

Mexico City Theatre, Summer 1997

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Theatre activity in Mexico City continues abundant and varied. The July 3-9 edition of *Tiempo Libre*, for example, listed 139 plays, about two-thirds of which were written by living Mexicans. Unfortunately, among the numerous plays were many lemons and several aspects of the big picture were negative, including the disappearance of the formal Teatro Clandestino phenomenon, a tendency among many plays to cater to the basest instincts of theatre-goers in terms of language, morals, and cheap humor, and the absence of any super-play by Mexicans on a large stage with large audiences.¹ Notwithstanding these phenomena, the season also had some encouraging signs, including a weekly series of plays entitled *Cinco dramaturgos mexicanos* at the Foro de la Conchita, several theatre festivals, a number of plays from Japan as part of a cultural exchange, and several excellent plays/performances. Although the season as a whole seemed weaker than prior years, its bright spots were outstanding.²

A pantomime festival was among the season's most noteworthy theatre festivals. It featured two to four new plays with different performers each week. Another was "Festival metropolitano de teatro de bachillerato," for which 20 (often enormous) groups from high schools each performed a full-length play at INBA's Teatro Orientación. Although a number of the plays were poorly done, others were done quite well. On the poor side, for example, one group performed Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's moving text formerly known as *La razón de Elvira* (now entitled *La fiera de Ajusco*). This play portrays the real-life case of a woman from Mexico City who ended up killing her children after getting caught in a downward spiral of poverty, drugs, pollution, underemployment, and deadbeat lovers. Unfortunately, in this performance the actors painted their faces for no reason, cut some of the most moving scenes, emphasized the worst of life rather than Elvira's humanity, and assaulted the audience with noise from a dilapidated drum set for no particular reason. By contrast, another group performed Emilio Carballido's sweet one-act play entitled *Matrimonio y mortaja y a quien le*

baja. The group effectively captured the essence of several provincial stereotypes and the humor of puns, situational misunderstandings, and strained social relationships. Many of the groups chose challenging texts, resolved dramatic problems admirably, and involved a large number of young people and their families in theatre.

The Foro de la Conchita is one of the few independent commercial theaters which has withstood the test of time, albeit in a modest way. Owner and actress Olga Martha Dávila's influence has made her Foro (seating limit approximately 40) one in which spectators can consistently see contemporary texts by living Mexicans – more often than not plays by Hugo Argüelles or his disciples. The season's "Cinco Dramaturgos Mexicanos" series featured plays by Sabina Berman (*La grieta*), Hugo Hiriart (*Simulacros*), Gerardo Luna (*Corazón de melón*), Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda (*La navaja*), and Carlos Haro (*Una cita con la muerte*). Mexico's genius set designer, Alejandro Luna, created a set versatile enough to be used for all five plays which highlighted a range of topics and styles.

Berman's play was perhaps the finest of the five plays. In the spirit of both Teatro Clandestino and theatre of the absurd, this play focused on the corrupt, inefficient, ridiculous nature of bureaucracy in Mexico City. The title alludes to the cave-like mentality and entrenchment of the bureaucratic world. A new employee uncovered the corruption of the office when he hit a "spider" on the ceiling which turned into a crack and then a dramatic opening through the roof. It turned out the Licenciado heading the office received kickbacks from builders in exchange for cutting corners during construction. The greatest manifestation of bureaucratic absurdity is reflected in the new employee's frustrated quest to find out his responsibilities. He wanted to contribute, but could not in an environment marked by empty formality, ceremony and phrases void of meaning, poignant silences, alcohol, three-piece suits, and corruption. Actors Jorge Levy and Carlos Santín captured brilliantly the tragi-comic idiot mentality of mid-level bureaucrats who kiss up to their superiors, treat their inferiors abominably, and work the system for personal gain. *La grieta* effectively combined humorous dialogue and visual slapstick with terrifyingly realistic incursions into the anesthetizing effects of bureaucracy.

