

Five Summers of Mexican Theatre

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Summer reports about theatre activity abroad provide a historical record as well as useful information for those trapped at home. The current article began as such a piece, about Mexican plays in Mexico during the summer of 1993, but after a few months in the midst of sloth, procrastination, and various and sundry other demands, the summer of 1994 suddenly appeared and undid all the brilliant conclusions about the previous summer. All the happy predictions for the future of Mexican plays reported in the article about the summer of '93 would have produced a healthy meal of crow in the disappointment of '94, so apparently a lack of organization can occasionally serve a useful purpose. After that summer's close call, it began to feel wiser to look for trends based on several consecutive summers of theatre. That approach – focusing on Mexican summer offerings from 1992 through 1996 (election year 1994 and the two years preceding and following) – suggests several things: that interest in Mexican theatre is growing, along with the number of new plays and playwrights; that, while an established group of successful dramatists exists, there also exists a new openness that can encompass other points of view; that economic, social, and political considerations drive much of the thematic content; that a new group of writers may be on the verge of creating new influences; and that, with so much activity, anticipating the future is harder than ever. A closer look at each summer will help to make all of this more concrete but, rather than providing a litany of descriptions for plays from each year, it seems more worthwhile to consider general characteristics of each season, and to reserve the litany for that especially interesting summer of '93.

July of 1992 looked a lot like many previous summers: a dozen or so Mexican plays, some by venerable dramatists, some by a more recent cadre; prices a little higher than comfortable; and generally half-full theatres. The expected names included Emilio Carballedo, Vicente Leñero, Hugo Argüelles,

and Elena Garro. Their plays ranged from the spectacle of Leñero's *La noche de Hernán Cortés*, with its computer, multitude of characters, and stage that tilted from the horizontal up to a forty-five degree angle (the better to provide healthy exercise for the actors), to Carballido's long-running *Rosa de dos aromas*, which continues to draw year after year. An automatic public exists for the established playwrights, but a new group of regulars has emerged, writers whose names now draw spectators in their own right — Sabina Berman, Jesús González Dávila, Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, and Tomás Urtusástegui.

Contemporary politics were not much in evidence in the plays of '92, although *La noche de Hernán Cortés* and Rascón Banda's *La casa del español* provided indirect comments on Mexico's socio-political atmosphere. In contrast to later years, the violence in these two plays, as well as others, was relatively removed from the audience's immediate experience. Women writers were also relatively removed; their plays made up only a small fraction of stage productions. All in all, it was a pretty typical summer, except that it was possible to find several Mexican plays on stage – a minor change from the 70s and 80s. The summer of 1993, on the other hand, represented a major change.

In July of 1993, the *cartelera teatral* in Mexico City listed twice as many Mexican plays as before and, amazingly enough, none was by Carballido or Leñero. Even more amazing, over half a dozen were written by women. This was all new, more than surprising, long overdue, extremely welcome, and worthy of detailed commentary.

The increased number of plays that summer resulted, at least in part, from a pre-election infusion of government funds (a sort of PRI-election campaign drive), but also from a new way of approaching the production process. Previously a common procedure was for the playwright to search for a producer, then try to convince him (almost inevitably a "him") to stage a play. The dramatist could also work through a director, but the producer was always there at the end, generally ready with a "no." A new factor in 1993, though, was the number of well-known actors and actresses looking for outlets other than television for their talent. When these "famous names" seek out plays themselves, then go looking for a theatre and financial support, their name recognition provides them automatic influence with producers. In addition, Mexican dramatists had by then managed to regain at least a measure of credibility, and several new playwrights – those mentioned previously – had established proven track records; their works attract audiences. Given

this, producers finally became more willing to take a chance on staging Mexican plays.

