

First Annual International Theatre Festival in San Antonio, Texas

Sharon Magnarelli

San Antonio hosted its first annual International Theatre Festival October 22 to 31, 1999. Organized by the Instituto Cultural Mexicano, the Alameda Center, and the City of San Antonio, with Felipe Santander as executive director, the festival included more than two dozen spectacles in various languages. The texts and production groups, which came from as far away as India, Croatia, and Argentina, and as near as San Antonio and Mexico, succeeded in providing theatre patrons with a fascinating variety of cultural representations. By defining the term “theatre” in its broadest sense, the festival organizers were able to include music and dance, an interactive theatre installation, street theatre, children’s theatre, and even a *charreada* and the Carnival de San Antonio, along with the more traditional fare. Space limitations will not allow me to discuss all of the many “spectacles,” so I shall focus on some of the more unusual or particularly interesting ones.

One of my personal favorites was *Palpitation* by the Theater Compagnie Markus Zohner of Switzerland, performed by Ursina Gregori and Zohner. A fascinating portrayal of interpersonal relations, the wordless play used minimal set and props, relying on two umbrellas, a few square boxes, and a couple of balls, all of which functioned as multiple, visual metaphors. For example, the balls that the characters passed back and forth on some occasions and dropped on others, seemed to provide tangible metaphors for expressions such as “the ball is in his court” and “he dropped the ball.” S/He who controlled the ball seemed to control the relationship, and dropping it signaled a violation of authorized norms. With the two characters cross-dressed (“he” as a “she” and vice versa), the play highlighted and undermined many of our notions regarding love and the genders. The accompanying sound track, when not used to evoke the characters’ emotions via the sound of a beating heart, provided classical music and opera, which



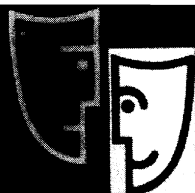
Santo Negro



Santo Negro

ITF@SA

International Theater Festival - San Antonio
October 22 - October 31, 1999



MEXICO

The Man in the Green Suit



JUMP-START THEATER

October 23, 1999 • 10:00 p.m.
October 24, 1999 • 10:00 p.m.

characters sometimes mouthed or mimed, thereby underscoring the “artistic” sources of many of our romantic myths and (mis)encounters.

Another favorite was *The Man in the Green Suit* by Mexican Felipe Santander. Produced in English and directed by Santander with U.S. actor Pearce Bunting in the title role, the one-character play was a chilling exposé of the Mexican drug culture and the abuse of power on all levels of government. Beaten and tortured by police, the unnamed character tells of his love for an adolescent and how, in order to conquer her, he secured a high political post for her father. Having used brutal power, buying off those he could and using a drug mafia to kill others, he ultimately became the victim of those same tactics, whence his current situation, beaten and left to die, all without having “won” the desired “Lolita.” The irony of the monologue is particularly poignant, for the character himself never grasps the fact that he is now victim of the same abuse and corruption he had earlier enjoyed.

Offerings of music and dance were as varied as the companies that performed them. From Africa, the National Dance Company of the Republic of Guinea, Les Ballets Africains, performed *Evolution*, a huge, colorful production of dance, music, and ritual. Spain was represented by Eva Garrido, “La Yerbabuena,” and her breath-taking performance of flamenco. The tango came to life in *Milonga Boulevard*, created by María Chiara Michieli and Marco Castellani of Argentina’s Nueva Compañía de Tangueros. Based on a short story by Cortázar, the combination of drama and dance captured the sensual mystique and nostalgia of the tango. Even more exotic was the dance performance of Alarmel Valli of India who treated the audience to traditional Bharatanatyam dances. A children’s group, Los Niños Mixes, from the Centro de Capacitación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Mixe, Oaxaca, Mexico, performed indigenous music in a park while La Caravana del Compadre Chema, also from Mexico, presented “the joyful, magical, playful, poetic, and musical Mexico” for children. One of the outstanding local offerings was *Santo Negro*, written by Sterling Houston (who also played the lead role as narrator) and directed by Dennis Poplin. Based on events in the life of sixteenth-century Afro-Latino Martín de Porres, who was eventually canonized, the play labeled itself a folk opera and combined a strong story line with elements of dance, video, and song.

