

## Mexico City Theatre: Summer 1999

**Timothy G. Compton**

Mexico City's Summer 1999 theatre season seemed weaker than summer seasons in previous years. By sheer numbers, the season compares well, but very few performances offered significant advances in Mexican theatre.<sup>1</sup> UNAM's student strike, which paralyzed its main mammoth campus as well as its satellite campuses and *preparatorias*, had a definite debilitating impact on the season. All of the theatres in UNAM's main performing arts complex, which consistently offer some of the country's finest theatre, were closed. Student strikers held protests in many parts of the city, often disrupting traffic, and riot control police maintained a high profile and sobering presence. Apparently a proposal has been made to privatize all the theatres in Chapultepec park which have been part of INBA (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes). Signs throughout the area decried the proposal, and the people with whom I spoke thought it could bring about a severely negative effect on Mexican theatre. In seasons past, despite the demise of the formal movement of Teatro Clandestino, the spirit of the movement continued strong.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the same could not be said of this season: very few plays dealt with burning issues of contemporary Mexican society. Despite these gray notes, the season featured a pair of excellent new plays by two of Mexico's finest playwrights, several notable festivals, and a handful of noteworthy plays.

The season's mega-production was by Sabina Berman, *Molière*, which had its premiere in January, but continued to sell out during the summer. Performed in the spacious Julio Castillo theatre by the Compañía Nacional de Teatro, everything about the play was ambitious, starting with a text which took roughly two and a half hours to perform. The play did deal with Molière's life, focusing on his artistic rivalry with Racine. In fact, the rival should probably have received titular billing, because his character developed

considerably more than Molière's, and his jealousy, ambition, and machinations were the play's driving forces. In this play Racine despises Molière, whose great theatrical talent is combined with Bohemian ways, a devil-may-care attitude, infectious jocularly, and the advantages of being the king's official playwright. Racine allies himself with the Archbishop to remove Molière and supplant him, but destroys himself in the process, while his rival maintains a *joie de vivre* to the end. Berman's gift for dialogue shone in the play, combining serious historically-based thematics with humor. *Molière* included a number of attractive performance features, among them a noteworthy orientation of the stage. Spectators sat in makeshift seating (for approximately 250 people) located directly behind the stage. The usual enormous seating area was used intermittently for scenes of the play, creating an enormous performance space and exquisite echoing dialogue. The action of the play was ingeniously staged in four different directions: the main action toward the audience, and meta-performances stage left (seen as if from back stage, through side curtains, with no view of the meta-audience), stage right (with meta-audience in view stage left, performance taking place on a raised platform), and away from the Julio Castillo audience but to the Royal meta-audience. Exquisite also were the lavish seventeenth century costumes and the live seventeenth century music which included elegant vocals accompanied by clavichord, cello, flute, and percussion. The cast of 20 included some of Mexico's best-known actors, among them Mario Iván Martínez as Racine, Héctor Ortega as Molière, and Juan Carlos Colombo as the Archbishop. These three actors were not the only ones who delivered excellent performances. Gabriel Pascal's set design and Antonio Serrano's directing were superb. The handbill indicated that the Compañía Nacional de Teatro was hoping to produce, in the near future, Rodolfo Usigli's *Noche de estío*, Elena Garro's *Felipe Ángeles*, and Héctor Mendoza's *De la naturaleza de los espíritus*. May their performances be as felicitous as *Molière*.

The season's other outstanding play star was by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda. As with many of his plays, *La mujer que cayó del cielo* has its roots in a tragic real-life precedent. In this case, a Tarahumara woman from the playwright's home state of Chihuahua spent over a decade in a mental institution in the state of Kansas. Although it could have been an exposé on the shortcomings and lack of compassion in the U.S. criminal justice and mental health systems, this play instead focuses on the experience and humanity of Rita, its protagonist. When police in Kansas apprehend her she

suffers taunting and abuse. That she doesn't speak English or Spanish stymies them and the health care workers assigned to work with her. For nearly a decade she makes no significant contact with anyone, and the system fails to even ascertain her native language or the continent she is from. Finally someone who speaks a tiny bit of Rarámuri makes contact with her, and she understands someone for the first time in many years.

