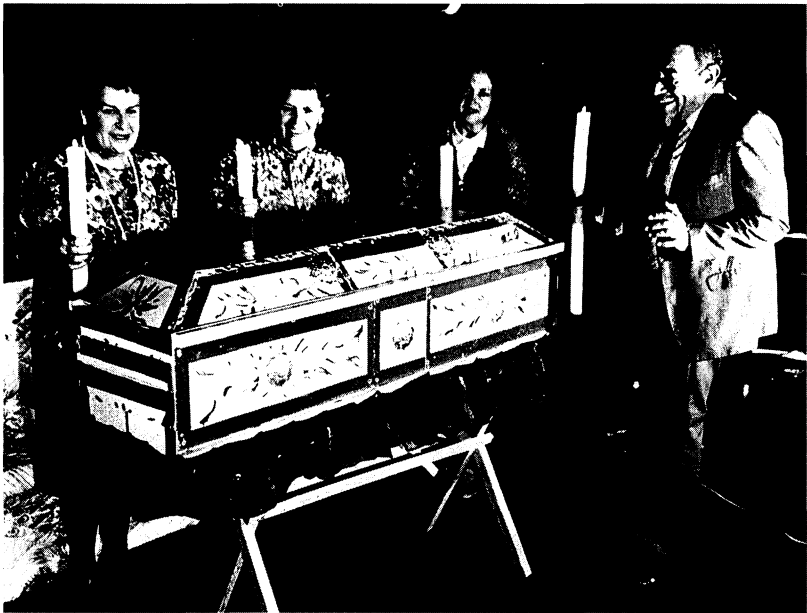




La cara de Morelos by Francisco de Hoyos



Vida, estamos en paz by Tomás Urtusástegui

Theatre, Society and Politics in Mexico City, Fall 1996

Paul Christopher Smith

Theatre in the capital of Mexico continues as plentiful as ever. During the months of November and December, 1996, I saw, on average, a play a day. Social and economic concerns dominated most of the plays that I saw, and compared to my 1989 trip to Mexico City, there was considerably less experimental fare. A review of Mexican theatre commentary in *LATR* since my 1990 article focusing on tradition and experimentation (137) reveals that other critics have also noticed this change.¹ Compton in 1993 emphasized the ongoing passion for Mexican issues and obsession with history (133). Two of the four threads he identified in 1993 were still evident in 1996: the question of Mexican identity, and the relation between the past and the present. Less evident in 1996 were his categories of metatheatre, and inquiry into human existence (even though most “serious” plays pertain to his last category to some extent). Magnarelli had written in 1983 that Mexican theatre was becoming more self-consciously artistic, more self-referential (74), a tendency that was even more dominant in my 1989 visit. Both Compton (142) and Costantino (133) observed in 1994 that stylized theatre was still prevalent, but judging from Compton’s later 1995 and 1996 reviews and my Fall 1996 experience, there seems to have been a swing away from stylized theatre toward more realistic theatre with social concerns. In his recent overview of five summers from 1992 through 1996, Burgess confirms these trends and comments on promising, new playwrights, especially Sabina Berman; he tempers his enthusiasm about abundant theatre activity, however, with concerns regarding meager attendance and high ticket prices (71).

Costantino, interestingly, closed her remarks on the theatre of 1994 with an emphasis on the word *spectacle*: “a theatre perhaps most characterized by its continued connection to the spectacle of Mexican political and social reality” (139). In 1995 and 1996, Compton thought the most noteworthy initiatives came from the Teatro Clandestino, a project that “aimed to produce plays dealing with current events in Mexico deemed *urgentes*” under the

guidance of the influential director Luis de Tavira (135). In the Fall of 1996, it seemed to me that the tolerance for the “urgent spectacles” of Mexican politics and society was wearing thin, both for playwrights and for the Mexican people.

