

Mexico City Theatre: Summers 1995 and 1996

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Several significant initiatives, a celebration of the 300th anniversary of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's death, a number of plays dealing with homosexuality and Aids, and a general continuing vibrancy marked the 1995 summer theatre season in Mexico City. On any given week spectators could choose from over one hundred offerings, the vast majority of which were written by Mexicans. Other plays were primarily classics from the United States, Spain, Germany, Denmark, Russia, England, and ancient Greece. Roughly half of the offerings by Mexicans were by relatively unknown, living playwrights; better known playwrights also had works presented, including Hugo Argüelles, Elena Garro, Vicente Leñero, José Ramón Enríquez, Jorge Ibargüengoitia, Oscar Liera, Ignacio Solares, and Xavier Villaurrutia.¹

One of the season's most noteworthy initiatives was a project trumpeted as "Teatro Clandestino." The Casa del Teatro, a cultural center headed by Luis de Tavira housing a small performing arts school as well as an intimate experimental theatre, sponsored the undertaking. Four plays performed weekly comprised the season's project: *La manta que las cobija* by José Ramón Enríquez on Sundays, *Todos somos Marcos* by Vicente Leñero on Mondays, *Mexican Dream* by Osvaldo Dragún on Tuesdays, and *Los ejecutivos* by Sergio Celis on Wednesdays. In this initiative, prominent playwrights teamed with equally prominent directors (such as de Tavira himself) and actors. According to the handbill, Clandestino aimed to produce plays dealing with current events in Mexico deemed *urgentes* in the words of the handbill. Politics, economic crises, Aids, drug traffic and abuse, poverty, and other topics constituted the grist of the venture's thematics. It was a very encouraging sign that two of the plays were sold out during my stay in Mexico City.

Mexican Dream hinged on a mysterious, symbolic character who represented pre-colombian cultures. Literally burdened with an enormous bundle on his bent back, he entrusted care of *la pirámide* to a modern Mexican

watchman. The watchman and other modern-day Mexicans sold out their responsibility for personal monetary gain or power, and a grotesque caricature of an American from the University of Chicago happily bought Mexico out. Ironically, given the tenor of the handbill, one would have expected a more realistic portrayal of Mexican problems, although the play did symbolically deal with NAFTA, corruption, and the plight of indigenous peoples. Even if it wasn't exactly *urgente* and it definitely was not clandestine, it was good theatre, with excellent acting, an unusual space used to its fullest, and some fine visual effects, including puppet theatre projections onto a screen from backstage, moments of absolute blackout, bathing of the scene in blood-like red, and trails of fire climbing the sides of the stage/pyramid.

Mexico's celebration honoring Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz on the 300th anniversary of her death included a number of theatre productions, most of which were billed as *espectáculos*. *Sueño del sueño*, by Luis Torner and Margie Bermejo, featured a rich combination of narration regarding the Tenth Muse's life, dramatic representations of key moments thereof, and readings of her poetry, exquisitely accompanied by on-stage classical guitar and vocal music from Sor Juana's era. The play was performed at the Centro Cultural Helénico's Capilla. This performance space is literally an elegant, pre-twentieth century chapel, complete with pews and a graceful double-tiered set of stone arches between spectators and stage. The performance was a multidimensional immersion into Sor Juana's world.

A play by Francisco de Hoyos, *Sor Juana sin hombres*, featured a very different approach to the poet. Written for young people, it offered a feminist message through metatheatre. It showed teenage school girls preparing a play on Sor Juana, but facing difficulties similar to some the poet herself faced. Inspired by her life and poetry they strive to overcome limitations they face. *Levantando el polvo*, another play by de Hoyos, examined the Conquest with similar didactic purpose and target audience. Once again metatheatre was the vehicle — a historian's writings came to life center stage. His idea was to revise history to how he wishes it had been; thus, the cruel Spaniards were put in their place, and Cuauhtémoc ended up scorching Cortés' feet. This play was excessive in its pandering to its youthful target audience, featuring an overabundance of smart-aleck modern day Mexicanisms (and profanity), an absurd presentation of the entire population of Cempoala being flamboyantly gay, and an inexcusable portrayal of Malinche as a dizzy, giggling airhead. Significantly, in a conversation with the playwright, he confided that he had given the actors more freedom than he may have wished, and a reading of the script did indeed reveal that the excesses this critic deplored had been added by the actors. The performance

also made notable changes to the play's ending, making it heavily pro-Aztec, whereas the original script stays neutral, calling for tolerance. This play was the best-attended play I saw of the season; de Hoyos is doing significant work in cultivating a taste for theatre in upcoming generations, although the actual performance of this play left much to be desired.