Overcoming burdensome bureaucratic resistance, he manages to secure her release and returns her to Mexico. Unfortunately, he reports at play's end that she ended up in a mental institution in Chihuahua, still detached from society. Aside from a compelling topic, several elements of this performance were outstanding. Luisa Huertas delivered a stunning performance as Rita, communicating her alienation and fright and pain, with many of her lines in Rarámuri. Also noteworthy was the fact that this was a trilingual play, with roughly 60% of the dialogue in Spanish, 25% in English, and 15% in Rarámuri. The English dialogue was as significant as the Spanish: it forcefully communicated the Americans' classic judgmentalism, ignorance and lack of compassion. I wondered about the experience of spectators who did not know English. The set, designed by Arturo Nava, was a room with seven passageways dumping into it. The effect was one of uncertainty: Rita and the audience never knew for sure whence her captors/health care providers would emerge. Changes of lighting caused the walls to become transparent, revealing an enormous photograph of Chihuahua's sierra. Obviously, during the hours and weeks and years Rita was detained, she must have thought of her origins. Similarly, in quiet moments of Rita's aloneness, the audience heard Tarahumara music recorded in Chihuahua, which further immersed spectators into this little known native American world. The effect was multiplied after the play, thanks to a display of photographs of Tarahumara artifacts, landscapes, and faces, including one of Rita herself. Despite reports that significant portions of worthy text had been cut, and several regrettable slapstick scenes featuring Rita's captors, *La mujer que cayó del cielo* was a marvelous performance at the Museo del Carmen's intimate theatre.

Two theatre festivals featured some of the season's better productions. One honored Tomás Urtusástegui, and featured performances of ten of his plays in a number of different venues and over a period of many weeks. Some, such as *Padre, por ti soy esto* (at the Foro Buñuel theatre) and *Carretera del norte* (at the Foro de la Conchita), have had long runs. Others were performed just once. The geographical center of the celebration was the diminutive Foro el Juglar, which has a seating capacity of around 40,

although standing room brought the performance of *Agua clara* to close to 60 very uncomfortable spectators. Having written over 100 plays, Urtusástegui is known for his easy-to-perform, reality-based short plays, often studies of how people might react in unusual and difficult situations. *Agua clara* is a good example of this. Expecting a visit from a relative, a childless couple in an apartment building has trouble with their plumbing and go to their neighbors for help. One by one their small apartment fills up with people who don't help at all, and in fact end up assaulting the couple. A little old lady with a sweet smile and even sweeter voice turns out to be a crude, gossipy nightmare, married to an even cruder man who makes himself at home on their bed. Their son is a violent punk complete with foul language and knife. Performed with extremely few props and very little set, this dramatized reading directed by playwright Jesús González Dávila was extremely well done, and the very uncomfortable, sweat-drenched spectators gave a standing ovation. This play undoubtedly reflects many of the tensions and fears people face in Mexico City. Before the performance of *Hoy estreno*, things seemed to be in chaos. For example, the lighting and sound technician sauntered to his position late, in full view of the audience, and then made a racket asking questions of several people back stage. His unprofessional actions were actually part of the performance, which represents the doomed premiere of a play. Through a transparent curtain, the audience witnesses the "behind the scenes" tensions between the director and his star actor, each of whom harbors delusions of grandeur and despises the other. This play was very funny, well acted, kept spectators guessing, and gave insights into Mexico. In short, these were two very fine short plays, and this well-deserved little homage to Tomás Urtusástegui enriched the season.

The other festival was the International Theatre Institute-UNESCO Encuentro de los Amantes del Teatro held at the Jiménez Rueda theatre over several weeks. This amateur theatre festival included performances of the highest quality along with some of the most amateur. Some of the plays premiered in the festival, while others have been performed in other venues numerous times. Several of the best were written by non-Mexicans, including Dario Fo's *El despertar*, which featured a delightful acting performance by Isabel García Mendoza. According to the program, it was adapted for Mexico and directed by one of Mexico's finest directors, José Ramón Enríquez. In addition to the timely, sometimes slapstick, and often poignant, snapshot of the rat race and absurdity of city life, it had wonderful on stage sound effects and music performed by Rebeca Varely. Mario Benedetti's *Pedro y el capitán*

enjoyed a very effective performance in which Germán Blanco played Pedro and Isaac Pérez played the captain. This was inspiring testimony to the resilience of the human spirit, even in the face of horrifying torture. One of the festival's finest plays by a Mexican was *1968 Tlatelolco* by Gabriela Yncán.<sup>3</sup> Given the student unrest at UNAM and reports that police had entered into scuffles with students, causing some of them bodily harm, this play was particularly haunting. In it, students and a teacher take refuge from the violence outside in a secret basement room off the Tlatelolco square. They discuss the brutality of the police, the chasm between reality and "official history," and the risks of getting involved in the conflict. After spending a worried night together, the four leave, but re-enter moments later, followed by bursts of machine gun fire which end their lives. Ironically, despite the play's title, this performance developed the notion that the events being depicted belong to the present: one character wore a shirt emblazoned with the image of sub-commander Marcos and the characters spoke of Marilyn Manson, Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton. Despite a few technical problems, such as the sound effects of rain drowning out the dialogue of the first 15 minutes, this was a powerful, sobering play in the mode of Teatro Clandestino.

