Mexico City's Summer 2019 Theatre Season

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I reported last year that I found Mexico City's 2018 summer season somewhat lackluster; 2019's summer season lacked nothing. As with most theatre seasons in Mexico City, this year I was back to agonizing over which promising plays (with several hundred to choose from) I would need to miss, to dealing with sold out performances, and knowing that this report can give but a glimpse into the abundance, originality and quality of some of the season's best.

Thirteen plays stood out to me this season. I approach most of them in alphabetical order, but I want to report first on *Last Man Standing: simulacro boxístico para actores*, a play written by Jorge Maldonado, directed by David Psalmon, and billed as a "Creación del Colectivo TeatroSinParedes." It premiered in March 2018 in the Xavier Rojas "El Granero" theater, but I saw it with the same cast in the recently remodeled Foro La Gruta of the Centro Cultural Helénico. Maldonado told me that he wrote seven scenes, then the company workshopped it, and then he wrote the remainder. And actually, a published version of the text includes several scenes which did not enter into the performance I saw. The handbill proclaimed that it explored the relationship between boxing, theatre, and Mexicanness, and it delivered. As spectators entered the theater, the actors were in full boxing character, training as if at a gym. The formal play started with a Brechtian explanation to the audience that what we would see would not actually be boxing, but a *simulacro* of it, and that actually theatre is also a *simulacro*, and then the actors challenged the audience to try to keep track of the similarities between the two *simulacros*, and to attempt to remember that they were not reality. Much of the rest of the play tested the audience on those challenges. It first highlighted/recreated the actual 1923 heavyweight match between the world champion Jack Dempsey and Argentinian Luis Ángel Firpo, "El

toro de las Pampas," the first Latin American to challenge for the world heavyweight title. Actors took on the roles of the boxers, referee, radio announcer, and a guide to the audience. Behind the fighters, and a *simulacro* of the fight itself, the set of lockers became a movie screen, and spectators saw footage from the actual 1923 contest. As the footage rolled and the actors recreated the fight, the guide explained how Firpo fought valiantly but lost due to some questionable calls from the referee. This scene and subsequent boxing scenes made for brilliant theatre. It included numerous contrasts, including the film and the live (acted) bout, the commentary and actual action, moments of frenetic flurries of punches and slow motion sequences and stoppages of action, during which four of the actors "froze" while the fifth, usually one of the boxers, gave insights into his (or her) unique perspective.

After a sequence showing/narrating the origins and history of boxing, starting in 17th century England, and carrying through to 2012, when women's boxing made its Olympic games debut, it turned to the main storyline, the story of the match between the undefeated champion, Rubén "El Chacal" Olivarez, and the newcomer, Christian "El Gallo" Diez. In another clear attempt to muddy the line between reality and *simulacro*, the names of the competitors corresponded to the names of the actors who played them. The play culminated with the actual bout between the two, but the buildup was monumental, giving the backstories of not only the fighters, but also of their trainers, those who worked in the gyms, and the way boxing became an obsession, for good or not, for each. One digression showed Mexico's remarkable success at producing world champion boxers and mused at the relationship: what does that success say about Mexico and being Mexican? Is it that Mexicans are fighters in the broadest sense? That they are willing to risk their all? That they know how to endure suffering? As the time for the big event approached, the promoter came to El Chacal and told him to throw the match. The promoter countered El Chacal's protests with the depressing idea that the world of boxing is part of a machine that doesn't reward athletic merit, but bows to the whims of the mob to whip up the public and make money. The conversation ended with not-at-all veiled threats. After the incredibly theatrical preening and trash talking of the press conference, the actual bout took center stage, with all the trappings of the Dempsey-Firpo fight, but with more rounds, more emotion, more detail, and more drama. About round ten, the fight paused and the actors returned to Brechtian mode, saying that the audience would actually decide the outcome of the bout. Voting for El Chacal represented integrity, merit, and fighting against

corruption, but the innocent victor and his family would assuredly die at the hands of the mob. Voting for El Gallo would save El Chacal's life, spare his family, send him with just one loss to his respectable retirement, and would give El Gallo his chance in the sun; but it would be a vote for corruption. I will not reveal how the audience voted, but I felt the weight of my vote. At least one audience member did not vote, and the actors called her on it. She responded that she didn't want to feel responsible for the consequences. The line between fact and fiction had disappeared. The bout ended according to audience vote and the consequences followed, evolving to the preparation of Carmen "La Flaca" Coronado for her boxing career. This led to consideration of women in Mexican society, equality and justice, and a look at the consumer side of boxing and theatre. What does it say about Mexicans (and boxing fans worldwide) that they are so anxious to see people try to do damage to each other?