Although Mexico City theatre seems to be as alive as ever, I fear it may not be as well as ever. On the one hand, the political unrest is providing much to criticize and dramatize, in both serious and comic venues. On the other, social unrest and economic pressures on individuals seem to be having an effect on attendance at plays, something lamented seriously by Compton, Costantino and Burgess. Some plays that I attended, including some in large commercial theatres, had more actors than audience members; a few played to full houses, but subsidies and volunteerism appeared to be more necessary than ever. Daily life in the Mexican capital seemed to seethe with too many economic struggles and disgust for the morass of political problems. Daily television news, newspapers and various kinds of “street theatre” delivered daily doses of inflation, unemployment and scandal. There were so many demonstrations in the Historical Zone of the capital that one newspaper headline declared: “D. F. se convierte en Manifestdrómono.” And that superb showman and manipulator of words and actions Subcomandante Marcos thumbed his nose at the government by having his photograph taken at a public telephone where he was supposedly attempting to respond to the government’s charges by calling the president. The caption to this front-page photograph was his one-syllable response to the threats of the government: ¡¡UUYYYY!! Whereas it was obvious that millions went about their daily lives in a rather routine fashion, daily conversations, facial expressions, and news reports (as well as theatre) were daily reminders of a country not only in transition but also in turmoil. Perhaps the most forceful use of language and the single, most striking word that I heard in two months in Mexico City came from playwright Francisco de Hoyos, commenting on the effect of political scandals on the Mexican people: “Es indignante.”

Against the live backdrop of social concerns, skepticism and indignation, the capital was awash with theatre opportunities that were still diverse, but now more often realistic than stylized. Thankfully, and hopefully, the incredibly resilient Mexican spirit and sense of humor were no less evident than the social themes. El Día de los Muertos, that macabre yet joyous national theatrical event of life and death, seemed especially poignant in 1996. I was able to “celebrate” the Day of the Dead with both *Pedro Páramo* and *Don Juan Tenorio*. The latter was performed with support from INAH, INBA, and personnel from UNAM, on the grounds of the former convent of

Churubusco (which today houses the Museo Nacional de las Intervenciones), a setting that would surely please a Spanish director from either this century or the last. The audience was effectively situated before a raised area on the grounds used for the tavern scenes, palace scenes, confrontations and sword fights, while a garden area became stage left where lighting created a darkly lugubrious mood for the cemetery and statue scenes, and a bright, lively, and nature-filled mood for scenes with song, dance and festivities. The shrubbery and huge trees on the grounds became effective props, and several arched doorways on the buildings behind the raised area added “period-piece flair” to entrances and exits. The ghost of Inés appeared in one of the arches behind a painted scrim that was backlit for a “ghostly” effect. Actress Judy Ponte was featured as the crafty old nun, and Gonzalo was expertly portrayed by Raul Valerio, bringing exceptional dignity and authority to his character without overacting. This outdoor theatre was so well done that the fireworks along with the Hallelujah chorus from Handel’s *Messiah* at the finale did not seem excessive.

Carballido’s *Conmemorantes*, performed outdoors in the patio of the Museo de Culturas Populares in Coyoacán, dramatized violence and the abuse of power. María Alicia Martínez Medrano, who is known for her work with theatre labs and indigenous groups, directed this multimedia and ritualistic piece that commemorates the 1968 massacre in Tlatelolco. To somber music of conches, drums, flutes and chanting, two rows of actors, carrying candles, file into the large performance area (approximately 50 by 100 meters). Most of the actors disperse, but one woman begins to speak of her child while looking at a photo album. Slides of a baby boy are projected on to a large side wall of the patio, and as she turns the pages in the album, the audience watches the boy grow to a young man. This mother attempts to interact with other characters to get information about her son who disappeared at Tlatelolco; students, police and bureaucrats all pass by without noticing her. As she continues to reminisce, gun shots suddenly ring out; many characters race by very close to the audience; screams, confusion, pandemonium reign as slides of the actual 1968 massacre are projected on the wall (ironically intensified by the sound of a siren passing the museum at that moment). Later, the desperate mother hears the ghost of her son from the shadows of the patio area, “Ya no me busques.” The two of them remember their talks and his ideals; the spotlight on the son fades out, and she asks, “¿Qué voy a hacer sin esperanza?” To close the “espectáculo” the many actors enter again in two rows as in the beginning, singing about a red flower, extending a very long red sash which covers the son’s body. The two rows become one row directly