Another hopeful initiative was billed as "El Arrebato, Repertorio de Farsas." If successful, this would be significant, for Mexico has been notoriously lacking in stable theatre groups over the years, and even more lacking in repertory theatre groups. This group's offerings this season consisted of *Los famosos culpables* by Malú Huacuja, *El pecado de tu madre* by Sabina Berman, and *Secuestros mexicanos* by Silvia Cruz. Most of the members of the group have full-time jobs outside theatre, so their start-up period need not immediately be fantastically successful. Time will tell whether El Arrebato will become a long-term venture, as its members hope.

On the subject of longevity, several excellent plays had runs continuing or returning from prior years, including *¿Qué si me duele? ¡Sí!* by Adam Guevara,² *Mejor jugamos* by Rafael Pimentel, and *Este paisaje de Elenas*, a triptych of short plays by Elena Garro.³ Critics rightly granted *Este paisaje* awards in 1994. Witnessing its performance is a unique experience for any spectator. The intimate theatre of the Núcleo de Estudios Teatrales became even smaller by reorienting the performance 90 degrees toward the theatre dressing rooms, rendering useless the usual audience seats. Spectators instead crowded onto minimal, uncomfortable (and along the top row potentially dangerous) risers, positioned to take in a unique performance space perhaps ten feet wide and sixty feet deep. (Spectator seating was actually located in the area normally used as a dressing room, relegating the actors to makeshift, cramped quarters up a vertiginously spiral staircase on the second floor.) The unique theatre space combined with various uses of lights, highly stylized acting, striking costuming, and intermittent use of fog to create fantastic (in both the senses of not real and excellent) visual effects. For example, in one scene, absolute darkness in the first 40 feet of the stage combined with bright lights from either side of the stage in the distance, creating an effect strikingly similar to cinema. All the staging, acting, and effects enhanced Garro's poetic, stylized texts. The night I saw the performance, twenty-two actors gave a master performance to a packed house of twenty-six cramped spectators, grateful they had not been among the 30-40 people turned away for lack of seating.

Mejor jugamos has enjoyed intermittent runs at various theatres over the last three years. Written and directed by UNAM's Rafael Pimentel, it is



La lucha con el ángel.



La cueva de Montesinos.



El medio pelo.



La visita del ángel.

an excellent play for children which played this season to standing-room-only audiences at the Foro Teatro Contemporáneo.⁴ The play featured a competition between actors playing a number of games, almost all of them Mexican. In addition to entertaining, *Mejor jugamos* cajoled children and their parents to play some of the games featured in the play instead of turning on their television sets and video games. The play also offered a costumbrista window into the world of traditional Mexican children games.

