

Mexico City's Summer 2018 Theatre Season

Timothy G. Compton

Almost everyone I talked to in Mexico City about the upcoming presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador was upbeat and hopeful that the next six years would be better than the *sexenio* presided over by Enrique Peña Nieto. While new administrations bring changes that affect cultural and artistic institutions, theatre practitioners seemed upbeat about the future. Of the seven plays that stood out to me as the best of Mexico City's 2018 summer season, most expressed explicit criticism of Mexican society and government, while all reflected government and societal corruption and the idea that Mexico needs change. Overall, the season seemed a little less vigorous than most seasons I have witnessed—I found fewer overall plays and no blockbuster play for the ages. Nonetheless, I did see some tremendous plays and many others with strong elements. Surely I missed other noteworthy plays due to the fact that no one can see all the plays offered in Mexico City during any one season.

For years Gabino Rodríguez and his theatre company, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, have been garnering increased recognition. They have now performed throughout Mexico and in numerous other countries. From July 5 through August 2 the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes organized and sponsored its 14th Festival of Monologues “Teatro a una sola voz.” The festival featured seven monologues, each performed in twelve different cities. It started in Hermosillo on July 5, with one performance per night through July 11. The pattern repeated itself two days later in Culiacán, then two days later in Durango, and so forth in Saltillo/Torreón, Nuevo Laredo, Guadalajara, Colima, León, San Luis Potosí, Morelia, Xalapa, and finally Mexico City. The finale in each of the twelve cities was *Tijuana*, a unipersonal written by Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, directed and acted by Gabino Rodríguez.

On the surface, Rodríguez narrated in *Tijuana* his story of going to the city of Tijuana for six months to experience working at a *maquiladora* and living on Mexico's minimum wage (and yes, he really did go to Tijuana and work there). He described and acted out his experience of creating a new identity, locating housing, the conditions of his housing, his relationship with the family he lived with, his job packing clothing, the social atmosphere at the company, the socio-economic situation of Tijuana, the things he would do in his free time, the newsworthy events that took place there, and his strategies for documenting his experience. So, on the surface, *Tijuana* showed the plight of Mexico's working poor, the difficulty of living on the wage government officials had declared adequate for a family of three, the hopelessness of ending the cycle of poverty, the pathetic and rare opportunities to enjoy life after long and grinding work days, and the crime and violence people face in poor neighborhoods. The play showed these elements with exceptional power. In the case of violence, when the protagonist witnessed brutal vigilante justice, he realized that if his cover were blown, locals might take exception to him and treat him the same way, so he pulled out of the experience early.

These themes in *Tijuana* form part of a much, much bigger vision and project that Lagartijas has called *La democracia en México* (1965-2015), in which they are exploring government policies and practices and their effects on people throughout Mexico. I have read that they have ambitions to write and perform a play on the theme for each of Mexico's states, and this particular one corresponded to state #3. But as I stated, this was "on the surface." At the next level, the play posited rich questions concerning identity, acting, and interpersonal relations. After all, during his time in Tijuana, Rodríguez was doing another kind of acting—acting as though he were NOT an actor, taking on the identity of the fictional character Santiago Ramírez. Much as if he had been a spy, he infiltrated a new society to gather information. This situation hearkened back to the idea Octavio Paz posited about Mexican identity in *El laberinto de la soledad*, in which he opined that Mexicans constantly hide their true identities behind masks. The protagonist was constantly on edge and on guard to protect his identity. He knew that he could not enter into truly rewarding, lasting relationships with the people around him.

And there was at least one more obvious level to consider. The handbill stated that Rodríguez based the play on texts and ideas from five different authors. Although the protagonist presented things as what had truly hap-

pened, had they truly happened? Could he really have worn a fake mustache and wig for five months with no one suspecting anything? Several of the “newsworthy” events from Tijuana that he mentioned were easily verified via the internet, but how much of the personal side of the play was real? Where was the line between reality and fiction?