The 1993 summer season featured “more” and “less,” with the emphasis on “more.” There were more plays by Mexicans staged, and more playwrights writing, because there were more open doors. At the same time, however, it cost the public more to get in the doors. As recently as 1992, one could purchase tickets for all but the big spectaculars for the equivalent of five or six dollars. In '93 the minimum shot up to about thirteen dollars, with some plays costing five or six dollars more than that. These prices obviously produce more profits, and thence more opportunities for Mexican dramatists, but they also limit the audience. Given the small number of spectators at many plays, logic suggests that the bottom line would be the same if prices were cut in half, and twice as many people attended. Despite that logic, higher prices have come to stay, especially since audiences are paying to see stars perform. A large majority of the plays in 1993 featured a famous television star, and that trend has continued. The playwright's name, then, attracts the “regular” theatre-goers, while the stars attract new blood. Undoubtedly the combination contributes to maintaining a reasonable number of paying spectators.

The plays of '93 also included more humor and more thematic variety than before. Except in the case of Carballido, audiences have not gone to many Mexican plays with much hope of laughing. A change was evident in 1993, with an influx of new perspectives that allowed new ways to get to the humor. This was due, in no small part, to the increased presence of women, and represented a giant leap from the days when Luisa Josefina Hernández, Elena Garro, and perhaps Maruxa Vilalta were about the only women who had a chance of staging plays. Now four women had plays on stage, one of the women had three plays at the same time (María Elena Aura), and a woman (Sabina Berman) had the hit of the season. It is difficult to underestimate the positive impact of this new presence and the attendant new perspectives. The new perspectives should mean less of the same old thing, and at this point we come to the “less” in the summer of '93. There were notably fewer of the cheap “bedroom comedies” that had been around for so long – plays that rely on tacky sexual innuendo and cheap laughs at the expense of male-female relations, male and female anatomy, and politicians. Perhaps they finally began to wear thin; the fact that audiences can turn to other kinds of plays for humor might also account for their loss of popularity.

The other “less” came in publication of plays. The only new and readily available works were a pair of two-volume anthologies of plays by

Carballido and Argüelles (a total value of about eighty dollars). Aside from one or two other works available mainly in university bookstores, the Sociedad General de Escritores de México (SOGEM) undertook the only major effort, publishing the finalists from its play writing competition, but those books, although printed, still sat undistributed in the SOGEM offices at the end of summer. In order to experience new plays, then, one had to go to the theatre. Brief descriptions of eight of those experiences follow.

Sabina Berman's *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (in the Teatro Helénico) was easily the hit of the season. Media reaction was positive, and on the night of the 150th performance (and the play had already been scheduled through 250 performances) an enthusiastic audience filled the theatre. Diana Bracho was the "name" attraction in this case, but Berman herself was the real star. She not only wrote the play, she directed it, and the direction had a professional feel to it.

The play is about a journalist/history professor who wants a no-strings-attached relationship with Gina, a single mother who is looking for love and seems willing to allow herself to be taken advantage of in her search. The professor is working on a book about Pancho Villa, and Villa's presence – both historical and physical on stage – pulls the professor into his macho attitudes and actions and helps to produce the play's thematic movement: the effects of machismo versus sincere feelings in a relationship. Villa also stands at the center of much of the play's humor. The work suggests that both machismo and the hopes that have always resided in the Mexican Revolution may be dead, or at least dying.

As with all of Berman's work, this one functions on various levels. It works well simply as a humorous play; it explores male-female relationships, what they are and what they could and should be; it also offers a comment on Mexican history, specifically the promise of the Revolution and the place occupied by Pancho Villa. The multiple levels and the thematic depth that characterize all of Berman's plays, contribute to making her one of Mexico's most important playwrights, and established her as the star of the summer. Jesús González Dávila was not so lucky. Although he has had successful stagings in the past, *Las perlas de la Virgen* (in the Teatro Benito Juárez) was not as happy an experience. The absurdist, waiting-for-Godot-ish play shows us two characters after some apocalyptic event. They kill each other frequently and are shadowed by two "siluetas" who serve no clear purpose through most of the play. The critics most common response to the play was, "What is it about?" That seemed to be the reaction of the 25-30 spectators

the evening I saw the play. The innocent sounding title undoubtedly lured in some of the more elderly members, and they were unpleasantly surprised when they were greeted by large quantities of smoke, violence, obscenity, and a bilingual handbill with its exquisitely tortured English. The play in its original form bore little resemblance to the final production. That more realistic, focused version sounded more capable of touching an audience with its hard-edged vision of how people struggle to survive in society than did the absurdist reworking by the performing group.