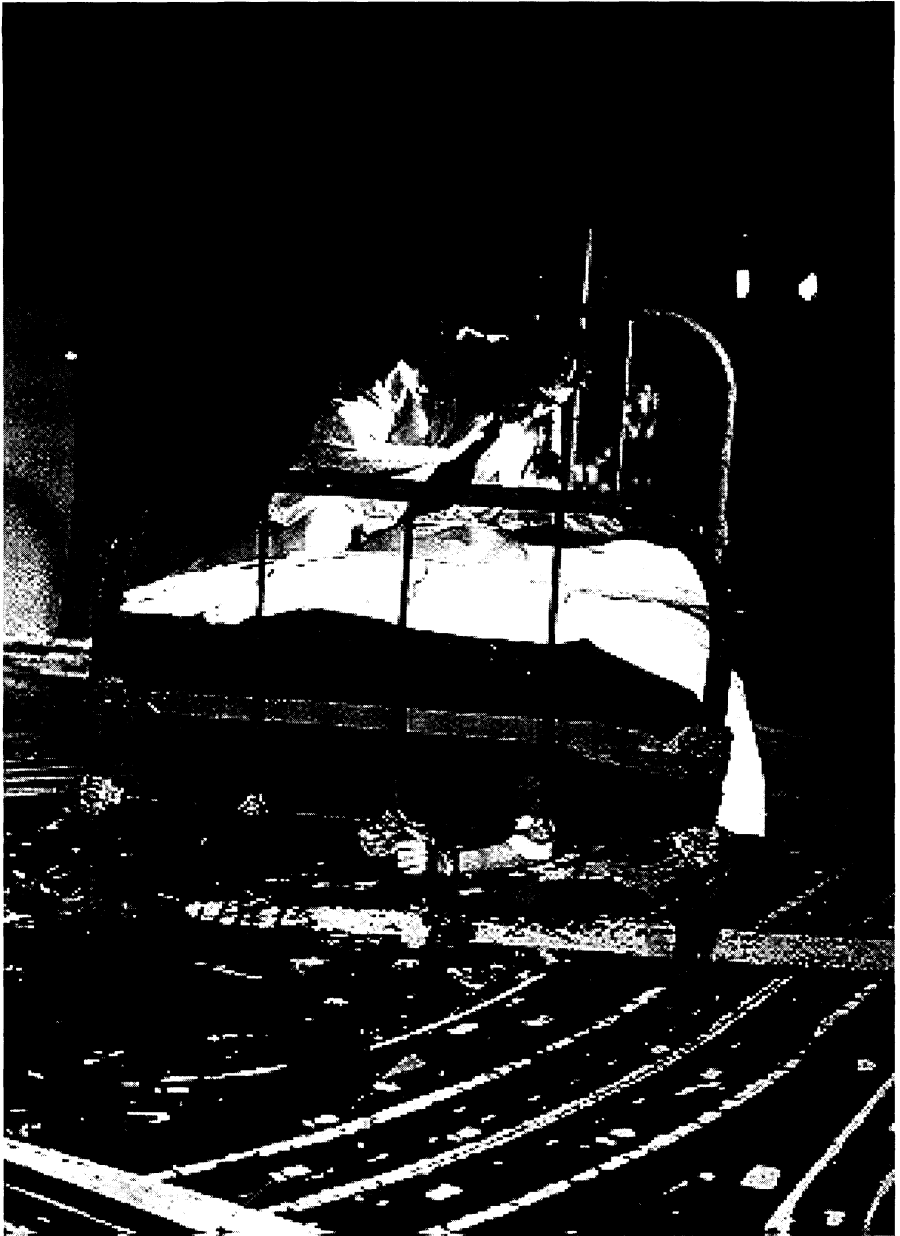
Homosexuality was a topic in a number of plays, some of which also explored the issue of Aids. In several cases the treatment of homosexuality was grotesque, caricatured and inexcusable, such as in *Levantando el polvo* (mentioned above) and a flawed version of *Cúcara y Mácara* by Oscar Liera. Other plays treated it thoughtfully. One of the most subtle was *La lucha con el ángel* by Jorge Ibarguengoitia. Students of the Foro Teatro Contemporáneo school gave sterling performances in the premiere of this play written 40 years prior. Alina Baron and Enrique Arreola turned in particularly noteworthy performances as the sudden wife and neighbor, respectively, of Alberto, a colorless, aimless, insecure young man. During most of the play Arreola's character shrewdly communicated, without verbal cues, that he felt threatened by the presence of Alberto's bride. He finally confronted his demons outright, asking his neighbor if he was rejecting him due to his homosexuality. He had given no prior indication of his sexual preference, and Alberto never gave a definitive answer; the play convincingly showed the psychological trauma of homosexuality. Perhaps it was effective because it was but one of many topics explored in the play, along with family relationships, happiness, love, alcoholism, unemployment, jealousy, and escapism. This performance used several simple but effective props to fine dramatic effect. For example, Alberto often picked up a vase before leaving the apartment, mentioning that he would sell it to soften the newlyweds' financial stress. Each subsequent scene found it back in the apartment, each time more strongly symbolizing his pathetic ineptitude. Each act wound painfully down with acid, unresolved, conjugal bickering, followed by unhappy silence and dimmed lights. At the end of each act Alberto turned on a television set, producing loud static and the stark light of an empty television screen. It represented well the hollow refuge into which people flee when life is not going well. *La lucha con el ángel* enjoyed a respectable run of over fifty performances.