Beyond these rich layers of thematic consideration, the acting and staging of the play were outstanding. First of all, Rodríguez moved deftly from his basic role as himself (?) as narrator to the roles of half a dozen other characters in his story, expertly changing voices, attitudes, and actions to match them. Second, a video screen stage right provided endless fascinating images that supported or illustrated the story. They ranged from footage of the protagonist’s flight to Tijuana to images of the daily journal he wrote nightly, from extremely rough recordings he took with his phone as he walked the streets to YouTube videos, and from footage from Tijuana newscasts to interviews he did after his time in Tijuana. These provided color and visual substance to the story, helping the audience to visualize the narrator’s experience. Third, as the audience entered, Rodríguez was on a small (4 by 6 feet?) stage set a few inches above the main stage. He was practicing, in slow motion, a dance he aspired to perform as Ramírez at the local bar. As the play progressed, he dismantled the small stage, made of rough bricks, and arranged it into a small representative model of Tijuana. As he would detail events, he would go to the model and indicate where they took place, which once again made the things he told seem more three-dimensional. The final major visual element of the play, for me, was a large painting by Pedro Pizarro that hung throughout at the back of the stage. It portrayed myriad houses separated by a viaduct of sorts, with no apparent movement from one side to the other. On the left was a large flag of Mexico on a pole. Although there was no corresponding flag on the right, given the location of Tijuana, I imagined that it represented the United States, and the lack of movement from one side to the other for me represented the chasm between the governments and opportunities available to the people of the two countries. In short, *Tijuana* was a visual and thematic tour-de-force that gave spectators plenty to think about at multiple levels. The first few plays I saw Lagartijas perform years ago had audiences of under 50; happily, the audience for *Tijuana* nearly filled Teatro Orientación, an audience I estimated at 250 people.

Tiaré Scanda, who has had a very productive career acting primarily in cinema and television, but to a limited extent in theatre, wrote, directed,



Tijuana. Photo: Nicholas Sheets.

and acted in *Finísimas personas*. Hypocrisy, corruption at the highest and lowest levels of society, sexual harassment, drug addiction, educational incompetence, and the breakdown of the family, all in Mexico, were at the heart of the play. And yet these dead serious issues were presented in hilarious cabaret sketches. The format made for a delicious skewering of people whose behavior and attitudes cause societal breakdown. It started with music and featured eight original songs written by Scanda, Federico Di Lorenzo, and Juan Carlos Compairet, accompanied by four outstanding musicians who, along with Di Lorenzo, actually form the band DiLo & The Falling Twenties. Although all the cast members sang very well, Di Lorenzo shined brightest, showing astonishing power and range, as the songs varied greatly in their musical style, ranging from blues to rock to rap and beyond. One instrumental song focused the spotlight on the musicians, while the others featured clever, acidic humor, proclaiming things such as “lo único importante es el tamaño de tu ambición,” lauding falsehood, protesting innocence, nodding to the “ángel de la corrupción,” and eventually admitting that all these ills take a toll on society and individuals.

Much of the dialogue was rich in irony, such as when a man complained about the government stealing people’s hard-earned taxes. “¿Tú pagas im-

puestos?” he was asked, to which he quickly replied “¡No! ¿Para qué si el gobierno me los va a robar?” The play pilloried corrupt police officers, politicians, therapists, spouses, parents, beauty queens, teachers, and even actors. Toward the end, a wildly decorated jacket representing corruption was taken into the audience where various spectators were unable to put it on because it was small, and the production made a point of encouraging the audience to never let corruption fit them. Scanda, Di Lorenzo, and Isaac Pérez Calzada wowed the audience with their versatility and in the way they connected with the audience. The other actors were good, but had reduced roles (although Katya Bizarro and Santiago Ulloa did some hypnotizing dancing). *Finisimas personas* was a brilliant combination of entertainment, sociology, and political commentary, a celebration of musical and acting talent, Mexican wit, and the destruction of societal evils.

Although most productions of children’s theatre recycle timeless fairy tales and Disney favorites, children’s theatre constitutes some of Mexico City’s finest and most creative. I saw two such plays this season. Haydeé Boetto wrote and directed *Descompuestos: relatos únicos de gente común*. In this play, six characters rode together on a bus (who could have imagined



Finisimas personas. Photo: Nicholas Sheets.

how entertaining a scene could be in which six characters “rode” on an imaginary bus?), which broke down in the boonies. To pass the time until the driver could fix the bus, they told each other stories either from their own lives or pertinent to their lives, and as they told stories they ended up performing them, which made for rich metatheatre. Each character beyond the bus driver was a type, starting with a business professional obsessed with money, a woman in a wedding gown, a hippie tourist, a redneck musician, and a frightful old woman. As the play progressed, these strangers became friends as they learned about each other, became involved in each other’s lives, and transformed into more compassionate and better human beings.