Last Man Standing gave audience members many layers of issues to consider, often in a very personal way. The performances of the actors were stellar (I mentioned three already, the others: Gilberto Barraza and Miguel Ángel Barrera) in their timing, in their flow from fast to slow, from narration to action, from past to present, from comic to deadly serious, from boxing to

Last Man Standing. *Simulacro boxístico para actores*. Photo: Cody Johnson.

theatre to life. This play was a remarkable combination of philosophy and action. It captured the essence of boxing's theatricality and blurred the line between theatre and life. I've seen three performances by TeatroSinParedes, each one outstanding—brilliant theatre each and each one a cause for profound reflection.

Performers staged seventeen different shows under the banner of *Ciclo entre Lenchas Vestidas y Musculocas* between June 6 and July 21. Supported by federal and city governments, this diversity festival ranged from ballet to circus to stand up comedy to concerts to cabaret to opera to theatre. Many of the acts had just one performance, while others ran for several days, and one play had 12 performances over four weekends. Three downtown theatres housed the festival, including the grand Teatro de la Ciudad Esperanza Iris, where I saw *Astrid Hadad. Hecha en México*. A well-known singer/composer/actor, Hadad's work skewers Mexican institutions, history,

Astrid Hadad. Hecha en México. Photo: Cody Johnson.

and culture, and her costumes are the stuff of legend. In this show, she sang 16 different songs, each with a show-stopping costume. Before most numbers, as technicians removed the previous costume and then assembled the new one onto her, she would tell the story behind the song she was about to sing, often offering withering cultural commentary as she went. Many of the songs focused on women in Mexico and how individuals and classes have been exploited since the time of the Aztecs, starting with the Aztecs, then Europeans, the Church, the US, China, and today's government. She sang beautifully, and the lyrics were clever and pointed, but the costumes stole the show, starting with a massive Aztec skull rack dress, a huge archbishop dress which opened to reveal an altar, a wide dress with images of nature which opened like a popup book to show villages of people, and a circus skirt which opened to show performers in the folds of its "big top." This frolicking performance treated the audience to both fun and seriousness, offered entertainment and food for thought, and pointed out societal foibles needing attention and change.

DHL. Photo: Cody Johnson.

Luis Eduardo Yee was one of the brightest stars of this season, performing in at least three plays, writing two of them, and directing another. *DHL* premiered in roughly 2013. Yee wrote and performed it, and Ricardo Rodríguez directed it. I asked both Yee and Rodríguez why a monologue written by the actor needed a director, and both said that Yee's original text lacked stage directions, any indication of set or costumes, and that Rodríguez's collaboration added flesh to the text's bare bones. I felt the play's main accomplishment was to create a quirky and appealing main character, Félix. He readily admitted that he wasn't the world's smartest, didn't come from a resource-rich environment, and had been bullied as a child. His life quest was to be an outstanding DHL employee, delivering their mail and packages without the help of GPS because he knew every street and building in his area. But one day an address surfaced which he didn't know, which forced him out of his comfort zone. The character told all this as he slowly set up a tent, lined it with lights, and dressed in an orange uniform which at first I thought was the DHL delivery jumpsuit, but eventually became astronaut gear. The tent became a spaceship, and through the urging of his girlfriend and the nudges from his work, he symbolically left that comfort zone and explored regions well beyond his section of town. This was a heartwarming, feel-good play, well acted, with strong but simple central imagery. No wonder it has had numerous seasons at many different theaters (this time at the Sala Xavier Villaurrutia in Chapultepec park).