Other outstanding performances for the season included *La visita del ángel* by Vicente Leñero, *La cueva de Montesinos* by José Ramón Enríquez, *Paisaje interior* by Estela Leñero, and *El medio pelo*, by Antonio González Caballero. Leñero's *La visita del ángel* was directed by Ignacio

Retes, who also had a major role in the play. The lobby was decked out with photos, handbills, reviews, and miniature sets as part of a tribute to Retes, honoring him for 50 years of involvement in Mexican theatre. This performance of *La visita* was appetizingly presented in UNAM's Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Spectators familiar with the theatre were surprised to find that the main floor entrance was inaccessible. Alejandro Luna, one of Mexico's finest set designers, created an absolutely realistic apartment (including a kitchen sink with running water) on a stage somehow suspended 20 feet above the main stage. As they entered, spectators found themselves face to face with a brick wall — a literal fourth wall — which was raised for the performance. The play's first 19 minutes were unforgettable. Not a word was spoken. A grandmother returned home, painstakingly chopped vegetables, and processed them into soup, literally. The audience responded to the prolonged silence and mundane culinary actions with occasional nervous laughter, perhaps because they could have stayed home to see the same thing. On the other hand, showcasing routine daily tasks dignified them and suggested that visual poetry can be all around us. She and her husband eventually received a visit from their dynamo of a granddaughter, played by Leñero's daughter Eugenia. Her impulsiveness and incessant jabbering formed a stark contrast to the serene, measured existence of her grandparents. *La visita del ángel* featured stunning staging, excellent acting, nimble dialogue, provocative aromas, and a memorable pacing shifts.

Estela Leñero, another daughter of Vicente, wrote and directed *Paisaje interior*, an intense play featuring two resilient women characters in search of their identity, fighting to survive and make a difference in a hostile world. In addition to the creation of two memorable characters, one of the play's outstanding characteristics was its symbolic use of stage props. A bed was used not only to sleep on, but also to signify a jail by crouching behind the bars of the headboard, and a tunnel by crawling underneath it. A revolving door combined with strategic lighting signified the passing of time. A large wardrobe transported the characters back and forth in time, a tree represented an apartment building, a fishbowl doubled as a sink, and other props were equally effective. Within a very small performance space, the audience was transported numerous times with the actresses through time and space. *Paisaje interior*, a play of ambiance, featuring intense personalities, actions, and emotions, drew spectators into a fascinating interior world of two unique women.

La cueva de Montesinos was at once a frivolous, sensual romp, a highly intellectual, philosophical treatise, and a tribute to (and criticism of) modern, consumer, popular culture. Written and directed by José Ramón



Paisaje interior.

Enriquez and performed primarily by graduating students from UNAM's school of acting, *La cueva* was far too dense to take in during a single performance. It was a collage of texts from Heraclitus, the Bible, Cervantes, Calderón, and Valle Inclán. It featured incarnations of Barbie, Dorothy of *The Wizard of Oz* as a sensual mankiller, don Quixote, a leper wrapped in swathes of cloth from head to toe, a set of Siamese circus performer twins, and Jesus Christ, whose crucifixion finally slowed the play's pace and was as a moving climax. The play's carnival-like nature was facilitated by an "author" who, during much of the play filmed the action with a camcorder, the images of which were shown on a TV on the stage. He sprinkled the play with comments about modern, throwaway society, the ineffectiveness of language, and the artificiality of theatre and life. Many of the characters were aware they were characters, complaining about the playwright and interacting directly with the audience. The set was cleverly conceived, props took on different shapes and uses, original songs were sung powerfully, and the action was non-stop for nearly two hours. This was a take-no-prisoners barrage of images which showcased the considerable talents of a group of graduating students and treated spectators to an experience not unlike riding a roller coaster.