In addition to the street performances already mentioned, the Teatro Taller de Colombia presented *Los Cingaros*. Directed by Jorge Vargas, the actors performed on stilts as they combined parade, music, and dance to tell the story of a gypsy tribe. Although not originally intended as street



Cabaret



The Stronger

performance, musical selections from *Angels in the Snow* (San Antonio's Spotlight Theatre Arts Group) were presented during lunch time at the Arneson River Theatre with the river walk as backdrop.

The festival also included numerous, "new" renditions of old favorites. For example, the Grupo Galpão from Brazil presented an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, using elements from Brazil's popular culture and adding a narrator. The Mozgó Ház Társulás of Hungary, directed by Laszlo Hudi, performed a variation on *The Cherry Orchard*, which they insisted was not Chekov's *Orchard*. Particularly interesting was Felipe Santander's adaptation of *Strindberg's The Stronger/La más fuerte*. Under Santander's direction, the play was performed bilingually, first in English with Bernadette Hamilton in the lead (speaking) role and then in Spanish with Guadalupe Carranza in that role.

The organizing committee is to be congratulated for, among other things, the charm of the venues chosen. The festival events were spread throughout the city, and to this critic seemed to make excellent use of traditional and non-traditional theatrical spaces: from the recently revitalized, ornate Majestic theatre in which the flamenco was performed, to the many outdoor locales already mentioned, to the small warehouse-type theatres such as the Jump-Start Theatre, where several productions were held. A downtown storefront gallery provided the stage for an installation, Ground Zero, which labeled itself "Interactive Performance." As one walked by, a "dead" woman was lying in the window of the gallery. Inside, four characters involved in the crime were available to talk about it and answer questions in what, for this spectator at least, was a frightening blurring of the distinctions between theatre and "real life." Directed by Uwe Mengel of Germany with local actors, the play was designed to force spectators to confront racial, ethnic, and gender biases. Earlier versions of the play, *Woman in the Window*, had been performed in the South Bronx (with a focus on the conflicts between white and black Americans) and in Berlin (with a focus on the relations between East and West Germans). Here, gender biases and tensions between Anglo and Mexican Americans were foregrounded. Another particularly memorable locale was the Southwest School of Art and Craft, which was formerly an Ursuline convent and whose chapel thus provided an ideal setting for *Intensidad mística*, a "spectacle of [mystic] poetry, lights, and motion" from Mexico, directed by Sergio Lasso and performed in Spanish.

The multilingual quality of Begovic Cabaret, presented principally in French and German, with a smattering of English and Spanish, made the

audience work a bit harder than usual but certainly did not inhibit enjoyment. Produced by the Croatian Teatar ITD (directed by Darko Lukic), the play was based on Milan Begovic's *Adventure in Front of Doors*, written in the 1930s and adapted by Pierre Diependaele and Ivic Buljan. Through a series of flashbacks and plays within plays, the performance began in the foyer of the theatre and moved to the main auditorium where the audience was invited onto the stage, which had been set up as a cabaret. In the inverse of traditional performances, this part of the play began only once the audience was seated at tables on stage, sipping wine, and the curtains were closed. Later, the audience was returned to their "regular" seats as the play continued, now in front of the curtain, before it finally ended back in the foyer where it began.

There are many other performances that merit note. I can only mention a few. *Surcos de oro/Watered with Tears*, a collaborative effort between artists from the U.S. and Mexico, was a bilingual work based on the life of César Chávez, directed by José Manual Galván of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center (theatre director Jorge Piña). John C. Thorpe's *Chap Am So: The Amistad Victory* was performed under the direction of Julius Spencer, and Italy was represented by *Icaro* of the Teatro Sunil, which provided Daniele Finzi Pasca the role of tragic clown. The list goes on and on. Finally, I am happy to report that the festival committee has already begun plans for the second annual festival of 2000 which promises to be even more spectacular.

Quinnipiac University



Palpitation