Isaac Pérez Calzada wrote and acted in *El cantar de Rolando*, a play he originally wrote as a writing exercise, but which he dusted off at the insistence of Paola Izquierdo, who then directed it. Pérez Calzada played an impatient accountant whose car broke down near a circus on the way to an important business meeting. The only thing in the area was the circus, run by Rolandi, played by Juan Acosta. Rolandi managed to slow the accountant down enough to witness the circus in exchange for an eventual ride to his meeting, but by the end, the accountant begged to stay with the circus. The actors performed wonderfully, using physical humor and gags, changing voices for different circus acts, embodying a variety of interesting characters, performing magic tricks, and donning different animal suits and circus costumes. The timing between the two and with the recorded sound effects was superb. This was a delightful children's play in the Foro San Simón, a locally-built community theatre where neighbors gather to see high quality theatre for free. On this occasion the children responded most favorably and even scored a father's day gift bag.

El cantar de Rolando. Photo: Cody Johnson.

UNAM's Carro de las comedias continues to crank out a high quality play every year. The set, props and costumes all fold down into a trailer which goes on tour to various parts of the country, but always has a nice run during summer weekend mornings at UNAM's cultural center. The plays tend to be classics, with this year's selection being *El cornudo imaginario* by Molière. Jesús Díaz directed the play, which, as with all Carro de las comedias peformances included actors singing original music (in this case, by Roam León), playing a variety of instruments, taking on a variety of roles, and directly engaging the audience. Their stylized, energetic acting matched the colorful, playful costumes. Molière's play of multiple misunderstandings allowed the actors to ham it up, to the delight of the audience. The consistent excellent quality of the Carro for over 20 years is one of Mexico City's theatrical jewels.

Rolando García wrote and directed *El doctor improvisado* and served as voice and puppeteer for the play as well. I saw it in the "Sala Novo" of Teatro la Capilla. I have found evidence on the internet that García has been performing the play since at least 2007. No wonder it was polished to per-

El doctor improvisado. Photo: Cody Johnson.

fection—by far the finest traditional hand puppet theatre I have ever seen. The plot, which García said he adapted from a Mexican story published in 1905, featured death itself. A tailor made him a new suit, so he gave the tailor riches and made him a doctor, but eventually called for his life. The tailor tried to cheat death, then confronted him. Very Mexican. So the plot entertained, but the puppet work wowed. García gave each of the puppets exceptional expression, both in the voices he provided them and in their movements. The characters charmed by themselves, but their interactions with each other brought particular delight. Chases, kisses, all-star wrestling, hide and seek, visual gags—García performed all brilliantly. The charm

took on increased dimensions when he had his puppets poke out the side of the box to coach the audience on how to react, when to clap, and what to say or yell. I've never seen children so engaged at a play, talking with the characters, giving advice, having fun. García's two sons, Alan and Olin, enhanced the performance by playing and singing original music they had composed for the play—a clear improvement over earlier performances. My companion and I did not read the program prior to the play, and when just one puppeteer stepped out of the box to take a bow, we were astounded—we had both expected a crew. García is clearly a puppeteer genius, and *El doctor improvisado* was a masterpiece of its genre.

I give priority in choosing performances to plays written by Mexicans, although I also find adaptations to Mexican culture worthy of study. Tuesday and Wednesday evenings are the lightest nights for theatre in Mexico City, with Wednesday being the lightest. I saw *El feo*, by German Marius Von Mayenburg, in a translation by Stefanie Weiss, and directed by Víctor Weinstock, on a Wednesday evening when a theater cancelled a play by a Mexican playwright. Despite the minimal and non-cultural set, as well as characters and subject matter not adapted to Mexico, they resonated to a packed house at the Milán theater. In it, the world's ugliest man, played beautifully by Reynaldo Rossano, realized he had lost opportunities at work due to his homeliness, so he submitted to plastic surgery and suddenly became the most handsome man in the world. A hilarious study on what good looks mean socially, psychologically, and in the work place ensued. His wife could look at him, other women flocked to him, he moved up the ladder at work, the plastic surgeon got rich. But once all of society, through plastic surgery, also became incredibly handsome, other psychological and social ramifications emerged. The audience had to imagine Rossano's transformation from ugly to handsome, since the actor's face did not physically modify, but his cocky, conceited body language and demeanor sparkled in their hilarity. Karina Gidi, Sergio Bonilla and Artús Chávez rounded out the excellent cast. Their hyper-exaggerated acting was hilarious without crossing over to insipid. An absence of props, which audience members had to imagine, albeit with the help of sound effects, enhanced this style of acting. The actors and the effects synched perfectly, as did the actors with each other. *El feo*'s illustration of society's insanity in its obsession over looks, good or bad, resonated strongly in Mexico City.

