carlos Fuentes. Juxtaposed, the two short pieces describe the violence and the decadence of a society in decline and the existential anguish of man as he faces death. With reference to the present political turmoil from which certain social classes are perceived as sheltered, these pieces underscore a lack of communication on both the individual and collective levels.

The spectator contemplates similar concerns in *El cerco de la cabra dorada* by Hugo Argüelles and *Infidencias* by Ignacio Solares, both produced by the second UNAM project which showcases Mexican playwrights. Argüelles' tragedy *El cerco*, directed by Bruno Bert, features a female protagonist trapped

not only by a phallogocentric system, but also within her compulsive nature. According to Argüelles' reading of Freud, this "female" nature corresponds to the two male characters' ambitious natures. Her possessiveness, however, dominates, causing her to destroy all around her, including her unborn child; suicide is her only escape. *Infidencias*, directed by film director Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, inverts the binary opposition female-passive/male-active while placing the lack of communication between husband and wife in the context of a meditation on death and afterlife. Hermosillo's cinematographic vision creates a space in which the couple is suspended in Purgatory as they journey from Life to a possible encounter with God. Their bedroom, where she dies while sleeping and they meet in the afterlife, is slowly cleared of objects (furniture) to symbolize the couple's movement from one world to the next. However, even in death, marital problems haunt them: her adultery, his extreme jealousy and passivity, their unfulfilled desires. Nostalgic review of unfulfilled desires is also the theme of Luis Eduardo Reyes' *El viejo de la Condesa*. In the fashionable Mexican neighborhood of Hipódromo Condesa, an elderly protagonist acts out a dream of racing his horse in the hipódromo for which this *colonia* was named. The scenography by Carlos Trejo reproduces the indoor patio of an Art Deco home that the old man's children want to sell to the Japanese and Gringos in the consumerist spirit of NAFTA. New generations, different values, different dreams.

In terms of scenography, one of the most interesting productions was Alejandro Luna's work in Jesús González Dávila's *Luna negra* directed by Raúl Zermeflo and acted by UNAM theatre students. Luna recreates a Sonoran desert town complete with a gas station-saloon, an antique juke box, a 1950s truck that moves characters on and off stage, and an abandoned ranch house whose back door opens to the outside of the theatre—all recreating the complex universe of that northern Mexican state. Unfortunately, the originality of his set was not matched in the representation or direction of characters and action, as the inhabitants of this difficult terrain fall into stereotypes of violent, uncivilized, sexually aberrant beings who live in a desperate culture where guns and alcohol abound, and intelligence and love are scarce.

Often, attempts to represent on the Mexico City stage either the urban popular classes or life in the provinces fall into clichés that were exploited in Mexican cinema in decades past. Such was the case of *La infamia*, written by Oscar Liera, directed by Germán Blandó, and presented in the UNAM program supporting new or relatively unknown theatre practitioners in Teatro Santa Catarina in Coyoacán. The consumption of beer and uncontrolled physical violence, especially victimizing a pathetically passive wife, mark the action of this play set in a humble farm house complete with live roosters, a tattered couch,

and straw rugs. The attempt to theorize and represent on stage the connection between geography and the sociological development of a community often does not move past established stereotypes. Nonetheless, during recent years, there has been a marked interest in representing social and geographic marginal groups on Mexico City stages. Such is the case of *Los tres reyes vagos*, first produced in 1993 in the outdoor patio of Los Cárceles de la Perpetua in Mexico City's historic center, and in 1994 in Chapultepec Park—both easily accessible to a more "popular" audience than may frequent UNAM theatres. Written and directed by Hugo Fragozzo, *Los tres reyes vagos* comically (and uncritically) portrays three street-types: three drug-toking young men and a young female prostitute. The men, in search of money for drugs and alcohol, pose as the Three Wise Men in Mexico City's Alameda to be photographed with children at Christmas time. Unsuccessful, they move on to the wealthy neighborhood of Polanco to rob a young, stereotyped, yuppy family. According to the spectators' response, the play successfully entertained the overflow audiences.

Few have been the cases where intelligence, wit, and humor are bestowed upon "popular" characters. An exception is Luis Eduardo Reyes' *Las mil traumas* presented in *Teatro Arte Santa Catarina* and to be included in the UNAM's program in Foro Sor Juana. The protagonist is a female wrestler whose friends include *Superbarrio*, an actual Mexican wrestler who has emerged on the social and political stage as a champion of the urban poor. A series of characters such as a priest, the husband of a feminist, and a homeless man populate the sparsely decorated stage, where the scenery consists only of four posts and the ropes of a wrestling ring that during the ninety-minute play are reconfigured to represent street scenes, a bedroom, and a confessional. Speaking in Mexico City street talk that is rich in *albures*, words and phrases with double (often sexual) meanings, each character demonstrates a critical vision of the contemporary social and political panorama in Mexico; they are conscious of the interworkings of the power structure that maintains them in the margins of Mexican society. The female protagonist demonstrates an ability to seek a lifestyle suitable to her needs and desires within the harsh reality of the poor barrios of Mexico City.

