

Mexico City Theatre – Summer 1998

Timothy G. Compton

As the summer 1998 theatre season in Mexico City attests, despite political corruption, street violence, economic crises, wildfires, pollution, the Chiapas standoff, and even a difficult loss to Germany in the World Cup, Mexico miraculously continues to produce excellent theatre. Although the number of plays was comparable to recent summer seasons, there was a significant drop in the number of plays which ran evenings Wednesdays or Thursdays through Sundays.¹ Instead, many plays were performed only one or two times per week, and early afternoon weekend time slots formerly reserved for children's theatre now feature adult theatre as well. Transportation and safety issues undoubtedly account, at least in part, for these trends. As a result, theatre-goers face less flexibility in seeing performances. Surely these circumstances further exacerbate the financial difficulties which actors and others involved in theatre face. Many actors resort to performing in multiple plays. Nevertheless, for at least the time being, spectators have at their disposal a large number and wide variety of plays, many of which are excellent.

I consider three of the season's plays masterpieces, and half a dozen other plays I saw were not far behind. Many others had varied strengths. One of the season's best actually premiered in September of 1997. Written by Jorge Gidi and Ricardo Esquerra, directed by Gidi, and presented as a "collage of texts," *Servando o del arte de la fuga* dealt with the life of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier and the persecution he faced for questioning the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe and suggesting that Mexico should separate from Spain in the late 1700's. The friar's moving, remarkable life story was presented in a style as spectacular as the black box Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz theater was bare. Six of the seven actors played numerous roles, including inanimate objects used by other actors (chairs, ships, animals, bridges, caves, etc.). The seventh actor, Rodrigo Vásquez, played the extremely challenging role of Fray Servando – he was rarely off stage, changed roles often within his role, and convincingly showed numerous stages of aging over a sixty year period. All actors demonstrated excellent singing, tremendous corporal agility and strength, wide ranges of voice rhythms, accents and volumes, the ability to switch instantly

from circus-like acrobatics with bombastic speech to quiet tenderness to shrill rage to monasterial reverence, the capacity to work without a set and with unusual props, the ability to move back and forth between narration and representation, and the endurance to do all this for over two hours. Props often had more than one dramatic use. For example, one of the “wigs” worn by the judges/actors in the picture which accompanies this report (items commonly sold in Mexico for massages) later symbolized a bridge which Servando crossed (fingers symbolizing legs). The same pail of water into which Servando’s head was brutally thrust during interrogation, moments later became his tool as he mopped the floor. Lighting was also marvelously versatile, “transporting” actors and audience from place to place. For example, vertical lines projected in a door shape represented a prison setting. A bed was “created” through a rectangular light, in which actors stood covered from the neck down by a sheet. Musicians on the stage not only accompanied the actors in several beautiful colonial style songs but provided all sound effects. Costumes consisted primarily of gorgeous, authentic Dominican habits, but the actors managed to use parts of them as presidential sashes, war banners, or torturer hoods. Thus, *Servando* was a high-energy romp through several continents, several centuries, and multitudinous ideas and emotions. It entertained the audience, but also demanded that spectators be accomplices to interpret and be alert to subtleties. Ultimately, Fray Servando returned to Mexico and saw his country independent, but ruled by power-hungry, corrupt people. The tone of “I gave my entire life for this?” was particularly poignant and pertinent given the difficulties with which modern Mexico grapples today.

Crónica de una tuerca, un tornillo y un cornudo shared some similarities in tone with *Servando*, but was much more aggressive in its socio-political statements and had a more complex, spiraling plot. Its author, Luis Eduardo Reyes, chose five moments in Mexican history which he perceived as parallel: Independence, French Intervention, Revolution, 1968, and 1998. The same four character types represented each era – a politician/cuckold, his adulterous wife, her lover, and their servant. In each era the politician was so busy creating and perfecting his rhetoric for an upcoming major speech that he missed the fact that his wife thumbed her nose at patriotism and family values by pursuing the thrill of infidelity. The adulterer happily obliged her, and the servant only regretted not being the object of the adulterer’s lust. In each era, all four characters cared only for their own selfish interests, but with each reincarnation the characters became increasingly open and aggressive in their self-centeredness. Ultimately, their actions condemned Mexico to a perpetual

