



La fábrica de juguetes. Por Los Estudiantes del Nucleo de Estudios Teatrales. Mexico City  
Fotografía José Jorge Carreón

## Mexico City Theatre: Summer of 1994

### Timothy G. Compton

The vigor and variety of Mexico City's summer of 1994 theatre offerings matched the vitality of the city itself. Analysis of plays listed in a single edition of *Tiempo libre* gives an indication of the season's abundance and diversity. The July 28-August 3 edition lists 72 full-length plays for adults and 30 for children. Of the adult plays, 41 were authored by Mexicans, while the others were adaptations or straight translations of English, Spanish, Irish, French, American, Greek, Russian, Uruguayan, Italian, Danish, and German works. Classic names, including Shakespeare, Sartre, Wilder, Cervantes, and Chekov dominate the listing of "foreign" plays. In general, deceased Mexican playwrights are apparently without honor in their own country—nary a play by Usigli, Basurto, or Villaurrutia was produced. Emilio Carballido, Willebaldo López, Alejandro Licona and the late Oscar Liera seem to be the "classic" Mexican names on the list. Most of the Mexican authors are relative newcomers or unknowns.

Hugo Argüelles, Ignacio Solares, and Jesús González Dávila enjoyed banner seasons, with multiple plays staged. Sabina Berman's *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, with a slightly modified cast from 1993, continued its commercial success. The season's grandest production was a pair of Harold Pinter plays, *Moonlight* and *Party Time*, translated by Carlos Fuentes and directed by Ludwig Margules on one of UNAM's main stages. Critics either raved or disparaged these plays with their extremely sophisticated (and expensive) special effects. Children's plays, dominated by traditional European fairy tales, featured some of the season's most charming visual effects, such as in *Así soy yo* by Leticia Colina and *Compañero de viaje*, a play adapted from Hans Christian Anderson by Rosa María Ruiz. The Foro Shakespeare theater sponsored and housed *Los mirones son de palo: Primer encuentro de sketcheros*, one of the season's notable events. On five different nights seven to ten groups or individuals (some of whose names are quite well-known, such as Enrique Alonso and Jesusa Rodríguez) presented sketches. Unfortunately, cheap humor and bad taste overwhelmed the moments

of classic sketch; nevertheless, the idea and effort were significant, and the house was packed. In this critic's opinion, most of the season's outstanding offerings took place on smaller stages, unfortunately with small audiences.<sup>1</sup>

Of the offerings written by Mexicans, metaphysics, metatheatre and Mexico constituted three of the season's major defining attributes. Three plays illustrate the season's penchant for metaphysics—*Infidencias*, *Las puertas*, and *Morir, dormir, soñar*. The first is a play by novelist Ignacio Solares, whose star as a dramatist has been rising consistently in recent years. In *Infidencias*, with its cast of two, renowned actress Martha Navarro played the part of "Ella," a widow of several years who has adjusted happily to life alone. After a normal evening's routine she retires to her bed, awakening with her deceased husband sitting calmly at her bedside. She comes to realize that her heart has stopped beating and that death bears a remarkable resemblance to life. Her relationship with "El" in particular remains similar, in that he subtly dominates and manipulates her emotionally. Envy, jealousy and humiliation extend beyond the grave. The play's title reflects the extra knowledge he has gained in death, including information regarding her intimate life which he now holds against her. Eventually she faces the metaphysical decision of staying with "El" or going toward light flooding out of what had been her bathroom. The Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz theatre at UNAM greatly enhanced the production of *Infidencias*, given that most of its seating precipitously overlooks the stage from a balcony. Spectators miss much of the action unless they lean over a rail to observe, giving the sensation of eavesdropping on highly personal interactions. *Infidencias* constituted movie director Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's first directing effort for the stage. Accordingly, some of the visual effects had movie-like qualities, such as sudden evaporation of household wares. This play featured convincing ambiance, brilliant lighting and special effects, and a disquieting interpretation of the afterlife.

*Las puertas* is a monologue written by Miguel Angel Montiel based on texts by Juan José Arreola. The dramatic premise of the play is the first day on the job of a radio talk show host whose show aims to help people grow closer to God. As she prepares for the program she voices deep philosophical concerns regarding God's existence and man's place on the Earth. Eventually she gains comfort, and finds that her musings constituted her first program—a smashing success. Skilled variety in lighting, music, dramatic pace, costume accessories, body movements, facial expressions, and speech kept monotony out of the monologue. In fact, Martha Torrecillas's performance was masterful in conjunction with equally expert dramatic effects, even within obvious financial restraints.

The first graduating class of the Foro de la Ribera theatre school staged *Morir, dormir, soñar: Crímenes Shakespearianos*. Two of the school's faculty, David Olguin and Consuelo Garrido, conceived the drama based on Shakespearean theatre's most famous crimes. They translated portions of *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and *Othello*, then linked them through Hamlet. As the Danish prince anguishes over whether to be or not, Yorick manages to bring crimes from the above plays to life. First, he sees the three crimes conceived and planned, then witnesses their execution, and finally observes the terrible consequences of the misdeeds on the perpetrators. The entire cast stayed on the stage at all times, staying wax-museum-still except when portraying their Shakespearean scene. Brilliant red curtains constituted the performance's only scenery, highlighting the timelessness and universality of the themes. Despite a slow start, *Morir, dormir, soñar's* basic premise, scenery, acting, and thematics made it a stellar production.