Shakespeare's *Othello* provided the foundation for *La maté por un pañuelo*, in what the program called a versión by Andrea Salmerón Sangi-

nés and Alfonso Cárcamo. Salmerón Sanginés also directed. The play used Shakespeare's basic plot and character names from Othello, but it took place in present-day Mexico. I saw it on the stage of UNAM's biggest theater, the Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, but it was scheduled to have a run at the Isabela Corona theater, in the northern part of the city, later in 2019. And this play deserved various runs. The cast was excellent, with particular kudos to Antonio Vega for his sinister role as Iago. Tall (fifteen feet high?) glass panels with encased blinds, and on wheels, organized the set, designed by Tania Rodríguez. In it, multiple spaces existed, separated by walls of fully closed blinds, or linked by opening the blinds, raising the blinds, or moving the panels themselves, to great dramatic effect. Offices, bedrooms, receiving rooms, street scenes appeared and disappeared instantly. Given Othello's tragic jealous rage and rush to judgement, which ended with Desdemona's death, this iteration of the play cast particular light on domestic violence against women. After the play's main action, a long fabric descended from the ceiling and one of the actresses performed sky dancing, with murmurs from the sound system accompanying her actions, to me symbolizing multiple murders of women. Finally, a large sign remembering Desdemona as a victim of violence against women unfurled. It followed the format of a group called "Bordamos Feminicidios," which has created memorials to women victims since 2011 (see their Facebook page for examples). Actual memorials honoring women victims filled the theater lobby, which created a particularly powerful effect on the heels of experiencing such a gut-wrenching play.

Luis Eduardo Yee wrote and directed *Manada*, but did not act in it. A friend tipped me off that it was based on Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, but the program and advertising made no mention of it. I was glad for the tip, or the characters' Russian names would have confused me even more. As it was, I had to adjust because all eleven characters switched genders for this version—the sisters in Chekhov's play became brothers in *Manada*, which seemed appropriate in Mexico's male-dominated society. Anfisa dressed completely in white, Vershinin wore black, and the rest of the characters wore black pants and white shirts, which reflected, for me, the colorless, fruitless economy of the play's relationships. Alejandro Preisser composed and played gorgeous cello music periodically, on the stage, next to the actors. The acting of the entire cast was terrific, but I give particular props to Hamlet Ramírez and Pablo Marín in their roles as the two older brothers, especially given how these roles differed greatly from other roles I've seen

them play. The multiple tragedies of the family and the resulting desolation came through loud and clear.

Américo del Río wrote and acted (with 6 other actors) in *¡Que arda Tebas!*, which Juan José Tagle directed. Publicity about this play claimed that it reflected the state of theatre in Mexico as well as the state of Mexico itself. If such was the case, flames have enveloped both. The action of this play about staging the premiere of a postmodern version of *Oedipus Rex* started backstage, moments before the scheduled start of the classic inner play. Unfortunately, the inner play's main actor hadn't yet arrived. To make matters worse, the house was full for the play within the play, and the audience included several bigwigs in the state theatre apparatus who would make decisions on the play's future, based on the performance. The play's brash young director decided to go forward with the performance, making radical changes with the cast as they went. An older actor jumped, for example, to play the lead, which she had always wanted to do. The director decided to let Thebes burn, leading to the play's title. Most of the action occurred backstage of Oedipus, but we saw several scenes of it so we witnessed the craziness of what the imagined audience saw. As the play and metaplay progressed, we learned about each of the actors, their frustrations with the theatre system, and their dreams. Eventually, the audience and bigwigs received this radical version of Oedipus with thunderous approval, and the bigwigs arranged for a long run at the current venue and a tour throughout the country. I found the acting superb (with a particularly strong performance from Héctor Holten, who played the actor who eventually showed up, albeit after the metaplay had begun), the dialogue compelling, and the flow between comic and serious, as well as between the inner and outer plays extremely well done. I asked del Río if he was aware of anyone in the theatre community who had taken offense at the play, since it skewers experimental theatre and its followers very pointedly. He responded that no, response to the play had been very positive, although a few people "se escandalizaron" because they thought he was criticizing David Gaitán's experimental and very popular (enjoying another run this summer) *Edipo: Nadie es ateo*. Del Río pled innocent, pointing out that he wrote *¡Que arda Tebas!* two years before Gaitán's play ever premiered.