state of corruption, despoliation, immorality and shamelessness. The actors brilliantly adapted from era to era, with the help of costume changes, acting tone, and linguistic signs. For example, the servant transformed from a poor, ignorant Indian in an 1820 dress into a “soldadera” with bullet packs crossing her chest in 1915, and finally into a headphone listening, high heeled, spray bottle toting, lipstick-laden, gum-chewing, bright red pants-wearing urbanite in the 1990’s. Stage curtains disappeared after each act, finally leaving the unsightly cement walls of the theater bare, similar to the way the acts depicted have left the ugly side of Mexico exposed to the world. Brilliant dialogue, dramatic structure, acting, costumes and set design combined with comic-seriousness to create a marvelous work of art.

Carmen Boullosa based the third “masterpiece” of the season, *Los totoles*, a piece of children’s theatre, on a Nahuatl legend. The story line was simple – a humble boy’s generosity and goodness to animals paid dividends when the king’s evil cook convinced her master to have the boy perform impossible tasks. The animals helped him, and as a reward the king granted unto him his daughter’s hand and rights to the kingdom. The evil cook, by contrast, was duly punished. In playing the lead, Tizoc Arroyo exuded genuine, unpremeditated goodness and optimism. The other three actors played four roles each, transforming from animal to animal or to members of the kingdom. Beautiful choreography and corporal movement together with stunning costumes and sets made the animal scenes visual delights. The costumes and sets were brightly colored and stylized rather than realistic. The set included crisply painted heavenly bodies which subtly gravitated across the stage to mark the passing of time, a throne and royal kitchen on wheels, and an undulating aquamarine projection for an underwater sequence. *Los totoles* exuded a mythical-magical ambiance. That such an excellent children’s play has its roots in Mexico’s indigenous culture and portrays indigenous people as decent and worthy of emulation is rarely seen in Mexican literature, and increases its value to Mexican culture.

Numerous other plays had many strengths. *¿Quién mató a Seki Sano?*, written and directed by Adam Guevara, dealt compellingly with numerous issues, among them the slippery nature of memory and history, corruption, life and politics as theatre, and the power of theatre in dealing with the past. The complex plot included several chapters in a rivalry between the main characters, starting when Marcelo learned that assassins did not follow his orders given years before to kill his friend. Once discovered, the old rival struggled to prove to himself and others that he still existed, while Marcelo worked to counter the

notion; after all, Marcelo's public persona depended on his rival's continued nonexistence. Their struggle triggered flashbacks to a theater in which they both acted, and scenes of plays and key moments of their lives. Constant, unannounced shifts in or doubling up of milieu and eras challenged spectators and contributed to themes related to the nature of reality and the way history is manipulated. Miguel Flores, who has been brilliant in each of the varied roles I have seen him play, delivered a sterling performance, as did two other very fine actors, Carlos Cobos and Antonio Algarra. This was a meaty, complex, thought-provoking play.

Lo Cortés no quita lo... Malinche, a monologue written and performed by television star Patricia Martínez, cleverly revisited the conquest of Mexico through metatheatre. "Cristina" was a costume designer scurrying in her backstage sewing room to prepare costumes for the coming premiere of a play on the Conquest. As she put costumes together she reflected on the corresponding characters and often took on their identities as she donned their garb. She came to the conclusion that hundreds of years after the events depicted we know very little about the culture and personalities of the players in the Conquest, and so judging them is very risky. Her approach was to seek understanding and to grant tolerance whenever possible. Despite poor lighting (exacerbated by a power outage in the performance I witnessed), poor sound effects, occasional forays away from theatre and into a history lesson, and cramped seating at the Foro Luces de Bohemia, this was a delightful play, featuring fine acting, excellent costuming, and a lively text. It illustrated admirably the way in which the characters and events of the Conquest continue to affect Mexico and Mexicans today.

The performers of "Teatro MUF" presented a unique puppet theatre performance called *Metamorfosis*. The performance consisted of 9 segments, during each of which the performers transformed everyday items such as handkerchiefs, pieces of fabric, wires, cloths, strings, and balls into puppets. In the fifth segment, for example, the actors intertwined ribbons attached to five small balls into the shape of a man. Four of the balls became his hands and feet and the fifth was his head. The actors made him dance and balance on a ball as if a circus performer. In this wordless performance the actors created and performed roosters, dogs, a bull, a ballerina, a snake, a snake charmer, a heart and a tightrope walker. Not only were the transformations ingenious, but the performances of their creations were fluid, lifelike, and beautifully choreographed, not to mention free to the public in the spectacular patio of the National Center for the Arts.