Rascón Banda is another perennial player in Mexican theatre. His *La casa del español*, at the Teatro Reforma, a reworking of his 1977 *Voces en el umbral*, continued into its second year. The poetic portrayal of the exploitation of Indian miners in Mexico's past has held up well. The focus falls on the daughter of the owner/director of the mine and her Indian companion. Enrique Pineda's directing, and Sonia Furió, Rosenda Monteros, and Oscar Narváez's acting produced a satisfying theatrical experience, although Narváez's need to play all the male roles led to the unhappy circumstance of his turning back and forth in order to talk to himself during some conversations. Nevertheless, the audience of some fifty-plus went away happy with the production, and no doubt healthier due to the "humo no-tóxico" used during the play and announced proudly on the marquee.

Even though María Elena Aura was new to Mexican drama, she had three plays in theatres. *El hogar de la serpiente*, in the Teatro Estudio Galerías, is a hyper-realistic view of two teenage brothers who live with their grandmother and face the apparently unhappy prospect of having to go back to living with their mother. The tension arising from their doubts about leaving the (slightly touched) grandmother who spoils them and having to return to a strict mother who does not seem to want them very much, plus their struggle to come to grips with their own doubts, questions, and differences – one effeminate, one violent, both wondering about their possible homosexuality – all lead to the suicide of one of the brothers. The audience members who went primarily to see Rita Macedo and Alma Muriel, though, had their attention diverted by the extremely high level of obscenity in the dialogue of all of the characters, and by the male nudity. At one point, as several spectators seated near me were fretting about the language, they became so distracted that they did not notice one of the sons undressing and taking a bath in full view of the audience. When they finally did notice, the shock was so great that they and perhaps eight to ten other members in the audience of about seventy simply got up from their seats in different parts of the theatre and

walked out. This added one more distraction from the thematic development that looks at the situation of teenagers with a different eye than that which led to so many long-suffering-teens plays of a decade or two ago.

Aura's *Doble filo* was more centered, although the night I went, I was in the smallest audience of the summer: ten of us in the tiny La Gruta of the Teatro Helénico complex. Enrique Pineda's direction and strong acting by Marta Aura (the author's sister) and Luis Rábago were effective in exploring the slow developing relationship between two married (although not to each other) characters who confuse their spouses with their new found partner. The inability to disentangle themselves from recurring visions of their unhappy marital relationships dooms the new relationship from the beginning. The high level of tension in the play was maintained by the well-written dialogue and by the excellent acting.¹

Leonor Azcárate took a chance with her *Pasajero de medianoche*, and she paid the price. The play is basically a primer on AIDS, developed by her and director Marta Luna in an attempt to inform audiences about the disease. The play's context is a television talk show, hosted by Gabriela (Kitty de Hoyos), whose focus for the current week is AIDS. This offers the opportunity to communicate information about the disease. Parallel to this action is the situation of Gabriela's son, for whom she has precious little time. He discovers that he has AIDS, and this puts even more pressure on the already fragile relationship between the son and his single mother. Critics absolutely destroyed the play, railing against the didacticism and the fact that the staging suggested Broadway (or rather something well off-Broadway) rather than a television show. Yet, given its objective, the play does in fact communicate information in an entertaining fashion, with songs, interviews and even touches of humor, and the didacticism is personalized through the parallel plot involving the mother-son relationship. A more significant problem was the lack of easy accessibility to the theatre, which is located at the UNAM. Although some fifty spectators were there, for the play to reach the large numbers that could benefit from the information, the prices needed to be lower, and the play needed a better location, both tall orders.