in front of the audience as if confronting the audience with the need for solidarity. During a conversation after the performance, some of the actors emphasized that Beatles music became such an important part of Mexican popular culture in the late 1960's that it was chosen not only to open and close *Conmemorantes*, but "Yesterday" was also played during the mother's reminiscence.

In 1994 Costantino reviewed another play dealing with Tlatelolco, Jesús González Dávila's *La fábrica de los juguetes*, which she reviewed with words also relevant to *Conmemorantes*: "Forgotten beings from a time past with wounds that never heal exist in limbo . . ." (137) and "Poetic language and metaphoric images attempt to reach a new generation of young Mexicans . . . who are products of historic amnesia and materialism . . ." (138). These two texts serve as socially significant markers: "Lest we forget."

González Dávila had two plays running in late 1996, *Aroma de cariño* and *De la calle*; both were very dark, dealing with the marginalized, the homeless and/or the dysfunctional. The ambience of *De la calle* began when the spectator entered the theatre through a narrow, dark hallway, walking carefully over a surface of small stones like those along railroad tracks. The set featured two real rails in the sunken center of the performance area; lateral areas used for other scenes were lighted only when the action took place away from the abandoned rail yard. One of Beethoven's symphonies opened the play and closed it with effective poignancy. The first sound after the Beethoven was a character coughing to death in the darkness; he is found dead by his friend Rufino, the young, homeless protagonist of the play. Almost everything that follows shows humanity at its worst: drug abuse serves as the prime mover for some characters; the older teenagers torment Rufino; a dead baby is found in a dumpster; a girl is raped; and the bully is finally stabbed to death at the end. Rufino's dream to leave for a better place with his girlfriend proves impossible. Throughout all this misery, González Dávila combines in his main character a certain innocence with the toughness to survive and also gives him enough depth so that the audience (of only 17) could develop some genuine sympathy for him. Rufino has a quest during the last part of the play to find Chicharo, the father he has never seen, because he wants to "reclamar," but it is also clear how badly he needs a parent. At a drunken street party, a transvestite who says his name is Chicharo, teases Rufino about his identity, then beats and rapes him. It is left ambiguous whether or not this Chicharo was Rufino's father. González Dávila spares the viewer nothing with his wrenching realism, presenting the worst problems that Mexico City needs to address. The line between art and life blurred as I made my way home from

the theatre: kids wanted to wash the windshield at stoplights, and – exactly as one of the secondary characters did on stage in the play – a boy was spitting lighter fluid and igniting it for tips at an intersection.

The draw of names like Carballido and Leñero did only somewhat better in attracting audiences. Carballido's *Escrito en el cuerpo de la noche* was performed in the Nuevo Centro Teatral Manolo Fábregas, which contains several theatres. The play is a "comedia en once secuencias," and had previously won several awards after its premiere at UNAM. The source for the title, as acknowledged in the program, is Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*: "as if reading off something written on the body of the night." The play is a delightful portrayal of Mexican society as represented by three generations of one family: the abuela Dolores, her divorced daughter Gaviota, and Gaviota's teenage son, Nicolás. The fourth character is a boarder they take in, the free-spirited and ex-junkie Isabel. A cellist, visible stage right, played during scene changes; the music was lively for most changes, but sad and especially poignant during moments of leave-taking and rites of passage for the teenager. The play is a microcosm of daily Mexican challenges as well as silly predicaments within a particular household. All are short of money, Isabel steals to pay the rent but also to shower the others with gifts, Gaviota is having a midlife crisis and dyes her hair orange and gray, something Nicolás cannot handle: "¡Tengo una madre punk!" He blames the absent father for his problems but also yearns to visit him. The abuela complains that burial prices keep going up and that she can hardly ever see the stars in the polluted sky of Mexico City, but she is also the stable one for the family. She manages to save some money, calm both her daughter and the teenager, and accept the fact that Nicolás is growing up. She will not allow Gaviota to interrupt the upstairs sex between Nicolás and Isabel. The mother complains that he is only a child; the abuela settles it with one word: "¡Era!" A long pause – appropriate for the occasion – accompanies the act of the abuela giving Nicolás her savings so that he can go study with his father. The boy comes of age and the women have to find their separate ways to carry on in this funny and thought-provoking comedy.