Las tremendas aventuras de la capitana Gazpacho was a bizarre, comical romp into a Quixotic/Alice in Wonderland-ish milieu written by Gerardo Mancebo del Castillo Trejo. Two levels of reality functioned in the play – a medieval, fictional existence framed as if in a television or a painting in the back half of the stage, and a mundane contemporary reality in front. During the play these realities overlapped, with fiction and the “real” world intruding on each other. Characters in the Quixotic world wore fantastically unrealistic, comic attire, starting with Gazpacho’s servant (played by Mancebo himself), who wore blond braids under a Nordic helmet complete with horns, and vertically striped pants which made him look even skinnier than he naturally is. Gazpacho herself wore tacky burlesque fishnet tights and a low cut top which contrasted her fuller figure with her servant. They were afloat on a raft with a toilet as lookout perch, searching for lands and people worthy of their conquering. The characters in the “real” world were almost as flamboyant, including a woman whose ambition was to be British, her sister who fell in love with Gazpacho’s servant, and a controlling slob of a husband married to a woman who obsessed over birds. Each of the fascinating characters constituted a variation on Quixotic dreams contrasting with less-than-fulfilling realities. Women fared particularly poorly in the play, which had unfortunate misogynous moments. The set design by Philippe Amand was superb, with regular doors as well as surprising trap doors connecting the two worlds. The dialogue mixed medieval, high sounding jargon and absurd realism from everyday life. This was a complex, well-polished play, especially for a very young playwright.

Inútil presentarse sin cumplir los requisitos, a play by Perla Szuchmacher and Larry Silberman, featured a tone, a set, and acting in the mode of theatre of the absurd. The play was a Dilbert-like spoof about job interviews. Its set consisted of a number of doors through which three candidates sought passage to get job interviews. At times the candidates viewed each other as rivals to fight and overcome, while at others they rallied around each other, recognizing that they were in the same boat in an impossible river. Beautifully choreographed to highlight variations on different themes as if in a dance, the play showed how absurd the process of looking for a job can become, how absurd “dressing for success” can be, how insincere one perceives he or she must be, and the emotions that accompany a job search, ranging from paranoia and desperation to self-confidence and competence. After passing countless tests and waiting for hours, the job-seekers never did interview. Our impossible, modern world transformed them into pathetic, clone-like, personality-less, hopeless, mindless caricatures.

Several plays dealt insightfully with human relationships, particularly dysfunctional ones within several dimensions of mainstream Mexican society. *Nube blanca*, by Luis Felipe Pacheco, for example, portrayed a writer who walled himself off from society because of his homosexual tendencies. The daughter he had never met came into his life and encouraged him to live genuinely regardless of society. Jesús González Dávila's *Tiempos furiosos* portrayed human beings who through drugs, infidelity, corruption, and lack of values were dysfunctional in all their relationships. Presented as theatre in the round at the El Granero theater, the walls of the set consisted wholly of steel bars, suggesting that people such as these lead imprisoned lives. In Thelma Dorantes' *Hombre tenía que ser* an emotionally weak, alcoholic singer sought the approval of men through her singing. Guillermo Cuevaslepe performed beautifully on his guitar, and Dorantes portrayed admirably the singer whose musical public persona was a thin shell which only sometimes hid a troubled, pathetic human being who caused her own problems, but blamed them on everyone else (hence, the play's title). Finally, a pair of dialogues by Tomás Urtusástegui, joined under the title of *Padre nuestro. . . (por ti soy esto)*, lamented two kinds of dysfunctional Mexican fathers. In the first, a man explained bitterly at his father's grave how his predecessor's alcoholism, physical abuse, infidelity, and neglect had devastated his family. In the second the actor portrayed his family life as a boxing match. His overpowering and overprotective mother dominated his weak, detached father. In humorous, re-enacted descriptions of their "bouts," the actor and his mother fought for control of his life – she through Catholicism, proper living and emotional blackmail, and he through disobedience, logic and detachment. Thus, this season dealt seriously and critically with a number of important aspects of Mexican culture.