Alejandro Ricaño and Luis Eduardo Yee wrote and Ricaño directed *Tal vez mañana sea un día cualquiera*. Jesús Hernández designed the set, which consisted of a perhaps 7 X 10 foot rotating platform with a desk on it. I counted 14 scenes, and for each scene the platform turned to a different

position. At times the space represented a government office, at times the office of an off-beat journalist, at times the homes of different characters. Performed in the Foro Lucerna of the Teatro Milán, with the audience surrounding the stage, the rotating set gave spectators unique, intimate perspectives for a play dealing with personal crises. The spinning stage mirrored the spinning dilemmas of the characters' lives. Sara Pinet played Emma, whose boyfriend disappeared after an extremely late party. Her pleas to authorities to help investigate fell on deaf ears—the flippant government representative laughed at Emma because her boyfriend had been a student activist, so he figured he had deserved whatever had happened. Emma launched her own investigation and came to the conclusion that her boyfriend's friend (and to complicate things, her former boyfriend) was responsible for his death in an accident which his wealthy father had covered up. Since authorities refused to get involved, she went to the off-beat journalist who published Emma's theory in a piece she veiled (very thinly) as fiction. The piece led to physical assaults to the friend, as well as great emotional distress to the writer, for whom it uncloseted memories of a tragedy from years earlier from which she hadn't fully recovered. The play tackled the enormously difficult issues in current Mexican society of disappearances, lack of justice, and the power of the media. And yet spectators didn't leave just shaking their heads at government and the media, for the play challenged them to look within, to be ethical, and to deal honestly with difficult situations that arise in average people's lives. The government representative and writer, played by Horacio Trujillo and Paula Watson, provided wonderful comic relief in the midst of such tense scenes. Pinet and David Calderón, who played the friend, also acted convincingly, although their roles were dramatic rather than comic. This play featured finely drawn characters in a compelling plot, with thought-provoking themes, excellent acting, a fine set, and sparkling dialogue, which we have come to expect from Ricaño.

In 2002 I reported on a remarkable improvisational show called the *Trattaria d'improvizzo* directed by Alberto Lomnitz starring up-and-coming actors. It started in 2001 and enjoyed a long run which spilled into the next year. In it, much like in *Whose Line Is It, Anyway,* spectators helped choose topics and styles for the actors to develop. The actors played waiters who served up improvised plays with great success.[1] Since that time improvisational theatre and even a television show have done very well in Mexico, some of them featuring actors from that seminal 2001 show. In 2018 the Trattaria rose again in the same La gruta space, and with mostly the same actors,

but with some changes—the waiters had become chefs and Lomnitz shared directing and hosting duties with Fernando Bonilla. As in the first run, it met with great success and a very long run, and I managed to witness two performances the year after its revival. Leo Soqui improvised at the keyboard and Matías Gorlero improvised lighting and effects, while four actors per night put on five improvised plays created with the input of the audience and hosts. Seventeen years later the same actors were just as quick, just as funny, and just as remarkable as previously. They worked together beautifully. Bonilla and Lomnitz managed the event masterfully, pointing out that what the audience saw each night would never be seen again. The actors I saw were Ricardo Esquerra, Carlos Aragón, Haydée Boetto, Carmen Mastache, Juan Enciso, Juan Carlos Medellín, and Julieta Ortiz, all of whom I have seen play a variety of roles in many types of plays. The Trattaria entertained for sure, but it also showcased Mexico's excellent actors' range of acting skills.

Yáax, el primer mexicano. Photo: Cody Johnson.