Leñero's *Qué pronto se hace tarde* premiered at the Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz at UNAM on September 26, 1996. This play and two others (Tomás Urtusástegui's long-running *Vida, estamos en paz*, and Ignacio Solares' *La vida empieza mañana*) dealt with various problems of aging. All three plays present intimate stories about individuals, but any large country with an aging population has a general social/fiscal crisis on the horizon. Director Angel Miguel Rivera made very interesting metatheatrical use of

the lab theater's space and its three levels in the Foro Sor Juana. The action started suddenly and mysteriously on the third-floor level with two men fighting. After a blackout, a journalist appears at a computer desk on the second level and speaks directly to the audience of writing a play about his elderly father, Genaro, a retired professor and a socialist. The son, Arturo, talks to the audience about his father – but also about John Reed, Tennessee Williams, Buero Vallejo and Usigli – in the first of many self-referential features in this play. Arturo finishes his “introduction” with, “A ver cómo lo ven ustedes.” Then the action starts on the first level; the two hoodlums who were fighting before on the third level attack and rob the elderly Genaro. In the program notes, Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda commented on both the content and theatrical style:

Dos viejos separados por una pared y la violencia cotidiana que llega para descubrir el rostro, la soledad más bien, de dos vecinos. Alguien quiere escribir una obra de teatro para contar una tragedia pequeña, pero intensa y alguien necesita una compañía para compartir el tren de la vida, que se va tan pronto. Última estación. . . . Difícil reto, seducir al frío e indiferente espectador contemporáneo con una mirada fraternal, amorosa, a los viejos y a su soledad en el último trecho, con una propuesta que revaloriza al narrador, que da otra vuelta de tuerca a las posibilidades del realismo.

The two elderly neighbors have lived next door to one another for years without getting acquainted until Malena and her maid, Paquita, come to Genaro's aid after he is assaulted. Malena and Genaro slowly fall in love and shyly discuss their fears and longings. At one point, Arturo narrates directly to the audience about the writing process while walking down the stairs on a side wall, but when he reaches the first level, his father's house, he resumes dialogue with another character. Later, back at his desk on the second level, and unhappy with his writing of this play, he quotes Eric Bentley to himself: “Las cosas diarias son aburridas; hay que buscar la crisis.” Genaro suggests to Malena that they add a door to one of their common walls, but she is reluctant; although she has been alone for many years, she is not legally divorced. Genaro suffers a fatal heart attack and Arturo rushes down to the first level, but he is too late to help. Back on the second level again, Arturo comments to the audience, “Aquí dejé la obra en borrador –dramático el momento. Como Usigli, como Willy Loman.” But this narrator is not reliable. He continues, “Pero no era verdadero. No murió así.” Genaro slowly gets up, and Arturo walks down to the first level again to have a much-delayed sincere talk with his father.

Qué pronto se hace tarde is a moving play (without becoming maudlin or exaggerated) about loneliness in old age and about troubled family relationships that almost, but not quite, improve. The viewer feels the needs and hopes of Malena and Genaro as they communicate awkwardly, and most of these needs and hopes are universal. These two cannot overcome the obstacles that keep them apart, yet they do achieve some companionship and a higher degree of self-realization. The frequent Brechtian reminders of the theatrical process and the creative process enhanced the dramatic presentation of the father/son relationship; the character of the playwright/son had to keep analyzing the relationship while he was “composing” it.