The foregoing plays have all been written in very recent years, but a number of the season's plays could be considered Mexican classics. One of the finest was Willebaldo López's *Cosas de muchachos*, originally written in 1968. The play represented a tragic chain of events which began with a frivolous sexual tryst between a pair of teenagers but, because of ignorance, lack of family support, lack of maturity and bad decisions, it unraveled into a long life of unhappiness for the couple. Despite the fact that the set was minimalist and primitive, lights, costumes, and use of space were little more than serviceable, and the intent was unabashedly pedagogical, *Cosas de muchachos* was a fine piece of theatre. Both actors (including López' daughter as "ella") transformed admirably from silly, energetic teenagers to tired, bitter adults. In a particularly nice touch, the performance featured audio footage of a song recorded in the

1968 premiere of the play, in which López and his wife starred. A discussion between the actors and the audience after the performance revealed that *Cosas* . . . had connected and made an impression on the large, youthful audience. Remarkably, the dialogue and situation seemed fresh and pertinent to Mexico thirty years later.

Three other noteworthy “classics” of the season were Elena Garro’s *El árbol*, Hugo Argüelles’ *Los cuervos están de luto*, and Jorge Ibargüengoitia’s *La farsa del valiente Nicolás*. Garro’s play focused on racism found in Mexican society. It portrayed a middle class woman being haunted by an Indian woman whom she had known years earlier. Her interactions with the former servant, which unfolded in an odd ambiance which never revealed whether the events were real or products of her imagination, showed that she considers all Indians liars, superstitious, dirty, ignorant, stupid and criminal. According to the program, Coyoacán produced Argüelles’ most famous play to honor him for the 40 years during which he has written plays. Although it was an unsophisticated performance, Ximena Ballinas did an excellent job in portraying the hypocritical Piedad. This run of *Los cuervos* once again showed that Argüelles’ plays are consistently among the best attended in Mexico City. And Ibargüengoitia’s children’s play featured a delightfully painted set, intriguing masks and clear delineation between good and evil. The power of theatre saved the day in the play, because the poor, exploited underlings of a town resorted to creating an avenging angel character (el Valiente Nicolás) to scare the town’s moneylenders and judge into treating them fairly. The play suggested that the only way to survive in dealing with Mexican institutions is through *picardía*.

Finally, I feel compelled to mention that far too much idiotic theatre is performed in Mexico City on a regular basis, and to large audiences and even critical acclaim. I suffered through an excruciating performance of *Atrapadas en el ascensor*, a play named best parody of the year in 1997. It featured men dressed as women, exaggerated actions and noises, a complete lack of plot, and a ream of anything but subtle jokes. It feasted on reprehensible anti-women, anti-elderly, anti-Indian, and anti-semitic humor. It seemed oriented to a junior high school mentality. Nevertheless, the rather large audience paid higher than average prices and laughed raucously throughout the performance. My only consolation was that the play’s run was due to end the following week. Far too much theatre of this type thrives in Mexico City.

Despite the nightmare of *Atrapadas* and its ilk, there was much to laud in the Summer 1998 theatre season in Mexico City. In fact, in terms of the quality of play texts and performances and their reflection of and potential

impact on Mexican culture, this was one of the strongest summer seasons in years. Theatre continues to be a mature, accomplished and often sophisticated means of artistic expression in Mexico City. I wonder whether it will ever receive the recognition it deserves.²

Northern Michigan University

Notes

1. The June 11-17 edition of *Tiempo libre* announced 151 plays for the week. Of the nearly 100 plays for adults, about two-thirds were written by Mexicans, most of them recent works. About three-fourths of the children's plays were written by Mexicans. Given the impossibility of seeing all of the season's offerings, I chose to focus this article on some of the most noteworthy plays by Mexican playwrights.

2. I am grateful for a Faculty Research Grant from Northern Michigan University which facilitated the travel for this report. Special thanks also to Mar Siller, Mike Rochon and Matt Pierson for their assistance in Mexico City.



Servando o del arte de la fuga

Collage de textos históricos novelísticos y fantásticos de Jorge Gidi y Ricardo Esquerri