Small theatres with modest seating capacities provided the setting for three of the season's finest plays. One was by Vicente Leñero while the other two were by less established dramatists. Leñero's play, *Qué pronto se hace tarde*, was directed by Miguel Angel Rivera at the Foro Contigo América theatre. The play's central concern was old age, a topic rarely broached with grace and intelligence in theatre. In this case, it highlighted the way in which

an elderly man became isolated from his family, from love, and even from the society around him. It also dealt with several issues pertinent to Mexico's current situation – street crime and corruption in politics and the press. In addition, it had a metatheatrical undercurrent, since in a corner of the stage the main character's son composed the play at his computer, interrupting his composition from time to time to take part in the action. The set designed by Arturo Nava worked very well in the difficult space of *Contigo América*. In contrast with the cubicle-like space of the son, an enormous table dominated stage center, with a substantial old Remington typewriter symbolizing the generation gap in its contrast with the son's computer. Genaro, the play's main character, was played tenderly (and with an Uruguayan accent) by Blas Braidot, the founder of the original Galpón in Uruguay who now resides permanently in Mexico City. The role of Malena was played beautifully by Raquel Seoane (Braidot's wife). *Qué pronto* was essentially a love story – Malena nursed Genaro after he was robbed one night. Their encounter helped them to overcome the isolating tendencies of city-life – they found they had been next-door neighbors for years but had never met. They fell in love with each other based not on physical attraction (heresy in our modern hedonistic world!) but the enjoyment of conversation, sharing time together, and service. When they kissed, he suffered a heart attack and appeared to die. The son intervened and announced that in his rough draft of the play it ended at this point. The metatheatrical element of the play gave it added dimensions – two endings, humorous references to the difficulty of writing as well as additional insights into the protagonist's life. The second ending showed Malena getting cold feet and bolting, leaving Genaro alone once again. This was a poignant, thoughtful play – beautifully done with original music, sweet dialogue, excellent acting, and insight into the difficulties of aging and writing.

The set created by Philippe Amand for *Fantasia subterránea para mujer y violín* simulated beautifully the landing of a subway station in Mexico City, an environment which strikes a chord with virtually any capital dweller. Amand resolved the theatrical challenge of representing the train itself and its movement via the brilliant use of moving and blinking rectangular lights which imitated vividly the feel of being at a station. The characters who took the metro would step off the landing stage left, sit on a small wheeled cart, then coast off the stage to the right. A series of mirrors allowed spectators to see the characters depart in the sunken space of the rails as the lights flashed. Before and after the play recordings from the metro were played over the loud speaker to further immerse spectators in the subterranean world. Appropriately, the play was performed in the Gruta theater of the Helénico Cultural Center.

The action of *Fantasía subterránea*, which was written and directed by Iona Weissberg, head of the Theatre Department at UNAM, centered on the magical relationship between a woman who was going to ride the metro and a violinist she encountered on the landing. The violinist turned out to be a genie of sorts, who converted to reality the desires the woman expressed to have a relationship with different types of people. For example, after wishing out loud that a revolutionary-sort would come into her life, one walked onto the landing and started a relationship with her. After about fifteen minutes with him, however, she realized that her fantasy was misguided, and she dispatched him on the next train. Thus, she met, and subsequently sent into the tunnels of the city, a series of suitors who were humorously varied, and who forced her to confront her naive notions that a prince charming could solve her problems. The performances of Silverio Palacios as the violinist, Mónica Dionne as the woman, and Luis Artagnan as the suitors were all sensational. Dionne played wonderfully the sweet, vulnerable, fantasizing young woman who was brought down to earth. Palacios didn't just play his violin beautifully, but created a most intriguing character who had fantastic powers which contrasted with his calm and stately actions and conversations. Artagnan masterfully created five absolutely different characters. The dialogue was brilliant, with moments of humor and others of poignancy and seriousness. Beautiful music, an evocative environment and excellent lighting effects rounded out this accomplished play, which was programmed for a limited run only one night a week in a space allowing a maximum of 60 spectators.

Another of the season's finest plays was also performed in the Gruta theatre on a different night of the week. In contrast with the involved set of *Fantasía subterránea*, the set for *Joe* consisted of a single free-standing door (on wheels) and the stark bare walls and floor of the theatre. Written and directed by a young Mexican, Eric Morales, the play dealt with the issue of Hispanic immigration to the United States. It illustrated that the protagonist's early life in his sleepy hicktown in Mexico wasn't so bad in comparison with the devouring, dehumanizing fast lane of the cities in the U.S., in this case New York City. Subtitled *La historia de un hombre al que le cambiaron el nombre*, the play's key moment came when José's "friends" rechristened him "Joe," thus severing his ties to his roots and identity, and placing him on the road to disaster. The play started with the end, and through a series of flashbacks the audience had to put the plot together like the pieces of a puzzle. Many of the pieces did not settle in until the very end, as in the case of a series of comic monologues delivered by a Puerto Rican floozy who was unconnected to the rest of the play until the final scene. Despite the stark