The other two plays about the elderly addressed similar concerns of companionship and meaningful life, but in a realistic fashion. *La vida empieza mañana* by Ignacio Solares is a two-person play about the friendship between a priest and a retired military officer. The play premiered in September, 1996 at the Casa del Teatro, and was continuing at the Teatro Casa de la Paz. Ignacio Retes directed and performed the role of the retired officer; Jorge Galván portrayed the disillusioned priest. According to the program notes, this play “surgió de la III Temporada de Teatro Clandestino,” and it is one of two plays I saw associated with this theatre group with its emphasis on “urgent current events.” In other program notes, Leñero, whose *Todos somos Marcos* was an earlier play in the Teatro Clandestino series, described the purpose of these plays:

El Teatro Clandestino pretende ser un teatro de urgencia, es decir, un teatro cuyos montajes aborden la conflictiva múltiple del país casi en el mismo momento en que ésta se está manifestando. Obras que contengan en sus temas la situación y los acontecimientos de nuestro presente inmediato . . . desde la perspectiva de quienes lo padecen. . . . Obras escritas en poco tiempo . . . destinadas a olvidarse y desaparecer, sin duda, pero que cumplan el propósito de testimoniar, hoy, lo que padecen hoy los mexicanos.

The officer and the priest comment on, and especially complain about, the problems in Mexico in 1996. The program lists “el sentido de la vida, el derecho a la muerte, el ansia por dislumbrar la verdadera libertad del hombre en espacios cada vez más castrenses, y el alejamiento que imponen las

relaciones humanas cuando la banalidad acalla la reflexión sobre preocupaciones fundamentales.”

These themes are certainly not limited to 1996, nor to Mexico, but in this play they are situated within constant references to current events. A television set is an important prop; it brings news programs and commentary into the play that the two characters react to and analyze. The officer is delightfully robust, cynical, cranky and cantankerous. He hushes the priest because he thinks the television news is about to announce some information about "the mysterious skull." (Some bones were found in 1996 in the garden of Raúl Salinas, brother of the president; Raúl was still in jail at the time of the performance, pending charges and possible trial.) He interrupts the priest again when he believes the news will reveal recent actions of President Zedillo: "Vamos a ver con quién se compromete hoy." The next line, delivered with careful comic timing, brings on even more cynical audience laughter: "Ayer se comprometió con el fulano ése de . . ." The priest is more calmly reflective about society and himself. He suffers from serious doubts regarding his own religious beliefs and the role of the church regarding social problems. With the help of some cognac, he criticizes the church's inflexibility regarding AIDS and contraception, declaring it "una iglesia sin Cristo." The play is a good balance of biting political humor with serious underpinnings of individual dilemmas and general social problems.

Vida, estamos en paz, by physician-turned-playwright Tomás Urtusástegui, is a play with four characters in their seventies. Urtusástegui, now 63 years of age, has been extraordinarily prolific in the last ten years since his retirement from medicine. During the last several years, this play has been performed more than 350 times by four dedicated actors for television and for large and small audiences in and around the capital. The title of the play comes from the last two lines of a poem by Amado Nervo: "Vida, nada te debo/Vida, estamos en paz." These words are frequently quoted in Mexico to express a certain stoic sense of fulfillment. The four elderly friends get together regularly to chat and to embroider. The one male, Nicanor, is at first painfully shy and has succumbed to the demands of the three women that he join them in the embroidery rather than just sitting idly. Luisa is the strongest and boldest of the group, often embarrassing the others with her outspoken, frank tendencies. She needs her strength though, because her son is pressuring her to give up her possessions and her independence and, ultimately, to move into a retirement home. One of her projects is the elaborate decoration of her own coffin which is seen briefly in the first act. All of the characters joke easily about death and dying; the dialog is humorous, sometimes dark, and reveals a variety of concerns of the elderly. The light chatting is about their daily habits, but it also includes giggles about worms and what body parts