Long a master of puppetry, Boetto had her characters make common items come alive. One story featured a baby born with enormous ears. A pair of hats became his ears and followed him through life. Another story focused on a frog, which the characters created from a gas container from the bus. In another, characters ran up a hill, which was represented in miniature on an umbrella. Sometimes the characters’ clothing magically transformed, such as when the bride hiked up her dress and became a little girl for a story. The actors displayed considerable talent in the way they transformed their voices and physical appearance from one role to another, with strong timing and chemistry between them, and all sang beautifully. The music was comical, mostly originating from the redneck, who at the end of each story said it had reminded him of a different ex-flame from his past, whereupon he (and the others) would sing a song about her. The music was original to the show, with lyrics written by Boetto and music composed by Carlos Porcel “Nahuel.” In short, *Descompuestos* was everything you could ask for in a children’s play, filled with visual and aural delights and surprises, acted by professionals, and containing uplifting messages of unity and goodness. It turned the almost empty stage of El Milagro’s theatre into a playground of imagination not just for the cast, but for spectators young and old.

Facto Teatro, a company dedicated to the production of “teatro de papel,” performed *La peor señora del mundo*, a play based on Francisco Hinojosa’s children’s book by the same name. The book was first published by Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1992 and has since been one of their best-selling children’s books, having reached nearly 20 editions. The program stated that Avelina Correa had adapted the story to a theatrical format, but I was told that all three of the play’s directors—Correa, Alejandro Benítez, and Ricardo García Arteaga—collaborated (for purposes of legal paperwork, I was told, only Correa’s name appears). Correa and Benítez acted in



Descompuestos. Photo: Nicholas Sheets.

the performance I saw, but the program indicated that Correa alternated with Sofía Sanz. Correa and Benítez created theatrical magic in the way they interacted with their two-dimensional paper puppets, sets, and props. They used images from the children's book as the sets and characters, with many of the characters showing up in various sizes. They told and showed the familiar story of the terrible woman who terrorized her town until the people united against her. Correa and Benítez manipulated the props and puppets and made the characters speak in full view of the audience. While making the two-dimensional characters speak, they took on different voices and facial expressions so that the characters were at once puppets and actors. The range of facial expressions and voices displayed by both Correa and Benítez dazzled the audience. Although most audience members knew the storyline, the play drew them in, captivating them with the suspense of how the actors would represent the various characters and situations. Although the play and its props were designed for a more intimate space, I saw it in the Teatro Orientación's generous space, with room for over 300 spectators. I sat about 20 rows in and found that the visual aspects of the play worked their magic very effectively from a distance, with the advantage of seeing children on the edge of their seats, delighting in wonderful theatre.

Fernando Bonilla rescued, adapted, and directed the virtually unknown play *A ocho columnas*, which was written and staged by Salvador Novo in



La peor señora del mundo. Photo: Nicholas Sheets.

1956. It featured excellent performances by the Clavo Torcido company. Elizabeth Álvarez designed a traditional set for it—the main office of a newspaper in 1951—where a receptionist receives visitors and guards the office of the paper’s bigwig. Each of the six characters portrayed made a memorable impression. Sr. Torres was the newspaper bigwig, willing to manipulate the news to snuggle in tight with the corrupt government. Diputado Gómez was the typical corrupt politician who loves power and will stop at nothing for it. Celia, Torres’ efficient secretary, buffered him very effectively from the world, while Marta Crespo was a spy from another newspaper who attempted, by any means, to get an inside scoop. Carlos was a wide-eyed new reporter hoping to make a difference in the world, and Enrique was his friend. When the politician and bigwig intervened on a story Carlos was producing, he took exception, wanting naively to cling to the truth. Torres advised Carlos, in a moment of self-reflection, to run from the industry with all its corruption, or Carlos would end up as miserable and corrupted as he. Carlos did run, and the secretary followed him, at which point Enrique, willing to do whatever it took to move up in the world, stepped into Carlos’ place to consummate the paper’s corruption.

José Carriedo played Carlos in his highmindedness and subsequent agony most effectively. Luis Miguel Lombana, Arnoldo Picasso, Pedro de Tavira, and Sophie Alexander Katz played the foursome of corrupt characters very believably, Picasso as the cut-throat, win-at-all-costs politician, Lombana as the hard-nosed newspaper executive who suffered a moment of conscience, de Tavira as the slimy, hypocritical friend-turned-traitor, and Alexander Katz as a two-faced manipulating spy, simultaneously full of empty praise and contempt. Alondra Hidalgo played the receptionist with great realism, much like so many personal secretaries who protect their bosses and keep the show running. The play featured period costumes designed by Estela Fagoaga and original music composed by Leonardo Soqui. This play, along with *Nosotros somos Dios*, showed that well-done traditional theatre, with strong character and plot development, excellent acting, and themes pertinent to Mexico more than half a century after the text was written, still has a place on Mexico's stages. *A ocho columnas* was done exceptionally well.