Not to be outdone, INBA's theatre school had some excellent performances as well. Their teaching facilities have moved across town to the fabulous, yet in many ways impractical, National Center for Performing Arts, which includes several state-of-the-art experimental theatres which were used for the first time during this season. A performance by a group of second year students constituted a strong contrast to *La cueva de Montesinos*. They performed *El medio pelo*, a play written in 1964 by Antonio González Caballero. Its strengths were its realism, a strong plot, psychology, and humorously stereotyped male characters. The key character was a fiercely arrogant widow from a city who overtly disdained the uncultured peasants around her, but ultimately met with humiliation. This difficult role, which melodrama could easily have ruined, was played subtly and magnificently by Menarda Vega Fragoso. As usual with INBA productions, the house was packed.

People continue to talk about the crisis which Mexican theatre has been suffering for the better part of a century. The quality of performances this season definitely varied widely — I saw performances ranging in quality from excruciatingly poor to outstanding. Although making a living in serious theatre continues to be a seriously difficult proposition, the summer 1995 theatre season proved that spectators in Mexico City had at their disposal abundant opportunities to see greatly diverse styles of quality theatre.

As of July 1996 the Teatro Clandestino project, trumpeted in the earlier season, had issued a manifesto and was presenting its third set of plays at the Casa del Teatro in Coyoacán. These plays are enjoying notable success, albeit with extremely limited space for spectators. Of far greater importance, the practice of the ideas espoused by the movement is spreading well beyond the walls of the Casa del Teatro, resulting in a number of socially committed, thematically contemporary, and artistically excellent plays.

The manifesto suggests that Teatro Clandestino in Mexico should deal with themes such as: “los temas de la política, de la justicia, del EZLN, del desbarajuste económico, del desempleo creciente, de la irritación ambiental, de la ecología, del sida, de los asaltos callejeros, de los abusos, de las violaciones, de la seguridad pública, del consumo y tráfico de drogas, de la pobreza que se extiende....”

The three plays from the official third cycle of Teatro Clandestino feature thematics well within the manifesto's suggestions. *Ley fuga*, by Jorge Celaya and directed by Octavio Trías, deals overtly with the issue of illegal immigration, and passively with poverty and the desperation of Mexico's lower classes. *Tabasco negro*, by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda and directed by Sandra Félix, brings to light environmental catastrophes generated by Pemex. It also focuses on issues related to abuse of power and control of information. *Las cenizas del poder* by Víctor Flores Olea and directed by José Ramón Enríquez, ponders the subject of political power focalized through the temptation to change laws disallowing presidential re-election. Each of these plays deals with subjects of absolutely contemporary concerns to Mexico today. Each is performed twice on a particular night of the week — Sundays, Mondays, and Tuesdays. It is a very encouraging sign for Mexican theatre that the official Teatro Clandestino movement has reached its third cycle, and that serious plays by and about Mexicans continue to draw spectators.

Many of the best plays of Mexico City's summer 1996 season exemplify the concepts undergirding the Teatro Clandestino movement, even though they have no formal tie to the movement.⁵ One clear example is *Krisis*, written and directed by Sabina Berman, whose star as one of Mexico's finest playwrights continues to rise. *Krisis* examines Mexico's current political situation in startlingly direct, transparently veiled images which both needle the powers that be and expose them as corrupt, power hungry, win-at-all-costs individuals. Even the printed program has an aggressive, in-your-face, farcical tone. In a newspaper format, it reports “scientific” findings that corruption is hereditary (based on research carried out on 650 public servants), announces the logical suspension of the study of ethics at UNAM, and lists

the actors, technicians, and production staff as “the accused” and their accomplices.

Brilliantly staged at the Telón de Asfalto theatre, the dazzling set and lighting design by Philippe Amand allowed for seamless jumps in theatrical spaces and times, and made possible the unraveling of an extremely complex web of politics, intrigue, double-dealing, womanizing, and assassinations. A farcical tone prevailed despite the play’s weighty thematics and its undisputable similarities to actual Mexican politics (the assassination of Colosio revisited, for example). *Krisis* begins with a short movie featuring five young boys precociously playing cards as if at a high stakes Vegas casino. When a maid interrupts to tell the little host to break it up because his parents will soon return home, he coolly shoots her, and with equal calm and an absolutely straight face, decides to put her in the fridge. The caption “35 years later” ends the movie, and sets the stage for the ruthlessness of the same five friends as major players in the Mexican world of politics in the 1990’s.