A growing interest in developing relationships between Mexico City theatres and regional theatre is manifested in the number of recognized regional theatre, in the *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes's* program to "decentralize" and support regional theatre and festivals, and in the increase in cooperative efforts between practitioners from the capital and the states. For example, one of the most interesting productions of the summer was Sabina Berman's *Arux*, a recreation of the myth of Arux, a Mayan midget-god. Directed by María Alicia Martínez Medrano, known for her work with indigenous groups in various Mexican states, the play counted on the performances of 250 young actors of the Laboratorio de

Xocen (a village near Valladolid, Yucatán). *Arux* was staged in a clearing in the jungle and attended almost exclusively by members of local communities, whose first language continues to be Mayan. Spoken in both Spanish and Mayan and spiced with references to actual political and social events in Mexico, *Arux* captured and reproduced the vital presence of myth and ritual in the daily existence of Mayan culture, evidenced by the intensity of the actor's work and the audience's enthusiastic reaction to and interaction with the text.

The exploration of the relationship between social classes and ethnic groups as a theme in Mexican theatre is joined by a noticeable preoccupation with violence, especially rape and torture. During this theatre season, Victor Hugo Rascón Banda's *Homicidio calificado* and Leonor Azcárate's *Trabajo sucio*, both directed by Enrique Pineda, as well as González Dávila's *Luna negra* directed by Raúl Zermeflo, all brought to the stage within the framework of a realism bordering on melodrama the violence that plagues Mexican society. *Homicidio calificado* recounts the true story of police brutality and racism in Dallas, TX, where in 1973 a young Mexican boy was killed by a policeman while being questioned about a \$10 robbery of a gas station. Found guilty, the officer was sentenced to three years in prison and a \$20 fine. In this second version of Rascón Banda's *El caso Santos*, now on stage in Dallas, the author underscores the universality and timeliness of the theme. *Trabajo sucio* and *Luna negra*, according to their directors, are not designed to provoke critical analysis, but rather seek a visceral response by reproducing in the spectator shock, terror, and a sense of helplessness of the violated body. However, the black humor and the repetition of images of violated nude bodies can have the opposite effect, and the images often result in clichés.

Several plays utilized a more poetic and metaphoric style in order to explore not only the reality of this violence, but its effect upon the individual and upon human relationships. *La condesa sangrienta*, written and directed by Raquel Araujo and performed by the theatre group La Rendija in the Patio de los Arcos of the 16th century convent of Carmen, is an oneiric journey into the realm of sexual desire, passion, and spirituality of the individual. In this example of *teatro personal*, in which the narration of a "story" is not the objective, a series of seemingly unconnected images created by bodies in motion is complemented by well integrated slides, music, and a voice (taped) that direct the spectator to abandon preconceived notions and to engage in a personal interior journey. The story of the Condesa Sangrienta, whose sadomasochism and legendary appetite for young virgins have been the subject of a variety of literary works, serves as a pretext for this exploration into the nature of human sexuality and desire within the context of a repressive society that renders impossible communication within and between individuals.

This exceptional and original work is joined by other Mexican and foreign texts that also opt for a metaphoric style to represent themes. A highly imaginative *puesta en escena* characterized Bernardo Galindo's version of Beckett's *Fin del partido*, presented in Teatro Santa Catarina. Also in this theatre, *La órbita del hombre*, by young Mexican playwright and director Victor Weinstock (whose *De nudos* was also being staged this summer), utilizes the story of a Soviet cosmonaut lost in space as a metaphor for Man's extreme solitude and isolation, as well as to postulate Death as a confirmation of Life. *Hombre mirando hombres*, featured in the alternative art gallery *Zona*, is a multimedia show (photography and performance art) permitting a reflection on the male body "a partir de la nueva realidad impuesta por los logros de los movimientos feministas en todas partes."

Martín Acosta and Luis Mario Moncada chose to adapt to the stage several texts by James Joyce, underscoring the universality of that author's existential explorations within a culture of guilt and repression. In *Cartas al artista adolescente*, the director and all-male cast seek to articulate "un universo masculino sin clichés." Purposefully selecting the intimate theatre space of La Gruta, each character utilizes Joycean interior monologue and flow of consciousness to narrate memories of a painful passage from childhood through adolescence to adulthood in times and spaces marked by religion and a movement away from God, here conceived as vital energy.

The minimal scenery and excellent acting and direction of *Cartas* characterize a series of plays produced by a young generation of theatre practitioners who are making their presence known on the Mexican stage. Antonio Crestani directs Ignacio Solares' *Tréptico*, a timely comedy that explores the desire for Truth in contemporary Mexican politics, with direct references to the characters and circumstances of the historic elections and widespread social unrest of 1994. The protagonist looks and speaks alarmingly (hilariously) like former President Salinas de Gortari. Alluding to the ruling party's (PRI) 65-year control of the government, this play foregrounds *el dedazo*, the "dictatorial" selection by the President of his successor. *Tréptico*, however, parodies not only the political system and players, but also the theatrical form of tragedy as it celebrates satire as a valid and vital "conscious-raising" device in a political spectacle dominated by official rhetoric.