Wilberto Cantón premiered *Nosotros somos Dios* in 1962. Armando Hernán directed a traditional version of it in the Salón Novo of the Casa de Cultura "Jesús Reyes Heróles." Set in revolutionary Mexico, its plot cleverly set up a "Trading Places" scenario, wherein the powerful government official in the first act became the enemy of the state in the second act, while the enemies of state from the first act became the powerful officials of the second act, all due to the change in administration from Huerta to Carranza. The dilemmas pitting allegiance to nation and allegiance to family in both acts were powerful, and the protagonist's ultimate willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of both family and country showed a rare example of intelligent heroism the world needs to see more often. I thought the acting was excellent, with the protagonist played by Alejandro Gazque and the upcoming powers played by Eduardo de Albar and Isaac Flores. I found the use of music and illumination to be far too melodramatic for my taste, but the strength of the plot, characters, and acting made up for those weaknesses. As with *A ocho columnas*, it was a pleasure to see the richness of "classic" Mexican theatre shining on Mexico's stages, even though this was a production clearly done on a shoestring budget.

The budget for *Enemigo del pueblo*, by Henrik Ibsen, in a version attributed to David Gaitán and directed by the same, was clearly a generous one. Members of the Compañía Nacional de Teatro performed it in one of Mexico City's best-equipped theatres, the Julio Castillo, with a gorgeous

set designed by Alejandro Luna. An enormously enlarged 19th-century map of Mexico City made up the tall walls of the set, which was not only beautiful, but invited audiences to associate the themes of this Swedish play with Mexico. The costumes and remainder of the set suggested 19th-century Mexican elegance.

In a brilliant piece of misdirection, before the play started, the protagonist, played flawlessly by Luis Rábago, sat on a chair stage right, and a large screen descended behind him. A recording complete with projected instructions informed the audience that the character's name was Dr. Luis Stockman, and that the audience was invited to show their displeasure with him by shooting bubbles into the air whenever he did or said anything reprehensible. Audience members had bubble-shooting guns attached to the seats in front of them, so as the play started and Stockman treated his wife, his daughter, and every other character abominably, bubbles filled the air above the spectators. It required a difficult change of mentality to realize as the play went on that Dr. Stockman was actually the hero of the play, despite his abhorrent personal behavior, as he tried to save the town from the ill effects of dangerous thermal waters the mayor (Stockman's brother) was trying to exploit for the financial development of the town. The ethical dilemmas came through loud and clear, as the press and government colluded to suppress the truth Stockman was trying to make public. Under the banner of progress and financial growth they engineered the public humiliation and discrediting of Stockman, whipping up a lynch mob mentality, which was symbolized by the filling of the stage with bubbles from numerous bubble-producing machines. The audience had unwittingly fallen into the lynch mob mentality at the beginning of the play. *Enemigo del pueblo* powerfully communicated many ethical dilemmas that resonate loudly in 21st-century Mexico.

Another play written and directed by Gaitán did not resonate artistically as much with me, but deserves mention as a noteworthy work. *Edipo: nadie es ateo* also benefitted from another gorgeous Alejandro Luna set, this time in the UNAM's Juan Ruiz de Alarcón theatre. Its main feature was an enormous table with Greek columns for legs, on and around which the play's action took place. The play drew from the Oedipus plays, placing an emphasis on the king trying to discover the ills of his people and eventually realizing that he was the main problem. Gaitán mentioned that he wrote this play during the recent presidential election, and that he felt it echoes Mexico's situation of corrupt government, suffering masses, and a difficult search for truth. A pair of curious staging details were noteworthy. First, the seer was played



Enemigo del pueblo. Photo: Nicholas Sheets.

by and as a woman (with an enormous beard). Second, toward the end of the play a life-sized elephant was inflated on stage. The inflated elephant was remarkable, but its significance was lost on me, as was that of a woman seer. The audience responded to the play most appreciatively, showing that ancient types continue to have meaning in modern culture.

Finally, I mention with sadness that the venerable Foro Shakespeare had its last full season in the summer of 2018, and was scheduled have its final performances on September 30. For 35 years it had served as a locale for independent and often avant-garde theatre. The owners of the building terminated the rental agreement in order to develop a more profitable housing complex. Although the directors announced that they will look for another place to open a new version of the theatre, no such announcement has been made, to my knowledge, as of the time of this writing. Hopefully a new site will indeed be created and soon, since, as illustrated in this report, the creative genius in theatre in Mexico City continues to be strong, even during a relatively down season.

Northern Michigan University