Metatheatre left a strong mark on the season, manifesting itself in a variety of forms. *Madeja*, a short play by young playwright Julieta Bracho, was the season's most overtly metatheatrical play. Staged as an exercise at the Foro de la Ribera theatre school, director Mar Siller assembled an excellent cast and orchestrated a remarkably mature production. In the play, a man and a woman have a serious, yet somewhat generic dialogue regarding their relationship. A projection of the woman in the past eavesdrops, then becomes distracted, bounces a ball and later plays with a scarf behind them. The man suddenly turns to an audience member and complains bitterly about the distractions of the dancer and the repetitive, sometimes corny lines of the dialogue. The audience member, actually the director of the metaplay, joins them on the stage, sternly insisting that the playwright is brilliant, that the session is going well, that as director, he has a complete vision of the play that the actor obviously lacks, etc. Moments later another audience member/director interrupts the practice and joins them on the stage. Her motherly, compassionate style contrasts markedly from the first. A third director emerges more concerned about her looks than the play, and a fourth just wants to move the play along. The metaplay's tone turns with each director, starting with melodrama and ending with slapstick farce. *Madeja* brilliantly highlights the complex relationships inherent to all performances—playwrights, actors and directors all interact.

Metatheatre also underscored *¿Qué si me duele? ¡Sí!* by Adam Guevara. This play turns on the idea that history repeats itself. In 1968, a cast and crew is filming on the outskirts of Mexico City a movie about the Mexican revolution. Revolutionary characters illustrate either the virtues of truth, democracy, love and tolerance, or the opposing vices of prevarication, despotism, selfishness, and bigotry. The same virtues and vices manifest themselves in the complex power

struggles between actors, the director, and management. Furthermore, the conflicts mirror those occurring in the city; news of student uprisings and eventually of the tragic massacre at Tlatelolco periodically reach the actors. The play ends with a loud speaker voice announcing: "¡Corte! Quedamos." This 1994 inference implies that the central issues of the Revolution and 1968 continue unresolved, especially in light of the charges of conspiracy and corruption which hung over Mexico's 1994 presidential campaign. Despite largely uninspired acting and running long, *¿Qué si me duele? ¡Sí!* featured a cleverly devised central idea, excellent use of the Centro Cultural Tecolote theatre's unusual space, and several original musical numbers.

Metatheatre saves *Vine, vi . . . y mejor me fui* by Willebaldo López from being merely a good portrait of a lower class family, complete with alcoholism, poverty, ignorance, domestic violence, and sometimes hilarious, sometimes foul language. The title takes the point of view of a baby born to a poor family, but who dies days later. In a bit of dark humor, during most of the play, a bundle symbolizing the baby's cadaver remains on the stage. A writer intrudes upon the family's bleak world hoping to find material for his work. Unlike the poor in the play, he sees the audience, sometimes interacting directly with spectators. The finest moment comes at the "intermission." House lights rise, but the actors stay on the stage, saying that the poor never get a break. The family's patriarch, who makes and sells sandwiches for a living, hawks his wares to the audience. Part-way through the "intermission," a power outage knocks out the lights and the rest of the play is performed by candlelight. As the writer composes, he sometimes tries to write about the family's bleak, amoral reality, while other times he invents. Toward the play's conclusion the line between fiction and reality blurs, as his writing seems to guide the other actors in their actions. Finally he burns his manuscript. Shadows of the play's characters project onto a sheet behind the flames. In this final, powerful image, the characters burn in hell for their absolute lack of humanity. This performance was extremely effective despite an obvious shoestring budget, a location far from the major theatre centers, the need to scurry off the stage to make way for a different performance, and just eight spectators.

Mexican culture laced many of the season's finest plays. The 1968 massacre at Tlatelolco was approached directly in *¿Qué si me duele? ¡Sí!* and indirectly in Jesús González Dávila's *La fábrica de los juguetes*. This play features the victims of the massacre agonizing over what their lives could have been, and striving to make contact with the living world so their tragedy will not be forgotten. The "sexta generación de actores" of the Núcleo de Estudios Teatrales performed the play in the school's small, unique theatre. Trap doors, moving walls, surprise stage entrances, and hiding places combined with

diminished light, effective make up, and supernatural costumes to give the play an otherworldly feel. Excellent acting communicated an almost tangible sense of despair resulting from the massacre.

Ignacio Solares' *Tríptico* looked daringly and condemningly at corrupt Mexican politics and politicians. An outgoing politician, corrupt, self-serving, manipulative, and rarely sober, calls on a ghostwriter/historian to help write his memoirs of public service. Interviews and writing sessions ensue, but the imaginative and idealistic outlook of the writer muddies the waters. He insists that finding truth in history is impossible, so he writes what could or perhaps should have happened, and what could happen *if* the politician had integrity, were committed to democracy, or cared about Mexico. These daydreams spring to life in ingenious television newscasts and on the stage, but are periodically interrupted by the stark reality of an increasingly inebriated politician wanting to leave a book of fantasy memoirs. By play's end the reputation of history being objective and truthful has taken a serious beating, at least in Mexican politics. Mexican politics and politicians, of course, do no better. The performances of Luis Mario Moncada and Miguel Flores were absolutely brilliant, as was the use of space and props. Of particular note was the resourceful use of three tables, each a different size, in four different configurations for vastly differing effects. This play was much more than an exposé on politics and a treatise on historical writing—it was excellent theatre.

Despite the traditional ongoing crisis of meager audience sizes (especially during the rainy season), Mexico City's theatre world continues to generate performances of great merit. There seems to be a proliferation of theatre schools independent of government subsidies that produce excellent performances and actors. Small, unique theatre spaces also seem to be propagating, creating opportunities for audiences to enjoy unusual intimacy and challenging directors and stage crews to be resourceful and imaginative. Tremendous creativity, excellent acting performances, complex yet entertaining texts, and compelling thematics characterize the best of the summer 1994 theatre season in Mexico City. Given the paltry budgets and scant audiences most plays faced, their excellence seems nothing short of miraculous.

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## Note

1. Given the numerous offerings of the season, this review highlights only a few of the season's outstanding productions.