they might eat first – one of them mimes a scratching action on the face as another wonders about the worms eating a corpse's eyes. Adelita worries, "Se me hace que se ha de sentir muy feo cuando se estén comiendo los ojos y la lengua." Nicanor responds, "A lo mejor se sienten como cosquillas." The three women have a good laugh comparing buttocks to various fruits (cantaloupe and even watermelon) in front of the oblivious Nicanor; he thinks they are just talking about shopping, but the audience enjoys the dramatic irony at the expense of the sometimes naïve male character. The second act begins without Luisa and with the other three characters dressed in black and talking about Luisa's coffin. The audience assumes Luisa has died and there are implications that she has committed suicide. This is a bit of audience deception, however, for Luisa soon makes a flamboyant entry in the dress she is preparing for her own funeral. Luisa's son has arranged to sell her house and move her out. The play ends with some tantalizing ambiguity as to whether Luisa will commit suicide or accept her son's actions. Urtusástegui's talent for dialog creates four characters who are funny and charming while incorporating universal preoccupations of the elderly.

Turning from theatre about aging to theatre about and for young people, several plays were very well attended that were pedagogical in nature. Urtusástegui's *Tiempo de heroísmo* played to a full house of 700 in the Teatro Ramiro Jiménez of the Colegio Anglo Mexicano de Coyocacán. The night I saw the play was a culminating event for the play, the school and the playwright. The Mexican ceremony of the "develación de la placa" (unveiling a large plaque to be hung in the theatre lobby and to commemorate a certain number of performances) was held for the playwright; however, the enthusiasm of the actors, the director, and the entire school community were even more noteworthy. This was an example of successful "teatro escolar" whose effect clearly went well beyond the stage and the performances. And the director, Omar Darío, chose a play that would have been a challenge even for professional actors.

Darío had to choreograph an extraordinary amount of movement and physical activity by three groups of actors throughout the play: contemporary punk youth, young military cadets and several pre-Columbian youth. The directing challenge was heightened by the frequent crossing of time lines in the play, but Urtusástegui was able to coherently connect questions of values throughout the play's many scene changes and time periods. The play begins with loud punk music as the punk youth party irreverently in the streets. Their clothing is tie-dyed, their bodies pierced, and their hair styles punk-spiked in neon colors – the male protagonist's hair is bright orange and spiked

several inches high. The extended conflict of the play is between this group and the military cadets who turn out to be the Niños Héroes, defending country and honor against the invading North Americans. The cadets assume the punk “foreigners” to be strange spies and hold them prisoners at first. The scene of the pre-Columbian warriors and princes suggests that the mid-nineteenth century was not the first time (or last) to see sovereignty and honor jeopardized in Mexico, or dignity and a promising future crushed. The scene is a kind of mythical/spiritual interlude during which young people of another era – almost of another universe – comment on issues of valor, necessities and desires.

The combative and distrustful atmosphere between the cadets and the punkers continues through most of the play, but they start to communicate even though the punkers cannot accept the patriotism of the cadets while the latter understand very little of these bizarre Mexicans from the future who complain about the lack of work and money. The cadets’ sense of dedication and honor is complicated at an elegant military ball where they overhear the corrupt Santa Anna and others planning to enrich themselves by cooperating with the invaders or others in power. Both groups finally accept that they need to re-evaluate and listen to each other, learning from the future, as it were, as well as from the past. Despite their contrasting “uniforms,” lifestyles and ideologies, they are finally able to join forces against external adversaries and internal corruption.

During the unveiling ceremony after the play, educators and students spoke of the vital role of the arts in education. Some students had been active in theatre programs for five years and participants in off-campus workshops for three. Graduating students spoke of their interests (and scholarships) for future studies and work in education and government as well as theatre. It was clear that this ceremony was more than an expression of hope, more than an emotional school awards ritual that would fade quickly with time; it was the theatre and the work of a playwright, teachers and students that would continue well beyond the stage performance and the school grounds to benefit a society in crisis.