emptiness of the set, minimalist props were used in almost magical ways. An umbrella, for example, was used as an assault weapon in a bank heist, then as a parachute, and finally as protection from rain! The door was the entrance to many different buildings (since it could be wheeled to different spots on the stage there was no confusion as to the differences) as well as a taxi cab. Several times space was folded, as when Joe gave his girlfriend a tattoo, with perfect concentration on a single spot, as she walked about the stage, or when a character knocked on the roving door, but a different one opened at the back of the stage, and the parties carried on their single conversation in a space folded outward through drama. Lights were used creatively to indicate shifts in time and space, to “freeze” characters, and to create environments. The actors performed beautifully in roles which required exact timing, rapid changes in tone and rhythm, and facial and corporal discipline. *Joe’s* excellence rested in its treatment of a vital subject combined with techniques which were absolutely theatrical and could not be duplicated in any other genre.

La raya del olvido, written by Carlos Fuentes and directed and acted by Ignacio Retes, also broached the theme of flight to the North and abandoning Mexico, but with an emphasis on its effect on the country. A very odd play, it consisted of Retes, seated in a rocking chair and with the script before him, carrying on a conversation with a film. The movie rolled flashbacks from his life and the lives of his family members, as well as visual metaphors of the depths to which his life had sunk. These stark images included incarceration, barbed wire, a barren, windy crag, and mud. He symbolized traditional Mexico and agonized over the way his children crossed the border (hence the title) finding personal advancement through capitalism, but abandoning their family, their heritage, their country, and their capacity to feel. Over and over he racked himself about his changing identity, about justice, love, and the future of Mexico. *La raya del olvido* was a most peculiar play in its technique, but presented penetrating images of the crisis Mexico faces.

Several fine performances of Golden Age Spanish theatre deserve mention. One group, for example, took on three of Cervantes’ entremeses. Heavyweight director Luis de Tavira tackled Lope de Vega’s *El caballero de Olmedo* with virtually no budget limitations resulting in his usual visual creativity and brilliance in a performance which lasted nearly four hours. José Ramón Enríquez directed another Lope play, *El animal de Hungría*, at INBA’s experimental black box theatre. Faithful to the text, the performance was nonetheless experimental with Brechtian details of actors never

completely leaving the sight of spectators, a minimal, stark, metallic set, and numerous lighting effects. Although set in 16th century Hungary, it dealt with the very Mexican issues of power, political corruption, revenge, and prejudice.

Finally, for the first time in at least six summer seasons, a play by Rodolfo Usigli reached the stage. *El gesticulador* was performed to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its premiere. In many respects, this was a fine rendition of Mexico's best-known play, especially considering the theatre's very shallow performance space. Actors played the main characters effectively, with a particularly fine performance by David Romero as Miguel. A nice touch at this performance was having some of the characters interact with the audience before the play to establish a feeling of postrevolutionary Mexico. On the unfortunate side, the performance featured considerable ridiculous comic relief, primarily by playing the character of Salinas with a life-sized puppet bearing a likeness of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Characters took every opportunity to bang him on the head and generally abuse him to the delight of the large, unruly, youthful audience. This ruined the bulk of the second act. Usigli would assuredly have been outraged. On the other hand, the political and interpersonal thematics of *El gesticulador* seemed as current for Mexico in 1997 as any other play of the season. Hopefully Mexico will start to produce more plays by its most distinguished theatrical pioneer.

Given the historic elections which took place in Mexico on July 6, and the ubiquitous talk about politics in the City, I expected more overtly political plays. Instead, the plays broached current issues in veiled ways. Overall, Mexico City's summer 1997 theatre season was not its finest in recent years, but its pearls were of very high quality. They combined creative use of unusual theatrical spaces, excellent acting, nimble dialogue, innovative theatrics, and significant thematics. Despite incessant laments by theatrical insiders in Mexico, this season proved that Mexican theatre still has plenty to offer.

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Notes

1. See *Latin American Theatre Review* 30.1 (1996), 135, for a brief overview of the Teatro Clandestino phenomenon.

2. This report offers a view of some of the season's noteworthy performances, with an emphasis on plays written by Mexicans.