Gabriela Ynclán's *Cuarteto con disfraz y serpentinas*, also at the UNAM, likewise deserved a more accessible theatre, in this case because the play is excellent. It won the SOGEM's 1993 play-writing competition, and deservedly so. It focuses on two middle-aged couples, one a strong woman and a weak, drunken husband, and the other a woman who still acts like a little girl and her homosexual husband. They are at a party to celebrate the

second husband's retirement. None of the other invited guests come, the man does not want to retire, the first couple fights constantly, and all the characters struggle with their own individual doubts and demons. The sustained tension was mitigated by the play's humor and by the excellent acting. The full house confirmed the strength of the play and bodes well for Ynclán, who made her rather auspicious debut as a playwright with this success.

Tomás Urtusástegui always seems to have a play or two in theatres around Mexico City, but *Danzón dedicado a...* (in the Teatro Folis) seemed as much a reunion of veteran dancers as a play. In fact, not much happens except dancing. Some time into the first act, a thread of political criticism appears, directed at the almost dictatorial control enjoyed by local officials, and the (in this case) minor rebellion that results. Despite a prohibition against the *danzón*, the dancers dance anyhow, defying the (drunken) politician who tried to ban it. The play was not as well received by the critics as it was by the forty audience members at the performance I attended. At the end they (audience members, not critics) had the chance to go on stage and dance with the actors, easily enough done given that the forty attendees were able to choose their partners from among twenty actors in the play.

Despite the variety of themes and approaches in all these works, there are still points in common. Most of them had an element of violence: the physical violence inherent in the pistols and/or deaths in most of the plays, and the emotional violence in all of them. While violence has frequently been a part of Mexican theatre, it has begun to acquire new faces. The divided family appears more and more, and in three of these eight plays there is a single mother. Previously the (almost always abusive) father was the villain. If *El hogar de la serpiente* and *Pasajero de medianoche* are any indication, though, a new villain – the mother – could eventually emerge. Alternate sexuality also began to sneak onto the stage in '93, in the suggested or real homosexuality in *El hogar*, *Pasajero*, and *Danzón*. Another major shift came in what was before the almost expected, usually gratuitous, and most times accepted female nudity. In this group of plays it appeared in *Danzón* (gratuitously), but was replaced by either male nudity or at the very least by the more undressed male than female in *Villa*, *Hogar*, *Doble filo*, and *Pasajero* (gratuitous in some of those cases, as well, but not so readily accepted). Also much in evidence was the extensive use of imagery, both linguistic and visual. Pancho Villa functions as a symbol for both the Revolution and for a certain view of women. The silhouettes in *Las perlas* serve the function of imagery, if little else. *La casa del español* is a poetic play in every sense, but even

strongly realistic works like *El hogar de la serpiente* and *Doble filo* pull back from their realism from time to time. The “serpiente blanca” that forms the religion for the grandmother in the former and the visually depicted memories of the two characters in the latter pull the audience out of a represented reality and broaden each play’s thematic scope.

Overall it looked like Mexican drama might have finally returned to respectability. More works mean more visibility, and more successful works mean more interest. New themes should lead to a wider audience, and the presence of name actors can only help to attract larger numbers. Given the variety and the quality of the plays in the summer of 1993, Mexican theatre seemed to be moving toward a bright future. Unfortunately, that hope was premature.

Whether a result of the chaotic state of the Mexican presidential election and the (unsurprising) disappearance of millions of pesos between Presidents, or for some other reason, by the summer of 1994, government funding went down, ticket prices went up, and the number of plays dropped by fifty percent compared with 1993. The veterans were nowhere to be seen: no Carballido, Leñero, Argüelles, or Garro; the new crew, however, (Berman, González Dávila, Rascón, and Urtusástegui) maintained its foothold. Apart from the large decline in the number of productions, a couple of other points deserve mention.