Krisis features a number of unforgettable characters, including the corrupt politician willing to do or say anything to claim the presidential seat, his inseparable bodyguard with slicked back hair, dark glasses, stony silence and expression, and cartoon-like grand entrances with pistol flailing, aching to blow someone away, the ethics professor who ghostwrites slimy political speeches and shares his wife with just about everyone, the professor’s sister who begins the play a naive, virtuous bystander and ends it chopping up bodies with an electric knife, and the angel of Benito Juárez, who visits a politician and physically strikes him with the constitution when he hints at not conforming to it. The acting in *Krisis* was superb, the sound effects aggressive (deafening but appropriate), the plot complex and gripping, the use of flash-forwards and flashbacks intriguing, the use of space stunning, the thematics gutsy, the combination of seriousness and comedy delightful, and the audience enthusiastic and abundant. In short, *Krisis* was nothing short of brilliant theatre.

Todos somos Marcos, a play by Vicente Leñero and directed by Morris Savariego, formed part of the first cycle of programming of the official Teatro Clandestino movement in 1995. A year later it is being performed in a commercial venue. Its title is taken from the events that immediately followed the Chiapas uprising of 1995. In Mexico City masses of people took to the streets in demonstration, chanting “Todos somos Marcos.” This play shows how national events have, or do not have, an impact at the personal level. Raúl and Laura, who form a couple living together for quite some

time, react to the uprising in diametrically opposed ways. She joins the demonstrations, wears the garb of the Chiapas revolutionaries, and feels that her life is changing. Raúl's apathy matches her enthusiasm. Eventually she leaves him to join the forces in Chiapas. Two things strengthened the committed message of *Todos somos Marcos*, the first intentional and the second serendipitous. First, the play's narrative structure featured an excellent flow between the past and the present. The play actually starts with Raúl alone in his threadbare apartment, and when a friend arrives and asks about Laura he tells the story through flashbacks. Second, at the end of the performance I saw, Raúl had blood on his shirt and pants, suggesting that those who are apathetic in crucial political matters have the blood of their countrymen on their hands. The friend with whom I saw the play, by contrast, was certain the actor had accidentally injured himself and the blood was coincidental. In any case, *Todos somos Marcos* reflected Mexico's escalating economic and political crisis, and effectively delivered a call to arms.

José Ramón Enríquez wrote and directed *La Rodaja*, a play performed in UNAM's black box theatre, the Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. *La Rodaja* shares many similarities with Enríquez's *La cueva de Montesinos* from the summer 1995 season: abundant inspiration from Spanish Golden age literature, Brechtian breaks, humor, a bleak view of modern day Mexico, a complex combination of Cervantine and modern Mexican (tepiteño slang) Spanish, use of live music, and the creation of stunning visual effects. In the play, a pair of modern-day Mexican *picaros* (who, according to the program, received their training from the rogues in Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares*) encounters their old friend la Rodaja, named after the title character of Cervantes' "El licenciado vidriera." As they struggle to survive together, they play, sing, dance, explore, exploit, and talk. The enduring dramatic image is of a suffering Mexico whose masses have been vibrant and resilient, but who are bending under the weight of constant abuse of power. Throughout the performance Raúl Zambrano was on the stage with his guitar, sometimes enjoying the play, and sometimes performing exquisite (and exquisitely) classical music from Spain's Golden Age, plus one composition he wrote himself. The lighting, done by Philippe Amand, included numerous angles, shades, combinations, and variations. One particularly memorable moment came when la Rodaja stood in absolute darkness at the back of the stage in a sort of crate. She flicked on a cigarette lighter, then moved it in circles as if looking for something. The resulting movements of shadows were a thing of beauty. Jesús Ochoa's comic performance was absolutely masterful, showing a phenomenal range of facial and corporal expressions, and an even more

remarkable range of verbal talent, repeatedly shifting from thunderous to hushed, from Cantinflas-quick to ultra-slow, from exultant Cervantine accent to spirited Mexican inflection. Incidentally, Eugenia Leñero and Antonio Crestani were no slouches in their demanding acting roles. *La Rodaja* is a complex, intellectually challenging work with committed messages about the abuse of power and the plight of the poor in Mexico, but it is also a hilarious romp with wonderful sound and visual entertainment.