Franciso de Hoyos is another playwright who is bringing history and thought-provoking theatre to teenagers by humanizing and giving personalities to national heroes and villains. I agree with Compton’s conclusion that “de Hoyos is doing significant work in cultivating a taste for theatre in upcoming generations” (“Mexico 1995, 1996” 137). However, I believe he misses the point with his severe criticism of “excessive pandering” and of a “giggling, airhead Malinche” in a play about the conquest, *Levantando el polvo*. Compton

noted that this was the best-attended play that he saw that summer of 1995. And that, in my opinion, is the point. The playwright is competing with popular music, movies and videos for the attention of teenagers – and he is succeeding by attracting hundreds of them to see questions both ancient and contemporary presented in live theatre. Regardless of whether it was the playwright or the actors (Compton, “Mexico 1995, 1996” 136) who were “excessive” with the Mexicanisms, profanity and characterizations, the important thing is that the teenage audiences I saw at similar plays were *engaged* in issues of social justice, power politics and corruption. The fact that there was a little hooting at the silly slapstick now and then did not undo the effective results of the didactic theatre: de Hoyos has audiences – of *teenagers*.

The three plays of historical adaptation that I saw by de Hoyos in late 1996 were *Zapata vive*, *La cara de Morelos* and *El quinto sol* (a later version of *Levantando el polvo*). Each one had a program that included an audience questionnaire. *Zapata vive* was especially timely due to the revolt in Chiapas that invoked Zapata’s name; the program questionnaire asked students to consider historical motivations as well as possible similarities between Zapata’s time and their own. In addition to Zapata’s strengths, the play also dramatized his doubts and personal problems that may have plagued him. He, Madero and Huerta were given a certain human reality that is not necessarily found in history textbooks. There were some stylized time shifts, including some simultaneous scenes, which contrasted with the energetic and realistic battle actions on a rather small stage.

De Hoyos succeeded in creating a dark, expressionistic world of torture and self-doubt in *La cara de Morelos*. This play opens with Morelos chained to a torture block with two menacing jailors on stilts, dressed in hooded robes so their faces are not seen. In a series of flashbacks, Morelos is as tortured by his doubts and decisions as he is by his mysterious tormentors, declaring in a strategy session with companions, “No puedo contar una muerte más.” The spirit of Hidalgo appears to him, not to advise, but to mock his failures and his uncritical acceptance of Hidalgo’s previous plans, a scene that suggests a broader tragedy: the various leaders of the fight for independence were not able to coordinate their efforts, a coordination that would have saved lives.

El quinto sol dealt with the conquest and addressed well-known human, military and economic problems of that era, but in a comedy whose present-day protagonist becomes an unwilling messenger and time traveler. An abundance of sight gags and anachronistic humor appealed to the young audience. The vaudevillian stunts, however, do not lessen the impact of the

ancient issues and their association with 1996: Cortés and a deceptive priest who manipulated Indians are later seen in modern-day business suits, still manipulating for greater profits at the expense of workers, and Malinche becomes Marina, their sexy, duplicitous secretary; the messenger is amazed at the force of power as a personal drug, leading to corruption in both ancient and modern times; and a PRI protest sign is changed to RIP.

In the vein of educational efforts, eight graduating UNAM theatre students under the direction of Tito Vasconcelos presented in cabaret style *Shakespeare a la carta*. The program was in the form of a menu with meals (scenes), and characters from several plays were hilariously and absurdly thrown together. Everything was fair game for parody and satire in this acting tour de force: the three witches were responsible for Zedillo's behavior, and the president's wife suffered the blood-stained hands; Ariel complained about technocrats who arrive only to leave in six years as millionaires; an improvised puppet scene featured a Salinas puppet (only the very recognizable head appeared at first; the puppet is later shown to be naked with a tiny erect penis when the puppeteer asks about his love life). The puppeteer solicited questions from the audience for herself and the puppet president, and the improvisation included a suspicious reference to me as "ese hombre que parece extranjero que sigue escribiendo quién sabe qué cosas." While this was not an evening of "important theatre," it was an evening of expertly performed "theatrical entertainment" with the highest possible energy level.