First, Sabina Berman established herself, without question, as one of the premier forces in contemporary Mexican theatre. After a series of strong plays in previous seasons, more than two years of success with *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (which made it to movie screens in 1996) cemented her reputation and probably make it legitimate to consider thinking about her in the same league with Carballido and Leñero. Second, the theatre began to give us a look at what would soon become common place on the street: the threat of violence. Play after play presented everything from overt, saturated violence – *Luna negra* by González Dávila; Leonor Azcárate’s *Trabajo sucio* – to, at the very least, gunshots. The lucky and the far-sighted bought stock in blanks in 1994, because since that time it has become increasingly difficult to find a play which contains no gunplay. In the theatre as in the street, audience members never know when they will be assaulted (in the confines of a theatre, blanks are **very loud**), but the danger and those blank-filled guns constantly lurk. The desperation created by Mexico’s economic disaster ensured that life would reflect art and that triggers would continue to be pulled.

Despite the state of the economy, somehow the government eventually found money for awards, scholarships, and grants to writers, and

by July of 1995, the number of Mexican plays climbed back to more than twenty, the “old guard” returned, the “new guard” remained, and even some new faces appeared. Carballido was back with *Antes cruzaban ríos*, *La esfinge de las maravillas* by Argüelles began a run, three plays by Garro formed *Este paisaje de Elenas*, and (Vicente) Leñero scored a double with *La visita del ángel* and *Todos somos Marcos*. (Estela) Leñero with *Paisaje interior*, Jaime Chabaud’s *Perder la cabeza*, and the successful *Tiro de dados* by Gerardo Velásquez led the newer entries, and Berman, Urtusástegui, and Rascón Banda continued their unbroken strings. Berman (*El pecado de tu madre*) and Urtusástegui (*La duda*) had solid entries, although they did not reap the same rewards as with previous efforts. Rascón Banda’s (very heavily) adapted *Cada quien su vida* (Basurto’s play), on the other hand, pleased audiences, if not critics. It had relatively little to do with Basurto’s original and quite a bit to do with providing an opportunity for Carmen Salinas’s comedy, plenty of music, dance, raucous behavior, and campy acting by Héctor Bonilla and numerous others, and an excuse to dress up the Salón México. It also filled the theatre. And, finally, enough interest existed for the INBA (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes) and A.N.D.A. (Asociación Nacional de Actores) to sponsor “El Teatro y sus Lenguajes,” a four-month-long series of Monday night lectures (followed by questions from the audience) presented by the likes of Berman, Rascón Banda, González Dávila, Héctor Mendoza, and many other writers and directors.

On the negative side, ticket prices stayed up, and precious few women managed to get their plays into theatres. Mexican theatre did display a surprising openness toward new writers and, even more surprisingly, toward works about the gay experience. A dozen plays presented everything from gay characters and relationships, to AIDS, to transvestites. After a down year in 1994, 1995 showed distinct signs of life and movement.

It all continued in 1996, too, against seemingly overwhelming odds. The economy kept to its disastrous ways, ticket prices rose even more (up to forty to sixty pesos, as an average range), and everybody talked about how dangerous it was to be on the street at night. Still, theatres offered nearly thirty Mexican plays, two series devoted to new Mexican drama were published, the previous year’s openness continued, dozens and dozens of young dramatists were writing, and a number of works growing out of *creación colectiva* appeared.

Rosa de dos aromas (Carballido) was back, Leñero’s *Todos somos Marcos* was still playing, and Argüelles had two plays going (*El vals de los*

buitres and the continuing *La esfinge de las maravillas*). In fact, several writers scored doubles in the summer of '96. Urtusástegui had *Vida estamos en paz* and *Macarenazo*, the latter written in conjunction with Alejandro Licona, who in turn had *Abuelita de Batman* on stage. Rascón Banda offered two plays of social-political commentary (*Por los caminos del sur* and *Tabasco negro*, about Pemex's problems), as did Sabina Berman – a good staging of *En el nombre de Dios (Los Carvajales)* (formerly just *En el nombre de Dios*; more formerly *Herejía*; even more formerly *Anatema*), and a new play, *Krisis*. *Krisis* seems to bring the circle around. It is a sort of “drama-a-clef,” a political farce paralleling very closely recent events in Mexico: one politician, as a child, kills his maid (shades of Salinas de Gortari), one of a group of U.S. educated politicians plans to play clean and help the poor, and his cohorts have him assassinated (shades of Colosio). Despite the serious theme, humor comes from playing the politicians as buffoons. This recalls the political satires that disappeared from bars years earlier, now raised to a new level of sophistication by Berman, but reminiscent of earlier times, nonetheless.