In a more serious tone, but also pointing to the corruption inherent in Mexico's political system, Philippe Amand directed Jesús González Dávila's *La fábrica de los juguetes*, written shortly after and based on the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre of students by the Mexican army. Forgotten beings from a time past with wounds that never heal exist in limbo, in a toy factory, where their innocence was destroyed by a violence that continues to exist despite their

sacrifice. Poetic language and metaphoric images attempt to reach a new generation of young Mexicans for whom, according to many critics, 1968 has little meaning, and who are products of historic amnesia and materialism that leave them seemingly indifferent to the increasing violence, corruption, and uncertainty in contemporary Mexico.

Both *La fábrica* and *Este paisaje de Elenas* were produced in the Núcleo de Estudios Teatrales (NET) by young theatre students. Also choosing "older" texts to speak to a younger generation, in *Este paisaje de Elenas* Sandra Félix juxtaposes three one-act Elena Garro plays: *Andarse por las ramas*, *La señora en su balcón*, and *Un hogar sólido*. With excellent direction and acting and creatively staged in a passageway of the NET, *Este paisaje de Elenas* won the 1994 Concurso Teatro Elena Garro and will travel within Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Félix's work, an example of increased interest in Garro, captures that author's poetic language and subtle humor as she skillfully underscores the timelessness of Garro's feminist critique of Mexican society.

In Mexico, many theatre practitioners lament the emptiness of repeated formulas, overused theatre language no longer capable of articulating the complexities of contemporary Mexican society within the global context. Consequently, interest has risen in reviving the forms of *teatro de carpa*, *cabaret*, and *teatro de revista*, as well as in cultivating future audiences through children's theatre. Both efforts were visible this summer. Artists such as Jesusa Rodríguez and Astrid Hadad continue to draw on those theatre forms popular during the latter part of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. In her theatre-bar, *El hábito*, Rodríguez directs her cabaret-style adapted version of the farce *Supermachos*, a 1965 text by the well-known caricaturist and political satirist Rius featuring characters from the 1994 political scene. In her show, *Faxes a Rumberta*, Astrid Hadad recuperates the figure of Lucha Reyes, interpreter of *rancheras* and *boleros*, cabaret and movie star of the 1930s and 1940s legendary for her *bravia* style and strong personality. In her performance, Hadad utilizes her body, her voice and the lyrics of popular Mexican songs, her costumes (such as a *china poblana* skirt with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe worn with a lacy corset), a removable moustache, and a variety of objects from popular culture to recreate layers of meaning through cultural codes inscribed on the female body. Biting and hilarious, Hadad's show is a wonderful example of Mexican performance art that draws on Mexican art forms and is attracting international attention. This interest in cabaret, *revista* and *carpa*, all "popular" scenic forms whose flexible structures provide contact with the audience that many artists are seeking, was also manifested in the Foro Shakespeare's *Primer encuentro de sketcheros*. The goal was to "recrear una manifestación popular," the sketch, a brief piece that tells a story with political and social satire, and in

which the double meanings of the words and the *albures* are central forms of expression. The week-long program included a conference and workshops, and five shows, each featuring at least six individual performers or groups with moderators such as Carlos Monsiváis, Jesusa Rodríguez, and Alejandro Aura. *Semana Cultural de Arte-Nativo* in El Poliforum Siqueros offered a week of local and international performance artists, and the Museo de Chopo featured *Quinto Encuentro de Teatro Independiente*, providing space for Mexico City theatre groups seeking independence from traditional spaces, structures, and commercial interests.

With a proposal to reach a "different" audience, *El eterno femenino* by Rosario Castellanos was presented in the Auditorio Nacional de la Secretaría de Hacienda, and . . . *Y Liz, ¡sí trata!* in Teatro Isabela Corona, both located in the working class neighborhoods of Tlatelolco. In the first, Lourdes Mendoza selects the second act of this rarely represented piece and adds additional scenes that update the content to reflect the Mexican woman of the 1990s, and underscore the "eternal" nature of Castellanos' feminist commentary. In . . . *Y Liz*, Germán Castillo creates a *teatro del barrio* with an adaptation of works by Aristófanes that maintains the structure of classical style, but replaces the language with the colloquial Spanish of Mexico City.

The plays, playwrights, and directors reviewed here, heterogenous in their perception of Mexican reality and their concept of and approach to escenic arts, provide an overview of the diversity of aesthetic proposals being offered on the contemporary Mexican stage—a theatre perhaps most characterized by its continued connection to the spectacle of Mexican political and social reality.

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*La fábrica de los juguetes*. De Jesús González Dávila. Dir.: Plilepe Amand. Mexico City, Aug. 1994