Guillermo Schmidhuber de la Mora wrote and Jorge Prado Zavala acted and directed the monologue *Yáax, el primer mexicano*. Prado Zavala's performance was simply phenomenal. He took on the role of the son of Spaniard Gonzalo Guerrero and his Mayan wife, a son born in the early 1500s, well before Hernán Cortés had even met La Malinche, and obviously previous to the birth of their son, Martín Cortés. Prado Zavala's speech, his corporal and facial expression and movement, and his emotions were all very studied, stylized, and exact. They had to be, since the distance between the actor and audience members ranged from no more than thirty feet to as few as two, and audience members surrounded him on three sides. He spoke with the audience at times, while at other times he acted out scenes from his life. He sang, he danced, he played instruments. He even delivered some of his speeches in Mayan. Prado Zavala used a variety of artefacts from from the Maya to set a tone, among them a flute, the head of a jaguar, shells on his legs, and white clothing from the Yucatán. Yáax claimed to be a wandering spirit, searching for personal peace and peace for Mexico. He told the story of his mother and father and showed that the first Mexican was born of love and cooperation (a clear rejection of the influential rape and violence narrative Octavio Paz advanced in *El laberinto de la soledad*). He spoke of Cortés as a monster and urged the audience to reject the conquistador's selfishness that has brought so much pain to Mexico, and to replace it instead with the spirit of his parents. Prado Zavala told me that Schmidhuber consented to the staging he had done, which included some non-Mayan aspects, such as the Yaqui dance of the deer. Prado Zavala included these elements, he said, to immerse the audience in a native American ambiance, and to great effect, in my opinion. *Yáax, el primer mexicano* offered wonderful acting, a beautiful text, and marvelous glimpses into another side of Mexican life.

Before finishing, I want to acknowledge briefly several other noteworthy plays from this season. Martín Acosta directed a two-part "Historia de la diversidad en la Ciudad de México en el siglo XX" at the El Milagro theatre. David Gaitán and Sara Pinedo wrote the first, *41 detonaciones contra la puerta de un closet,* and Marianella Villa and Servando Anacarsis Ramos wrote the second play, *La herida y la flecha: Réquiem para no olvidarte*. The first focused on the history of the gay rights movement, and the second on the women's rights movement. I saw the first and admired the idea, but felt that it did not come together as a work of art. Its 41 scenes seemed disjointed to me, although it did bring to the fore some of the giants of the movement. *Wenses y Lala*, by Adrián Vásquez, continues having great success—it has

had runs at a variety of theaters around the city, as well as performances around Mexico and beyond. I saw its gala 300th performance with an audience full of people from the industry, television coverage, a plaque at the end, and speeches. The play itself was as good as ever, and Teté Espinoza was at the top of her game in her improvisations with the audience.[2] Several other excellent plays from seasons past continued their runs or had new runs this season, among them *A ocho columnas*, *El niño que se comió la servilleta de su sandwich,* and *Edipo: Nadie es ateo*.[3]

Mexico City's 2019 summer season had plays of transcendent beauty, crucial social relevance, and brimming with creativity. It included experimental, comic, dramatic, and improvisational plays. Its casts ranged from one to numerous. Its spaces ranged from intimate to monumental. Its subject matter tackled a remarkable array of important Mexican and global issues. It made audiences, laugh, cry, think and admire. Indeed, Mexico City's theatre continues vast, varied and vibrant, and represents an important part of Mexico's astonishing cultural and artistic world.

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Notes

[1] See pages 110-111 of my "Mexico City Theatre: Spring 2002" published in the Spring 2003 issue of *Latin American Theatre Review.*

[2] See pages 247-248 of my "Mexico City's Spring 2016 Theatre Season" in the Fall 2016 issue of *Latin American Theatre Review* to see my original comments on *Wenses y Lala*.

[3] See pages 191-193 of my "Mexico City's October 2017 Theatre Season, with a Bonus Performance in Querétaro" in the Fall 2018 issue of *Latin American Theatre Review* for my comments on *El niño que se comió la servilleta de su sandwich*, and pages 183-187 of my "Mexico City's Summer 2018 Theatre Season" in the Spring 2019 issue of *Latin American Theatre Review* for my comments on the other two plays.