Many of the summer's offerings, in fact, drew on earlier (happier?) times, even as plays took on a decidedly political tone. The flashbacks: Solórzano's *Los fantoches* was playing; back from the past came *De la calle* (González Dávila), Tomás Espinosa's, *María o la sumisión*, *El gesticulador* by Usigli, Garro's *La mudanza*, Ibargüengoitia's *El viaje superficial*, and the aforementioned plays by Carballido and Berman. The politics: *Krisis* and some of the “flashbacks”; *Tabasco negro* alternated with two other political plays in the “Teatro Clandestino” series; Leonor Azcárate returned with another violent commentary, *Las alas del poder*.

A few more women made it into theatres (about twenty percent of the Mexican plays), some as directors – a significant development that holds promise for the future – and the doors remained open for plays built around the gay experience (half a dozen plus). There were still lots of guns carried around, but at least they were discharged less. Violence will continue to find its way from the street to the stage, but there may be some movement away from that, especially by younger playwrights who are just beginning to find their way into theatres. It is too soon to tell, but that movement bears watching. With so many dramatists, so many plays, and so little money, creative thinking takes over. Instead of one play occupying a theatre all week, many works played only one night a week, thus allowing a theatre to stage different plays for different audiences throughout the seven-day cycle. Younger writers in particular are well aware that more actors require more funds, so they think

in terms of fewer characters. Plays still feature (television) stars as a way of attracting an audience, but a more insidious effect of the tube may be creeping into the creative process, as well. A public raised on the sound bytes and superficiality of television may not have the patience to sit through the slow development of complicated plots, themes, and characters. Will writers challenge audiences who may or may not be able to rise to the occasion (and, as a result, may or may not buy tickets), or do they re-think their dramatic presentation to ensure that the audience will come, knowing that they will not be confused or forced to focus for too long on any one thing? Another five years should begin to provide some answers.

The past five years may have created as many questions as answers about directions, but we do know several things. We know that Mexican theatre has not died. There are more dramatists at work than at any other time, certainly in this last half-century. The number of Mexican plays on stage has risen steadily over the last half decade, except for the one dip in 1994. The economy, while a factor, has not become a determining factor. A new group of dramatists has proven its staying power, and now one expects to see Berman, Rascón Banda, González Dávila, and Urtusástegui along with Carballido, Leñero, and Argüelles on the marquee. Violence and politics have bullied their way back onto stage and may stay for the foreseeable future. It is not uncommon to find plays by women – Berman, Estela Leñero, Azcárate, Aura, Ynclán, Garro – although they are making headway very (much too) slowly, with no clear indications in sight as to their future. As a hopeful note, though, there were no future indications of the wave of plays about gays.

In short, Mexican theatre seems to be in good shape, if it does not dilute itself in the ocean of new plays, and if it does not price itself out of the market. There are positive forces at work in the many excellent – and by now accepted – dramatists, in a more established public, in a growing number of smaller theatres, in more accessibility to a wider variety of plays, in a larger number of women directing, in growing theatre activity in different parts of Mexico which can only enrich its national drama, and in an interest that had suffered much during the seventies and eighties. It appears that Mexican theatre should survive for at least another five years, when it will be time for another look at where it has been.

Notes

1. As an aside, it is interesting to note that *Doble filo*, a play based on words (almost the only thing that happens is that the characters talk), came to La Gruta immediately after Estela Leñero's *Insomnio*, a play with no words at all. Aura's third play was *La mujer rota*, a monologue based on a Simone de Beauvoir text.

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