In recent years, Mexican classics have rarely found their way to the contemporary stage. Happily, this season included a delightful version of Manuel Eduardo de Gorostiza's classic from 1833, *Contigo pan y cebolla*. This variation on *The Taming of the Shrew* included beautiful costumes, excellent acting, a lovely set designed by Arturo Nava, subtle lighting effects, and clever transitions between acts. The performance I saw of the play had a very large audience composed primarily of retirees from all over Mexico who were visiting Mexico City as tourists. Mexico needs more of this kind of theatre, which shows that Mexican theatre has strong roots, and is well-advertised enough to offer to tourist groups.

A number of other plays featured noteworthy contributions to the season, among which I will briefly mention four. Three of them surfaced from other seasons. One such play was *El pasatiempo de los derrotados* by Agustín Meza, a very young playwright who wrote this play several years ago. It represented the vivid, harrowing memories of an actor who simply did not make it in the theatre world. Its visual effects were stunning, including multiple uses of lights, strobe lights for silent movie effects, uses of props for varying purposes, and a scene in which the actor walked on the back wall. At times the concept of space was challenged: doors on either side of

the stage theatrically represented the two sides of the same door, for example. Most of the acting was excellent, and required a great deal of the actors. This was a dense, multi-leveled work, one which bombarded the audience with a plethora of signs. The unhappy world represented may have actually represented Mexico or modern society.

The second and third plays that premiered in other seasons but continue with roughly the same casts and directors are both historical plays. The first, *Frida*, by Rauda Jamis and Reynold Guerra, was written nearly a decade ago and premiered about 1994. This play's strength derives from the ingenious idea to draw on two parts of Frida Kahlo's make up, as manifest in



*Zapata Vive*. Directed by Emmanuel Novelo.

her 1939 painting "Las dos Fridas." Thus, the play began with the actresses in a living pose of that self-portrait, and then proceeded to tell and act out aspects of Frida Kahlo's life. Actually, one of the play's weaknesses was that it did too much telling and not enough performing. Certainly, spectators left knowing more about the artist than when they arrived, and there were fine moments, including some in which spectators were treated to the smells of actual food. Another of the play's strengths was its setting in the Salón de Actos of one of the best-kept secrets in Mexico City: the Dolores Olmedo Patiño museum, which houses many Frida Kahlo originals and has spectacular

grounds graced by peacocks and other animals, along with many displays of folk art within its former convent walls. The other noteworthy play in this mode was *Zapata vive*, by Francisco de Hoyos, which has at its heart the notion that Mexico today should be inspired by Zapata's example – people need to stand up for what is right instead of seeking their own interests. Unfortunately, the performance I saw of this fine play was delayed over an hour because the fabled Teatro Lírico had overbooked and we had to wait for an earlier play to finish. I fear the youthful audience gave more care to whistling and catcalls than to the play, making appreciation difficult for more serious spectators. De Hoyos continues to do excellent work at taking serious Mexican themes to large, often uncultivated audiences.

Finally, *Las historias que se cuentan los hermanos siameses*, a play recently written by Luis Mario Moncada and Martín Acosta and directed by the latter, featured some outstanding acting by Ari Brickman and Mario Oliver, who during much of the action represented brothers who had been joined at the hip during their entire lives. It was delightful to see them in their very convincing Siamese twin mode. The stories they told each other were fantasies which they acted out separately from each other. Several props were used brilliantly. A glass of water was first used in a game of balance, then the water represented drops of blood, then rain, and finally it was used as a window. What began as a suitcase became a train, then a small stage, then a closet, and finally a seat on a train. Unfortunately, this play was as void of meaningful content, particularly in the tales they told each other, as it was noteworthy in its visual effects.

Despite the weaknesses of this season, it had a number of bright spots. Mexican society continues to be under siege by ever more corruption, police abuse, drug cartels, assaults, violence, strikes, and so forth. Despite all this, the vast majority of Mexicans resiliently, courageously live their lives. And many continue to make and attend theatre. Despite the monumental problems, there seems to be the promise that Mexico will continue to produce excellent theatre for many years to come.<sup>4</sup>

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## Notas

1. The June 10-16 edition of *Tiempo Libre* listed 93 plays in its theatre section, of which approximately 54 were by Mexican authors. The children's section listed 54 performances, approximately 39 of which had Mexican creators. Obviously, with so many plays available and the impossibility of

seeing every play, this report offers information and analysis on some of the most noteworthy performances and trends, particularly highlighting plays by Mexican authors.

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

3. This play was originally titled *Nomás que salgamos*, and appears in a recently published anthology entitled *Teatro del 68*, featuring 13 plays about the massacre at Tlatelolco. The volume was edited by Felipe Galván and published by Tablado Iberoamericano.

4. I express my sincere thanks to Daniel Dean, Mar Siller, and Oscar Rodríguez for helping to make my stay in Mexico City a safe and pleasant one. Northern Michigan University's faculty travel fund provided partial support for this research, for which I am very grateful.



*Zapata Vive*. Directed by Emmanuel Novelo.