El vals de los buitres, written by Hugo Argüelles and directed by Bruno Bert, is not an overtly political play, but it belongs in the vein of teatro clandestino for its realistic look at the face of intolerance and other social problems in contemporary Mexico. It has a number of classic Argüelles characteristics: animal imagery, dark humor, the theme of homosexuality, cruelty in human relationships, suffering, and a setting of contemporary Mexico. It shows the final hours in the lives of a pair of aging, homosexual neighbors, second-rate movie actors who have spent a frustrated lifetime yearning for acceptance and recognition. One is a flamboyant cross-dresser who envies María Felix, and the other models himself after Pedro Armendáriz. Their elegant attire contrasts with their bleak, gray, decaying apartment, and helps emphasize the pathetic condition of the characters. Lovers, but exhibiting a love-hate relationship, they unload on each other, telling of their suffering, unrealized ambitions, and the difficulties of being homosexual in Mexico. They also perform metatheatre to try to escape and cope with the cruel realities of life. They end up a sort of twisted Romeo and Juliet, committing suicide together. Philippe Amand designed the excellent set for the Granero's space in the round. It had walls around the stage to waist level, then about six feet of open space through which spectators viewed the play, then the walls continued to the ceiling. It was not an imaginary fourth wall, but four imaginary walls, allowing spectators to be exceptionally close to the action. Actors Angel Casarín and Raúl Quijada were both up to the challenge of close scrutiny, playing their roles beautifully. *El vals* is the most intelligent treatment of homosexuality in Mexico that I have seen. It also tackles the issues of aging, alienation, and intolerance with unusual realism and strength.

Two plays, *El viaje superficial* by Jorge Ibarguengoitia, and *En el nombre de Dios (Los Carvajales)* by Sabina Berman, seem to fit the spirit of the teatro clandestino manifesto, but in veiled terms through the use of historical referents and settings. *En el nombre de Dios*, directed by Rosenda Monteros and performed by the Foro Dramático de México theatre group, highlights the tragic results of intolerance, the depths which ambitious people can reach, and the suffering of good people. It portrays the founding and

colonization of Nuevo León in the 16th century by Luis de Carvajal. Born Jewish in Extremadura, he converted to Catholicism to be able to participate in Spanish life. The play shows how, through his courage and intelligence, he becomes Nuevo León's first governor. He subsequently brings numerous relatives from Spain to settle the new territory, but they bring along a powerful desire to secretly continue their Jewish beliefs and rituals. They are eventually discovered and turned over (by individuals who stand to gain from the Carvajal family's downfall) to the Spanish Inquisition, which brutally removes them from power, tortures them, claims their land and possessions, and imprisons them. Several aspects of the play were noteworthy, including the performance of several beautiful Jewish rituals (a wedding, a funeral, and greeting the sabbath) in Hebrew, fluid temporal and special transitions, wonderful ethnic and period costumes for over 40 characters, beautifully performed flamenco dancing and singing, and a wonderful use of light and shadow. During most of the play, when many characters were not performing, they sat in the shadows near the back of the stage, silently watching the atrocities of the state/church, and suggesting that onlookers witnessed offenses in the 16th century (just as there are assuredly witnesses in the 20th). Throughout the play flamenco dancing plays an unusual role. As the inquisition tightens its screws, the rhythm and passion of the dancing intensifies, vividly communicating the acute suffering of the entire Jewish community. Although it presents events of tremendous historical interest in and of themselves, *En el nombre de Dios* also has profound political implications for contemporary Mexico.