UNAM, often with professional actors, continues to produce some of the best Mexican theatre. Ibarguengoitia's *El viaje superficial* was running through the Fall semester. This play has already been thoroughly reviewed (and praised) by Compton ("Mexico City 1995, 1996" 148-149), and I would add that Raúl Zermeño's direction of this performance with so much physical activity was the best directing I saw during the Fall. It is important to add that the final moment of this production – when the two servants suddenly fire rifle shots – is not in the published play. This directorial addition brought much more force to the play's underlying social theme.

For some of us who study Mexican theatre, commenting on it without commenting on Jesusa Rodríguez would seem incomplete. Writing about the theatre of the 1980s, Fernando de Ita chose to close his essay "diciendo que la imagen de la actriz y directora Jesusa Rodríguez sintetiza lo mejor que dio el teatro mexicano de los ochenta" (122). Since one of my very finest nights of theatre was her adaptation and direction at UNAM of *Yourcenar o cada quien su Marguerite: Divertimiento sagrado*, I was anxious to see her work at her "teatro bar," El Hábito, and the play at her small adjoining theatre,

La Capilla, which offers experimental fare in its intimate setting. The play at La Capilla, *Los duelistas*, was a short “espectáculo” by Patricia Rivas (performed for an audience of only four) that creatively combined music, video, mime and fencing to present an extended metaphor of the absurd and violent relationship between a man and a woman. In their fencing uniforms, the couple act out various episodes from their love/hate relationship while the sound track and the video images projected on a large screen behind them portray their subconscious thoughts and emotions.

El Hábito, the teatro bar, is evidently a successful establishment that offers (in addition to a livelihood) humorous but thought-provoking entertainment for patrons who might not otherwise be exposed to such social critiques. I think it is safe to assume that a high percentage of the teatro bar patrons would not attend many plays like those described above by González Dávila and Leñero. Rodríguez herself performed in a biting spoof called “El conde del orgasmo.” She was made up as the count, complete with goatee, and the bawdy sexual humor soon gave way to political satire with Zedillo as the main target. The show was fun; the humor was broad and silly but also intelligent. However, my enjoyment was tempered by a sudden thought: Will this artist ever again have the resources, as she did at UNAM, to direct a performance of such grandiose scale and of such mythic proportions as *Yourcenar*? In the midst of her (very well-performed) clowning, I could not help but sense a weighty loss to Mexican theatre if her endeavors should be limited to El Hábito and La Capilla.²

Theatre in Mexico City is still all-encompassing: stylized and cutting-edge experimental, social-historical, didactic, and commercial, but the clear emphasis of late is the thematic content that reflects a troubled society. Almost all plays contained some element of social unrest, and it dominated most plays. I agree with others that Mexican theatre is as vibrant and fascinating as ever, but there is ample evidence that audiences continue to shrink. I also agree with Garavito’s recent remark about Colombian theatre: “Si como dice Frederic Jameson, ‘all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of a community,’³ a Colombia le sobran razones para empezar a preocuparse” (86). Unfortunately, I find this all too relevant and timely for Mexico as well, with evidence everywhere, ranging from the “Manifestdrómono” of newspaper headlines to the statement by Leñero on the Teatro Clandestino. While it is easy to be optimistic about the future of Mexican theatre because the 1990’s have produced such varied and good theatre, it is equally easy to be pessimistic about the political scene. From afar, I can only hope that the next presidential term brings some solutions as

well as stability, and that theatre artists might have fewer urgent crises they feel compelled to address.

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Notes

1. I wish to express my appreciation to Pittsburg State University for a sabbatical leave that made this study possible. For suggestions on attending plays and maneuvering in Mexico City, see my report on Mexican Theater in *LATR* 24.1 (1990): 146.

2. For a review of *Yourcenar*, see my report in *LATR* 24.1 (1990): 143-44.

3. Quoted from Jameson, 70.

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