Jorge Ibarguengoitia is one of very few deceased Mexican playwrights whose plays are staged with any regularity in contemporary Mexico. This trend continued with the staging of *El viaje superficial*, a play written in 1959, and directed during this season by Raúl Zermeño. Set in 1910 on the eve of the Revolution, it portrays upper-crust families who feel it is their right to exploit the masses, live frivolously and well, and ignore signs that change may be coming. Hypocrisy, superficiality, and self-centeredness mark their interactions, often to the point of ridiculousness. Unfaithfulness in marriage runs rampant, the clergy preaches freedom from sin, but closes its eyes to violations by generous donors, and the characters' luxurious clothing and formality of expression contrasted effectively with their vile, shallow actions. At the end the main character declares, with supreme self-assurance, "Todos estamos muy bien. Todo está exactamente como lo queremos." As he relishes his invincible lot in life, ear-shattering gunshots ring out, and the servants begin the Revolution. Alejandro Luna designed two exquisite sets for *El viaje*. A beautiful miniature French-style chateau dominated the first

two acts, which were punctuated by having the main character drive across the stage in a perfectly preserved vintage horseless carriage from the turn of the century. The set for the third act was even more detailed and luxurious. By contrast, the final act stripped the stage of literally everything, including doors! The actors entered via a trapdoor through the floor. The stark barrenness of the final act suggested the emptiness of the Porfiriato. Given the numerous recent scandals, charges of corruption and “inexplicable enrichment” in the recent governments of Mexico, and the growing economic chasm between the social classes, it does not take tremendous imagination to see that the culture presented in *El viaje* superficially mirrors a portion of contemporary Mexico. Although veiled in historical terms, it seems a clear call to arms. At the same time it was excellent theatre, with stunning costumes, choreography, set design, and acting.

The summer theatre season included numerous excellent plays outside the scope of Teatro Clandestino. Héctor Mendoza wrote and directed *Creator principium*, a fine play on the theory of acting, the paranoia of actors, and the complexities of human relationships in general. Luis Zermeño, an actor with training in ballet, beautifully performed the entire text of Octavio Paz’s *Piedra de sol* in the atrium of the José Luis Cuevas museum. The centerpiece of the atrium is an enormous man/god statue surrounded by water. Zermeño masterfully used the entire atrium in his wonderfully choreographed monologue featuring one of the great poems of this century. The theatre group Búsqueda Escénica presented *La mudanza* by Elena Garro, a play which captured the feelings of suffering and guilt felt by an aging woman as she moves out of the house in which she lived her entire life. A statue accuses her and reminds her of her past failings. An apparition of the main character, as a young woman, saunters across the stage, then flees. This was classic poetic theatre by Garro. Enrique Alonso wrote and directed a pair of nostalgic plays presented as *Y ahora...La carpa*. This is a return to the entertainment and atmosphere prevalent in Mexico in the first few decades of this century, featuring lively comic sketch, exuberant singing and dancing, lavish costumes, cheeky interaction with the audience, roving spotlights, and a performance by a magician of a puppeteer. Children’s theatre also continues strong, with performances such as *El caracol sin su concha* by Sergio Molina and directed by Mar Siller, which features wonderful animal costumes, a sweet plot (complete with moral), original music by Sergio Rangel, fine acting, interaction with spectators, and a general orientation toward drawing childrens’ interest.

In short, despite Mexico’s ongoing economic crisis, its escalating political difficulties, ever-increasing scandals, rising crime, and armed

uprisings in various regions, Mexico City's theatre continues to thrive. In fact, the various crises seem to have provided not only a rich cache of new material, but an added measure of relevance and vibrancy to its world of theatre.

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Notes

1. Given the season's numerous offerings, this report gives a cross-section of some of its most notable initiatives and performances.
2. See pages 143-144 of my report in the Spring 1995 issue of *Latin American Theatre Review* (28:2).
3. Roselyn Costantino mentions this play on page 138 of her excellent article on Mexican theatre in the Spring 1995 (28:2) issue of *Latin American Theatre Review*.
4. This foro, located on the second floor of a private theatre school founded in the early 1990's by legendary director Ludvig Margules, is a small but versatile experimental space. Margules has attracted first-rate teachers for his students of acting and directing, including David Olquín, Rodolfo Obregón, and Julieta Egurrola, among others. The school's structure was formerly a mortuary, and one of the actors in *Mejor jugamos*, Gabriel Fragoso, mentioned that it is an unusual sensation to perform in the same space in which he participated in his grandmother's wake.
5. This statement, written by Vicente Leñero, appears on the inside cover of the program of *Todos somos Marcos*, a play discussed in this report.